

Using Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation Approaches in Postsecondary Research and Evaluation

At Education Northwest, we are committed to breaking down systemic barriers and supporting students as they strive to reach their personal and professional goals. To support student success, we partner with postsecondary institutions and systems, philanthropic organizations, government agencies, and nonprofit and community-based organizations within the postsecondary ecosystem to conduct applied research, evaluate policies and programs, and support the implementation of evidence-based practices.

We take a culturally responsive and equitable evaluation (CREE) approach to all of our postsecondary success research and evaluation work, collaborating closely with our partners to produce high-quality and accessible products that contribute to a more just and equitable postsecondary ecosystem. This brief describes how we have used CREE approaches in our postsecondary education research and evaluation portfolio.

What Is Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation?

CREE is a holistic framework that puts culture at the center of program evaluations by remaining responsive to culturally defined values and beliefs that are context specific.¹ As such, CREE rejects culture-free evaluation and instead centers questions around a specific community, its people, their stories, and who gets to tell those stories.¹ CREE requires a research and evaluation team to be deeply intentional about who is being evaluated, what is being evaluated, and how the evaluation is being conducted, giving particular focus to groups that have been systemically excluded or marginalized.¹

Accordingly, CREE requires an intentional focus and integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion in all stages of the work. This is what distinguishes it from other evaluation approaches. CREE allows evaluators to incorporate structural, cultural, and contextual factors into evaluation, underlining a participatory process that gives power to those most impacted by the program, policy, or practice being evaluated.ⁱⁱ

By developing an evaluation that aims to benefit the community, culturally competent evaluators seek to develop evaluations *for*—rather than impose them *upon*—those most likely to be impacted by the results.ⁱⁱⁱ Accordingly, a CREE approach to evaluation requires cultural humility, self-reflection, and self-critique.^{iv} It encourages us to challenge power dynamics, bring empathy and compassion to the work, and reflect on how our positionality impacts situations and interactions.^v

Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation in Practice

To support the use of CREE approaches in postsecondary research and evaluation, this brief provides specific examples drawn from our recent work with partners in the postsecondary field. First, we provide brief descriptions of these projects, then we explore the nine stages of CREE (figure 1), using examples from these projects to illustrate how CREE principles and strategies can guide all aspects of an evaluation. These examples are not meant to be all inclusive. They represent only some of the many possibilities.

Recent postsecondary projects



BASIC NEEDS INITIATIVE EVALUATION

Partner: ECMC Foundation

The ECMC Foundation launched the Basic Needs Initiative in 2019 to address the basic needs insecurity of college students nationwide. Education Northwest conducted an evaluation to understand the work of the grantees, identify lessons learned for implementing and sustaining student-centered basic needs services at postsecondary institutions, and examine the impact of basic needs services on students' academic outcomes.



BUILDING RESILIENCY IN RURAL COMMUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK

Partner: Achieving the Dream (ATD)

In 2020, ATD launched a project in recognition of community colleges' vital role in their communities. ATD facilitates and supports a cohort of seven rural community colleges to strengthen community colleges' capacity to reduce equity gaps,

develop and strengthen community partnerships, provide students with digital skills, and connect students with careers in the digital economy that pay family-sustaining wages. Education Northwest partnered with ATD to conduct a participatory, qualitative, and formative evaluation to identify lessons that can benefit other rural colleges.



COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION AND INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS LEARNING ENGAGEMENT

Partner: College Futures Foundation

Through the CBO-Institutional Partnership Project, College Futures Foundation funded a set of partnerships between community-based organizations and higher education institutions in California, focused on building institutional capacity to support students' immediate and future financial stability. Education Northwest facilitated a participatory, formative learning engagement to better understand and identify strategies for effective partnerships.



COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

Partner: Blackfeet Community College (BFCC)

BFCC is a tribally controlled community college located in Browning, Montana. The college partnered with Education Northwest to facilitate a culturally responsive community needs assessment and strategic planning process. BFCC is using this information to guide its programming, services, and community partnerships, with the goal of providing more effective support for students' academic, well-being, cultural, and linguistic aspirations.



COUNTING ON MATH FACULTY: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF FACULTY AND INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES IN STUDENTS GATEWAY MATH SUCCESS

Partner: Education Equity Solutions

Education Equity Solutions, in partnership with Education Northwest researchers, conducted a research study to examine the role of instructors in supporting student success in community college transfer-level mathematics courses. The project used multiple sources of data to identify instructional practices that can close equity gaps in student math success.



