



TRANSFORMING MINDSETS, POWERING CHANGE

Getting to the Root

JANUARY 2022

EQUAL
MEASURE

FINDING
PROMISE
FUELING
CHANGE



ABOUT LUMINA FOUNDATION

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all and increasing the proportion of Americans with college degrees, workforce certificates, and other high-quality credentials to 60% by 2025. The Foundation envisions a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. The Foundation works in partnership with education and business leaders, civil rights organizations, policymakers, and individuals who want to reimagine how and where learning occurs. Between 2017 and 2020, Lumina Foundation launched and supported 26 communities designated as Talent Hubs for creating environments that attract, retain, and cultivate talent—particularly among today's students, many of whom are people of color, the first in their families to go to college, and from low-income households.

ABOUT EQUAL MEASURE

Equal Measure is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit consultancy working with national and regional foundations, nonprofits, and public entities to advance social change. Equal Measure offers program design, evaluation through a wide range of methodologies, capacity building, technical assistance, and communications services to help *those who do good do even better*. For more than 30 years we've partnered with clients across the broad spectrum of content areas, sharing fresh insights and translating good ideas into meaningful change—strengthening our clients' efforts to make our communities healthier, more equitable, and more inclusive.

For more information about Equal Measure, please contact Seth Klukoff, Vice President of Thought Leadership, at sklukoff@equalmeasure.org or visit equalmeasure.org.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- [Learn to Earn Dayton](#), Dayton, OH
- [Shasta College/North State Together](#), Shasta County, CA
- [St. Louis Graduates](#), St. Louis, MO



INTRODUCTION

“When we have so many initiatives and so many partners that are working on things that have been on agendas for the last 10-15 years, we shouldn’t still be dealing with those things. That tells us that something else is beneath the surface.”

-COMMUNITY LEADER

Many in the United States are working to redress unjust systems pervasive in all corners of life—education, health, criminal justice, housing, and the environment. While divisive politics and contentious public discourse are quite visible today, deeper—and perhaps less visible—dialogue continues in many communities to create an accurate and more nuanced narrative about history, the impact of racism, and systems that present or engender barriers to many citizens. Exploring the root causes of inequity is critical to understanding how society at large, and our local communities in particular, have evolved over decades and even centuries. The roots and their evolution create the social and economic conditions we see today. In public health a root cause is often described as finding the “upstream” cause of a problem. For example, persistent disparities in education take on new meaning when they are examined alongside their roots from the past and present (e.g., racist policies leading to underfunded schools, poverty, and environmental hazards).ⁱ

In a recent evaluation of Talent Hub communities, we found numerous examples of cross-sector partnerships and postsecondary institutions making time to uncover and acknowledge the roots of inequity in their communities as part of efforts to alter policy and practice and close gaps in educational outcomes between demographic groups. Through interviews with 70 partners at 13 Talent Hubs across the country, we identified four approaches that were critical to the implicit and explicit changes happening in Talent Hubs.

1. Elevating Social Determinants
2. Disaggregating Student Outcomes
3. Unearthing Historic Injustice
4. Reorienting Institutional Policies and Practices

In this report, we look at these approaches in more detail and elevate the stories of three Talent Hubs—Dayton, OH; Shasta County and the Northern Inland Region, CA; and St. Louis, MO—that explored root causes of inequity in their communities, reconsidered measures of success, and enacted community or institutional-level changes that recognize and address historic injustices. We will share four approaches that provide meaningful perspectives about the roots of inequities, and examine the considerations in exploring root causes to change systems and outcomes for students and communities. Our aim is to equip readers, including (but not limited to) practitioners and leaders of postsecondary institutions and cross-sector partnerships with goals and strategies to further understand the significant historic and root causes that matter to resolving today’s educational gaps.



TRANSFORMING MINDSETS, POWERING CHANGE SERIES

Evaluation Approach

This report is part of a series, Transforming Mindsets, Powering Change, in which we share learnings related to advancing equity through policy and practice change. Equal Measure served as Lumina Foundation's evaluation and learning partner for Talent Hubs from 2017 to 2021. These products are the culmination of 70 interviews with Talent Hub partners and a survey documenting 240 policy and practice changes underway at 22 Talent Hubs. Six types of organizations were involved in interviews: postsecondary institutions (40); community organizations, including nonprofits and chambers, some serving as the Talent Hub grantee (22); government (3); philanthropy (3) workforce/employers (2). Interviews were conducted with postsecondary institution presidents, provosts, deans, and department heads, students, and leaders from local government, business, and community-based organizations.

We invite you to read the two companion reports in this series:

- *Advancing Equity through Postsecondary Education Policy and Practice*, which provides an emerging picture of how postsecondary institutions and their partners are unearthing complex and entrenched barriers embedded in their systems and shifting culture, practices, and policies.
- *Recognizing Catalysts for Change in Postsecondary Education*, which explores those who play an outsized role in promoting equitable change within and across partner institutions and identifies common approaches to this work.



FOUR APPROACHES FOR EXPLORING ROOT CAUSES

Historic injustices and systemic barriers prevent many students of color—and adult, first-generation, and low-income students—from enrolling, persisting, and attaining a recognized postsecondary degree or credential. Exploring root causes unveils the multi-layered challenges that interfere with educational success. Some challenges are within postsecondary institutions (e.g., bias, traditions, policies, and practices that create barriers for students as they navigate classes, academic programs, tuition and fees, other costs, and student services). Challenges also can be present off campus, affecting students, their families, and their communities in terms of access to quality housing, transportation, childcare, healthcare, jobs, and intergenerational wealth. Some challenges are structural manifestations of historic and intentional discrimination and marginalization of communities of color. Acknowledging the full set of factors—the **root causes**—that affect student success leads to more equity-focused, systems-based solutions. Without examining root causes, solutions are more likely to be short-term, programmatic “band-aids” that will not resolve the underlying issues facing students today and in the future.

Four Approaches

Data is an essential component of getting to the root causes. In this report, we consider data expansively—it can take multiple forms, come from many sources, and involve storytelling to create a clearer and more holistic picture grounded in the experiences of students facing barriers in education—on campus and beyond. **Through our interviews with 70 partners in 13 Talent Hubs across the country, we identified four approaches (Table 1) to getting to the root causes. These approaches have helped communities shape shared narratives, engage partners from systems, and advance equity in postsecondary institutions.** Below is a short description of each approach.

