

NOW WE KNOW OUR REGIONAL MIGHT: ADVANCING EQUITY AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY THROUGH CAREER EDUCATION

COMMUNITY COLLEGES

SAN DIEGO & IMPERIAL COUNTIES

CAREER EDUCATION

This article is the third in a series by the San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges Regional Consortium. It builds upon two previous articles about the region's reform efforts to increase the capacity of its community colleges to lead more students to completion and into living-wage jobs.¹ The Regional Consortium serves as a hub for implementing the state's Strong Workforce Program in the San Diego–Imperial region. After initial years of planning and piloting, the colleges are institutionalizing new systems and practices – and doing so with an equity lens to ensure that the region's students, especially those disproportionately impacted by inequities, are afforded access to opportunities and success in both education and careers. This article highlights three equity-focused areas of change made possible by this regional infrastructure.

After five years of steady progress in improving systems for all students, the community colleges in San Diego and Imperial Counties are strengthening their focus on tackling difficult issues of equity. They are challenging themselves by asking, *which of our students are not advancing? What institutional barriers are in the way? How can we change systems and policies to include students who are left out? How do we ensure that students are afforded the same opportunities? What changes in individual practice can better help students and avoid unintentionally harming them?*

By building an innovative infrastructure – a collaborative system supported by trusting relationships and structures for accountability – the region has created an environment where equity improvements can occur. “We have the relationships to have the hard discussions and the trust to be vulnerable and honest,” said Amertah Perman, Dean of Career Education and Workforce

Development at San Diego Community College District (SDCCD), as she reflected on the region's progress and its readiness to do this essential work. “Now we know our regional might.”

Building an Infrastructure That Supports Change

The 10 community colleges in the San Diego–Imperial region are united by a shared vision to improve postsecondary student success and to advance the economic and social mobility of the region's residents. The colleges work collaboratively, bridged by an infrastructure created by and for them – the San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges Regional Consortium – with support from the state's Strong Workforce Program (SWP; see box).

¹ Previous articles in this series about SWP efforts in San Diego and Imperial Counties include *Leveraging Strong Workforce Funding to Build an Innovative Infrastructure* at https://myworkforceconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Leveraging_SWP_SDICCCA.pdf and *Stronger Together: How an Ecosystem of Partnerships Leads to Change* at <https://myworkforceconnection.org/resources/stronger-together-how-an-ecosystem-of-partnerships-leads-to-change/>.

Strong Workforce Program: More and Better

In 2016, the California legislature approved the Strong Workforce Program (SWP) to incentivize the state's community colleges to increase and improve career education (CE). Administered regionally, the program's mission is to advance economic mobility by increasing completion and career opportunities while strengthening the region's economies. The state's message to the 115 community colleges is *more and better*: more students enrolled in programs leading to high-demand, high-wage jobs; *better* CE programs that result in more students completing certificate or degree programs, becoming employed, and improving their earnings.

State-funded initiatives designed to support regional collaboration among colleges are uncommon, and the San Diego–Imperial region has seized the opportunity to effectively leverage the SWP. The Regional Consortium has taken a multifaceted approach to addressing the complexities involved in improving student success, while supporting the colleges to provide high-quality CE programs aligned to the region's needs and to better prepare students for securing living-wage employment in the region.

The Regional Consortium exists to support the colleges through systemic change. Initially, as with any change, there was reluctance by faculty and staff at the colleges. However, as the Regional Consortium's work became more visible, it began to gain trust among faculty and staff, who now value it as a source of support. According to Regional Consortium Chair Dr. Danene Brown, "They come to the Regional Consortium when they're working on a new initiative or are making changes. They see that the Regional Consortium is really trying to help everyone."

