



Umoja: The Power of Unity and Community

Every day I learn about myself and about the people around me, how we need each other. This is a time in my life; I lost my job, a parent passed away. I need the support. I need community.

--Anonymous Umoja Student

I. Introduction

Student Voices: Why Umoja?

- *Umoja is here to help everyone, to get you on track to the university.*
- *In class, there are so many points of view. I get to look at the world through different lenses, not just my own eyes. There is so much to explore--myself and other cultures as well.*

Umoja is the Kiswahili word meaning unity. More than ten years ago educators leading existing African American programs in California community colleges came together and formed the Umoja Community. The Umoja Community is rooted in the experiences of African and African American cultures and inclusively welcomes students, faculty, and staff into a community that embraces similarities and differences.

Currently 62 California community colleges have Umoja programs and this number is projected to continue to grow. Each college adapts the Umoja model core requirements to its local setting and population. While college programs have variations in design, they share the unity of common practices, commitments, and support for their students. All Umoja programs draw on students' individual strengths, acknowledge their needs, and encourage their growth in the community setting.

This is a time of increased attention to equity in California community colleges, and a period of expansion of the Umoja Community. The intent of this document is to describe Umoja practices and programs, and more than that, to express in human terms the experiences of students and educators across the Umoja Community.

The Achievement Gap: Numbers Tell the Story

Student Voices: Unasked questions

Umoja has organized the activity '*If I were your teacher,*' at professional development events at a number of community colleges.¹ The educators in the room read the quote from James Baldwin's talk to Castlemont High School students in 1963.

¹ This activity was created by Umoja faculty and has been conducted at an Umoja conference, the Strengthening Student Success conference, the A²MEND leadership conference, and at other college professional development settings.

If I were you, I would force me, I would put me on the spot, ask me the most difficult questions you can. And I would not be able to answer them. My responsibility is to hear them. And when you ask your question, any question, you begin to know more about what you really think.

--James Baldwin "Living and Growing in a White World"

During this activity, a group of African American community colleges students sit at the front of the room. Many are students who have come to community college despite prior struggles, setbacks, and challenges they had in school. They have written questions that they had never been able to ask their teachers. One at a time, they ask their questions:

- *When a student struggles with focusing, and dwells in frustration on how to do the schoolwork, why wouldn't you help?*
- *Why do some teachers appear to feel that their obligation is to some students and not all?*
- *Why did I become invisible to you when you were supposed to teach me?*
- *Why didn't you ask questions when I was failing?*
- *Why didn't you ask me if everything was ok at home?*
- *Why didn't you ask me why my grades went from all "A's" to all "F's"?*
- *Explain to me what the color of my skin had to do with you teaching me?*
- *Why did you say that I would never grow up to be a success in anything?*
- *Why didn't you push me harder in class instead of sports, knowing that the student is first in student-athletes?*
- *Why did you act surprised when you realized that I got a perfect score on my chemistry test?*
- *Why didn't you show me all of the different pathways in order for me to achieve my goals?*

The teachers in the room hear the questions that students were never able to ask before, questions that were formed over years. Despite the teachers' urge to rush in, answer students' questions, and solve the students' problems, the exercise is to listen. These questions illuminate the insights, insults, and both overt and implicit racial assumptions that Black students may bring from prior educational experiences. Those experiences in turn, shape the expectations they bring to community colleges. Umoja programs are designed to address the issues underlying the questions: Why didn't you see me? Why didn't you see my strengths? Why didn't you see my struggles?

Any examination of African American students across the education system shows inequity in access, experiences, and outcomes; the data is unambiguous. From pre-school to higher education, the education system is not equitably nor effectively serving African American students and other students of color. Numerous studies (US DoE, 2015; Stanford CEPA, 2016) indicate this is also the case for Latino and Native American students. The outcomes of the educational system mirror broader societal inequities in economics, business, and health status. This persistent achievement gap is the reason that schools and colleges need programs for African American students.

Starting as early as pre-school, there is a differential in access to quality preschools for African American children. Even more telling, African American students in preschool are suspended more often than their white classmates (NPR, 2016). This pattern continues

throughout the K-12 education system: children of color receive more punitive behavioral responses. They are three times more likely to be sent to the principal's office or suspended than white students exhibiting the same behavior (US DoE, 2014).