TABLE 1: Four Approaches to Getting to the Root

Elevating Social Determinants	Understanding off-campus factors that affect educational experiences and outcomes. These affect students daily, and may include access to high-quality, culturally appropriate infrastructure factors related to food, transportation, or childcare. Lack of access often signals systemic inequities that perpetuate poverty or poor health across a community and over generations.
Disaggregating Student Outcomes	Examining student data by race, ethnicity, gender, age, and other demographic characteristics to understand differences among student groups that are masked by aggregated data. Student outcome data includes enrollment, retention, student debt, and degree completion at a postsecondary level. At a secondary level, it may include credits earned, test scores, FAFSA completion, or attendance records.
Unearthing Historic Injustices	Acknowledging that the root causes of systemic inequities’ are racism, sexism, and xenophobia, and exploring how they have historically and specifically manifested in communities, can help identify effective strategies and policies to address their persistent impact. Federal redlining policies from the mid-20th century, for example, continue to affect investment in many communities; racism toward Native American communities and dismissal of celebrations and cultural practices directly affect outcomes of students.
Reorienting Institutional Policies and Practices	Identifying or reviewing policies or practices at postsecondary institutions to understand the degree to which they are discriminatory or may perpetuate or create disparate outcomes across groups.



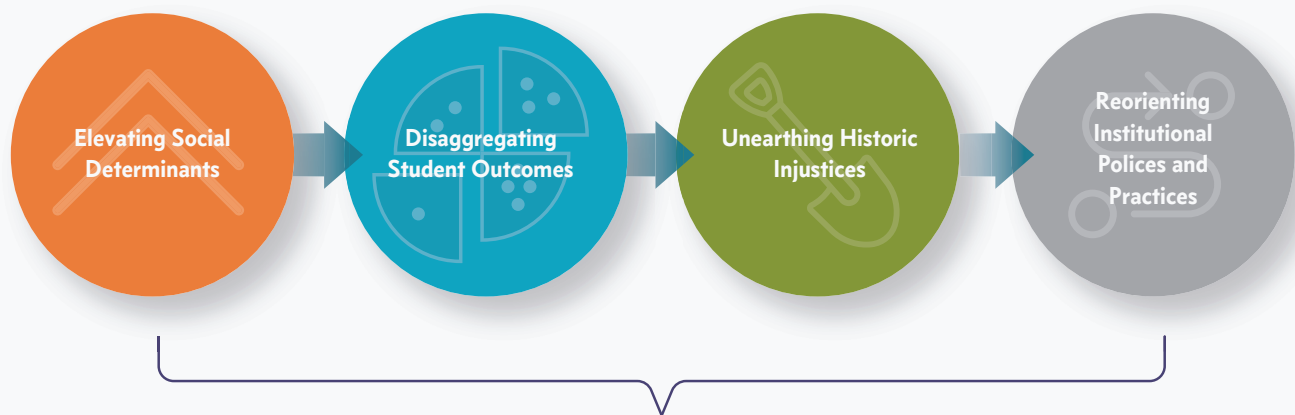
Each approach used alone has some value but can be limiting. For example, most postsecondary institutions regularly collect student outcome data to track trends and understand success among different student groups. However, disaggregated student data does not explain the reasons for group differences and can hinder the generation of effective solutions when used alone. When postsecondary institutions singularly emphasize student outcome data, it can lead to a focus on the individual responsibilities of student groups for their own success, “blaming” groups of students, and universal policies that “weed” low-performing students out of the institution because decision makers lack a holistic understanding of the barriers some students face in their educational, social, and economic journeys.

Using multiple approaches deepens understanding of the issues affecting students of color and those experiencing barriers. Multiple approaches lead postsecondary institutions to:

- Create a nuanced and collective mindset and values that advance equity.
- Re-examine policies and practices through systemic and equity lenses.
- Engage and share power with students and residents with lived experiences and expertise to inform solutions.
- Identify local partners who can contribute to multi-sector, system-level, sustainable solutions on behalf of students who are experiencing barriers on and off campus.

In this evaluation, we learned a common sequence of approaches to getting to the root (see Figure 1). The communities did not plan this sequence of approaches in advance. Over time the communities learned that data from one approach may naturally lead to questions that can be answered by another approach. Hence, the communities developed and implemented more informed and focused strategies.

FIGURE 1:
General Sequence of Getting to the Root in Three Communities



EARLY SIGNS OF CHANGE

New Knowledge • New Mindsets • Small Wins • Shared Power • Policy and Practice Shifts

In the next section, we present three vignettes that bring to life these approaches, how they built upon each other, realizations they surfaced individually and together, and how they led to equitable changes in three communities.



VIGNETTES

“If the data’s able to tell us that we’re losing Black and Brown, Southeast Asian students at a particular point, we might be able to identify why that’s happening and then create some measures that would help alleviate those issues.”

—TALENT HUB PARTNER

In this section, we feature Talent Hub partnerships in Dayton, OH, Shasta County and the Northern Inland Region, CA, and St. Louis, MO, all of whom are committed to advancing equity in their postsecondary institutions and communities. Their journeys exemplify the role of root causes in understanding and changing policies, practices, and conditions in their communities to better support educational success.

The three Talent Hub partnerships featured in this report experienced a similar sequence to the root cause approaches in their work. Although these communities experienced a similar sequence, the process may occur in a different sequence in other communities. Therefore, it is important to find an entry point to root cause work that is right for the community and its postsecondary partners. *We consider these four approaches to getting to the root as ingredients that fuel systems change, rather than as a step-by-step recipe.*

DAYTON, OH

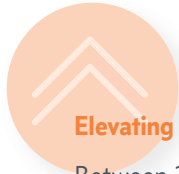
Changing Hearts and Minds throughout the Community

In the mid-20th century, Dayton, OH looked like the epitome of a small city at its apex. Dayton was a hotbed of economic innovation during the early to mid-20th century, where the Wright Brothers flew, the National Cash Register Company changed the flow and exchange of money in retail, and automotive companies were churning out auto parts in unionized factories. Dayton was the “Silicon Valley” of its day, with the greatest number of patents per capita. Yet, systemic racial inequities simmered, as Black residents were discriminated against through systemic redlining. With time, deindustrialization hollowed out urban centers and disinvestment in public education and health programs led to economic decline. Today, through concerted efforts by the education and civic community, an undercurrent of hope and racial equity efforts are emerging.