In its work to create foundational structures, the Regional Consortium has done the following:

- Established inclusive workgroups and committees, involving 150 stakeholders, structured to intentionally include space at the table for CE and non-CE faculty, credit and non-credit staff, student services personnel, adult education, K–12, and administrators to build cross-role relationships and to make decisions collaboratively about improvements to the student experience

- Built capacity for developing and institutionalizing CE programming and processes by seeding or ensuring funding for essential CE positions such as Work-Based Learning coordinators, job placement case managers, and employer relations liaisons at each of the 10 colleges
- Facilitated the colleges' development of a student-focused, postsecondary success framework, *A Community College Student's Road to Career Success*, based on Guided Pathways research;² the road map outlines a student's trajectory from matriculation (including the various paths that lead to community college) to completion and readiness for employment or transfer, plus the layers of career, academic, social-emotional, and practical supports aimed at helping students to persist and succeed
- Leveraged its strong relationship with the region's Center of Excellence for Labor Market Research, which provides the colleges with current and consumable labor market information about employment needs and salaries within the region's industries to inform program decision-making

The investments of time and resources in a regional infrastructure have paid off. As the Regional Consortium fuels and sustains the colleges to focus on their collective, equity-driven reform efforts, the colleges are implementing change to create successful student experiences and ensure that students are afforded the same opportunities, regardless of which community college they attend.

Moving the Regional Work Forward: Three Areas of Equity-Focused Change

With trust established, the Regional Consortium is asking the colleges to do the hard work of addressing inequities and improving student outcomes. In return, the Regional Consortium continues to incentivize the colleges, including through grant-making targeted to support strong systems and build capacity at the colleges with stipends to faculty and staff as well as funding for personnel dedicated to CE programming. "SWP and the region's investment in CE have brought relief to the CE faculty, validating their work and programs," said Monica Romero, former Associate Dean of Career Education and current Dean of Business and

² To download *A Community College Student's Road to Career Success*, visit <https://myworkforceconnection.org/strong-workforce-program/swp-governance-structure/>.

Technology at San Diego Mesa College. “That translates into faculty able to focus on new work such as Work-Based Learning, industry needs, and instruction.”

Such incentives are moving the work forward, and progress is evident in three significant efforts that have taken root: the Strong Workforce Faculty Institute, Work-Based Learning (WBL), and Pathway Navigation. At the core of each is the drive to address inequities, whether through institution-wide changes to policies and practices or improved classroom practices.

Building Capacity for Change through the Strong Workforce Faculty Institute

A shining star in the region is the Strong Workforce Faculty Institute, a regional, cross-college professional development program aimed at building faculty capacity for using data to inform practice. Funded by the Regional Consortium and led by the region’s Center of Excellence for Labor Market Research, the Faculty Institute reflects the Regional Consortium’s commitment to improving student outcomes and equity by changing classroom practices. Faculty learn to disaggregate student-level data in order to identify patterns in student performance and examine their own classroom practices that may be creating barriers to student success – especially where student outcomes vary disproportionately by race, gender, socioeconomics, and language proficiency. Faculty then develop an action plan to try innovative strategies that intentionally target an equity gap. This process helps faculty develop long-term habits of data-informed decision-making to change practice and foster an inclusive teaching and learning environment for their students.

Each college recruits a cohort of 25 CE and non-CE faculty to participate in the Faculty Institute, where they learn collaboratively and engage with researchers and deans from their own colleges. The Regional Consortium’s investment includes a \$2,000 stipend for each faculty participant upon completion of a data-informed action plan and attendance at the professional learning events. Additionally, the Regional Consortium provides funding for an institutional researcher at each college to provide every faculty participant with a customized data report about student performance in the participant’s classes and ongoing support for working with data.

Participants report that the Faculty Institute experience has helped them use data to shine a light on their practice, thus opening their eyes to where improvements need to be made. “You know there are low retention and success rates in your classes, but seeing the data forces you to recognize that,” said one faculty member. “It’s hard to look at.” The action plan prompts reflection – “OK, these are great policies I have in my class, but are they truly working for everyone?” – and maps out steps to be taken toward change.

Faculty develop long-term habits of data-informed decision-making to change practice and foster an inclusive teaching and learning environment for their students.