Nationally the high school graduation rate has been increasing overall, as have college attendance and college graduations rates. As part of those trends, more African American students now complete high school, attend college, and graduate. However, examination of the data shows that gaps still exist between populations. The national adjusted cohort graduation rate for public high schools, for example, is at an all-time high of 83% (Strauss, 2016). This national average rate, however, masks differentials by population and gender. *The Condition of Education*, (McFarland, et al., 2017) lists the following high school graduation rates by ethnicity and race for school year 2014 - 15:

- 90% Asian/Pacific Islander
- 88% White
- 78% Hispanic
- 75% Black
- 72% American Indian/Alaska Native

Although gaps between graduation rates of different ethnic populations have been decreasing gradually, differences are still evident. When gender is included as a variable, differences are even greater. The high school graduation rate for Black males is 59% and 65% for Latino males, but contrast this to the 80% graduation rate for white males (Schott Foundation, 2015).

In higher education, the differential patterns continue. Although increasing numbers of African American students are attending and completing college (Ed Trust, 2014), enrollment and completion rates are not growing sufficiently to close the gap in college graduation rates with white students. The Hechinger Report (Kolodner, 2016) notes that the percentage of African-American adults that have at least a two-year college degree has grown from about 28% in 2007 to 33% in 2016. For Latinos, that figure has increased from 19% to about 23%. In comparison in the same timeframe, the percentage of whites with a college degree grew from 41% to 47%.

In looking at public higher education in California, the Campaign for College Opportunity (2015) sadly found, "Across all three public sectors of higher education—the California Community Colleges, California State University, and University of California—Blacks have the lowest completion rates for both first-time freshmen and transfer students."

Many more national, state, and local data could be included to illustrate the deep disparity of access and success of African American students across the education system. These large patterns tell a composite story. Both the struggles and the successes of students can be seen in the numbers. However, these dynamics are expressed in the lives of individual students. Their stories—both of struggles and successes—reinforce the need to create programs such as Umoja that encourage and support African American students in college.

Community Colleges

Student Voices: The Journey to College

- *I always knew I would go to college. That was what I would do: high school, college, career. My parents valued education....*
- *My parents want things for me that they didn't have*
- *They told me, this is an opportunity for you, take advantage of it*
- *I don't just represent myself, but my whole family, so I get as much as I can.*
- *My family couldn't afford any other college. It's good to save the family money....*

Designed to be the gateway to higher education, California community colleges now serve a student population that is diverse in age, race, ethnicity, and academic preparation. Community colleges welcome students directly out of high school who cannot afford to leave home, as well as those who are not academically ready for college work. They provide a pathway for adults who return to college seeking new work and career opportunities. Community colleges are first, second, and if needed, third and fourth chance institutions. They are educational settings where—if they meet their mission—people who have encountered obstacles in school and life can move towards productive futures.

Community colleges embody the hope and possibilities for the students who enroll and for the society as a whole. During the last several years, community colleges have increasingly been in the national spotlight for their access and affordability. However, access is not enough to build students' futures. Along with a wide range of community college accomplishments, wide scale data analysis shows that community college completion rates—Associate degrees, certificates, and transfer—are low across all student populations. Since 2010 there have been calls from the White House, with the First Summit on Community Colleges, and other policy, research, and advocacy organizations (McPhail, 2011) to increase community college success and completion rates.

But progress towards those goals is slow. A national report (Juszkiewicz, 2015) found that “Full-time community college students graduate at a rate of 57% within six years, according to the report, either from the institution where they originally enrolled or another college.” More telling, data from the National Education Clearinghouse puts the six-year completion rate for all community college students—not just full-time students—at 39%.

An analysis of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data by the organization Five Thirty-Eight (Casselmann, 2014), known for statistical analysis, noted that Blacks are more likely than whites to attend a two-year college, to go to school part time, and to take remedial classes and are less likely to graduate in six years.

In California in academic year 2016-2017, of the approximately 2.4 million students enrolled across the community college system 145,000 students (6.12%) are African American (CCCCO, 2018). This number and percentage are lower than the previous year when there were 150,000 African American students enrolled, 6.38% of the total enrollment (CCCCO, 2018).

As every community college in California writes its equity plan, African Americans are one of the populations that Title 5 regulations §54220(d) stipulate must be “reviewed and addressed for disproportionate impact.” If community colleges are to be true to their mission, they need to not only provide access, but also commit to student success and completion. To do so means understanding their students, as populations that are disproportionately impacted and as individuals.

When we consider the educational needs of African American students, it is important to recognize that the African American community is not monolithic. African American students bring a wide range of background and experiences. Some students may have grown up and been immersed in African American culture, art, and literature, while others were not. Some students may have been raised in strongly religious families, others have not. Some may have been supported and thrived in school, others did not.

