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# Stated Value, Renewed Commitment? Community and Technical Colleges' Response to Racial (In)equities During COVID-19

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## ABSTRACT

In this study, we interrogated the efforts adopted by community and technical colleges in a Midwestern state to address racial inequities since the onset of COVID-19. We analyzed such efforts reported in institutional newsletters and associated media through critical content analysis supported by text mining techniques. Our findings demonstrate a notable reckoning with racial inequities on the part of institutional leaders and stakeholders. However, many initiatives remain short-term solutions and are detached from a holistic equity focus. This study challenges community and technical college leadership to reimagine their policies, structures, and practices toward advancing racial equity.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

COVID-19 crisis; community college; technical college; racial equity; critical content analysis

## Purpose of the study

The unprecedented challenges brought upon by the COVID-19 global pandemic have amplified long-standing racial inequities and injustices infiltrating all levels of society, with racially minoritized populations, such as Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color, experiencing greater health and economic disparities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *n.d.*; Maxwell & Solomon, 2020) and inequitable access to education opportunities (Fogel, 2020). During the pandemic, enduring racial injustices were brought to even greater light by the police killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, among other Black people, along with xenophobic violence against Asian and Asian Americans, to name just a few of these incidences of police brutality and racial discrimination.

As racial justice movements gained national attention, postsecondary institutions have a key responsibility to lead efforts aimed at dismantling systemic inequities that have hindered the educational opportunity of racially minoritized students. This call to action is relevant for community and technical colleges — primarily public open-access institutions that offer certificates,

diplomas, associate degrees, and transfer/liberal arts programs, among others.<sup>1</sup> While these institutions are lauded for their open access, affordability, and flexibility (Baber et al., 2019; Gault et al., 2014), racial diversity and equity remain thorny issues of concern, with Students of Color often experiencing a lack of representation (Baber et al., 2019), hostile environments (Rainey et al., 2018), and disparate access and outcomes (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017; Wang, 2020).

As the pandemic and the nation's racial reckoning continue to challenge institutional leadership across postsecondary education, it is pivotal to have a clear view of whether and how community and technical colleges make changes and adaptations to address racial inequities amid interlacing crises. Further, because dismantling systemic barriers facing historically minoritized students is at the heart of equity efforts (Cuellar & Gándara, 2021; Felix & Castro, 2018; Pasque et al., 2022), it is critical to examine whether and how racial equity initiatives depict existing inequities within structural barriers. These insights will inform current and future efforts in bringing about change toward diverse, inclusive, and most importantly, racially equitable and just education at community and technical colleges. Guided by this larger purpose, our study examines the following research questions: *What new policies, practices, and initiatives with a focus on racial (in)equities have emerged in a community and technical college system since the onset of COVID-19? How are racial (in)equities depicted in the description of these efforts in light of systemic and structural barriers facing Students of Color?*

## Background literature

In this section, we review prior literature and emerging research to contextualize our inquiry. We describe how the pandemic has amplified long-standing issues and priorities facing community and technical colleges, particularly racial equity. Additionally, we consider the growing body of literature that adopts race-centered approaches, including Critical Race Theory (CRT) and race-conscious perspectives, to gain insights into the intricate dynamics of racial inequities within these institutions.

### Community and technical colleges during the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has propelled community and technical colleges into an influx of various challenges due to disruptions to instruction continuity. Common challenges included uncertainties and barriers associated with the sudden pivot to online instruction (Floyd et al., 2022), declining enrollment (Brock & Diwa, 2021), budget disruptions and constraints (Zottarelli et al., 2022), among others. For technical programs in particular, the unexpected and rapid transition to online instruction resulted in the loss of access

to hands-on practice, lab components, and limited quality and quantity of learning materials that are traditionally needed for courses (Thanawala et al., 2022).

While colleges rapidly responded to many challenges, they were also confronted with ever-changing health guidelines that complicated institutional decision-making in regard to the safety of their campuses, students, and local communities (D'Amico et al., 2022). In light of these concerns in times of crisis, community and technical colleges have prioritized continuity in students' education and provided them with supports for essential needs, including food, housing, technology and digital equipment, and childcare (McCarthy & Ferreira, 2022; Strayhorn, 2022). Remote advising and tutoring services have also been offered on many campuses, along with altered library and bookstore services (Garcia Falconetti & Bottorff, 2022). Nonetheless, the pandemic has constrained colleges' overall capacity to holistically support students, often in the absence of emergency plans for responding to pandemic and global health crises (Garcia Falconetti & Bottorff, 2022).

### ***Racial inequities amplified by the pandemic***

Communities of Color have experienced the most severe effects of COVID-19, such as disproportionate infection and death rates, employment loss, and income insecurity (Brock & Diwa, 2021). These inequities also manifest in community and technical colleges. Notably, the declining enrollment rates facing these colleges nationally (Fink & Jenkins, 2020) are particularly pronounced among Black and Latinx students (Bulman & Fairlie, 2021). This situation was further complicated by the swift shift to online learning, when technology and related supports were limited or nonexistent for racially minoritized students (Anderson et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2019). These students also faced disproportionately lower rates of online course completion due to added family responsibilities, along with digital inequities impacting access to equipment, broadband, and a safe space conducive to their learning (García-Louis et al., 2022; McCarthy & Ferreira, 2022; Thanawala et al., 2022).

While these racial equity gaps were amplified by the pandemic, they are not new to community and technical colleges. Predating the pandemic, these institutions were already challenged by persistent equity concerns, as reflected in racial disparities in access (Bragg & Durham, 2012), degree completion (Lin et al., 2023), and transfer outcomes (Crisp & Nuñez, 2014; Wang, 2020). In particular, technical education programs have long experienced a significant overrepresentation of white male students (Reed et al., 2018), along with persistent disparities in degree attainment and postgraduate earnings between Students of Color and their white counterparts (Anderson et al., 2021). These institutions have implemented laudable initiatives to reduce racial equity

gaps by addressing inadequate supports, limited resources, and stereotypes and bias regarding Students of Color (Gándara et al., 2012; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012). Yet, efforts were not widespread, an issue further challenged by the underrepresentation of People of Color in leadership positions and thus constraining institutional capacity to address systemic inequities (Eddy, 2018).

### ***Extant literature centering racial equity in community colleges***

Beyond documenting enduring racial inequities within community and technical colleges, a growing body of research employs race-centered frameworks, offering critical insights into how race intricately plays out in organizational structures, policy implementation, leadership practices, and student experiences. For instance, Jain and colleagues (Jain, 2009; Jain et al., 2011, 2020) and George Mwangi et al. (2023) utilized Critical Race Theory (CRT) to interrogate transfer as a racialized and gendered process. Other scholars adopted a race-conscious perspective to shed light on the experiences and persistence of various minoritized student groups (Gaxiola Serrano, 2017; Giraldo et al., 2017; Mertes, 2013; Naca, 2022). Taking an organizational lens, McNaughtan et al. (2021) employed CRT to investigate the unfolding of racism within community college spaces, while also illuminating the power of Black presidents in fostering an antiracist culture. In their recent publication, McCambly et al. (2023) utilized Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations to reframe community colleges as subjected to racialization, drawing attention to the systemic marginalization experienced by these institutions.

Taken together, the issues exposed in the existing literature are indicative of underlying systemic issues of racial inequities within enduring historical, economic, and educational contexts, which were brought to greater light due to the larger racial justice movement that beseeches community and technical colleges to reexamine their actions and responsibility in addressing racial disparities (Floyd et al., 2022; Ison et al., 2022). It stands as a key challenge for these institutions to live up to their espoused values and goals in advancing students' education and mobility (Rosen & Dalporto, 2020). These volatile times offer a unique opportunity to examine how community and technical colleges show up to long-existing racial inequities as they reach this historic tipping point. Timely empirical research delving into such efforts will shed light on promising approaches and persistent barriers, providing valuable insights to inform future policy and action steps. To that end, our study focuses on how institutional communications depict and engage with racial (in)equities and their underlying systemic barriers, thus contributing to the expanding body of critical inquiry previously reviewed.

## Theoretical framework

We adopted Critical Race Theory (CRT) to guide our study. Rooted in critical legal studies (West, 1995), a critical race perspective was introduced by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) to serve as an analytical apparatus to explain inequity in education and society by highlighting the central role of race, property rights as opposed to human rights, as well as the intersection of race and property. Various scholars (e.g., Dixson & Rousseau, 2016; Espino, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2019; Yosso, 2005) have since articulated key tenets underlying CRT. Despite nuanced differences across these scholarly treatments, we adopt Solorzano and Yosso's (2001) conceptualization that delineates five of the key tenets that form the foundation of CRT: a) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; b) the challenge to dominant ideology, such as notions of colorblindness, meritocracy, neutrality, and objectivity, commonly held by institutions to perpetuate institutionalized forms of racism; c) the centrality of experiential knowledge, highlighting the lived experiences of People of Color; d) the transdisciplinary perspective that views race as a socially constructed concept situated within political, historical, and contemporary contexts; and e) the commitment to social justice, seeking to advance solutions to eliminate racial oppression and marginalization.

As a malleable approach to interrogating how race and racism impact, and are embedded within, societal and institutional structures, practices, and discourses (Yosso, 2005), CRT represents an appropriate framework for our study since it allows us to closely examine whether and how the emerging racial equity efforts in community and technical colleges, as reflected in their communications, indeed challenge the status quo of racial inequality that has permeated institutional policy and programming. It also critically grounds our analysis in discerning whether and how these efforts attend to reducing, or instead perpetuate, harm in policies and structures.