From the mid-2000s to the present, in a national wave of urban renewal, university and school district leaders coalesced around cradle-to-career priorities to bolster educational outcomes. Today, the Dayton Talent Hub, facilitated by *Learn to Earn Dayton*, aligns, maximizes, and expands existing postsecondary attainment strategies for traditional-age and adult students, with particular emphasis on under-represented, low-income students, especially Black men. Grounded in disaggregated data, and committed to using data for continuous improvement, the partnership works collaboratively with its P-16 partners to close pervasive opportunity gaps in its community.



The Dayton mayor's office is playing a pivotal role, illuminating the pervasive effects of historical injustices and longstanding systemic racist strategies such as redlining, which have created barriers to academic and economic opportunity for Black residents. The Montgomery County Educational Service Center (ESC) implements the Equity Fellows program, which trains teachers and administrators in strategies to achieve greater equity among student and administrative processes and curriculum. Education institutions, such as the University of Dayton, Sinclair Community College, and multiple school districts, are involved in policy and practice shifts within their own institutions. Dayton's partnership signals a collective commitment to evidence-based strategies to advance equity; the partnership also focuses on cross-sector collaboration to shift systems.



Elevating Social Determinants

Between 2016 and 2017, the Ohio Policy Center, Dayton Children's Hospital, and the City of Dayton Public Health Department released a series of reports outlining troubling disparities in health and economic outcomes between White, Black, and Hispanic residents. These reports highlighted significant declines in income and increases in poverty and vacant housing, and documented effects on physical and mental health, all disproportionately affecting Black and Hispanic residents.^{ii, iii, iv} As these reports circulated, Learn to Earn Dayton—a nonprofit organization working on cradle-to-career initiatives—reflected on the declining indicators of health and the economy alongside educational data (e.g., Black students had lower third grade reading scores than White students). Learn to Earn focuses on improving kindergarten readiness by expanding enrollment in quality early learning programs, increasing STEM participation, and accelerating college access (e.g., FAFSA Champions in all high schools).^v



Disaggregating Student Outcomes

Researchers at Learn to Earn Dayton found other significant gaps between Black and White students in kindergarten readiness, math, high school graduation, and postsecondary enrollment and completion, all of which were tied to the compounding inequities in health, education, and economic outcomes.

Learn to Earn Dayton officials collaborated with other sector representatives to convene the K-12 and postsecondary leaders and invited prominent education researchers to help them understand why these trends were occurring. As conversations ensued, community leaders began to think about root causes. As a Learn to Earn Dayton leader remarked, "you can keep giving people palliatives, but if the palliative is not dealing with the root cause, you are going to keep having manifestations of the problem."



Unearthing Historic Injustices

Partners in Dayton can point to several historic factors that contributed to inequities in the region. Like many urban areas, neighborhoods in the city were subject to redlining—discriminatory lending practices in which banks did not invest in Black homeownership or small business development, leaving White neighborhoods (mainly in the outskirts) to benefit from greater public and private investment. Redlining was prevalent in the West Dayton and Trotwood neighborhoods, which are located on the west side of the Miami River in downtown Dayton—the river still serves as a delineation of segregation in the city with Black residents concentrated to the west. The introduction of redlining was especially detrimental following the Miami River’s catastrophic flood in 1913. Black residents lacked financial capital and generational wealth to rebuild after the flood, and their financial challenges were compounded by the city’s early 20th century systemic disinvestment in their neighborhoods. During this time, Black residents also faced discrimination in postsecondary institutions, especially at the University of Dayton, where they were limited to enrolling in evening classes.

These factors exacerbated disparities and downward trends in poverty, population health, education, and career success. Dayton was once a hub of innovation and manufacturing, but in the last few decades has experienced massively diminished industry as manufacturing jobs are outsourced.^{vi} The major gaps and disparities in educational and economic opportunities have had repercussions for decades in already under-resourced schools and neighborhoods—preventing students, families, and communities from experiencing upward mobility.

Today, Dayton’s postsecondary institutions and their partners are talking publicly about the historic roots of systemic racism in their city. Working with a number of regional partners, Learn to Earn Dayton created an accessible, multi-media exhibit, [Undesign the Redline](#), for the public to learn more about their city’s racist history and seek a shared path toward equity. A discussion series, [Roots of Racism](#), was produced and recorded by the University of Dayton in conjunction with the mayor’s office; it explores the devastating impacts of redlining and discrimination.

“Understanding redlining has caused us to focus more intentionally on how to look at students...that in the past we may have deemed problem students. Systemic issues have an historical impact for a family who faced redlining.”

—TALENT HUB PARTNER

As the public campaign unfolded, Learn to Earn Dayton invited community members to listening sessions and data walks to help them understand the data and devise their own solutions for shifting power and resources into neighborhoods and away from traditional bureaucratic institutions. Families could interpret data around high school graduation and college enrollment rates and devise solutions to benefit their own family’s needs, like completing FAFSA and college applications or understanding new skills necessary for meeting the requirements of in-demand career pathways. A Talent Hub partner remarked that new programs should be implemented by understanding what the true needs of constituents are and ensuring that beneficiaries “move forward with dignity” and “anticipation that things will get better over time.”



Reorienting Institutional Policies and Practices

Learn to Earn Dayton leaders recognized early that there would not be a single strategy to address the disparities, but rather a “composite” approach was necessary. For postsecondary education partners, that has meant new policies, practices, and collaborations. Sinclair Community College developed a college pathways initiative focused on Black men, who are paired with mentors from the faculty and staff. The institution is channelling attention and resources on an often-neglected group of students and ensuring they are supported to stay on track academically and in their careers through guided pathways and wrap-around supports. In the K-12 system, high school students now receive more individualized attention for college transitions. A FAFSA Champion is identified in every high school in Montgomery County to coordinate FAFSA applications with students; the goal is for 70% of graduating students to submit a FAFSA form. The FAFSA Champions collect and compile implementation data (e.g., number of completed FAFSAs) weekly to track progress and adjust if the rates falter.