Cultural assumptions and media representation do not do justice to the depth and richness of diversity across the Black community. The common denominator is that African Americans live in a society that is stratified by race, class, and socio-economic status. Their experiences in school and in daily life necessitate the existence of programs such as Umoja to support African American students.

Certainly, African American students share characteristics with other community college students. Like so many community college students, they bring to college a mix of hope and hesitancy, aspirations and fears.

Along with hopes and aspirations to succeed, many community college students also bring weighty baggage of doubt. Many students who come to community colleges feel they are outsiders in one way or another. If they were not good in school, are older and have been out of school for a long time, are not fluent in the English language, are working parents, have a physical or invisible disability, are undocumented, or grew up in another culture, they may be unsure about their ability to be a successful college student.

Moreover, adding to their questions about belonging in college, Black students have also encountered institutional and implicit racism that permeates national history, current society, and the education system. The Umoja Community is designed to recognize the strengths African American students bring to community college, as well as their needs, and draw on the creativity and depths of African American culture as a framework to support growth of individuals and community.

II. Umoja Program Design

Umoja programs focus on and recruit African American students. Moreover, every campus Umoja program is open to and has included students of all races and ethnicities. White, Asian, Hispanic, Pacific Island, and students of mixed race backgrounds have found a home in Umoja. At some campuses, the percentage of African American students in the

surrounding community and in the campus, population is small; at those colleges, the Umoja program tends to have a wider profile of participation. Umoja believes that students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds can benefit from learning about the African and African American diaspora. Some students come with their friends, regardless of race. Others find that an Umoja class is open at the time that fits their schedule. Students of all races have found that learning about African American history and experience is a way to learn about themselves, to view their own cultures, and to critically examine their own experiences.

The Umoja Community is a consortium of programs with shared structural components and intentional practices. Other programs in California community colleges, for example African American Male Education Network & Development (A²MEND), also explicitly support African American students. However, Umoja is the only program that offers academic courses, where existing college curriculum is “Umojafied” and enhanced by including African American history and culture. Student support services—advising, counseling, tutoring, financial aid, etc.—are interwoven with the academics as part of the overall Umoja program.

The Umoja Community provides an organizing framework for program design. Affiliated programs create local iterations shaped on the college environment and to some extent reflecting the individual or office on the campus that established the program. On different campuses, educators in academic departments, counseling, and administration have been the force that initiated campus Umoja programs. However, those leaders know from experience that beyond their commitment, building an effective campus program requires an inclusive coalition of administration, faculty including counseling, and staff.

Model Core Requirements

The Umoja Community has model core requirements for affiliated programs. These include:

- A memorandum of understanding signed by the college president to ensure ongoing commitment
- A program coordinator
- A new student orientation/welcoming ritual and closing year ceremony
- A learning community model with two or more linked courses or a cohort model
- Umoja-supported classes with smaller cohorts of Umoja students, supported by the Umoja program
- A two-semester sequence of guidance/counseling
- Individual counseling until students graduate or transfer
- Academic and support services tailored to the needs of Umoja students
- A dedicated space or ‘village’ where students and staff can study and gather
- Participation in statewide and regional Umoja events

In the same way that students benefit from many points of connection and engagement on campus, Umoja programs benefit from many points of contact, collaboration, and shared

resources across campus. Umoja programs at different colleges have shared space, classes, events, and strategies with other campus programs with common goals, including Puente, Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, and Athletics.

Umoja Classes

Student Voices: Transition to College

- *I realized I could benefit. I would have crashed and burned in the first three weeks. I would've been failing. I would have put everything off and begged for more time. Before I graduated (high school) my study habits were bad. I'd choose to sleep and eat and not do homework. I'm still adapting. The first semester the classes were hard.*
- *I never had to do homework in high school. I could do nothing and get a C. Now I need the structure to study.*
- *If I wasn't in Umoja I wouldn't still be in school...the first semester I got sick a lot, then I learned about the program.*

Umoja students, like so many community college students, are willing to work hard to succeed but when they come to college, they may not know how to do it (Bailey et al, 2015). The basic building block of an Umoja program is a shared learning environment. Students either enroll in a learning community with linked Umoja courses and/or small groups of students enroll together in designated Umoja-supported classes. Students move through their common courses as a cohort, building relationships with other students who share academic aspirations and with their caring instructors.

Many Umoja programs serve as a first-year experience. Umoja students may enroll in a learning community that links a counseling course with an academic course such as English. Before the implementation of AB 705 (Irwin, 2017), the sequence started one level below and moved through to college level English or math. San Diego City College, for example, had accelerated developmental English classes and a mathematics intensive that lets students complete the developmental sequence in one year. Other academic courses that anchor Umoja learning communities include communications, African American history, psychology, or sociology.