## Research design

### *Critical content analysis*

We employed critical content analysis (CCA) as our primary method, supported by text mining as a data reduction and organizational tool. Broadly, content analysis is applied to words, concepts, and themes within qualitative text data to make sense of their meaning and relationships (Krippendorff, 2018). As a form of content analysis, CCA is an umbrella term that describes a range of research methods that engage and interpret written artifacts grounded in a critical stance (Utt & Short, 2018). With a focus on "locating power in social practices by understanding, uncovering and transforming conditions of inequality and addressing broader contexts of structural inequities" (Beach et al., 2009, p. 129), CCA centers the role of theory and adopts an

explicit critical lens that involves the interrogation of systems of power and inequities (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). CCA is particularly suitable for addressing our research topic that focuses on racial (in)equities through voluminous text data (e.g., websites, news stories).<sup>2</sup>

### ***Research context and data source***

Our study is situated within a public 2-year college system in a Midwestern state that consists of close to 20 institutions, with their respective campuses spread across urban, suburban, and rural areas. The system serves over 300,000 students and offers approximately 500 associate degree, diploma, and certificate programs. The colleges in the system serve multiple missions and functions spanning continuing education, workforce development, collegiate transfer, and community enrichment, but all share a prominent focus on career and technical education as well as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs. Situated within a predominantly white state, most, if not all, institutions are also predominantly white. Still, when compared with the state population, the system disproportionately serves more Students of Color, especially Hispanic students. Table 1 presents additional contexts in close connection to our study.

Because policies, practices, and initiatives connected to racial (in)equities since the pandemic are often described and shared via internet-based publications, we relied on the system's weekly newsletters as our first access points and retrieved both entries in the newsletters themselves and the websites, news items, and other media sources embedded in the newsletters using their hyperlinks. We set the search window to March 1, 2020 to June 1, 2021, and as a result, curated 64 newsletters and 1,255 unique web-based publications.

### ***Data analysis***

We approached data analysis through five steps (see Figure 1). The first step involved gaining familiarity with the original sources and performing data screening. During this step, we adopted text mining techniques that help harness the unstructured and widely dispersed data, as they are difficult to process manually (Munzert et al., 2014). We applied a set of keywords (or target words) to identify relevant sources that directly pertained to our research questions and grounded in CRT. These keywords included race, racism, anti-racist, anti-racism, racial equity, racial justice, Black Lives Matter, racial diversity, racially diverse, racial oppression, police brutality, Black, Asian, Indigenous, Latinx, Hispanic, BIPOC, Students of Color, and so on. For terms depicting students by race/ethnicity, we also accounted for their multiple expressions in media, such as "Latina," "Latino," and "Latine" in addition to "Latinx," and "African American" in addition to "Black."

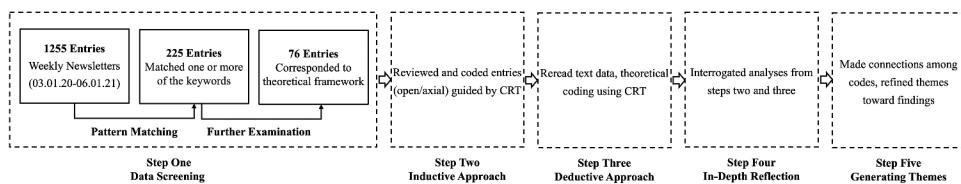
**Table 1.** Relevant institutional contexts and distribution of key domains of initiatives.

Institution	Locale	Size <sup>a</sup>	Mission <sup>b</sup>	Race/Ethnicity		Race-Centered Initiatives Covered by Media <sup>c</sup>				
				Students of Color	White	Leadership and Institutional Statements	Scholarships	Data Disaggregation	Longer-Term Initiatives	
1	City	Large	Comprehensive	38.8%	61.2%	9	6	3	9	
2	City	Large	Comprehensive	66.2%	33.8%	5	1	7	9	
3	City	Large	Comprehensive	19.8%	80.2%	2	0	0	2	
4	City	Medium	Technical	20.2%	79.8%	0	0	0	4	
5	City	Medium	Comprehensive	33.9%	66.1%	0	0	0	1	
6	City	Medium	Comprehensive	25.2%	74.8%	1	0	2	1	
7	City	Small	Technical	31.9%	68.1%	0	0	0	0	
8	Suburb	Large	Technical	31.0%	69.0%	0	0	1	1	
9	Suburb	Medium	Technical	41.1%	58.9%	1	6	2	5	
10	Suburb	Medium	Technical	29.9%	70.1%	1	0	0	3	
11	Suburb	Small	Technical	33.5%	66.5%	2	1	1	2	
12	Rural	Small	Technical	25.8%	74.2%	0	1	1	1	
13	Rural	Small	Technical	17.1%	82.9%	0	0	0	0	
14	Rural	Small	Comprehensive	14.1%	85.9%	1	0	1	1	
15	Rural	Small	Technical	21.3%	78.7%	0	0	0	0	
16	Rural	Small	Technical	13.4%	86.6%	0	0	2	2	
Not specified	Systemwide			32.5%	67.5%	1	0	2	1	

<sup>a</sup>Institution's size is based on 2021–2022 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) students' enrollments. According to Carnegie Classification 2021: Size and Setting for two-year institutions, very small = FTE enrollment of fewer than 500 students; small = FTE enrollment of 500–1,999 students; and large = FTE enrollment of 2,000–4,999 students.

<sup>b</sup>"Comprehensive" refers to the institutions whose mission and offerings include 4-year transfer opportunities, university-level liberal arts education, and bachelor's degrees. "Technical" refers to institutions that mainly focus on career and technical education, as well as workforce development.

<sup>c</sup>Some of the media entries reported multiple efforts that fell into multiple categories. Thus, the counts reported add up to more than 76 entries.



**Figure 1.** Critical content analysis procedures.

Specifically, we first imported 1,255 entries into R, a versatile software environment for statistical computing and text mining. Using the pattern matching function in R, we identified 225 entries that contained one or more of the keywords. We then created an Excel file that includes the content of these entries along with their corresponding website hyperlinks, publication dates, and retrieval dates. We further examined these entries to ensure that all retrieved content was directly relevant to our research, with particular attention to whether each entry centered race as a social issue or construct, conveyed experiences of People of Color, or had a social justice orientation — all grounded within our theoretical framework. During this process, we eliminated duplicated sources and entries that only contained one or more keywords but did not actually describe or discuss initiatives with a focus on race or racial equity. For example, we removed entries that included images of People of Color but did not reference them in the text, or only listed resources on racial issues without further elaboration in the entry. These data-cleaning procedures resulted in a final analytic sample of 76 entries<sup>3</sup> that directly corresponded to our theoretical framework.<sup>4</sup>

Starting the second step, we proceeded with a critical analysis of the content of these entries using CCA. With a shared understanding that the “critical” in CCA signifies an explicit researcher stance to employ inquiry as a way to interrogate inequities, CCA draws upon a range of analytical approaches across disciplines. Therefore, during this second phase of data analysis, we conducted inductive, open coding. Specifically, we independently reviewed in depth each of the identified text sources to familiarize ourselves with the content and context of each source. During this step, we adopted an inductive approach to code the content in each text entry from a descriptive, exploratory stance (Saldaña, 2013) and recorded emerging codes, categories, and our own reflective notes in the Excel spreadsheet we developed. This phase, while inductive in nature, was guided by CRT’s larger framework that served to ground our initial coding in response to anything in the data that “spoke” to us regarding the nuanced, implicit, or explicit ways in which race and racism were represented in the media sources.

This open coding process set the stage for the subsequent analysis to address our research questions in ways that were both theoretically focused and well-informed by the data. Following inductive, open coding, we adopted axial

coding approaches (Allen, 2017) to connect, elaborate, and synthesize the codes and categories into broad themes. This step allowed us to arrive at the broad areas to describe emerging efforts (to address our first question) and the substantive theme or themes underneath each area (to attend to both of our research questions).

In the third step, we moved toward a deductive approach by rereading the text data within and across categories and themes, and identified key elements informed by CRT (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). To facilitate this step, we developed a theoretical coding structure using the five CRT tenets to explore answers in the data in response to our research questions. To illustrate, engaging the first tenet, we examined whether and how race and racism are (not) regarded as central to educational inequity and the notions or facts to which disparities are attributed, as reflected in institutional statements. The second tenet helped examine the motivations and proposed solutions and their potential to challenge or move away from dominant notions of colorblindness, meritocracy, neutrality, and objectivity. The third tenet guided us toward centering the experiential knowledge of diverse groups (e.g., staff or students) in investigating the efforts in a way that questions how marginalized groups' experiences and knowledge are situated in identifying problems and creating solutions. Engaging the fourth tenet, we paid attention to whether and how colleges framed issues of racial inequity and structured institutional actions within political, historical, and contemporary contexts. Finally, we centered the fifth tenet of commitment to social justice by examining institutional action in seeking justice, including the colleges' and system's responses and related initiatives concerning racial unrest and other initiatives.

In the fourth step, we engaged in an in-depth reflection and reexamination of the previous analyses outlined in the second and third steps. In this process, we interrogated our data analysis procedures, sensemaking, and interpretation, engaging all our initial rounds of codes, reflective notes, and our framework. In the fifth and final step, we individually constructed relationships among the codes and discussed them to make further modifications, ultimately arriving at common findings, and critical themes and associated sub-themes if applicable. To ensure the trustworthiness of our findings, across all stages of analysis, we examined our coding from our independent processes and calibrated until we reached consensus. Throughout data analysis, we purposefully centered CRT to stay truthful to our critical stance by taking into consideration five of the key CRT tenets selected for our study.

### ***Researcher positionality***

As equity-guided and equity-centered educational researchers, our racial, social, and professional identities directly influenced and continued to shape how we saw the education problem at hand and how we positioned ourselves

in our inquiry. We all identify as women and members of racially minoritized groups in our specific field of study and practice. Although our professional and personal journeys varied, our paths as past or present students in American institutions were filled with structural barriers and limited access to opportunities at the systemic level; ultimately, they all led us to develop a close affinity with community and technical colleges' open access mission and cultivate a deep commitment to the study and advancement of their leadership and practice. From our collaborative research experiences, we have witnessed how community and technical colleges open doors to marginalized populations whose access to higher education was historically either limited or denied by higher education. At the same time, our observations have equally shed a clear light on the long-standing equity gaps and concerns within these institutions and programs that must be made explicit to facilitate change.