Partners are continuing to use data exploration approaches to inform their work. The Equity Fellows, as mentioned previously, serve in six school districts across five counties, including communities still suffering the effects of redlining. The Equity Fellows help identify bias, inequities, and harmful policies and practices that have led to disparities. They create spaces for collaboration and dialogue, provide training, and collect and support interpretation of data. Their work has led to more equitable policies around discipline, attendance, and social and academic supports.

“...because of neglect and disinvestment, over time, there were a multitude of issues that individuals and families were dealing with. So over time, those issues have increased, they’ve become much more complicated. The desire at this point is not to just continue doing something for a community, but to engage the community who’s directly impacted by those issues in a meaningful way that they can come to the table and say, ‘this is what we’re experiencing, and this is what we can use in the way of help.’”

—TALENT HUB LEADER

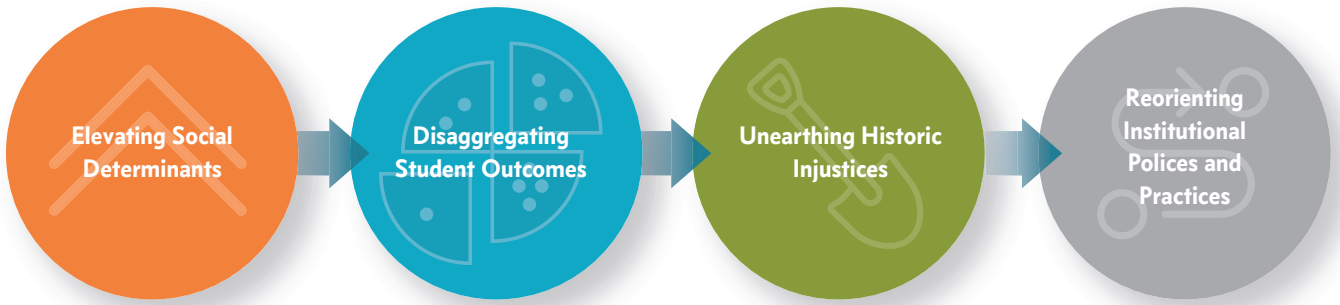
Current Impact:

The four approaches to exploring root causes of inequity have been central to Dayton’s progress. Data has supported public awareness campaigns around historic and systemic racism practices that have changed how White and racially marginalized communities are engaged with one another. For example, predominantly affluent and White communities in Dayton now embrace calls for equitable funding solutions that affect the health and wellbeing of the entire region.

Learn to Earn Dayton leaders are working with key stakeholders to galvanize the positive community response to the redlining exhibit. As one example, they are formulating advocacy efforts to improve the city’s appraisal process, so that it becomes more accurate and fairer for Black and Hispanic residents. In the education space, the Montgomery County ESC and local colleges are enhancing funding toward individualized student supports to address systemic disparities and social emotional wellbeing. Training and professional development initiatives have grown throughout K-12 and postsecondary systems to foster understanding and combat bias, and to develop new policies and practices for students and faculty.



TABLE 2:
Identified Problems and Focused Solutions in Dayton, OH



FINDINGS

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disparities in educational and economic opportunities. Repercussions in schools and neighborhoods already under resourced for decades. Students, families, and communities prevented from experiencing upward mobility. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research showed significant gaps between Black and White students. Racial differences in indicators of kindergarten readiness, math, high school graduation, and postsecondary enrollment and completion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Redlining policies to reinforce segregated communities. Systemic disinvestment in Black neighborhoods. Downward trends in poverty, population health, education, and career success rates. 	<p>Postsecondary institutions and high schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge pernicious impact of enrollment policies on prospective Black students. Struggle to recruit and retain Black and Hispanic teachers, faculty, and staff.
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FOCUSED STRATEGIES

<p>Partnership Education:</p> <p>Learn to Earn Dayton leaders convened the educational community and invited prominent education researchers to help the community understand why these trends were occurring.</p>	<p>Engagement:</p> <p>Residents invited to data walks and listening sessions to understand data and devise their own solutions that shift power and resources into neighborhoods from traditional bureaucratic institutions.</p>	<p>Public Exhibit:</p> <p><i>Undesign the Redline</i> exhibit and <i>Roots of Racism</i> video series released that explore the devastating impacts of redlining and discrimination.</p>	<p>Professional Development:</p> <p>Programming focused on racial equity and embedding equity into educational institutions, through practice/policy change.</p>
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SHASTA COUNTY AND NORTHERN INLAND REGION, CA

Changing Policies and Practices for Past Injustices

Natural resource industries in mining, lumber, and fishing have long dotted Shasta County and the Northern Inland Region of California, often employing residents for manual labor with few opportunities for individual career advancement or sustained economic development. Cycles of exploitation of labor and the environment created detrimental conditions for a region where the Indigenous peoples in Shasta County were mistreated for centuries. Settlers and opportunists claimed land for themselves and forced Native people to labor in these industries. For too long, the Indigenous peoples in Shasta County have remained underrecognized in formal economies and educational systems, which has had pervasive effects on the ability of students and families to progress and lead meaningful lives.

The necessary infrastructure and public resources for the region are lacking, especially in health and education, leaving students and families with limited opportunities for upward economic mobility. Major hospitals and universities are 75 miles away; the number and location of community colleges and small health centers are sparse. Many young adults who can move out of the region to seek educational and career opportunities do so. Some return to live an affordable life and, to varying degrees, support their home communities. However many young people, especially from tribal communities, do not have options to leave and further their education.

In recent years, educational leaders in the region recognized the potential to support transitions to postsecondary education, value adult learners, and revitalize a struggling economic region. The Shasta County and Northern Inland Region Talent Hub's aim is to re-engage adults who left the formal education system with relevant options and to boost economic development in the northern California region. Collective impact partnerships began in five adjacent counties (Shasta, Tehama, Modoc, Trinity, and Siskiyou).

Over time, the five collective impact efforts joined forces under an umbrella, North State Together, which today directs this work as a coalition of K-12 and postsecondary institutions and tribal communities anchored by Shasta College. North State Together partners collect and report on regional educational data and devise strategies to support adults with tailored schedules, guided pathways, case management, cohort support, and worksite learning.