Part of the learning community is likely to be a two-semester sequence of transfer-level counseling, human development, or career exploration courses that makes space for the affective dimensions of learning. These classes cover the usual content of a student success class; however, they are also customized, "Umojafied," to explicitly address African American culture and experience. The counseling class is often the site of emotional exploration; it is a safe place to share common challenges and in a setting where students can comfortably discuss issues of race and culture from their personal perspectives.

Some programs extend Umoja classes to a third or fourth semester. Programs grow as local resources and opportunities allow. Project Success, an Umoja program at El Camino College, was modeled as a student success program for African American students more than 30 years ago. They have mainly cohort courses and are expanding to add Umoja-

supported courses, as well as intrusive counseling, math and English tutoring, college-based mentoring as well as peer mentoring. Like all Umoja programs across the state, Project Success provides cultural and transfer-oriented field trips. Chabot College's Umoja Program, formerly known as Daraja, now has a three-semester course sequence, with a range of other courses that meet IGETC transfer requirements, including an African American Student Leadership course. The students themselves contributed to the development of the curriculum for the leadership course.

Umoja Community Outreach

Beyond those students enrolled in Umoja classes and learning communities, Umoja casts a wide net to include students on campus and in the surrounding community with social, cultural, and political activities. Some colleges have organized Umoja clubs as a way for students who have completed the learning community classes to continue to participate and take on roles as tutors or mentors, or organizers of community activities. Some examples include

- Chaffey College AMAN/AWOMAN organizes film nights for middle and high school students;
- Solano College Umoja Scholars go to the juvenile hall and teach alternatives to violence to incarcerated youth.
- Chabot College Umoja hosted three hundred students from Oakland middle and high schools who are part of the African American Male Achievement Project. (Two of the Oakland educators who came with the students were former students).
- Diablo Valley College and Fullerton College have summer bridge programs, bringing high school students to the college campus, and providing the chance to develop mutually beneficial relationships when college students mentor high school students.
- San Diego City College, along with other San Diego community college programs, in collaboration with San Diego Unified School District, hosted an Umoja day for over 800 high school students.

III. Umoja Philosophy and Practices

Early in the development of the Umoja Community a group of faculty created a collection of pedagogical, communication, and cultural practices that represented their shared wisdom in language that resonated with the African American community. The Umoja Practices[®] continues to grow as educators contribute their combined knowledge.

The Umoja Practices[®] weave together into a multi-colored fabric of community and connection. That fabric stretches to include students' and educators' lives at school and beyond.

Umoja Practices®:

- Acceleration: English, Math, ESL, and Counseling
- Awareness of Connectedness to African Diaspora
- Community: Building Communal Intelligence
- Counseling: Affirming, Integrated, Intentional
- Encircling Diversity
- Ethic of Love—The Affective Domain
- Everybody's business
- Gifting
- Language as Power
- Live Learning
- Manifesting
- Mattering
- Mentoring
- Occupy Study Spaces on Campus
- Raising Intentional and Deliberate
- Tapping African American Intellectual, Spiritual, and Artistic Voices
- The Porch
- Umoja as a Power Base

*Love takes off the masks that we fear
we cannot live without and know we
cannot live within. I use the word
"love" here not merely in the personal
sense but as a state of being, or a state
of grace - not in the infantile
American sense of being made happy
but in the tough and universal sense
of quest and daring and growth.*

— James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

A few of the Umoja Practices® are described on the following pages in detail to demonstrate how they shape personal interactions and the community. Sometimes, in classrooms or daily conversations, practices are explicitly called out and named; other times they are like air: present, essential, and invisible.

The student voices included below were collected across more than half a dozen colleges and Umoja programs. Although the programs vary somewhat, the students' responses were strikingly similar across colleges in their enthusiastic responses to the Umoja Practices®.

The Ethic of Love

Student Voices: We are Family

- *We're like a family. There's someone helping you, and you reach down and help those who aren't there yet.*
- *It has this sense of family, being part of the bigger Umoja community. It shines light and opens doors.*
- *They're like my moms, the director and the counseling teacher. They're pushing me to do my best.*
- *The teachers fill a void. They're like family. My dad wasn't there.*

The Umoja Community talks boldly and comfortably about love. Relationships have the highest value in African American culture – above material things. African American students need to know they are personally known and loved. For Umoja educators, love is

an integral part of the professional development; love means sharing themselves with their students. As one teacher said, “As you express more of yourself in the classroom, you allow your students to be themselves.” Students respond with the same vital appreciation when they know that their teachers “... know me as a student, but also as a person.” For students, one-way love is expressed in the affectionate language of family. At all the colleges, students comfortably and warmly described their Umoja classmates, teachers, and staff as family.