Both inspired and "troubled," we came into this research with an acute awareness of the assumptions and biases we hold, as well as the tension we experience from navigating our advocacy for and critiques of these institutions — a tension further complicated by the privilege associated with our positionality as well-resourced education researchers situated within a "prestigious" research-intensive 4-year institution when conducting this study. To reconcile and harness these various positionnalities and conflicts, we attempted to be as transparent as possible toward our audience and one another throughout the research process. We also engaged practitioner colleagues at community and technical colleges to read drafts of our research and provide feedback along the way. Aligned with critical research (Bryman, 2016; Holmes, 2020; Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), we did this because we view knowledge as socially constructed and never politically neutral, and we strove to ensure that the interests and views of various groups, including those of our practitioner colleagues, were not neglected or marginalized. Collectively, our ultimate purpose with this critical study was to interrogate and illuminate persistent racial inequities that must be attended to in the context of community and technical colleges.

### ***Limitations and caveats***

We must note a few limitations and caveats for interpreting our findings. Because we relied on information and stories published in newsletters and media sources, our data were not fully inclusive of every institutional effort addressing racial equities during our study's timeframe. Nonetheless, without being able to document all such efforts in a feasible, exhaustive manner, these sources provided reliable and significant evidence of what types of efforts were implemented, and equally important, what was regarded by the colleges and

the media as “news-worthy” to share publicly and communicate with their stakeholders.

In addition, our study is situated within the specified period from March 2020 to June 2021, instead of an expansive time frame, given the confines of a singular study. This limits our ability to longitudinally follow these institutions both before and post the pandemic to examine the full development and evolution of racial equity initiatives over time. Further, a limitation that comes with analysis of media sources is that, meant for a broad readership and written in an accessible and straightforward fashion, such publications are not always filled with complex and intricate details that we would have desired in analyzing nuanced racial equity issues. Finally, due to these benefits and constraints of the sources we used, our analysis of the publicly shared media is aimed at understanding what types of efforts have been documented and likely prioritized, thus allowing us as researchers to identify patterns, contexts, and any important missing components for addressing persistent structural barriers to advancing racial equity, as opposed to making conclusive judgments about whether individual institutions have thrived or fallen short in this regard.

## Findings

As reflected in [Table 1](#), our analysis revealed the following key domains under which the new policies, practices, and initiatives<sup>5</sup> with a focus on racial (in) equities fell: a) leadership and institutional statements, b) new scholarships, c) data disaggregation, and d) longer-term racial equity initiatives (such as creating and filling diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) leadership positions, professional development efforts, and a few focused and substantially resourced equity initiatives). A simple descriptive breakdown<sup>6</sup> showed that 29% of the 76 entries pertained to institutional statements and leadership speeches as rapid responses to racial injustices or to inform the college about the pandemic-related updates that center racial equity; 18% addressed scholarship opportunities<sup>7</sup> available to students, especially Students of Color; 26% reported disaggregated data that highlighted racial disparities among student enrollment and outcomes; and 62% described initiatives that were longer-term efforts including the creation of new DEI leadership positions; professional development for faculty and staff; and equity-focused initiatives. Notably, these four domains were uniquely associated with racial issues and are distinct from other reported efforts that occurred during the pandemic. Further, there were variations in the reported efforts across the colleges in the system, with greater concentrations from large, comprehensive colleges situated in cities, and fewer media-reported efforts at small technical colleges in rural areas.

We now zero in on specific findings considering our two research questions. Due to their embedded and intertwined nature, we organize our findings

based on the broad areas of emerging efforts and initiatives focusing on racial (in)equity as reflected in our first question, and equally offer detailed findings in response to our second research question regarding the depiction and reflection (or lack thereof) in these efforts and initiatives of structural barriers facing Students of Color.

### ***Leadership and institutional statements***

The media-reported institutional statements and speeches from leadership (often the college president or other senior leadership responsible for student supports or academic affairs) with an explicit focus on race, racism, or racial inequities were almost exclusively in response to police brutality and often in the wake of the George Floyd murder. Although widely varied, these statements and speeches explicitly called out the unjust nature of the death of George Floyd along with Breonna Taylor by naming these tragedies using terms such as “police brutality,” “right-out racism,” “injustice,” and “racist policies.” Another common theme of these statements and speeches was their emphasis on racism as a larger societal issue that affects everyone and every domain of society. As a telling example, a statement made by the president of one of the largest colleges in the system said, “[police brutality] must end. We simply cannot stand by and say, ‘It doesn’t affect me.’ . . . It affects you, even if you don’t think it does.” As another example in a college statement about top leadership’s engagement with racial equity work, “Talking about racism in the U.S. can be exhausting. Racist systems, policies and actions are being held under light and examined more than ever before. Conversations on a mass scale are being had about racism’s presence in education, health care, careers, neighborhoods, policing, and justice.” Lastly, these statements also demonstrated a change orientation, particularly drawing attention to the importance of developing and growing equity efforts and making sure that commitments transpire in action. For example, a college president said, “Even right now, the college has looked at the equity and inclusion plan that was developed in 2017 and has now created a living document that basically transforms and transitions and actually grows with [the college] and the populations that we serve.” On occasion, institutional leaders’ narratives also clearly acknowledged institutional and systemic barriers. As stated by one college president, “We are all committed to removing those systemic and institutional barriers to student success” when introducing the newly built public-private collaboration for retaining Students of Color.

### ***New scholarships***

Closely related to the first area, there was a substantial number of new scholarships<sup>8</sup> established. The bulk of these new scholarships was created in

honor of Black people murdered due to police brutality, such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. These scholarships varied in size and often involved private donations initiated by college leaders, faculty, or other donors. The eligibility criteria focus was Students of Color, with a few explicitly developed to support Black students who are older adults or the Black community writ large. The issues around “inequities” were commonly introduced in reference to newly developed scholarships, citing the rationale that “[such resources] could help reduce educational inequities.”

Further, some of the new scholarships extended beyond these contexts and focus by addressing more broadly framed issues of racial inequities. As an example, in the announcement by a private agency to create a scholarship for supporting Students of Color in pursuit of graphic design, the CEO stated that the “Black Lives Matter movement showed us it is not enough for our business to be a welcoming environment for People of Color. We need to attract Black talent to our city and provide them paths to success within our organization.” Overall, these scholarships appear to serve as a cost-reduction mechanism for individual students to offset part of the financial burden associated with their education. However, the size of the award and the heavy reliance on individual donations raise concerns around the support’s impact and sustainability.

### ***Data disaggregation***

Before we dive into this particular area, it is important to mention that, because the colleges we studied have always had access to their own institutional data, we double-checked similar news sources (notably the system newsletters that had been regularly published pre-COVID-19) and confirmed that these types of data disaggregation and their framing did not predate the pandemic. We thereby present two main themes in this area as equally emerging efforts in response to the pandemic. First, the colleges used disaggregated data to highlight their role in serving a significant proportion of Students of Color and to support their efforts for more equitable hiring, staff recruitment, and overall commitment to racial equity. For instance, stating the institutional commitment to equity, a dean of student access and success at one of the colleges said, “Roughly 30% of our students are minorities or People of Color, from diverse backgrounds. So based off of that one of the core pillars within equity, is to make sure that . . . [our college] is reflective of our student body.” Noticeably, little to no deficit language or framing appeared in the news entries that attributed low “success” rates among Students of Color to individual students’ fault and responsibility. But rather, disaggregated data were often provided to support institutional commitment to advancing racial equity. In some cases, data were presented to highlight racial disparities, engaging terms such as “inequities” in reference to the mismatch between student demographics and those of the local community, and to pinpoint

structural issues such as the lack of access to financial resources among racially minoritized students.

Second, data disaggregation was used to draw attention to racial equity gaps within the colleges and the state system, particularly in graduation rates, as a call to action toward achieving equitable educational outcomes. For example, a report extensively cited data from the National Student Clearinghouse when breaking down statewide longitudinal graduation rates, pinpointing racial disparities, with Students of Color, including Black, Hispanic, and Asian students trailing their white counterparts in six-year graduation rates. One of the news entries used the metaphor “putting a man on the moon” to describe both the challenges and hopes of maximizing college graduation rates for Students of Color and other underserved populations. Both daunting endeavors; one already attained, and the next in sight. Although the reference to the disproportionate graduation rates in this and other sources paints a clear picture of persistent racial equity gaps in educational attainment, the call to action often was not explicitly discussed in tandem with structural conditions underlying these gaps.

### ***Longer-term racial equity initiatives***

The fourth broad area of emerging efforts was also among the most robust and complex for us to make sense of. We coded this as longer-term racial equity initiatives given that these varied efforts all shared the nature of moving beyond a one-shot effort or statement and extending into the future in a longer-range and conceivably more sustainable way. Specifically, we observed three key subareas for longer-term initiatives.

The first was creating new positions and hiring leaders that serve in roles as chief diversity officers. About a quarter of all colleges in the state system created brand new positions equivalent to chief diversity officers (CDOs) who provide leadership and direction for enhancing institutional equity and inclusion. In news releases reporting these initiatives, the officers’ roles in closing equity gaps were highlighted, as well as evaluating and sustaining efforts toward equity as a strategic priority. As one source announcing the hiring of the college’s new CDO mentioned, “We are dedicated to promoting equitable outcomes for all students and employees by creating an inclusive and supportive college environment … Working with [new officer] to help lead these initiatives will help [us] further support, expand and strengthen our efforts in an intentional and effective way.” Or as in another similar announcement at a different college, “With this new position on the Executive Leadership Team, we will elevate our focus on ensuring access, effective teaching and learning, and success for all People of Color.”