Elevating Social Determinants

The North State Together initiative is anchored by Shasta College in Shasta County, but supports the surrounding counties of Tehama, Modoc, Trinity, and Siskiyou. It developed when regional leaders became more interested in and aware of health indicators negatively affecting the educational and economic prospects of community residents. More than a decade ago, research on the social determinants of health^{vii} illuminated the prevalence of health disparities in Shasta County. The county public health department further determined that Shasta was performing poorly on many common health indicators, such as obesity, tobacco use, and physical activity.^{ix} Health inequities were greatest between those with differing levels of education and income. Within two years, local health and educational leaders met for the first annual *Roots of our Health Summit* in 2010.^{viii} The summit included discussions on the connections between public health and other key indicators, such as workforce, education, and early childhood education. This sparked new ways of thinking about wellness—and partnerships—in Shasta communities.

A group focused on postsecondary education emerged from the summit interested in knowing how well they were serving residents. Leaders from Shasta College, the Shasta County Office of Education, several K-8 and high school districts, businesses, and the Shasta County Health Department then launched Reach Higher Shasta as a collective impact initiative to understand the data deeply and devise solutions to overcome troubling trends. Combining K-12 and postsecondary institutional data, partners learned:

- Twenty percent (20%) of adults in the region had a bachelor’s degree.
- Eighty percent (80%) of college students were enrolled in remediation courses.
- Thirty-four percent (33.7%) of youth graduated high school.
- One-quarter (25%) of high school students had high rates of chronic absenteeism.
- Many adults have some postsecondary experience and no degree or credential.



Disaggregating Student Outcomes

The educational partners mentioned above then began to disaggregate the data, revealing that educational success indicators in tribal communities were well behind those of White peers, especially in high school chronic absenteeism and truancy. Partners understood they had a tremendous challenge in front of them; the disparities pointed to the limited resources and job prospects facing rural communities, compounded with institutional barriers to tribal communities. They shaped a vision spanning cradle-to-career education for residents, holding themselves accountable to improvements in kindergarten readiness, social emotional health in middle school, college and career readiness in high school, and postsecondary completion.



Unearthing Historic Injustices

North State Together evolved as Shasta County leaders began partnering with neighboring county school districts and local colleges to ensure progress was being made regionally. As part of their efforts to achieve outcomes across the cradle-to-career spectrum, coalition partners reflected on the historic roots of inequities and injustice—especially exploitation and disengagement of the Indigenous peoples of Shasta County and issues of access for students seeking postsecondary education. Tribal leaders had been voicing their concerns for many years about K-12 curriculum and policies. The K-12 curriculum did not accurately reflect the history and culture of the region’s Indigenous people; tribal ceremonies lasting multiple days were considered unexcused absences and holidays were not recognized by school districts. The accumulation of absences increased truancy rates, and obstructed students’ acceptance into colleges. Furthermore, many local students did not feel welcomed or a sense of belonging if they enrolled in college. While 30% of the region’s community colleges are composed of Indigenous and Black students, few faculty and staff shared their lived experiences, values, and struggles.



Reorienting Institutional Policies and Practices

In 2017, a new superintendent of Shasta County Schools, the largest school system in the region, began attending to longstanding issues in the K-12 systems. She created spaces for tribal leaders to meet with school district leaders and become more involved in shaping education in the region, with a focus on reorienting policies and practices. Tribal representatives advocated strongly to incorporate more learning about the region’s tribes, who had been negated from the academic curriculum for decades. Tribal leaders and the superintendent worked to recognize annual rituals and gatherings of local communities—called “culture days”—as excused absences for students. Grants and resources have been allocated for bias training for teachers, curriculum redesign, and student representation at public events to bolster the visibility of tribal history and culture.

The new superintendent, with students and tribal representatives, worked with state legislators to draft a bill allowing students to attend tribal events as excused absences, which passed in September 2021.^x Furthermore, Shasta educational and community leaders are now working to incorporate tribal-recognized events into state-wide curriculum standards.

“We made the commitment to bring together teachers to write lessons that would tell the local story of our tribes. [These lessons] would be taught in conjunction with the history standards, so that our native students really see themselves in history as well as in the present. In addition to that, our non-native students begin to see and recognize the contributions, the culture, and the atrocities that have happened to natives within our county.”

—TALENT HUB LEADER



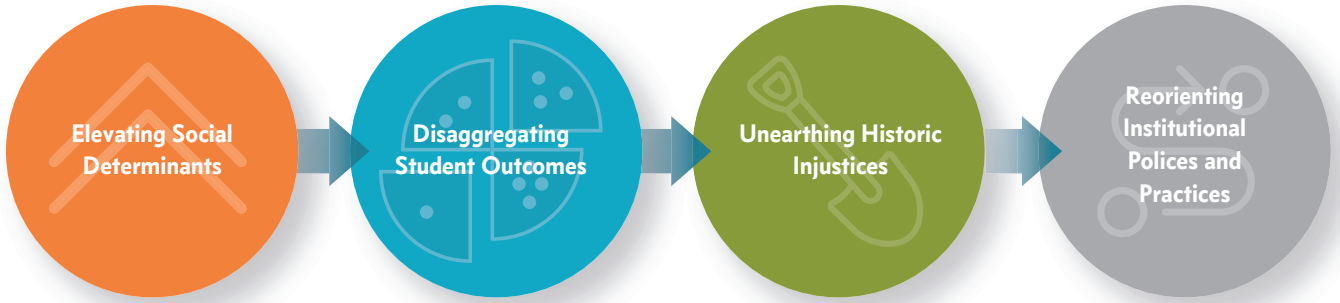
Shasta College has focused on more institutionalized approaches to supporting students from underrepresented populations. The college has engaged equity experts to strategize on curriculum and student supports. The college also has hired counselors for Indigenous students, and these counselors act as direct liaisons and voices for students' needs. The college's Umoja program, which focuses on building community among Black students, has expanded to include programming for residents outside of campus to create supports for students to persist and complete school. Credit for Prior Learning, Degrees When Due, and degree completion and bachelor's programs for adults have been institutionalized to support adult learners from the communities, especially Indigenous students, to return to school and earn degrees with limited burden. Many of these approaches and policies were piloted with a small group of students and administrators, but now are becoming central to the college's goal to become more equitable. A Shasta College administrator relayed that adult learners bring an incredible amount of knowledge and experiences—they are "seen and recognized."