Examples of ways that faculty changed their practices include reducing lecture time and increasing hands-on learning; providing more teacher-to-student contact with students in online classes to improve retention rates; sharing tutorials on how to navigate an online platform so that students can focus on the course content; providing computer science videos recorded in Spanish for English learner Latinx students; and incorporating more case studies into curricula. One computer science faculty member who wanted to better understand why students drop her class developed a qualitative survey to gather information from them.

Faculty appreciate the compensation for the time it takes to reflect on their practice and grow professionally. The colleges, meanwhile, are embracing the Faculty Institute for its collaborative approach to learning about data use and its effectiveness in improving classroom practice. They are building on its work in a number of ways, including the following:

- At San Diego College of Continuing Education, faculty are able to participate in both the Faculty Institute and in WBL professional learning to continue improving success outcomes for students. Alex Berry, Associate Dean of Career Education, reported seeing a “very noticeable” impact on students after the first 25 faculty participated in the Faculty Institute. That outcome prompted sending more faculty. “Each teacher impacts 100–150 students

each semester, so one cohort can impact 2,500 students.” Faculty are provided a stipend to develop a lesson plan, including working with employers.

- Southwestern College is implementing its own innovative approach by combining the Faculty Institute, which focuses on examining data, with the college’s own previously developed professional learning program, Advancing Equity Teaching Academy, which focuses on creating solutions. During the yearlong blended program, faculty learn to evaluate issues, analyze disaggregated data, test solutions, and measure change. Jennifer Lewis, Dean of Continuing Education and Workforce Development at Southwestern College, said access to data is a major improvement enabled by SWP and the emphasis on disaggregated data is important: “The data need to be disaggregated to understand that you have an issue or that a population of students is disproportionately impacted.” Southwestern incentivizes faculty with the choice of a “step” increase in pay or a one-time \$2,500 stipend. The enthusiastic response of 50 faculty members participating in the first blended program cohort has led Southwestern to institutionalize it. Some alumni have become data coaches to mentor current participants and are compensated through the college’s SWP funds.
- At San Diego Mesa College, faculty who have completed the Faculty Institute are continuing their professional learning through Faculty Inquiry Groups. These are faculty-led, cross-disciplinary groups that dive into an issue of interest. Recently, for example, interested CE faculty have inquired into equitable grading practices based on Joe Feldman’s book *Grading for Equity*, which led these faculty members to re-examine their own assessment and grading practices. As a result, they have shifted their emphasis and modified their approaches to make sure students are learning the skills needed to be prepared for jobs rather than focusing on their class grade. One inquiry group, comprising faculty from the veterinary technology program, identified a diversity gap and developed a coordinated effort to strengthen the program and expand student opportunities by recruiting more Black students to enroll.

Currently being developed is a regional Counselor Institute, which will initiate new partnerships between student services and CE. Historically, the sphere of the counselors has been education planning and course scheduling with lesser involvement in career exploration and preparation. The Regional Consortium is invested in bringing together student services and CE, so that both are working in complementary ways to advance students’ social and economic mobility. Similar to the Faculty Institute, the plan for the Counselor Institute is to provide opportunities for counselors and faculty to look at disaggregated data, identify where inequities exist and for whom, and improve processes so that more students can benefit from increased opportunities. Plans for a community of practice are also included.

Embedding Work-Based Learning for Increased Student Success

The region defines Work-Based Learning as a critical educational strategy that provides students with interactions with industry or community professionals linked to course-based instruction. WBL comprises a continuum of experiences, from middle or high school through postsecondary education, involving career awareness, career exploration, career preparation, and career training. A body of research suggests that WBL increases student persistence as well as graduation and employment rates, especially for students disproportionately impacted by inequities.³ Based on these findings, the Regional Consortium identified WBL as a key strategy in CE and non-CE courses for increasing student retention, success, and completion.

Regional investment in WBL

Through SWP, the Regional Consortium enacted a plan for institutionalizing WBL at every college. It includes a myriad of supports, such as initial or ongoing funding for personnel dedicated to WBL coordination and student job placement at every campus, as well as regional professional development for faculty.