Somewhat related, top leadership hiring during the pandemic also saw an unprecedented emphasis on racial diversity. When a college announced its

first ever woman and Latina president, its statement emphasized the new leader's potential contributions as "a dynamic, engaging, and thoughtful leader with a proven track record" to the college as well as the inclusive search process. The newly announced president also stated that her identities as a woman, Latina, refugee, and English learner would help her understand the challenges students face.

The second subarea was professional development for faculty and staff. Many colleges implemented multiple virtual events or speaker series featuring experts on racial issues. A newsletter released by the central system office in November 2020 indicated that many colleges "require equity and inclusion training for staff and hold summits with their community to include the voices of marginalized populations." At the system level, a conference on race and ethnicity was held during the pandemic that brought together employees, students, and community members to discuss issues concerning "barriers to inclusion for populations like English Language Learners, refugees and immigrants, populations of color, veterans and folks with disabilities." Many institutions also had their individual strategies to provide professional development opportunities for faculty and staff. For example, several institutions provided multiple racial diversity training programs for faculty, staff, and students; supported employee-led affinity groups; and integrated diversity training as a formal part of faculty development and review.

The third subarea pertained to a number of equity-focused initiatives that were holistic and longer-term in nature. Although different in planning, contexts, and models, the major goals of all such initiatives were to help Students of Color persist and graduate. The students served by the initiatives included Women of Color in STEM, Students of Color in technical education, Students of Color in healthcare programs, and Native American students. These programs often reflect the multifaceted institutional missions and roles, spanning career and technical education, workforce development, transfer, and community enrichment. Across these programs, we saw a pledge to long-term, holistic support for student success toward equitable outcomes. For instance, some institutions created paid positions for students to serve as equity fellows or ambassadors. Many colleges also collaborated with outside entities, including 4-year institutions, to launch multi-year projects in building racially equitable career and/or transfer pathways. Another key part was advising and mentoring to support persistence and success among Students of Color. The majority of the initiatives designated long-term financial support to students and opportunities to engage with employers and professionals for sustainable outcomes post-graduation. The initiatives also included new partnerships among community and technical colleges, 4-year universities, industry, and professional organizations.

Overall, the narrative around these initiatives highlighted them as "a way to begin righting the ship against systemic racism in the workforce," pointing to

the need for change in the existing systems and structures as the wrong approach for contemporary times. Further, the reporting of these initiatives appears to prioritize their potentially transformative, generative impacts on advancing racial equity. As stated in a report covering one of the initiatives, “[This program is] a door to opportunity that can lead to generational change.” Overall, long-term change was reflected in the narratives as both the driving factor to create these initiatives and a long overdue task for higher education to address enduring equity gaps.

## Discussion and implications

Although the institutions in our study were highly responsive to the various pandemic-imposed challenges, as reflected in well over 1,000 initiatives put into place, only a small proportion of the reported efforts touched upon racial issues, with an even smaller percentage that addressed racism and racial inequities amplified during the pandemic. This small number is an issue of concern speaking to outstanding racial challenges, structures, and barriers at these institutions and/or prioritization in communicating such critical efforts, making the advancement of racial equity in community and technical colleges timely and long overdue.

To make deeper sense of what we found, we critically analyzed and interrogated the alignment — or a lack thereof — between the emerging racial equity efforts and our theoretical framework. On a broad level, our findings demonstrate a notable, albeit incomplete and still evolving, reckoning with racial inequities on the part of community and technical college leaders and various stakeholders. This is often indicated in a growing, explicitly communicated institutional responsibility for moving away from dominant ideologies, removing barriers, and taking intentional action to promote racial equity. Through these emerging efforts and initiatives intended to address racial equity gaps, we see suggestive evidence that points to an increased awareness that may lead to well-informed change and solutions. Meanwhile, it is also clear that the many layers that comprise racial equity have yet to come to fruition in the reported efforts. In particular, except for a few initiatives with potential to take on systemic racial inequities at scale, many of these emerging efforts continue to be short-term, isolated solutions, with opportunities for systemic change, such as program and policy development, remaining detached from a holistic equity focus. Our findings also reflect the often messy and complicated nature of communicating and tackling racial inequities in higher education writ large. While community and technical colleges are historically regarded as engines for democracy and mobility that serve diverse student populations (Cohen et al., 2014), they continue to grapple with the hard work of combatting racial inequities. In [Table 2](#), we provide a high-level summary that outlines key findings in light of the CRT tenets.

**Table 2.** Key findings along five key CRT tenets.

CRT Tenets	Domain 1 (Leadership and institutional statements)	Domain 2 (New scholarships)	Domain 3 (Data disaggregation)	Domain 4 (Longer-term racial equity initiatives)
Centrality and intersectionality of race and racism	Named race and racism as affecting everyone and other social domains.	Limited to no reference to race and racism as central.	Limited reference to race and racism as central to the educational contexts.	Referenced systemic issues.
	Didn't attribute them as root causes.	Overall lack of acknowledgment of intersectionality.	No reference to racism as cause for inequities. Overall lack of acknowledgment of intersectionality.	Intended to remedy past wrongs.
	Overall lack of acknowledgment of intersectionality.			
Challenge dominant ideology	Challenged notion of colorblindness, but did not name other commonly held notions such as meritocracy and neutrality	Challenges meritocracy to some extent by act of focusing Students of Color.	Less deficit framing, trending away from notions of meritocracy, objectivity, and neutrality.	Acknowledged institutions' responsibility, challenged the notions of meritocracy and neutrality.
Experiential knowledge	Limited reference of the history of lived experiences of People of Color.	Highlighted both talent and structural (including financial) barriers as part of lived experiences of People of Color.	No explicit reference to the history or lived experiences.	Connecting Students of Color and mentors from similar backgrounds. Somewhat attuned to experiential knowledge of People of Color.
Race as socially constructed	Explicit about political, historical, and contemporary contexts.	Somewhat attuned to the cotemporary and historical contexts.	Limited and no reference to social and various other contexts shaping what was shown in the data.	Attuned to various contexts. Recognized race is socially constructed (workforce, STEM, healthcare, etc.). Focused on addressing holistic nature of racism.
Commitment to social justice	Strong action orientation toward seeking justice.	Reactive, one-shot effort in the wake of police brutality and in memory of the victims.	Data used as the rationale for why institutions must work toward equity and social justice.	Strong commitment to social impact and justice.

We now turn to a more elaborated discussion of the findings according to each of the selected CRT tenets. Our study revealed that the narratives in the media that cover leadership and institutional statements and long-term equity initiatives were more explicit in naming racism and racial inequities; whereas efforts around new scholarships and data disaggregation were rarely depicted in ways that pinpoint race, racism, and intersectionality as central, permeating societal issues. On the other hand, all the media reports on these efforts referenced a strong commitment to

social justice, with some specifically confronting dominant ideologies such as meritocracy, objectivity, and neutrality. Further, the depiction of leadership statements and long-term equity initiatives acknowledged the socially constructed nature of race and race issues, and in many instances, it also tackled race and racism from a transdisciplinary approach and engaged experiential knowledge of People of Color when naming racial inequities. However, the narratives describing efforts in the domains of data disaggregation and development of new scholarships often stayed at the descriptive and superficial level, without touching upon deeply intertwined historical, political, and societal contexts undergirding race and racism.

Next, we highlight several key observations and implications based on our findings. First, although institutional leaders were bold in explicitly naming racism as a societal issue, there was limited to no acknowledgment in leadership statements that squarely called out structural and systemic racism as the root cause for educational equity gaps. However, we should note community and technical college leaders' power is both impacted and limited by multiple institutional, local, and policy realities. Throughout history and especially during the pandemic, community and technical college leaders have adapted with evolving and expanding roles and responsibilities, and these efforts are complicated by a culture of compliance reinforced by the global health crisis that may limit leaders' capacity to make proactive decisions and actions (Burmicky & Duran, 2022).

In addition, persistent underinvestment in community and technical colleges has made these institutions even more vulnerable to negative impacts of the pandemic (Brock & Diwa, 2021). Most of the efforts in response to COVID-19 relied on emergency funds and scholarships, which do not necessarily offer resources for developing longer-term, sustainable plans and initiatives (Burmicky & Duran, 2022). In our study, the scholarships created to support Students of Color or students with intersecting minoritized identities (i.e., Black male students; Women of Color in STEM, Students of Color in Technical Programs) are promising steps toward prioritizing holistic development of Students of Color, as identity centrality can serve as a powerful tool toward equity (Briscoe et al., 2020). For these scholarships to optimally benefit their intended groups, it is pivotal that they become a piece of a longer-term solution toward addressing racial barriers in systems and structures. Colleges also need to sketch out simple and navigable application processes to deliver scholarships since the administrative burden brought by financial aid applications can present a hindrance to students, particularly those with minoritized identities (Burmicky & Duran, 2022).

Furthermore, gathering, analyzing, and sharing robust and reliable institutional data with an equity lens empower institutions to interrogate their own policies, structures, and practices that contribute to racial equity gaps. Our

findings show that numbers disaggregated by race/ethnicity without placing responsibility on individual students and Communities of Color create opportunity for institutions to challenge notions of colorblindness and neutrality. However, data disaggregation alone is not sufficient to disrupt majoritarianism and meritocracy. Our findings revealed that, while racial gaps were portrayed numerically, the presented data failed to tell the story behind them, often leaving untold the political and historical contexts shaping these numbers. In-depth, race-conscious exploration of student experiences and outcomes will unpack what is behind the numbers and illuminate exactly what supports are needed or missing (Blom & Baker, 2022; Kezar et al., 2021). Engaging experiential knowledge of People of Color through counter-narratives and storytelling represents a thoughtful and powerful way to challenge endemic and structural racism (López et al., 2018). Further questions that can guide more change-oriented data disaggregation include: “Where and how is the system failing Students of Color and hindering their chances to persist and graduate?” and “How can our institution address these systemic and structural barriers by dismantling policies and politics that do not serve this cause?” One powerful way of doing this is for colleges to diversify their data collection by extending opportunities to Students of Color to tell their stories through focus groups, interviews, etc. To achieve that, thoughtful planning and financial resources must be in place, as these institutions are often underfunded, thus more vulnerable to crisis and disruptions (Eddy, 2012).