Current Impact:

The Shasta region's education systems engage tribal communities, school administrators, counselors, and teachers in tandem to support more inclusive teaching and learning practices. Academic leaders will begin to review how these approaches have affected student outcome data between 2021 and 2030. They vow to continue sharing data and to constantly design new programs for greater student access and representation, while keeping students, families, and tribal communities at the heart of policy and decision making. Collective efforts among K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions push for tribal students to grow and succeed academically. New grant funding supports professional development, student engagement, and shifts in academic policies and structures that are more inclusive of tribal history and culture. Curriculum changes to include tribal history and culture, and policies to accept tribal ceremonies as excused absences, are powerful outcomes after centuries of neglect and mistreatment of the region's Indigenous people. The elevation of Indigenous voices into policy making and decision making is a profound shift in paradigms and mindsets to become more inclusive and equitable in reversing historic injustices.



TABLE 3:
Identified Problems and Focused Solutions in Shasta County and Northern Inland Region, CA



FINDINGS

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health inequities greatest between those with differing levels of education and income in the region. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievement gaps disproportionately affecting Indigenous students. • Disaggregated data highlighted significant disparities in the following outcomes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » High school graduation. » Chronic absenteeism. » Remediation courses in college. 	<p>The historical exploitation and exclusion of the Indigenous people living in Shasta County continues for students today in challenges to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Postsecondary education access. • Curricula about history and lives. • Sense of belonging on campus. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum did not accurately reflect the history and culture of the Indigenous people living in Shasta County. • Students were marked chronically absent for unrecognized tribal ceremonies and holidays.
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FOCUSED STRATEGIES

<p>Health Summit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual convening of partners. • Focus on jobs, education, early childhood development, and community health. • New thinking on wellness and partnerships to improve the health of Shasta communities. 	<p>Shared Metrics:</p> <p>North State Together shaped a cradle-to-career vision to improve indicators of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kindergarten readiness. • Social emotional health in middle school. • College and career readiness in high school. • Postsecondary completion. 	<p>Cultural Responsiveness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tribal representatives helping to adjust curriculum standards to incorporate more teaching and learning that centers local Indigenous people and their tribes. • Tribal ceremonies are now recognized as excused absences. 	<p>Policy Changes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College counselors focused on advocating for and supporting educational advancement for Indigenous people living in Shasta County. • Postsecondary programs for adult learners, especially from the Indigenous community, to return to school and earn degrees with limited burden.
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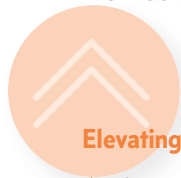


ST. LOUIS, MO

Sharing Accountability for Institutional Change

Throughout its history, St. Louis, MO has been a microcosm of America's racial tensions. Lewis and Clark's 1803 expedition to map the territory west of the Mississippi River began in St. Louis, but the mythology of the young country's westward expansion did not include the atrocities against Native communities that followed in its wake. The 1857 Dred Scott Supreme Court case was argued in St. Louis' Old Courthouse, with the decision voiding the Missouri Compromise and denying all people of African ancestry their right to American citizenship.

In the late 19th and early 20th century St. Louis was a booming center for transportation and manufacturing, but also experienced social and racial strife. In 2014 the city once again found itself at the center of a racial reckoning when a recently graduated high school student, Michael Brown, was killed by a police officer in the nearby suburb of Ferguson. Brown's death sparked nationwide protests against police brutality and elevated the Black Lives Matter movement for social and political change.



Elevating Social Determinants

At the time of Michael Brown's death, St. Louis Graduates, an organization dedicated to improving college access, was regularly convening partners from nonprofit access programs, business, and philanthropy to support low-income, first-generation students. Since then, partners in the St. Louis region can point to several research efforts that helped them explore the roots of low access and attainment rates for students of color.

The first report was from the governor's independent Ferguson Commission,^{xi} which conducted a "thorough, wide-ranging and unflinching study of the social and economic conditions that impede progress, equality and safety in the St. Louis region." The Commission's report was meant to create unity; it was written by and for citizens of the region and covered policing and safety, youth development, economic opportunity, health, and racial equity—providing a holistic picture of social determinants critical to people's wellbeing and success. While the educational recommendations focused primarily on K-12 systems, St. Louis Graduates recommended increasing need-based financial aid for postsecondary education—recognizing affordability as the biggest postsecondary barrier. Organizational leaders knew the cost of college was increasing faster than wages, presenting difficulties for low-income students who are often working and accruing debt while in school.

A second report, *For the Sake of All*,^{xiii} chronicled how low levels of education and high poverty rates, mostly in Black neighborhoods, contribute to high rates of chronic disease, mortality, and crime and imprisonment. The report sparked a series of community meetings and policy briefs outlining social and economic recommendations to increase the health and wellbeing of all St. Louis residents.



Disaggregating Student Outcomes

In the years before the events in Ferguson, disaggregated data revealed that college affordability is the biggest barrier for low-income students and Black students for college. In 2017, St. Louis Graduates commissioned mixed-methods research to identify institutions successfully graduating low-income, first-generation, and students of color in the region. The foundational *Degrees with Less Debt*^{xiii} report drew from interviews with students and administrators to understand attendance and completion. Digging deeper, the research showed need-based financial aid as a critical component in closing postsecondary education gaps in gains. However, the picture was complicated—a combination of federal Pell grants, state-level need-based grants, and institutional support was found to be most meaningful to successful enrollment and completion. The reports pointed to a “formula” in which these three forms of financial support, coupled with just-in-time advising and transition programs, ensured more students would enroll and graduate, with less debt.

“Public policy contributed to a financial problem for students and an institutional policy was going unchecked in the absence of a coalition thinking about this and paying attention to it.”

—TALENT HUB PARTNER

The report, followed by a second one in 2020 and a companion video series, served as an inflection point—adding new layers to the picture of inequities in the region and helping partners identify levers for change where they can gain the most traction. The partners have been successful in making institutional policy and practice changes at a host of postsecondary institutions in the region and state, which has influenced advocacy efforts aimed at Missouri’s state-level public policies to make financial aid and state funding easier to apply for and receive.