Prior to SWP, WBL and job placement were not coordinated in any systemic or organized way across the San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges. Now each college is funded for three WBL-related positions. First, WBL coordinators help faculty

³ In the Office of Community College Research and Leadership brief *Work-Based Learning as a Pathway to Postsecondary and Career Success*, authors Rodriguez, Fox, and McCamby summarize the research on work-based learning and its benefits for student success in postsecondary education and careers. Access the brief at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED574535.pdf>.

expand WBL in their courses – for example, by increasing awareness of WBL and providing resources and guidance that expand WBL opportunities available to students in the classroom. WBL coordinators also train faculty so they can lead WBL workshops for other faculty on their campus. Second, job placement case managers provide students with preparation for and placement in jobs. And third, employer relations liaisons build and strengthen relationships with employers and industry to increase employment opportunities for students. These three positions are a trifecta for building WBL capacity on the campuses.

WBL implementation in both CE and non-CE is still a work in progress, but the region has made a lot of headway through deliberate efforts to define what WBL means for the region's colleges, reported Larry McLemore, former Dean of Career Education at Cuyamaca College. "We have done an outstanding job at moving all of these separate colleges collectively into that definition of WBL. Ultimately, we will have reached social change when we are not just talking about doing WBL, but when it has become a part of how we teach."

To further support faculty in WBL implementation, the Regional Consortium collaborated with colleges in the region to develop a new 20-hour, online WBL Faculty Professional Development course for faculty to gain a deeper understanding of the continuum of WBL experiences and ways to integrate WBL strategies and opportunities for students into course curricula. In end-of-course surveys, participants responded unanimously that they had gained valuable strategies from the course and that it helped them see the importance of WBL and how it can impact students' career choices. Said one participant, "I have learned that not only the content of my course is important but that exposing students to more career awareness and interactions is crucial to showing them how many different related fields exist." Said another, "I thought I knew what WBL was, but [my understanding] was very surface-level and stopped at class visits or guest speakers. I appreciate knowing more about how to be very intentional with my assignments and activities, especially for my English learner students, who are navigating and learning a new culture."

"Ultimately, we will have reached social change when we are not just talking about doing WBL, but when it has become a part of how we teach."

– Larry McLemore, former Dean of Career Education at Cuyamaca College

Addressing equity with WBL

The region's increased attention to WBL is helping faculty and staff understand its value to student success. They are learning how student motivation and persistence increase when academic content is connected to real-world experiences, and they are seeing why WBL is critical to increasing success for students disproportionately impacted by inequity. Historically, assumptions have been made about all students being ready with workplace skills or all students having equal access to job opportunities. Now San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges are realizing that these desired outcomes will occur only by bringing an equity lens to strategies such as WBL as a means of identifying, adopting, tracking, and measuring the effectiveness of more equitable practices.

"What we see from an equity standpoint is that students of color are still not treated the same due to implicit biases in the economy, hiring processes, and systems and structures that act as barriers," said Ben Gamboa, Associate Dean of Career Education at MiraCosta College. "We know that résumés of Black and Brown students aren't viewed the same way as [those of] their peers."

This kind of thinking about equity has been elevated in the region's WBL workgroup. The workgroup's impact on awareness is evident in actions by the Regional Consortium and individual colleges to reduce barriers to implementation, including the following:

- The region's new WBL professional development course provides research-based strategies to help faculty maximize access and inclusion in WBL, as well as to help ensure that experiences for all participating students are learning-rich and high-quality.