THE ANNIE E. CASEY
FOUNDATION

EFFECTIVE APPROACHES TO REENGAGING YOUNG ADULTS

Partner: The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Education Northwest conducted an evaluation of young adult reengagement program models to provide a clearer picture of the goals, theories of change, and practices used across diverse reengagement programs, as well as a deeper understanding of the experiences of young adults in these programs.



EXPLORING HOW RURAL STUDENTS IN OREGON MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT EDUCATION AND TRAINING AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

Partner: The Ford Family Foundation

Education Northwest conducted a qualitative study to explore how rural students in Oregon make decisions about their future, specifically around college choice and access, with perspectives from high school students, parents/caregivers, high school counselors and teachers, college students, and college and university counselors and advisors.

Incorporating CREE principles and strategies at all stages of an evaluation

Figure 1. The nine stages of culturally responsive and equitable evaluation



Adapted from Hood, S., Hopson, R., & Kirkhart, K. (2015). Culturally responsive evaluation: Theory, practice, and future. In K. Newcomer, H. Hatry, & J. Wholey. (Eds.), Handbook of practical program evaluation (4th ed.). Wiley.

STAGES 1 AND 2

Prepare for the evaluation and engage partners

CREE requires attention to context, community, diversity, power, and privilege.^{vi} One way to learn about a program's cultural context and incorporate local community in the evaluation process is to gather an evaluation team and engage partners whose experiences and expertise are appropriate and responsive to the context and needs of the evaluation.

In preparing for the study on rural high school students, funded by **The Ford Family Foundation**, we assembled an advisory group that included staff members from rural high schools, college staff members working with rural students, and rural college students. We worked closely with the Foundation to contact networks of professionals working with rural students across all rural high schools and colleges in Oregon. The advisory group included high school staff members in a variety of roles (e.g., counselor, teacher, administrator). The college staff members were the dean of student success and chief diversity officer at rural-serving institutions^{vii} who had a broad view of student supports and services at their colleges, including those specifically provided to rural students. The advisory group also included a college student from a rural background.

Once assembled, we were transparent with advisory group members about the time needed to participate in the group, the length of the research study, their responsibilities, and their compensation—as each member was compensated for their time. Engaging this advisory group from the beginning of the evaluation helped us refine the research questions and the purpose of the questions; develop data collection protocols; conduct outreach to participants, including crafting friendly email messages; and design the study with the audience in mind for our work. The resulting [study](#) provides a nuanced understanding of how rural students make decisions about life after high school.

STAGES 3 AND 4

Identify the purpose of the evaluation and frame equity-centered questions

In identifying the purpose of an evaluation and framing questions, evaluators consider power imbalances,ⁱ and take systems approaches in developing equity-centered evaluation questions. In these stages, we work closely with our partners to align the purpose of the evaluation—and its guiding questions—to the cultural values of the communities being served.

We collaborated with **BFCC** partners to better understand the goals, assets, and strategies that contribute to fulfilling its mission and then align the evaluation to those goals. First, we facilitated a discussion with administrators, faculty members, and staff members to understand the topics that were important to BFCC and its partners and identify data sources that could help us learn more. Through the process, we

built consensus around four key areas of interest: community partnerships; student academic, well-being, cultural, and linguistic needs; the impact of online learning; and community workforce needs. From there, we met regularly with BFCC partners to refine the evaluation questions and develop an approach that reflected the community's values. In addition, this work helped us take a systems-level approach and acknowledge student success as embedded within the structures and strengths of the college; existing community partnerships and relationships; and the broader historical, political, and cultural assets of the Blackfeet community.

STAGE 5

Design the evaluation

A culturally responsive approach implies flexibility in how the evaluation is designed rather than the imposition of a research framework or standard for what qualifies as credible evidence.^{viii} During this stage we explicitly center the cultural context of a particular program or policy, as well as the cultural identities of those who will participate in the study.