Finally, loss of enrollments among Students of Color is a serious concern that community and technical colleges must address. Prospective or current community and technical college students are twice as likely to cancel their college plans as their university counterparts (Brock & Diwa, 2021), with the pandemic further exacerbating this issue. Post-COVID-19 reforms need to be grounded in equity-centered and -guided solutions to fully support students (Raby & Zhang, 2021). In our research context, institutional efforts for building holistic initiatives and engagement with a wide range of education, community, and industry partners represent promising steps toward situating racial equity work squarely within interlaced historical, social, and political contexts and dismantling deeply ingrained racial disparities.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that, during the pandemic, community and technical colleges engaged in countless efforts to ameliorate the challenges facing students. These are incredible feats that must be acknowledged, especially considering the reality that leaders, faculty, and staff themselves also struggled to navigate multiplicative, stressful demands amidst the pandemic (Floyd et al., 2022). At the same time, racial inequities stand as

a persistent, amplified challenge for these institutions to live up to their espoused values and goals in advancing students' education and mobility (Rosen & Dalporto, 2020). Drawing upon CRT, our inquiry reveals promising approaches, but also highlights the challenging nature of reducing racial disparities holistically, as reflected by a persistent lack of attention to systemic issues and how institutions communicated such efforts. Taken together, a systemic, multilayered approach tackling racial inequities (Welton et al., 2018) is potentially missing, especially at the institutional and structural levels. This study further complicates and challenges community and technical college leadership as to what types of change are needed for these colleges to realize their full potential as engines of mobility, diversity, and equity, as well as a vital sector that both deserves more equitable public support and is in need of reimagination of their policies, structures, and practices to effectively advance racial equity.

## Notes

1. While in the scholarly literature the term “community college” is often used to broadly include most public “2-year” institutions, in practice, this term does not resonate with some of the institutions with workforce development as a primary mission, often with the word “technical” in their institutions’ names. To be more precise and to honor practitioner colleagues’ positionality and varying mission priorities, we use the term “community and technical college” in our study to mirror the differences in the missions and functions of public “2-year” colleges.
2. Our choice of critical content analysis, as opposed to critical discourse analysis — an equally valuable approach that often represents a “competing” choice — is grounded within our research questions that center communicated content and its embedded values and ideologies, as opposed to discursive practices by different groups. While both types of analysis focus on communication and both offer insights into power dynamics and ideology, critical content analysis deals with the content of communication to uncover hidden power relations and ideologies (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), while critical discourse analysis examines the social context in which communication occurs and the discursive practices used by different groups (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000).
3. Among the 76 entries, five of them were from the institutions’ websites, four from national media sources, and 67 from local media websites.
4. We also examined pre-pandemic newsletters (2018–2020) using R programming and generated the frequency of the key terms that appeared in the newsletters. The results showed that the term “race” or related terms only appeared 10 times in 82 newsletters during that two-year period. Additionally, the term “equity” or related terms appeared only twice, and “scholarship” in support of Students of Color only appeared one time.
5. Nearly all 76 entries referenced the racial unrest during 2020 as the impetus of the initiatives.
6. Some of the media entries reported multiple efforts that fell into multiple categories. Thus, the percentages reported add up to more than 100%.

7. 86% of scholarship mentions were specifically established to support Students of Color after the pandemic and racial unrest emerged in 2020.
8. There were nine new scholarships mentioned in the newsletters (mentioned 14 times). The range of total scholarship funds varies from \$20,000 (by a single faculty member) to \$5.5 million (by a company). Since many of the scholarships created due to the racial unrest in 2020 were still in the fundraising stage, the ultimate dollar amount was not available.

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to hands-on practice, lab components, and limited quality and quantity of learning materials that are traditionally needed for courses (Thanawala et al., 2022).

While colleges rapidly responded to many challenges, they were also confronted with ever-changing health guidelines that complicated institutional decision-making in regard to the safety of their campuses, students, and local communities (D'Amico et al., 2022). In light of these concerns in times of crisis, community and technical colleges have prioritized continuity in students' education and provided them with supports for essential needs, including food, housing, technology and digital equipment, and childcare (McCarthy & Ferreira, 2022; Strayhorn, 2022). Remote advising and tutoring services have also been offered on many campuses, along with altered library and bookstore services (Garcia Falconetti & Bottorff, 2022). Nonetheless, the pandemic has constrained colleges' overall capacity to holistically support students, often in the absence of emergency plans for responding to pandemic and global health crises (Garcia Falconetti & Bottorff, 2022).

### ***Racial inequities amplified by the pandemic***

Communities of Color have experienced the most severe effects of COVID-19, such as disproportionate infection and death rates, employment loss, and income insecurity (Brock & Diwa, 2021). These inequities also manifest in community and technical colleges. Notably, the declining enrollment rates facing these colleges nationally (Fink & Jenkins, 2020) are particularly pronounced among Black and Latinx students (Bulman & Fairlie, 2021). This situation was further complicated by the swift shift to online learning, when technology and related supports were limited or nonexistent for racially minoritized students (Anderson et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2019). These students also faced disproportionately lower rates of online course completion due to added family responsibilities, along with digital inequities impacting access to equipment, broadband, and a safe space conducive to their learning (García-Louis et al., 2022; McCarthy & Ferreira, 2022; Thanawala et al., 2022).

While these racial equity gaps were amplified by the pandemic, they are not new to community and technical colleges. Predating the pandemic, these institutions were already challenged by persistent equity concerns, as reflected in racial disparities in access (Bragg & Durham, 2012), degree completion (Lin et al., 2023), and transfer outcomes (Crisp & Nuñez, 2014; Wang, 2020). In particular, technical education programs have long experienced a significant overrepresentation of white male students (Reed et al., 2018), along with persistent disparities in degree attainment and postgraduate earnings between Students of Color and their white counterparts (Anderson et al., 2021). These institutions have implemented laudable initiatives to reduce racial equity

gaps by addressing inadequate supports, limited resources, and stereotypes and bias regarding Students of Color (Gándara et al., 2012; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012). Yet, efforts were not widespread, an issue further challenged by the underrepresentation of People of Color in leadership positions and thus constraining institutional capacity to address systemic inequities (Eddy, 2018).

### ***Extant literature centering racial equity in community colleges***

Beyond documenting enduring racial inequities within community and technical colleges, a growing body of research employs race-centered frameworks, offering critical insights into how race intricately plays out in organizational structures, policy implementation, leadership practices, and student experiences. For instance, Jain and colleagues (Jain, 2009; Jain et al., 2011, 2020) and George Mwangi et al. (2023) utilized Critical Race Theory (CRT) to interrogate transfer as a racialized and gendered process. Other scholars adopted a race-conscious perspective to shed light on the experiences and persistence of various minoritized student groups (Gaxiola Serrano, 2017; Giraldo et al., 2017; Mertes, 2013; Naca, 2022). Taking an organizational lens, McNaughtan et al. (2021) employed CRT to investigate the unfolding of racism within community college spaces, while also illuminating the power of Black presidents in fostering an antiracist culture. In their recent publication, McCambly et al. (2023) utilized Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations to reframe community colleges as subjected to racialization, drawing attention to the systemic marginalization experienced by these institutions.

Taken together, the issues exposed in the existing literature are indicative of underlying systemic issues of racial inequities within enduring historical, economic, and educational contexts, which were brought to greater light due to the larger racial justice movement that beseeches community and technical colleges to reexamine their actions and responsibility in addressing racial disparities (Floyd et al., 2022; Ison et al., 2022). It stands as a key challenge for these institutions to live up to their espoused values and goals in advancing students' education and mobility (Rosen & Dalporto, 2020). These volatile times offer a unique opportunity to examine how community and technical colleges show up to long-existing racial inequities as they reach this historic tipping point. Timely empirical research delving into such efforts will shed light on promising approaches and persistent barriers, providing valuable insights to inform future policy and action steps. To that end, our study focuses on how institutional communications depict and engage with racial (in)equities and their underlying systemic barriers, thus contributing to the expanding body of critical inquiry previously reviewed.

## Theoretical framework

We adopted Critical Race Theory (CRT) to guide our study. Rooted in critical legal studies (West, 1995), a critical race perspective was introduced by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) to serve as an analytical apparatus to explain inequity in education and society by highlighting the central role of race, property rights as opposed to human rights, as well as the intersection of race and property. Various scholars (e.g., Dixson & Rousseau, 2016; Espino, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2019; Yosso, 2005) have since articulated key tenets underlying CRT. Despite nuanced differences across these scholarly treatments, we adopt Solorzano and Yosso's (2001) conceptualization that delineates five of the key tenets that form the foundation of CRT: a) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; b) the challenge to dominant ideology, such as notions of colorblindness, meritocracy, neutrality, and objectivity, commonly held by institutions to perpetuate institutionalized forms of racism; c) the centrality of experiential knowledge, highlighting the lived experiences of People of Color; d) the transdisciplinary perspective that views race as a socially constructed concept situated within political, historical, and contemporary contexts; and e) the commitment to social justice, seeking to advance solutions to eliminate racial oppression and marginalization.

As a malleable approach to interrogating how race and racism impact, and are embedded within, societal and institutional structures, practices, and discourses (Yosso, 2005), CRT represents an appropriate framework for our study since it allows us to closely examine whether and how the emerging racial equity efforts in community and technical colleges, as reflected in their communications, indeed challenge the status quo of racial inequality that has permeated institutional policy and programming. It also critically grounds our analysis in discerning whether and how these efforts attend to reducing, or instead perpetuate, harm in policies and structures.