- MiraCosta College has been piloting faculty- and student-led diversity, equity, and inclusion workshops with stakeholder employers about implicit biases in the hiring pipeline with plans to scale after the college finesses the messaging.
- Southwestern College has increased retention and completion rates in its Cooperative Work Experience courses, where students experience an internship on their way to completing their CE certificate or degree. Students have always interned toward the end of their course sequence, but previously, when the college had not focused on preparing students for internships, students often dropped out. The new practice of meeting with the intern specialist in advance has helped students be better prepared and contributed to their increased internship success.
- At Imperial Valley College, a train-the-trainer approach now has CE and non-CE faculty leading WBL training in their respective departments. According to Efrain Silva, Dean of Economic Workforce Development, the faculty-led training has really changed the culture: “WBL has become commonplace language beyond CE.” In the Department of English as a Second Language, for example, classes require participation in mock interviews with employers to familiarize students with the expected job-hiring practice.
- At San Diego College of Continuing Education, nontraditional students – including those who are starting over, students who struggled in high school, refugees, and immigrants – benefit from industry-specific career events where employers who know the industry well make it easier for students who are less comfortable promoting themselves to engage in conversation without the need to sell themselves. These events include employer mixers, on-campus employer presentations, on-campus employer interviews, and industry-specific job fairs.

“Students of color are still not treated the same due to implicit biases in the economy, hiring processes, and systems and structures that act as barriers.”

– Ben Gamboa, Associate Dean of Career Education at MiraCosta College

Measuring WBL progress at the colleges

In 2020, the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office signaled the importance of WBL implementation by introducing the WBL reporting requirements, Data Element SG21, into the Management Information System. California community colleges are now asked to track WBL participation and activities at the student level at their campuses. Initially, the Regional Consortium began implementing an annual WBL inventory with the colleges to support their data collection practices. Colleges collect data from faculty about the types of WBL activities students complete along a continuum of WBL experiences and numbers of participating students. Colleges learn from the data how many students are building awareness about careers, applying knowledge through practical experiences, and preparing for employment. The Regional Consortium encourages the colleges to use this data as an opportunity to see whether all students are benefiting from the WBL efforts and to determine where to expand WBL.

In this vein, Southwestern College uses a “syllabi scanning process” to identify faculty who are incorporating WBL into their courses. WBL implementation is routine in CE courses, and it is becoming increasingly more routine in non-CE courses. Serving a Latinx-majority student population, Southwestern College would like more students, especially those with the most to gain, to access WBL opportunities to learn about careers beyond the ones they know and to acquire the skills needed to secure in-demand jobs.

MiraCosta College has developed an alternative approach, involving an implementation team that met with faculty and staff of each discipline to review and code their courses according to the Data Element SG21. The coding process revealed that 67% of students at MiraCosta College were accessing some form of WBL. The college's next step is to support faculty in assessing and improving student learning through WBL opportunities. By disaggregating the data to understand which students are and which are not engaged in WBL, faculty can take measures to ensure that all students participate. Already, MiraCosta is sharing its methodology with the rest of the colleges in the region. It's this combination of disaggregating data by demographic characteristics and building capacity across colleges that will help move the needle to increasing economic mobility for all students in the San Diego–Imperial region.

Guiding the Student Experience through Pathway Navigation

The Pathway Navigation workgroup is one of the Consortium's five SWP workgroups, each focused on a key area to advance promising practices for student career success. This workgroup focuses on implementing equitable student onboarding practices – the early community college experiences that get students on the postsecondary path so that they are set up to persist and successfully complete their program of study. The Pathway Navigation workgroup has identified three research-based onboarding practices that the colleges should particularly focus on: comprehensive intake, differentiated orientation, and integrated career and education planning.

As a result of this guidance, the colleges have refined and improved their intake processes for gathering information about entering students so as to better orient students to their program of study and connect them to wraparound services and resources specific to their needs or circumstances (e.g., services for veterans, child care, or financial aid). Integrated career and education planning, meanwhile, is in development at some colleges and underway at others. Research shows that when students identify career interests and goals up front, they are better equipped to progress toward completion.⁴ To help students do so, San Diego City College, for example, has begun coordinating

efforts between student services and counseling. Job Placement Coordinator Sasha Knox stated, "We are institutionalizing the practice of career planning before education planning, training our counselors in career exploration practices and tools to facilitate a new process for career plans."