For the **ATD** rural resiliency project, the rural colleges participating in the project played a key role in evaluation design. In a rural convening hosted by ATD at the onset of their work with the colleges, we held an evaluation design session in which college teams provided feedback that directly informed the evaluation plan. The college teams included individuals in a variety of roles, including administrators, faculty members, student services staff members, and institutional research staff members, which ensured the evaluation would touch on all functions of the college as it worked toward the goals of the initiative. The design session included two feedback sessions, during which the evaluation team facilitated small-group discussions using Mentimeter (an interactive presentation software that allows participants to respond to prompts and see other responses) and Google Sheets. We then used this information to develop interview protocols and data collection strategies. We continued working closely with the colleges, and their ATD coaches, to refine the evaluation questions, plan, and study protocols. We have used similar approaches across all our projects to gather feedback on our evaluation plan before embarking on data collection.

STAGES 6 AND 7

Select and adapt instrumentation and collect data

During this stage, we consider the burden of our partners and participants. Evaluation can take considerable time, and CREE evaluators consider the types of data being collected, the time and resources partners and participants will have to spend to provide data, as well as the socioemotional burden of data collection.

For the evaluation with the **ECMC Foundation**, we designed an interactive interview protocol that allowed college students the opportunity to guide the interview. Specifically, we used a virtual mapping interview in which students were able to point out on a map where they can access basic needs services and

the locale of basic needs centers in relation to their classes and other campus services. Students were also able to show interviewers the tools and websites used when trying to access services and the accessibility of such tools. This approach allowed students to lead the interview as an expert guide, virtually escorting the interviewer to areas important to them and allowing for exploration of the social, organizational, and institutional factors shaping their experiences.^{ix} To address system-level root causes that impact student outcomes, it is essential to incorporate elements in the evaluation that explicitly allow students to reflect on the structures and systems impacting their experiences.

In the evaluation we conducted with **The Annie E. Casey Foundation**, focused on effective approaches to engaging young adults, we assembled a youth advisory group that included participants and alumni of our selected reengagement programs. Feedback from the advisory group led us to revise our data collection protocol, emphasizing the voices and experiences of youth participating in the reengagement programs. In addition, after interviewing alumni of our selected programs, we asked them if they would be interested in supporting the interview process of current participants of the program. This approach allowed current participants to be interviewed by someone who was closer in age and shared similar experiences. Alumni who agreed received additional compensation as well as a training session focused on research ethics and Institutional Review Board standards. After these training sessions were complete, alumni were given the opportunity to conduct a focus group session of current participants of the reengagement program. Some of these alumni were college students interested in pursuing research opportunities at their institution. These participants found this experience particularly exciting and helpful. Centering student voice in the development of data collection instruments and during data collection, while remaining cognizant of burden and reciprocity, can benefit both evaluators and postsecondary students.

STAGE 8

Analyze data

During data analysis, we engage partners—including cultural interpreters—in the process of disaggregating data, in order to explore how some groups are impacted more than others and examine outliers that can be used to elucidate any complexities within the findings.^{vi}

Education Equity Solutions and Education Northwest researchers used multiple data sources to identify instructional practices that contribute to students' math success, focusing on Black and Latino/a/x students, specifically. This included student, instructor, and course administrative data from four community colleges in California; surveys of instructors teaching transfer-level math at these colleges; and an analysis of course syllabi. Our analysis produced a large amount of data on specific instructional practices and syllabus features that predict the success of different groups of students. The study team shared the preliminary results with each participating community college, including math faculty members who participated in the research, so that they could help interpret the findings. The study team also met dozens of times over several months, both as a team and with the project's advisory group, to

identify the key instructional practices that had the strongest evidence across the various approaches used in the study. The resulting [study](#) points to specific instructional practices that can reduce racial disparities in transfer-level math outcomes.

STAGE 9

Disseminate and use results

In a culturally responsive evaluation, the evaluator should go beyond adding to the knowledge base and give back to the participants and the community.ⁱⁱⁱ Taking a CREE approach in dissemination includes developing deliverables that provide a benefit to study participants, align with the purpose of the study or evaluation, and are accessible and useable for relevant partners.

Over the course of the CBO-institutional partnerships project with **College Futures Foundation**, we learned that CBO grantees needed resources to help them make the case for partnerships with higher education institutions. To support grantees' future work, we worked with College Futures Foundation to shift the focus of the deliverables. We created a map identifying CBOs in California who partner with higher education institutions to holistically support student success. The map shows the prevalence of partnerships across California higher education institutions, allowing grantees to show they are part of a larger movement. In addition, we created two-page case studies for each grantee to highlight their successes to support outreach to potential partners and funders. Over the course of our engagement, we facilitated three "learning engagement meetups," which provided a space for grantees to connect, share, and learn from one another. Based on grantee feedback, the focus of the final meetup was on growing, sustaining, and funding partnerships.