An Umoja faculty member has students formalize the support they have from family and friends. Everyone has rocks on their desk. On each rock they have written the names of the people who supported them, maybe someone who passed on, or someone who inspired them, or someone they can call on when they need help.

Interconnection: Building Communal intelligence

Student Voices: Together We Rise

- *Together we rise. Everything I went through, to get to appreciate what I do now. Now I want to give back to life. I want to work with young people to help save missteps I made.*
- *I appreciate my classmates; I value their opinions. We’re a community. It’s what we do.*

Umoja believes and demonstrates that individuals will thrive in a communal setting with care and relationships. Students come to understand that they are not there—in college, in the world—only for themselves; their successes are not only for themselves as individuals, but also for their families and the greater community.

Ubuntu: You can't be a human all by yourself. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world.

When students are part of a cohort, taking classes together, they become responsible to care for others and accountable to each other for their learning. It’s common in Umoja classes, as students are settling in their seats, the teacher may take roll to see who is there and who is missing. When a student is not in class, another student will call or text to check on him or her. Students know someone will notice if they are not there; someone will reach out. In their Umoja classes, students feel they are seen and their voices are heard. Within the community, they belong, people care and look out for them; they feel that someone ‘has their back.’ And they are responsible to look out for their peers.

In the research literature on persistence in higher education, the retention theory of Vincent Tinto (1987) and the involvement theory of Alexander Astin (1999) are commonly

cited. Both theories recognize the value of students becoming socially and academically integrated into the institution. Although theories such as Tinto's and Astin's have become conventional wisdom, they have not necessarily become common practice.

In Umoja, the theories come to life. Vincent Tinto (personal communication, 2015) watching a video of Umoja students (which he has included in his own presentations) described how effectively the Umoja class embodies his theory, "Students feel they belong when the activities in class reflect them as people. When the books they read are relevant to their lives, they want to read more. When students experience shared learning with people who value them, when the curriculum reflects them, and values their history, they feel they belong socially, academically, and intellectually."

Counseling

Student Voices: Bring your Best Self

- *What did I gain? focus and direction. Umoja support helps you go forward with confidence. This opened my eyes, so I see I can do it.*
- *The program wants the best out of you, they see the best in you; they see your potential. They tell us to bring our best selves.*
- *In the counseling class we explore feelings and power, communication and culture. What makes us the same and what makes us different? What's going on in the world?*

Many community colleges now do what they call 'intrusive counseling,' preemptively reminding students to meet requirements and deadlines. In Umoja, counseling—formal and informal—is more than a designated program component or class. Counseling is part of ongoing conversations and relationships: it can happen at any time—without a clock, without an appointment, without walls to enclose it. Umoja refers to this proactive level of engagement as being 'intentional and deliberate.' Students are supported as they learn how to focus and shape decisions in their lives. And students recognize the value.

The obstacles that community college students encounter are not solely academic. Umoja students, similar to other community college students, have complex lives and are often trying to balance multiple roles and responsibilities in their lives. Many students struggle daily with transport, finances, and work schedules, simply to get to class. One student's story demonstrates how many things can go wrong at one time. Yet she was determined to continue in college; being in Umoja supported her determination.

- *The first semester my car was stolen. I got it back, but I had to drop my evening math class. I got evicted and had to live with a relative. Umoja was helpful. They make sure you will not fail. They understand life happens and don't hold it against you.*

The Umoja program at Solano College, for example, has three social work interns from CSU Sacramento. The interns have tracked student challenges; in one semester, they identified students' major needs of mental health concerns, physical health problems, transportation, and housing (McCord, 2014). One social work intern's own educational experiences, which started in community college, mirrored those of the students he now works with.

- *I [first] came here to get a certificate. As I learned more, my goals changed, now I'm at four-year institution, getting a social work degree.... Now I can help support them.... All the personal aspects of life - bills, transport, work—we can offer and support. We try to be all the way around students and assist in each area.*

As the social work intern noted, to support students means to “be all the way around them.” Many Umoja programs keep a range of resources on hand to meet students’ basic needs: snacks (and directions to the campus food bank), bus passes, an emergency fund for gas money, and loaner copies of textbooks (for early in the semester when Pell grants are delayed, and students cannot buy texts). Some colleges have organized childcare to cover class times and some pay students to work in their childcare program.