Innovative, equity-focused onboarding practices

Recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work for all students, each of the region's colleges customizes its onboarding practices to provide students with the specific supports they need to successfully navigate their journey. To understand equity gaps and identify student needs, Mesa College and MiraCosta College intentionally began by examining institutional data. Based on findings from that analysis:

- As a designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), Mesa College used its HSI grant to develop the Creating Rich Unique Intelligent Student Experiences (CRUISE) program, which SWP has supported and enhanced. CRUISE focuses on closing equity gaps among all students, particularly Latinx students, through engagement to build community and student confidence. Second- and third-year students serve as peer navigators to mentor incoming students. This peer-to-peer mentoring has positively impacted student retention, success rates, and academic performance. Notably, CRUISE program data show that the more contact mentees have with their mentors, the greater the retention rate.
- MiraCosta College developed the Academic and Career Pathway Student Success Team, focused on closing the equity gap for the three groups at the college most disproportionately impacted by equity: Black, Latinx, and adult (25 years and older) students. Using an approach informed by research and best practices, the team includes a counselor, faculty member(s), a success coach, a career liaison, and career peers, who provide students with varying types of support. Most important is ensuring that students receive their comprehensive education plan, which includes career planning, by the end of their first year of college – which research shows improves student persistence.

⁴ In her review of the literature on promising approaches to guidance and counseling, *Entering a Program: Helping Students Make Academic and Career Decisions*, Dr. Melinda Mechur Karp identifies four principles, including that career counseling should drive an integrated approach to advising. The report can be accessed at <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8CJ8BGD>.

These two examples reflect several years of looking at data, identifying research-based practices, planning, coordinating across departments, and implementing and refining strategies based on data. During summer 2021, Pathway Navigation community of practice (CoP) members from Mesa and MiraCosta Colleges shared these promising practices with other colleges in the region at a CoP session focused on exchanging strategies, ideas, research, and lessons learned related to Pathway Navigation.

Pathway Navigation community of practice

The Pathway Navigation CoP is an offshoot of the Pathway Navigation workgroup. The CoP exemplifies the evolution of a collaborative community built through relationships. Much larger than the Pathway Navigation workgroup, the CoP comprises representation from each college. Its 80-90 cross-functional members meet quarterly. Members help drive the agenda of this learning environment, which is open to all who are interested in sharing promising practices to better onboard students in an equitable way. One unintended, positive outcome of the CoP is that it has united the often-siloed arenas of student services, instruction, and counseling, thus enabling joint work across a campus or regionally, focused on establishing equitable onboarding practices.

Since its inception five years ago, the Pathway Navigation CoP has become a high-functioning group with consistent membership. As members are implementing this enormous change process on their own campuses, they use the CoP as a place to check in with colleagues going through similar experiences. Over the past years, each college has presented to the group about the college's practice-changing efforts and given updates on campus pilots underway and lessons learned.

One unintended, positive outcome of the CoP is that it has united the often-siloed arenas of student services, instruction, and counseling, thus enabling joint work across a campus or regionally, focused on establishing equitable onboarding practices.

The CoP is a safe place to be vulnerable. Members can share struggles related to the inequities they see in their campus's practices or in the data. The CoP is committed to looking at data to identify equity gaps and to change systems in ways that can improve outcomes for disproportionately impacted students. This equity-driven mission extends from the Pathway Navigation workgroup, whose lead, Dr. Claudia Estrada-Howell, Associate Dean of Career Education at San Diego Miramar College, consistently brings an equity-focused lens to decision-making. Her message is this: "It's about *all* students. If you fix the problem for the targeted group, it will improve performance for all."

Applying an Equity Lens as the Norm

The colleges' focus on equity as they engage with the Strong Workforce Faculty Institute, implement WBL, and improve Pathway Navigation demonstrates that applying an equity lens is becoming the norm. The Regional Consortium reinforces the practice by leveraging its grantmaking processes used to support change at each campus. Colleges applying for regional funds now must include an equity component in their grant applications. For example, the region's recent Request for Application guidelines for WBL grants required colleges to include equity-oriented outcomes. Notably, this requirement was recommended by the deans and associate deans, who are pivotal in working with faculty on equity-centered change at their campuses. This leadership synergy between the Regional Consortium and the colleges allows them to use their respective strengths to advance regional initiatives and systems change. "We've discovered that we can impact institutional behavior," said Amertah Perman, SDCCD Dean of Career Education and Workforce Development. "And if we know we can, then we have a responsibility to more intentionally, and more explicitly, focus on equity."