In close collaboration with **BFCC**, we developed a final report describing findings from the community needs assessment and facilitated a public forum to gather community input and reflections. Next, we used recommendations from the community needs assessment to facilitate two all-day strategic planning sessions at the college to identify high-level priorities across the BFCC community. Our approach emphasized meaningful engagement with students, faculty members, staff members, administrators, community members, and the Blackfeet Tribe to ensure that our questions, activities, and deliverables integrated multiple perspectives and drew on multiple ways of knowing. The result was an equity-centered strategic plan and an accompanying action plan for implementation, including a timetable and benchmarks.

For the evaluation with the **ECMC Foundation**, in addition to [traditional evaluation reports](#), we provided study participants with internal products inclusive of findings and results for their own context. Specifically, case study colleges and universities received detailed site memos describing the history and progress of basic needs services on their campus, grantees received survey results for their partner institutions related to basic needs services implementation, and postsecondary institutions that shared student-level data received their results related to student use of basic needs services and outcomes of students who accessed

services versus those who did not. We also used the evaluation data to develop a rubric that identifies the underlying conditions and outlines benchmarks for different stages of basic needs initiative implementation. Indicators and activities for each goal and examples of implementation practices were developed and refined based on survey data collected from nearly 70 postsecondary institutions. The publicly available [final rubric](#) assists colleges across the country in assessing their progress in implementing basic needs services.

Questions to consider when approaching a new evaluative effort

1. What communities are most impacted by the postsecondary issues I'm evaluating? How can I ensure their voices are included throughout the evaluation process?
2. Whose voice is missing from the evaluation and how can I support broader engagement and participation from across the college and with community partners, employers, school districts, and other stakeholders in the postsecondary ecosystem?
3. How can I ensure the evaluation addresses system-level root causes and does not focus on community or student deficits?
4. What power imbalances should I be aware of within the postsecondary ecosystem? Whose voices are typically prioritized? How does my position as an evaluator or researcher impact any existing power imbalances?
5. What approaches described in this brief could make my postsecondary research and evaluation project more culturally responsive?

About the authors

Destiny McLennan, Ph.D. (she/her) is a senior researcher at Education Northwest with a deep passion for centering and amplifying the voices of diverse, yet systemically marginalized, students. Destiny has extensive experience in qualitative research and centering participant voices in research and evaluation. In all her work, she strives to avoid deficit-based models that are used as a guide to predict behaviors, recognizing that they are often focused on "traditional" or "majority" populations rather than those affected by systemic oppression. Accordingly, her work is grounded in asset-based methods and theories to highlight achievement and success in marginalized communities.

Emi Fujita-Conrads, Ph.D. (she/her) is a senior researcher at Education Northwest with extensive experience in mixed-methods research and participatory approaches. Her research focuses on understanding the factors that influence postsecondary enrollment and persistence and approaches for conducting culturally responsive evaluation studies that promote social justice. Emi sees evaluation as a collaborative process of learning alongside partners. In her work, she prioritizes the values and experiences of the program community to develop studies that promote learning, educational equity, and community-led change.

Michelle Hodara, Ph.D. (she/her) is a senior leader in Applied Research and Equitable Evaluation at Education Northwest where she directs a portfolio of research and evaluation projects related to postsecondary access and success. Michelle provides high-quality, accessible, and actionable research and evaluation that can contribute to a more equitable education system and society. She specializes in quantitative research and is passionate about learning about and incorporating equitable evaluation approaches so that the context, culture, and lived experiences of the systems, institutions, and individuals participating in the research and evaluation inform the project from design to dissemination and use.

Libbie Brey, Ph.D. (she/her) is a senior researcher at Education Northwest where she leads research and evaluation projects across a broad range of content areas. Libbie collaborates with clients and partners to design and conduct culturally responsive and asset-based evaluation and research approaches. She is a qualitative researcher who specializes in gathering information from students and those who work with or support students to better understand how systems and education settings can provide more equitable student experiences and outcomes.

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Endnotes

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