In a safe setting, students can admit that college is challenging. Even with support and encouragement, even with deep motivation, learning to be a serious student takes effort. Many of the students struggled academically in high school and they are still struggling. Umoja is a place where they can admit to the struggle and find tools to keep going. Students learn that it is okay to struggle, and it is safe to ask for help from teachers, tutors, counselors, and peers. Asking for help will not get them labeled as poor students, but rather they will be seen as serious students. Students may struggle being in school, but they feel that their struggles are supported.

Student Voices: Struggle and Support

- *I know what works for me, this is good for me, the way I can approach the situation. I'm treading water, still not swimming.*
- *I expected college to be difficult, but four classes, full-time, I'm getting stressed out.*
- *The counselor is someone I can talk with, work on my ed plan. Honestly, I'm still lost. The program set us up with mentors.*
- *For statistics, I go to the tutoring center. In Chemistry, I get stuck. I struggle with the class. In English I can ask other students in the (Umoja) scholars' program. I still struggle asking.*

Language as Power

Student Voices: We Free People with Our Stories

- *Everyone has a story. They're all a critical part of the puzzle of life. We free people with our stories.*
- *Something I take with me from Umoja is 'language as power.' What you speak--the words in your head--that becomes your reality.*

The centrality of feelings and experiences is embodied in *the power of language*. Umoja students speak in multiple languages: the home languages students bring to the classroom, the genres of academic discourse, the emotional language of change, and the shared language of community. Personal stories are a natural part of Umoja classrooms and conversations. Students know that their stories, their struggles, their victories are welcome in the classroom. The personal stories weave together into a shared story that helps them see themselves and others in a wider context. Umoja pedagogy illustrates the

ways that including students' voices enriches the students' sense of self-efficacy, which provides a foundation for their academic success.

Words are things.... You must be careful, careful about calling people out of their names, using racial pejoratives and sexual pejoratives and all that ignorance. Don't do that. Someday we'll be able to measure the power of words. I think they are things. They get on the walls. They get in your wallpaper. They get in your rugs, in your upholstery, and your clothes, and finally into you.

– Dr. Maya Angelou

The Porch

Student Voices: On the porch

- *I see him as a mentor, a father. He speaks truth. He doesn't sugar coat things. When he talks to you, he's real. But he won't take excuses.*
- *These professors and counselors, they're about love. The theories are painful and eye opening.... living on purpose is new to me.*

In the rural south the porch, or in the urban north the front stoop, is the place where people talk with their neighbors. The porch is where small things got attention, news is shared, and the conversations that connect the community take place. Porch talk in Umoja holds moments of honesty, from calling out a problem to appreciation. Teachers may take a moment 'on the porch' to talk frankly to students about what they need to do if they are not putting in their time to meet academic standards. Or students may call out to be 'on the porch' for something they notice that needs attention. The porch recognizes that difficult truth is part of learning.

Live Learning

Student Voices: Being Present for Learning

- *Friends told me what English class to take. Actually, they said (this teacher) was tough; he'll hold you accountable. But that's okay. Other teachers before didn't even read what I wrote... He sees me as a student and a person. I want to hold up my standards to his standards.*
- *I took the normal English before, but I was not motivated, not challenged. I got a D; the teacher wasn't pushing me to do better or encouraging me. Now I'm taking the English class again. The first day, I was overwhelmed. It came off as hard. 'Who's willing to stay for education?' I stayed longer and appreciated it more.*
- *I've learned so much, black history, but also the, holocaust (a survivor came to talk with our class) and Native American history. Things that have gone on in the world, I've touched so many cultures.*

Umoja pedagogy recognizes that emotions are inherently part of learning. In order to learn, students need to feel trust, hope, and connection. At the same time that teachers pay attention to the personal experiences and emotions of their students, the teachers are clear about the intellectual content and rigor of their classes.

Although teachers may take time to remind students—repeatedly if necessary—about logistics, assignment deadlines, or the correct format for citation, the heart of learning is concepts, analysis, and understanding.

Umoja teachers do not confuse student behavior with intellectual capacity. In students' daily lives they may deal with constant obstacles and needs—transportation, food, family responsibilities, work schedules, health, etc. However, Umoja teachers can see beyond patterns of tardiness, absence, or late assignments. They do not mistake the surface chaos of students' daily lives with their inherent intellectual wherewithal to engage with big ideas.