Unearthing Historic Injustices

St. Louis Graduates leaders and partners grappled with the historic implications of the death of Michael Brown—a young man with college plans—and the Commission’s recognition of St. Louis as the fifth most-segregated city in the United States. When the leadership team met in the aftermath of Brown’s death, they put aside planned agendas and began to process the trauma happening in the community, influenced by historic roots of systemic racism. Despite St. Louis’s economic growth, systemic racist policies continued in the form of redlining, disinvestment in public services, and discrimination in industry that disproportionately affected the Black community. Partners reflected on the lack of economic opportunity and the victimization of Black students, particularly Black men. They realized they needed to become more explicit about their mission and doubled down on efforts to measure and improve outcomes for low-income and Black students.



Reorienting Institutional Policies and Practices

Institutional policy and practice progress is attributed to statewide conversations among 16 colleges and universities who hold each other accountable in the Postsecondary Equity Network (PEN), a statewide coalition of postsecondary administrators, faculty, and students formed by St. Louis Graduates. Partners sign letters of commitment to change institutional policies around equitable access, affordability, representation, persistence, and completion for Black and low-income students. Students are compensated for their time and expertise in roles that influence major decisions on campus; they are involved in prioritizing issues, identifying action, and advocating for policies on campus as well as public policies.

Within one year, several PEN partner institutions had implemented new policies for students and elevated career positions for underrepresented faculty and administrators.

- The University of Missouri-St. Louis established the Finish Your Degree and Senior Degree Completion grants supporting students with back balances and those who exhausted Pell grants.
- Southeast Missouri State University (SEMO) expanded its model student mentoring program by merging its TRIO-based Academic Mentoring Program structure with student assistant work to add funding from TRIO coupled with funds from the university.
- Several institutions have created Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion leadership positions and elevated faculty of color to leadership or cabinet positions, including a full-time director of a multi-cultural center at the University of Central Missouri, and a DEI position restructured to an executive staff position reporting directly to the President at Maryville University. SEMO now has five people of color serving as department chairs, representing about 20% of department leaders, and 10 faculty of color, comprising approximately 20% of faculty in Academic Affairs.



Current Impact:

St. Louis Graduates, in partnership with PEN, continues to refine culture, policies, and practices to serve students in the region and inform advocacy efforts at the state level—with some early success. St. Louis Graduates partners continue to disaggregate data, but for different purposes. For example, when the CARES Act^{xiv} dollars were released in 2021, postsecondary institutions met to discuss and define methods to ensure supports reached students of color and those from low-income backgrounds; several also tracked the actual disbursement of CARES Act funds to ensure they were meeting their stated values and goals around racial equity.

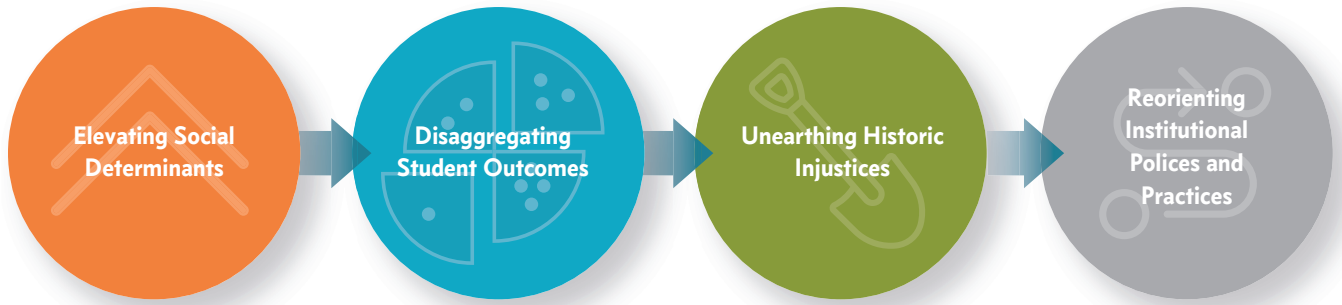
Campuses have become more equity- and student-focused, with students more active in advisory roles affecting program design and implementation. Students at PEN institutions work to hold administrators accountable for Black students' success—especially when it comes to funding extracurricular activities, equal access to loans and scholarships, and creating environments where Black students feel safe, included, and supported. These approaches demonstrate a renewed focus toward making sure students, especially Black students, are getting resources and supports directly and are being recognized and represented on campuses as equal partners. St. Louis has experienced centuries of racial tensions, so these new paradigms and mindset shifts toward equity are fresh acknowledgments and accountability of historic atrocities.

“It’s everybody’s obligation to make sure that people feel like this is their actual home—on every part of campus, whether that be mental health counseling, financial aid, scholarships, career services. Everybody being more educated on things like racism, and microaggressions, and learning how to speak to people who are different from them...that would literally just make a lot of my college career moments. I just need you to be able to know how to talk to me, and accept me as I am, and help me get to where I want to be the same way you do it for White students.”

—STUDENT IN TALENT HUB INSTITUTION



TABLE 4:
Identified Problems and Focused Solutions in St. Louis, MO



FINDINGS

<p>After the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014, the Ferguson Commission highlighted how:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • St. Louis is the fifth most-segregated city in the United States. • The racial disparities in poverty, education, health, and wealth are symptoms of longstanding racial inequities in the city. 	<p>College affordability remains the biggest barrier for low-income and Black students for college. Barriers to affordability include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rising cost of college. • Cuts to state funding for public colleges and universities, resulting in higher tuition rates. • More pressure to get loans. • Stagnant growth of the federal Pell grant. 	<p>The impact of racism in St. Louis has resulted in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographic segregation. • Discrimination and bias. • Public policies that limit educational access and mobility. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cost of college has increased faster than wages and is difficult for students to pay while working jobs and avoiding debt. There is a lack of institutional and state need-based aid to support students. • Lack of faculty and senior administrators of color in higher education institutions who share experiences with students of color.
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FOCUSED STRATEGIES