Going deeper with equity research projects

Two regional equity research projects are underway or planned for the future to inform institutional practices aimed at improving student success, particularly for Black and Latinx students. Like the Regional Consortium's reform efforts, these projects are made possible by the years invested in building trust and relationships within the region. One is a qualitative study conducted with San Diego Workforce Partnership to understand the barriers faced by

Black students who enroll and drop a class, withdraw from college and do not re-enroll with three years, or do not complete a degree after being enrolled for a lengthy amount of time. Student voices will inform a significant part of data collection.

The other project will build on the first equity project and focus on social inequities in employment in the region. Researchers will identify CE programs in the colleges where Black and Latinx students are completing programs of study, but are not moving out of entry-level jobs into living-wage jobs. The researchers will seek to identify barriers that may keep Black and Latinx students from returning to school to advance their careers, such as medical assistants who don't return to school to become registered nurses or licensed vocational nurses. The study will also examine industries where biases in hiring practices are barriers to employing more people of color. This follows up on a previous study by San Diego Workforce Partnership's Senior Economist and Project Lead, Dr. Daniel Enemark, which found that racism still plays a large role in the hiring behavior of US employers.⁵ Aware that it's more challenging to impact students after program completion, the project will develop strategies to improve how colleges can inform and educate students, while they are still enrolled, about their options for social mobility and about hiring biases in the field.

Making Strides...but More to Do

The state's investment in SWP has translated into an infusion of resources into the San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges, leading to innovative and inclusive structures, improved practices for increasing student success, and stronger cross-sector partnerships. Guided by equity-minded goals, these efforts have sharpened the region's work to create greater economic opportunities and outcomes for traditionally marginalized students and their families. SWP's focus on career education spotlights good work that faculty and students have been doing in CE programs all along and brings workforce preparation to the forefront. "SWP has elevated CE and brought it to the table," said Regional Consortium Chair Dr. Brown.

The stakeholders in San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges have demonstrated significant progress in how they work together and embrace change to advance their region's goals. They have carried out significant collective work and shifted mindsets, accomplishments that will serve as sustainable assets even after SWP funding ends. Conscious of the need for greater improvement, the region's leaders, faculty, and staff are committed to continued bold action, especially in terms of expanding efforts to address job market inequities and increasing access to high-demand and well-paying jobs.

To learn more about this work, please contact Dr. Danene Brown, Chair, San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges Regional Consortium, at danene.brown@gcccd.edu.

Developed in partnership with WestEd, this article is part of a series about the collaborative efforts of the San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges Regional Consortium to strengthen education and workforce opportunities and to increase economic mobility in the region. For more information, visit <https://myworkforceconnection.org/>

The authors are grateful to the many Regional Consortium members who generously contributed their time and insights to the making of this article: Javier Ayala, Alex Berry, Danene Brown, Claudia Estrada-Howell, Ben Gamboa, Sasha Knox, Jennifer Lewis, Stephanie Lewis, Jeanie Machado Tyler, Larry McLemore, Tina Ngo Bartel, Amertah Perman, Nichol Roe, Monica Romero, and Efrain Silva.

*Suggested Citation: San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges Regional Consortium. (2022). *Now we know our regional might: Advancing equity and economic mobility through career education.**

⁵ In his 2021 study for San Diego Workforce Partnership, Dr. Daniel Enemark examined about 50 studies and conducted qualitative research to learn about employer attitudes toward hiring justice-involved applicants. The report, *Employer Attitudes toward Hiring Justice-Involved Workers*, can be accessed at <https://workforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Employer-Attitudes-Toward-Hiring-Justice-involved-Workers.pdf>.