## Research design

### *Critical content analysis*

We employed critical content analysis (CCA) as our primary method, supported by text mining as a data reduction and organizational tool. Broadly, content analysis is applied to words, concepts, and themes within qualitative text data to make sense of their meaning and relationships (Krippendorff, 2018). As a form of content analysis, CCA is an umbrella term that describes a range of research methods that engage and interpret written artifacts grounded in a critical stance (Utt & Short, 2018). With a focus on "locating power in social practices by understanding, uncovering and transforming conditions of inequality and addressing broader contexts of structural inequities" (Beach et al., 2009, p. 129), CCA centers the role of theory and adopts an

explicit critical lens that involves the interrogation of systems of power and inequities (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). CCA is particularly suitable for addressing our research topic that focuses on racial (in)equities through voluminous text data (e.g., websites, news stories).<sup>2</sup>

### ***Research context and data source***

Our study is situated within a public 2-year college system in a Midwestern state that consists of close to 20 institutions, with their respective campuses spread across urban, suburban, and rural areas. The system serves over 300,000 students and offers approximately 500 associate degree, diploma, and certificate programs. The colleges in the system serve multiple missions and functions spanning continuing education, workforce development, collegiate transfer, and community enrichment, but all share a prominent focus on career and technical education as well as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs. Situated within a predominantly white state, most, if not all, institutions are also predominantly white. Still, when compared with the state population, the system disproportionately serves more Students of Color, especially Hispanic students. Table 1 presents additional contexts in close connection to our study.

Because policies, practices, and initiatives connected to racial (in)equities since the pandemic are often described and shared via internet-based publications, we relied on the system's weekly newsletters as our first access points and retrieved both entries in the newsletters themselves and the websites, news items, and other media sources embedded in the newsletters using their hyperlinks. We set the search window to March 1, 2020 to June 1, 2021, and as a result, curated 64 newsletters and 1,255 unique web-based publications.

### ***Data analysis***

We approached data analysis through five steps (see Figure 1). The first step involved gaining familiarity with the original sources and performing data screening. During this step, we adopted text mining techniques that help harness the unstructured and widely dispersed data, as they are difficult to process manually (Munzert et al., 2014). We applied a set of keywords (or target words) to identify relevant sources that directly pertained to our research questions and grounded in CRT. These keywords included race, racism, anti-racist, anti-racism, racial equity, racial justice, Black Lives Matter, racial diversity, racially diverse, racial oppression, police brutality, Black, Asian, Indigenous, Latinx, Hispanic, BIPOC, Students of Color, and so on. For terms depicting students by race/ethnicity, we also accounted for their multiple expressions in media, such as "Latina," "Latino," and "Latine" in addition to "Latinx," and "African American" in addition to "Black."

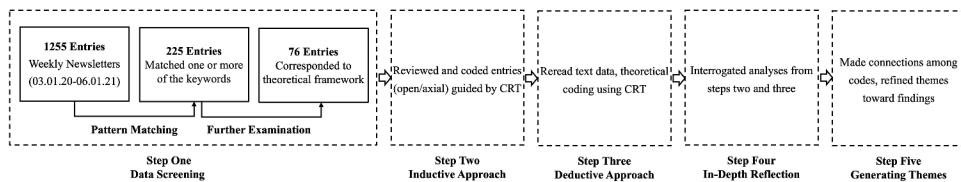
**Table 1.** Relevant institutional contexts and distribution of key domains of initiatives.

Institution	Locale	Size <sup>a</sup>	Mission <sup>b</sup>	Race/Ethnicity		Race-Centered Initiatives Covered by Media <sup>c</sup>				
				Students of Color	White	Leadership and Institutional Statements	Scholarships	Data Disaggregation	Longer-Term Initiatives	
1	City	Large	Comprehensive	38.8%	61.2%	9	6	3	9	
2	City	Large	Comprehensive	66.2%	33.8%	5	1	7	9	
3	City	Large	Comprehensive	19.8%	80.2%	2	0	0	2	
4	City	Medium	Technical	20.2%	79.8%	0	0	0	4	
5	City	Medium	Comprehensive	33.9%	66.1%	0	0	0	1	
6	City	Medium	Comprehensive	25.2%	74.8%	1	0	2	1	
7	City	Small	Technical	31.9%	68.1%	0	0	0	0	
8	Suburb	Large	Technical	31.0%	69.0%	0	0	1	1	
9	Suburb	Medium	Technical	41.1%	58.9%	1	6	2	5	
10	Suburb	Medium	Technical	29.9%	70.1%	1	0	0	3	
11	Suburb	Small	Technical	33.5%	66.5%	2	1	1	2	
12	Rural	Small	Technical	25.8%	74.2%	0	0	1	1	
13	Rural	Small	Technical	17.1%	82.9%	0	0	0	0	
14	Rural	Small	Comprehensive	14.1%	85.9%	1	0	1	1	
15	Rural	Small	Technical	21.3%	78.7%	0	0	0	0	
16	Rural	Small	Technical	13.4%	86.6%	0	0	2	6	
Not specified				32.5%	67.5%	1	0	2	1	
Systemwide										

<sup>a</sup>Institution's size is based on 2021–2022 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) students' enrollments. According to Carnegie Classification 2021: Size and Setting for two-year institutions, very small = FTE enrollment of fewer than 500 students; small = FTE enrollment of 500–1,999 students; medium = FTE enrollment of 2,000–4,999 students; and large = FTE enrollment of 5,000–9,999 students.

<sup>b</sup>"Comprehensive" refers to the institutions whose mission and offerings include 4-year transfer opportunities, university-level liberal arts education, and bachelor's degrees. "Technical" refers to institutions that mainly focus on career and technical education, as well as workforce development.

<sup>c</sup>Some of the media entries reported multiple efforts that fell into multiple categories. Thus, the counts reported add up to more than 76 entries.



**Figure 1.** Critical content analysis procedures.

Specifically, we first imported 1,255 entries into R, a versatile software environment for statistical computing and text mining. Using the pattern matching function in R, we identified 225 entries that contained one or more of the keywords. We then created an Excel file that includes the content of these entries along with their corresponding website hyperlinks, publication dates, and retrieval dates. We further examined these entries to ensure that all retrieved content was directly relevant to our research, with particular attention to whether each entry centered race as a social issue or construct, conveyed experiences of People of Color, or had a social justice orientation — all grounded within our theoretical framework. During this process, we eliminated duplicated sources and entries that only contained one or more keywords but did not actually describe or discuss initiatives with a focus on race or racial equity. For example, we removed entries that included images of People of Color but did not reference them in the text, or only listed resources on racial issues without further elaboration in the entry. These data-cleaning procedures resulted in a final analytic sample of 76 entries<sup>3</sup> that directly corresponded to our theoretical framework.<sup>4</sup>

Starting the second step, we proceeded with a critical analysis of the content of these entries using CCA. With a shared understanding that the “critical” in CCA signifies an explicit researcher stance to employ inquiry as a way to interrogate inequities, CCA draws upon a range of analytical approaches across disciplines. Therefore, during this second phase of data analysis, we conducted inductive, open coding. Specifically, we independently reviewed in depth each of the identified text sources to familiarize ourselves with the content and context of each source. During this step, we adopted an inductive approach to code the content in each text entry from a descriptive, exploratory stance (Saldaña, 2013) and recorded emerging codes, categories, and our own reflective notes in the Excel spreadsheet we developed. This phase, while inductive in nature, was guided by CRT’s larger framework that served to ground our initial coding in response to anything in the data that “spoke” to us regarding the nuanced, implicit, or explicit ways in which race and racism were represented in the media sources.

This open coding process set the stage for the subsequent analysis to address our research questions in ways that were both theoretically focused and well-informed by the data. Following inductive, open coding, we adopted axial

coding approaches (Allen, 2017) to connect, elaborate, and synthesize the codes and categories into broad themes. This step allowed us to arrive at the broad areas to describe emerging efforts (to address our first question) and the substantive theme or themes underneath each area (to attend to both of our research questions).

In the third step, we moved toward a deductive approach by rereading the text data within and across categories and themes, and identified key elements informed by CRT (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). To facilitate this step, we developed a theoretical coding structure using the five CRT tenets to explore answers in the data in response to our research questions. To illustrate, engaging the first tenet, we examined whether and how race and racism are (not) regarded as central to educational inequity and the notions or facts to which disparities are attributed, as reflected in institutional statements. The second tenet helped examine the motivations and proposed solutions and their potential to challenge or move away from dominant notions of colorblindness, meritocracy, neutrality, and objectivity. The third tenet guided us toward centering the experiential knowledge of diverse groups (e.g., staff or students) in investigating the efforts in a way that questions how marginalized groups' experiences and knowledge are situated in identifying problems and creating solutions. Engaging the fourth tenet, we paid attention to whether and how colleges framed issues of racial inequity and structured institutional actions within political, historical, and contemporary contexts. Finally, we centered the fifth tenet of commitment to social justice by examining institutional action in seeking justice, including the colleges' and system's responses and related initiatives concerning racial unrest and other initiatives.

In the fourth step, we engaged in an in-depth reflection and reexamination of the previous analyses outlined in the second and third steps. In this process, we interrogated our data analysis procedures, sensemaking, and interpretation, engaging all our initial rounds of codes, reflective notes, and our framework. In the fifth and final step, we individually constructed relationships among the codes and discussed them to make further modifications, ultimately arriving at common findings, and critical themes and associated sub-themes if applicable. To ensure the trustworthiness of our findings, across all stages of analysis, we examined our coding from our independent processes and calibrated until we reached consensus. Throughout data analysis, we purposefully centered CRT to stay truthful to our critical stance by taking into consideration five of the key CRT tenets selected for our study.