In their classes, Umoja teachers provide the ongoing structure for academic engagement. When the teachers create an open educational environment, students have the space to talk about what they are learning and how they feel about what they are learning. The environment of trust and relationships lets them try out ideas and listen to the ideas of others.

*To hear each other (the sound of different voices)
to listen to one another, is an exercise in
recognition. It also ensures that no student
remains invisible in the classroom.*

*-bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as
the Practice of Freedom*

In a Basic Skills Umoja English course at Norco, the students had been studying all the elements of close reading and argumentation. Some of the topics in the class included colorism, internalized racism, and unconscious bias. Near the end of the term, the instructor used one of the Umoja Practices, *Manifesting*, to structure the final project, helping her students put all of their learning into action and to extend the Umoja classroom beyond the class itself into the lives and hopes of her students.

The Umoja instructor who collaborated on the final project assignment with a colleague asked her students to create a visual argument, on a social media platform--Zine, Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter. When presenting the final assignment to the students, they grew very excited and started talking to each other, while she was introducing it. She interjected that she was happy about their chatter as long as they were listening as well. The rapport in the class was very high. The whole class moved forward to discover what was being asked and what was possible, everyone engaged and enthusiastic.

The assignment: “This final project will be an argument of your own creation, your audience will be Black youth, and you will complete this project in a group of two or three students who are interested in a similar topic (*collaboration*).” The instructor asked the students to start a campaign that helps Black Youth improve their lives. Besides all the readings done over the semester serving as a resource, the instructor added a selection from James Baldwin, “Letter to My Nephew,” and “Preface 2001” from Cornel West’s book, Race Matters. The readings were used to look at argument and audience in relation to West’s and Baldwin’s pieces addressing Black Youth.

The students were asked to create handles, hashtags, Instagram pages, twitter campaigns, and photo arguments that required a minimum number of posts and evidence of at least 50 followers. Each post had to have a rationale and the whole project had to present an argument, demonstrating what they had learned. The students were captivated at the final. They talked all the way out the door, forming groups, talking about possible topics, acknowledging and thanking the instructor.

The common themes of the social media campaigns the Umoja students created were: Self Love and Mental Health. Asked later, the teacher remarked, “I’m hoping by ending like this that the students see that English matters, that rhetoric matters. So often they just get a grade and the semester disappears. My goal is to help them experience their voice, their impact and carry that confidence forward.” The instructor and students even took the project to another level and shared their work on Norco’s Umoja Community Instagram page: Umoja Norco College.

Umoja instructors set and hold their students to high academic standards. The students may have been in educational settings where standards were lowered because the classes were for ‘minority’ students. Students would be justifiably suspicious of classes that are deceptively easy. What Claude Steele (2010) noted has been shown to be effective—what has been shown to inspire students to work harder—is to make clear that the teachers hold high standards and they believe the students can meet those standards. Umoja students see themselves as capable and value serious academic engagement.

Tapping African and African American Intellectual, Spiritual, and Artistic voices: Connecting to the African Diaspora

The Sankofa bird is a mythical symbol from West Africa that looks backward, as she moves into the future, holding the egg of the future in her beak, The Sankofa bird represents reaching back and gathering the best of the past (which may have been lost or forgotten) in order to move forward.

In American history books and classes, African American history is typically covered briefly through a narrow focus on slavery. This is the common curricular approach, so African American students may have had little chance to explore their cultural history either in the Americas or in Africa. Umoja engages students with the frequently omitted richness and breadth of African and African American scholars, art, and literature.

Many local Umoja programs have chosen African names representing values and aspirations. Umoja, means unity; Daraja (at Chabot) means bridge; Diop (at Cosumnes River) is the Sengalese word for scholar; Tumaini (at San Bernardino Valley), means hope. Programs at DeAnza and Long Beach City are called Sankofa.

In Umoja English and counseling classes, students read a wide variety of African American writers: Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, W.E.B. DuBois, bell hooks, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Malcolm X, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and others. One English class, for example, read the contemporary novel, *We Need New Names* by the African author NoViolet Bulawayo.

The Umoja Conference begins by asking permission of the elders in the room to proceed. At the front of the room is an altar, covered with African cloth. In a ritual, people place symbolic objects on the altar: a mask symbolizing the dream/the vision; water symbolizing peace, fruit representing the earth; a plant for nature and transformation. The ritual calls the people into the room. It brings together the past and the present, the shared struggle and the hope.

Umoja statewide annual conferences and regional symposia are a time for celebration by the extended community: students, faculty, and staff from multiple campuses. African and African American culture are celebrated at the statewide events with intellectual content, personal voices, and artistic performances.