<p>Leader Conversations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elevated urgency to address disparities in college enrollment and graduation rates between Black and White students. • Identified tactics to unite state public colleges and universities in examining and eliminating their own structural barriers. 	<p>New Formula:</p> <p><i>Degrees with Less Debt</i> determined that applying a formula that combines Pell grants at the federal level, state need-based grants, and institutional support helps close those gaps in a meaningful way, so that students can afford to not just enroll, but complete college, and with less debt.</p>	<p>Reflective Space:</p> <p>Organizational leaders representing a coalition of postsecondary institutions in the St. Louis region:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processed the traumatic events. • Asked questions of how explicit they were in addressing educational outcomes and disparities. 	<p>Commitments:</p> <p>Postsecondary Equity Network partners signed a letter of commitment to change institutional policies to improve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access, affordability, representation, persistence, and completion for Black students. • Representation of Black faculty and administrators in leadership positions.
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IMPLICATIONS

Deepening our collective understanding of the historic and root causes of inequities in our communities provides a strong foundation for working toward sustainable, anti-racist solutions. Partners exploring root causes found that establishing a shared knowledge base about the roots of inequities and injustice in postsecondary success leads to more collective aspirations and helps set common priorities. In addition, engaging citizens and community leaders helps unearth the vast historic, as well as modern, factors that stand in the way of educational success. At times, a catalyzing event or major report provides the spark toward action—encouraging institutions and their partners to rapidly come together, surface beliefs, and engage those with a different lens on the issues at hand.

The vignettes in this report bring to life the lengthy and complex work of uncovering root causes. They are meant to affirm the efforts among postsecondary institutions, community partners, and students already underway in communities across the country. Dayton, Shasta, and St. Louis began with one data point (e.g., credential and degree attainment rates). That one data point led to questions of curiosity, concern, angst, and discovery—and ultimately to deeper approaches to understanding and addressing inequities along the pathways of educational success (e.g., reading proficiency). Our hope is that their stories encourage partners to persist in their questions and expand their approaches as they consider action to make postsecondary education a reality for all. Here we offer some key takeaways that can change systems and outcomes for students and communities through postsecondary partnerships.

- 1. Harness the power of multi-layered approaches.** When partners engage in two, three, or four approaches to understand student success, they deepen their efforts in several ways that are proving effective for more equitable and inclusive approaches to education. Engaging multiple approaches leads to expanded networks and partners who can better support educational equity and remove barriers at the community and institutional levels; to honoring community perspectives and solutions; and to creating shared narratives about historic and present-day conditions that act as systemic barriers for communities and families seeking upward mobility.
- 2. Parse out the stages of questions, data, and solutions with inclusion in mind.** Partners can be strong facilitators of conversations with communities, students, and families. They have the tools and resources to navigate data sources, disaggregate data, and highlight the disparities and successes represented in the data. Instead of deciding strategies on their own, they can engage people who have historically been excluded from decision and policy making, instilling collective ownership and responsibility.
- 3. Step into public conversations that raise awareness of systemic injustices.** Partners exploring root causes can catalyze, or align with, public discourse that highlights historic patterns of inequitable practices. We learned of partnerships leading awareness-raising efforts, as well as partnerships that joined long-time advocates and extant public conversations occurring just outside their doors. Testimonials from students, families, and other community members provide narratives that demonstrate the devastating personal impacts of systemic racist, bias, and unjust policies, as well as the assets and strengths of local communities. Students are the experts in the room, with the insight and experience to shape needed change. Public awareness and will-building campaigns influence community-wide advocacy efforts to “right the wrongs” and establish more respectful and fair practices.



4. Understand that collective action distributes power and creates accountability.

Local, regional, and statewide networks take time and patience to build, but serve as important grounds for cross-sector leaders and community members to deeply understand—and act upon—the conditions, barriers, and assets critical to postsecondary success. Collective approaches can expand shared knowledge and promote innovative practices by convening partners, assembling data or research from different sources, and creating inclusive spaces to devise ground-up and grassroots solutions. Coalitions with a strong understanding of the issues and clear messages potentially have greater leverage to influence need-based aid legislation and funding for students.

- 5. Promote students, faculty, and staff of color into leadership positions with real authority.** Root cause examination makes it much more difficult for institutions to shy away from the moral prerogative to change internal policies and practices and serve students who have traditionally been marginalized. Institutional leaders can identify levers of change to promote diverse and equity-minded actors in positions of authority. Institutional leaders and faculty who share lived experiences with students in K-12 and postsecondary settings contribute greatly to academic structures conducive to student-centered learning; and create a culture and climate welcoming and safe for students, so they can succeed and excel in their academic and career journeys.



ENDNOTES

- i The importance of root-cause examination is often described as finding the “upstream” cause of a public health problem. Understanding this metaphor, as explained in this article from Salud America!, may provide helpful context for this report. <https://salud-america.org/the-upstream-downstream-parable-for-health-equity/>
- ii <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59396fee59cc6877bacf5ab5/t/595f9ed9bf629a49f1e1d35b/1499438840836/FromAkronToZanesville.pdf>
- iii <https://www.childrensdayton.org/sites/default/files/Dayton%20IP%20FINAL%206-20-17.pdf>
- iv <https://mih.ohio.gov/Portals/0/Local%20Conversations/MGS%2016%20-%2001%20Dayton%20Council%20on%20Health%20Equity%20Booklet.pdf?ver=2019-09-11-162140-647>
- v <https://d7220025-00c0-4f65-9303-83fbaf2465b8.filesusr.com/ugd/a395eedb99ced6f84d4c6a9504bd4458e43696.pdf>
- vi <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-struggling-dayton-ohio-reveals-the-chasm-among-american-cities>
- vii <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2008/02/overcoming-obstacles-to-health.html>
- viii <https://www.co.shasta.ca.us/docs/libraries/hhsa-docs/about-us/chsa-draft-040816.pdf?sfvrsn=44>
- ix https://www.co.shasta.ca.us/docs/libraries/hhsa-docs/professionals/Winter_2010
- x https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB516
- xi https://3680or2khmk3bzkp33juiea1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/101415_FergusonCommissionReport.pdf
- xii https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/sites.wustl.edu/dist/3/1454/files/2018/06/FSOA_report_2-17zd1xm.pdf
- xiii <https://www.dwdstl.org/>
- xiv <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/caresact.html>

EQUAL
MEASURE

FINDING
PROMISE

FUELING
CHANGE