### ***Researcher positionality***

As equity-guided and equity-centered educational researchers, our racial, social, and professional identities directly influenced and continued to shape how we saw the education problem at hand and how we positioned ourselves

in our inquiry. We all identify as women and members of racially minoritized groups in our specific field of study and practice. Although our professional and personal journeys varied, our paths as past or present students in American institutions were filled with structural barriers and limited access to opportunities at the systemic level; ultimately, they all led us to develop a close affinity with community and technical colleges' open access mission and cultivate a deep commitment to the study and advancement of their leadership and practice. From our collaborative research experiences, we have witnessed how community and technical colleges open doors to marginalized populations whose access to higher education was historically either limited or denied by higher education. At the same time, our observations have equally shed a clear light on the long-standing equity gaps and concerns within these institutions and programs that must be made explicit to facilitate change.

Both inspired and "troubled," we came into this research with an acute awareness of the assumptions and biases we hold, as well as the tension we experience from navigating our advocacy for and critiques of these institutions — a tension further complicated by the privilege associated with our positionality as well-resourced education researchers situated within a "prestigious" research-intensive 4-year institution when conducting this study. To reconcile and harness these various positionnalities and conflicts, we attempted to be as transparent as possible toward our audience and one another throughout the research process. We also engaged practitioner colleagues at community and technical colleges to read drafts of our research and provide feedback along the way. Aligned with critical research (Bryman, 2016; Holmes, 2020; Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), we did this because we view knowledge as socially constructed and never politically neutral, and we strove to ensure that the interests and views of various groups, including those of our practitioner colleagues, were not neglected or marginalized. Collectively, our ultimate purpose with this critical study was to interrogate and illuminate persistent racial inequities that must be attended to in the context of community and technical colleges.

### ***Limitations and caveats***

We must note a few limitations and caveats for interpreting our findings. Because we relied on information and stories published in newsletters and media sources, our data were not fully inclusive of every institutional effort addressing racial equities during our study's timeframe. Nonetheless, without being able to document all such efforts in a feasible, exhaustive manner, these sources provided reliable and significant evidence of what types of efforts were implemented, and equally important, what was regarded by the colleges and

the media as “news-worthy” to share publicly and communicate with their stakeholders.

In addition, our study is situated within the specified period from March 2020 to June 2021, instead of an expansive time frame, given the confines of a singular study. This limits our ability to longitudinally follow these institutions both before and post the pandemic to examine the full development and evolution of racial equity initiatives over time. Further, a limitation that comes with analysis of media sources is that, meant for a broad readership and written in an accessible and straightforward fashion, such publications are not always filled with complex and intricate details that we would have desired in analyzing nuanced racial equity issues. Finally, due to these benefits and constraints of the sources we used, our analysis of the publicly shared media is aimed at understanding what types of efforts have been documented and likely prioritized, thus allowing us as researchers to identify patterns, contexts, and any important missing components for addressing persistent structural barriers to advancing racial equity, as opposed to making conclusive judgments about whether individual institutions have thrived or fallen short in this regard.

## Findings

As reflected in [Table 1](#), our analysis revealed the following key domains under which the new policies, practices, and initiatives<sup>5</sup> with a focus on racial (in) equities fell: a) leadership and institutional statements, b) new scholarships, c) data disaggregation, and d) longer-term racial equity initiatives (such as creating and filling diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) leadership positions, professional development efforts, and a few focused and substantially resourced equity initiatives). A simple descriptive breakdown<sup>6</sup> showed that 29% of the 76 entries pertained to institutional statements and leadership speeches as rapid responses to racial injustices or to inform the college about the pandemic-related updates that center racial equity; 18% addressed scholarship opportunities<sup>7</sup> available to students, especially Students of Color; 26% reported disaggregated data that highlighted racial disparities among student enrollment and outcomes; and 62% described initiatives that were longer-term efforts including the creation of new DEI leadership positions; professional development for faculty and staff; and equity-focused initiatives. Notably, these four domains were uniquely associated with racial issues and are distinct from other reported efforts that occurred during the pandemic. Further, there were variations in the reported efforts across the colleges in the system, with greater concentrations from large, comprehensive colleges situated in cities, and fewer media-reported efforts at small technical colleges in rural areas.

We now zero in on specific findings considering our two research questions. Due to their embedded and intertwined nature, we organize our findings

based on the broad areas of emerging efforts and initiatives focusing on racial (in)equity as reflected in our first question, and equally offer detailed findings in response to our second research question regarding the depiction and reflection (or lack thereof) in these efforts and initiatives of structural barriers facing Students of Color.

### ***Leadership and institutional statements***

The media-reported institutional statements and speeches from leadership (often the college president or other senior leadership responsible for student supports or academic affairs) with an explicit focus on race, racism, or racial inequities were almost exclusively in response to police brutality and often in the wake of the George Floyd murder. Although widely varied, these statements and speeches explicitly called out the unjust nature of the death of George Floyd along with Breonna Taylor by naming these tragedies using terms such as “police brutality,” “right-out racism,” “injustice,” and “racist policies.” Another common theme of these statements and speeches was their emphasis on racism as a larger societal issue that affects everyone and every domain of society. As a telling example, a statement made by the president of one of the largest colleges in the system said, “[police brutality] must end. We simply cannot stand by and say, ‘It doesn’t affect me.’ . . . It affects you, even if you don’t think it does.” As another example in a college statement about top leadership’s engagement with racial equity work, “Talking about racism in the U.S. can be exhausting. Racist systems, policies and actions are being held under light and examined more than ever before. Conversations on a mass scale are being had about racism’s presence in education, health care, careers, neighborhoods, policing, and justice.” Lastly, these statements also demonstrated a change orientation, particularly drawing attention to the importance of developing and growing equity efforts and making sure that commitments transpire in action. For example, a college president said, “Even right now, the college has looked at the equity and inclusion plan that was developed in 2017 and has now created a living document that basically transforms and transitions and actually grows with [the college] and the populations that we serve.” On occasion, institutional leaders’ narratives also clearly acknowledged institutional and systemic barriers. As stated by one college president, “We are all committed to removing those systemic and institutional barriers to student success” when introducing the newly built public-private collaboration for retaining Students of Color.

### ***New scholarships***

Closely related to the first area, there was a substantial number of new scholarships<sup>8</sup> established. The bulk of these new scholarships was created in

honor of Black people murdered due to police brutality, such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. These scholarships varied in size and often involved private donations initiated by college leaders, faculty, or other donors. The eligibility criteria focus was Students of Color, with a few explicitly developed to support Black students who are older adults or the Black community writ large. The issues around “inequities” were commonly introduced in reference to newly developed scholarships, citing the rationale that “[such resources] could help reduce educational inequities.”

Further, some of the new scholarships extended beyond these contexts and focus by addressing more broadly framed issues of racial inequities. As an example, in the announcement by a private agency to create a scholarship for supporting Students of Color in pursuit of graphic design, the CEO stated that the “Black Lives Matter movement showed us it is not enough for our business to be a welcoming environment for People of Color. We need to attract Black talent to our city and provide them paths to success within our organization.” Overall, these scholarships appear to serve as a cost-reduction mechanism for individual students to offset part of the financial burden associated with their education. However, the size of the award and the heavy reliance on individual donations raise concerns around the support’s impact and sustainability.

### ***Data disaggregation***

Before we dive into this particular area, it is important to mention that, because the colleges we studied have always had access to their own institutional data, we double-checked similar news sources (notably the system newsletters that had been regularly published pre-COVID-19) and confirmed that these types of data disaggregation and their framing did not predate the pandemic. We thereby present two main themes in this area as equally emerging efforts in response to the pandemic. First, the colleges used disaggregated data to highlight their role in serving a significant proportion of Students of Color and to support their efforts for more equitable hiring, staff recruitment, and overall commitment to racial equity. For instance, stating the institutional commitment to equity, a dean of student access and success at one of the colleges said, “Roughly 30% of our students are minorities or People of Color, from diverse backgrounds. So based off of that one of the core pillars within equity, is to make sure that . . . [our college] is reflective of our student body.” Noticeably, little to no deficit language or framing appeared in the news entries that attributed low “success” rates among Students of Color to individual students’ fault and responsibility. But rather, disaggregated data were often provided to support institutional commitment to advancing racial equity. In some cases, data were presented to highlight racial disparities, engaging terms such as “inequities” in reference to the mismatch between student demographics and those of the local community, and to pinpoint

structural issues such as the lack of access to financial resources among racially minoritized students.

Second, data disaggregation was used to draw attention to racial equity gaps within the colleges and the state system, particularly in graduation rates, as a call to action toward achieving equitable educational outcomes. For example, a report extensively cited data from the National Student Clearinghouse when breaking down statewide longitudinal graduation rates, pinpointing racial disparities, with Students of Color, including Black, Hispanic, and Asian students trailing their white counterparts in six-year graduation rates. One of the news entries used the metaphor “putting a man on the moon” to describe both the challenges and hopes of maximizing college graduation rates for Students of Color and other underserved populations. Both daunting endeavors; one already attained, and the next in sight. Although the reference to the disproportionate graduation rates in this and other sources paints a clear picture of persistent racial equity gaps in educational attainment, the call to action often was not explicitly discussed in tandem with structural conditions underlying these gaps.

### ***Longer-term racial equity initiatives***

The fourth broad area of emerging efforts was also among the most robust and complex for us to make sense of. We coded this as longer-term racial equity initiatives given that these varied efforts all shared the nature of moving beyond a one-shot effort or statement and extending into the future in a longer-range and conceivably more sustainable way. Specifically, we observed three key subareas for longer-term initiatives.

The first was creating new positions and hiring leaders that serve in roles as chief diversity officers. About a quarter of all colleges in the state system created brand new positions equivalent to chief diversity officers (CDOs) who provide leadership and direction for enhancing institutional equity and inclusion. In news releases reporting these initiatives, the officers’ roles in closing equity gaps were highlighted, as well as evaluating and sustaining efforts toward equity as a strategic priority. As one source announcing the hiring of the college’s new CDO mentioned, “We are dedicated to promoting equitable outcomes for all students and employees by creating an inclusive and supportive college environment … Working with [new officer] to help lead these initiatives will help [us] further support, expand and strengthen our efforts in an intentional and effective way.” Or as in another similar announcement at a different college, “With this new position on the Executive Leadership Team, we will elevate our focus on ensuring access, effective teaching and learning, and success for all People of Color.”

Somewhat related, top leadership hiring during the pandemic also saw an unprecedented emphasis on racial diversity. When a college announced its

the need for change in the existing systems and structures as the wrong approach for contemporary times. Further, the reporting of these initiatives appears to prioritize their potentially transformative, generative impacts on advancing racial equity. As stated in a report covering one of the initiatives, “[This program is] a door to opportunity that can lead to generational change.” Overall, long-term change was reflected in the narratives as both the driving factor to create these initiatives and a long overdue task for higher education to address enduring equity gaps.

## Discussion and implications

Although the institutions in our study were highly responsive to the various pandemic-imposed challenges, as reflected in well over 1,000 initiatives put into place, only a small proportion of the reported efforts touched upon racial issues, with an even smaller percentage that addressed racism and racial inequities amplified during the pandemic. This small number is an issue of concern speaking to outstanding racial challenges, structures, and barriers at these institutions and/or prioritization in communicating such critical efforts, making the advancement of racial equity in community and technical colleges timely and long overdue.

To make deeper sense of what we found, we critically analyzed and interrogated the alignment — or a lack thereof — between the emerging racial equity efforts and our theoretical framework. On a broad level, our findings demonstrate a notable, albeit incomplete and still evolving, reckoning with racial inequities on the part of community and technical college leaders and various stakeholders. This is often indicated in a growing, explicitly communicated institutional responsibility for moving away from dominant ideologies, removing barriers, and taking intentional action to promote racial equity. Through these emerging efforts and initiatives intended to address racial equity gaps, we see suggestive evidence that points to an increased awareness that may lead to well-informed change and solutions. Meanwhile, it is also clear that the many layers that comprise racial equity have yet to come to fruition in the reported efforts. In particular, except for a few initiatives with potential to take on systemic racial inequities at scale, many of these emerging efforts continue to be short-term, isolated solutions, with opportunities for systemic change, such as program and policy development, remaining detached from a holistic equity focus. Our findings also reflect the often messy and complicated nature of communicating and tackling racial inequities in higher education writ large. While community and technical colleges are historically regarded as engines for democracy and mobility that serve diverse student populations (Cohen et al., 2014), they continue to grapple with the hard work of combatting racial inequities. In [Table 2](#), we provide a high-level summary that outlines key findings in light of the CRT tenets.

**Table 2.** Key findings along five key CRT tenets.

CRT Tenets	Domain 1 (Leadership and institutional statements)	Domain 2 (New scholarships)	Domain 3 (Data disaggregation)	Domain 4 (Longer-term racial equity initiatives)
Centrality and intersectionality of race and racism	Named race and racism as affecting everyone and other social domains.	Limited to no reference to race and racism as central.	Limited reference to race and racism as central to the educational contexts.	Referenced systemic issues.
	Didn't attribute them as root causes.	Overall lack of acknowledgment of intersectionality.	No reference to racism as cause for inequities. Overall lack of acknowledgment of intersectionality.	Intended to remedy past wrongs.
	Overall lack of acknowledgment of intersectionality.			
Challenge dominant ideology	Challenged notion of colorblindness, but did not name other commonly held notions such as meritocracy and neutrality	Challenges meritocracy to some extent by act of focusing Students of Color.	Less deficit framing, trending away from notions of meritocracy, objectivity, and neutrality.	Acknowledged institutions' responsibility, challenged the notions of meritocracy and neutrality.
Experiential knowledge	Limited reference of the history of lived experiences of People of Color.	Highlighted both talent and structural (including financial) barriers as part of lived experiences of People of Color.	No explicit reference to the history or lived experiences.	Connecting Students of Color and mentors from similar backgrounds. Somewhat attuned to experiential knowledge of People of Color.
Race as socially constructed	Explicit about political, historical, and contemporary contexts.	Somewhat attuned to the cotemporary and historical contexts.	Limited and no reference to social and various other contexts shaping what was shown in the data.	Attuned to various contexts. Recognized race is socially constructed (workforce, STEM, healthcare, etc.). Focused on addressing holistic nature of racism.
Commitment to social justice	Strong action orientation toward seeking justice.	Reactive, one-shot effort in the wake of police brutality and in memory of the victims.	Data used as the rationale for why institutions must work toward equity and social justice.	Strong commitment to social impact and justice.

We now turn to a more elaborated discussion of the findings according to each of the selected CRT tenets. Our study revealed that the narratives in the media that cover leadership and institutional statements and long-term equity initiatives were more explicit in naming racism and racial inequities; whereas efforts around new scholarships and data disaggregation were rarely depicted in ways that pinpoint race, racism, and intersectionality as central, permeating societal issues. On the other hand, all the media reports on these efforts referenced a strong commitment to

findings show that numbers disaggregated by race/ethnicity without placing responsibility on individual students and Communities of Color create opportunity for institutions to challenge notions of colorblindness and neutrality. However, data disaggregation alone is not sufficient to disrupt majoritarianism and meritocracy. Our findings revealed that, while racial gaps were portrayed numerically, the presented data failed to tell the story behind them, often leaving untold the political and historical contexts shaping these numbers. In-depth, race-conscious exploration of student experiences and outcomes will unpack what is behind the numbers and illuminate exactly what supports are needed or missing (Blom & Baker, 2022; Kezar et al., 2021). Engaging experiential knowledge of People of Color through counter-narratives and storytelling represents a thoughtful and powerful way to challenge endemic and structural racism (López et al., 2018). Further questions that can guide more change-oriented data disaggregation include: “Where and how is the system failing Students of Color and hindering their chances to persist and graduate?” and “How can our institution address these systemic and structural barriers by dismantling policies and politics that do not serve this cause?” One powerful way of doing this is for colleges to diversify their data collection by extending opportunities to Students of Color to tell their stories through focus groups, interviews, etc. To achieve that, thoughtful planning and financial resources must be in place, as these institutions are often underfunded, thus more vulnerable to crisis and disruptions (Eddy, 2012).

Finally, loss of enrollments among Students of Color is a serious concern that community and technical colleges must address. Prospective or current community and technical college students are twice as likely to cancel their college plans as their university counterparts (Brock & Diwa, 2021), with the pandemic further exacerbating this issue. Post-COVID-19 reforms need to be grounded in equity-centered and -guided solutions to fully support students (Raby & Zhang, 2021). In our research context, institutional efforts for building holistic initiatives and engagement with a wide range of education, community, and industry partners represent promising steps toward situating racial equity work squarely within interlaced historical, social, and political contexts and dismantling deeply ingrained racial disparities.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that, during the pandemic, community and technical colleges engaged in countless efforts to ameliorate the challenges facing students. These are incredible feats that must be acknowledged, especially considering the reality that leaders, faculty, and staff themselves also struggled to navigate multiplicative, stressful demands amidst the pandemic (Floyd et al., 2022). At the same time, racial inequities stand as

a persistent, amplified challenge for these institutions to live up to their espoused values and goals in advancing students' education and mobility (Rosen & Dalporto, 2020). Drawing upon CRT, our inquiry reveals promising approaches, but also highlights the challenging nature of reducing racial disparities holistically, as reflected by a persistent lack of attention to systemic issues and how institutions communicated such efforts. Taken together, a systemic, multilayered approach tackling racial inequities (Welton et al., 2018) is potentially missing, especially at the institutional and structural levels. This study further complicates and challenges community and technical college leadership as to what types of change are needed for these colleges to realize their full potential as engines of mobility, diversity, and equity, as well as a vital sector that both deserves more equitable public support and is in need of reimagination of their policies, structures, and practices to effectively advance racial equity.

## Notes

1. While in the scholarly literature the term “community college” is often used to broadly include most public “2-year” institutions, in practice, this term does not resonate with some of the institutions with workforce development as a primary mission, often with the word “technical” in their institutions’ names. To be more precise and to honor practitioner colleagues’ positionality and varying mission priorities, we use the term “community and technical college” in our study to mirror the differences in the missions and functions of public “2-year” colleges.
2. Our choice of critical content analysis, as opposed to critical discourse analysis — an equally valuable approach that often represents a “competing” choice — is grounded within our research questions that center communicated content and its embedded values and ideologies, as opposed to discursive practices by different groups. While both types of analysis focus on communication and both offer insights into power dynamics and ideology, critical content analysis deals with the content of communication to uncover hidden power relations and ideologies (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), while critical discourse analysis examines the social context in which communication occurs and the discursive practices used by different groups (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000).
3. Among the 76 entries, five of them were from the institutions’ websites, four from national media sources, and 67 from local media websites.
4. We also examined pre-pandemic newsletters (2018–2020) using R programming and generated the frequency of the key terms that appeared in the newsletters. The results showed that the term “race” or related terms only appeared 10 times in 82 newsletters during that two-year period. Additionally, the term “equity” or related terms appeared only twice, and “scholarship” in support of Students of Color only appeared one time.
5. Nearly all 76 entries referenced the racial unrest during 2020 as the impetus of the initiatives.
6. Some of the media entries reported multiple efforts that fell into multiple categories. Thus, the percentages reported add up to more than 100%.

7. 86% of scholarship mentions were specifically established to support Students of Color after the pandemic and racial unrest emerged in 2020.
8. There were nine new scholarships mentioned in the newsletters (mentioned 14 times). The range of total scholarship funds varies from \$20,000 (by a single faculty member) to \$5.5 million (by a company). Since many of the scholarships created due to the racial unrest in 2020 were still in the fundraising stage, the ultimate dollar amount was not available.

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