The keynote speaker at the annual Umoja conference 2014 and at the regional symposia 2015 was Dr. Joy DeGruy, author of *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*. Her scholarship

analyzes the current state of African American culture in the context of African culture.

Dr. DeGruy's observations speak directly to the experiences of the Umoja students. She speaks with personal immediacy, weaving her experience and voice into the historical analysis. As she describes the broad swath of history, she mentions her own conflicts, decisions, and actions in choosing this as a focus for her scholarship. She notes that the African culture was broken in slavery: the tribes disrupted, families separated, traditions transported in pieces. "How can it be healed?" She speaks directly to the students, "You can't heal what you don't know. You should know yourselves and know your history. Umoja can help you understand who you are."

At these statewide and regional events, students experience being part of an extended African American community and connected to the African diaspora and people across the world. Students are in an auditorium with hundreds of other African American students, instructors, and mentors; they know they are part of a far-reaching extended community.

IV. Umoja Educators--Professional Learning and Development

Teacher Voices: Students are our professional development.

Umoja teachers transform students' stories and voices into pedagogy and practice.

- *The students are our professional development. We get in between the spaces of learning and watch them. We learn from them. That's our professional development. We make ourselves vulnerable and empower them to be our teachers. We continue to learn from them. They model how to be taught. We write curriculum based on their lives and voices. We bring their voices in places – like schools and colleges—where historically they have been suppressed.*

Umoja educators say, without embarrassment, this is their passion, the work they do because of love. It is work they are “called to do.”

- *You come into the room authentically, who you are, not afraid. That's the energy student respond to, being comfortable who you are. Students know you care. They feel supported, becoming, and they are held accountable. They understand they need to support others in the community. This ethic of love is infused in their education.*

Educators are integrally part of the Umoja community. Umoja program staff include a range of educators: faculty including counselors, administrators, tutors, instructional aides, and volunteers. In fact, more than half a dozen current Umoja faculty and coordinators began as students in their own community college programs. These individuals chose educational pathways through community college, transfer and degree completion, and graduate school. Now they reach back, returning and teaching students at the community colleges where they were students. Umoja instructors are there to nurture and mentor students; at the same time, as professional educators they continue to learn and develop. Their students are their guides; understanding their students shapes their teaching.

Relationships as Learning

Student Voices: Teachers Change our Lives

- *...I came to college for financial aid, but when I met the teachers, I changed my mind. Now I want to help other people.*
- *And this English teacher – you can see his passion – he has passion dripping off him*

The relationships between Umoja instructors and students are about reciprocal learning. Mutual respect and caring connect the members of the community.

When Umoja students describe their teachers, they speak with respect and affection. They talk about the lasting effects the teachers have on their lives. In turn, Umoja educators see the complex layered reality students live in, including, in many cases, the traumas they have suffered. But at the core they see students' strengths. When the teachers can show the students how much they believe in them, the students come to believe in themselves.

Teacher Voices: I feel their hunger for knowledge

- *We see their needs. They may need food and transport or books, but we never doubt their capacity.*
- *When we can help remove the over-the-top anxiety that students feel, they are able to grasp material, be more interested, and figure out how to learn better.*
- *I can feel their hunger for knowledge, their resiliency, determination, and tenacity.*

As educators, their satisfaction is to see their students develop into the informed students and the leaders they can be.

Teacher Voices: We get to see them grow

- *We get to see them grow and change.*
- *We give them support so they grow, they internalize the structure and consistency, and priorities.*
- *We connect students with the path they want to take.*
- *We see the struggles and pain of the past as strength. If you only talk about how your hard life is, you won't get out of bed... focus on the goal and make a plan to do it.*

One teacher summed up her unmitigated support for students and the interrelated structure of success:

- *We let them know, failure is not an option. And then we celebrate success.... I want students to know, 'I can't be successful if you're not successful.'*

V. Outcomes

It is a natural question to ask about the effects of any educational program, to ask about the measurable outcomes as well as outcomes that are less easily measured. The Umoja Community conducted an internal preliminary study of quantitative outcomes at three colleges with well-established Umoja programs, American River College, Chabot College, and San Diego City College.

Numeric Outcomes

Based on data provided by the institutional research offices, they compared Umoja students with African American students enrolled at the college, but not in Umoja. The aggregated data across three colleges showed positive effects.

Increased units attempted and completed

Umoja students attempted and earned twice as many credits in an academic year as students not in Umoja. Umoja students were more likely to pass basic skills courses and be ready for transfer level work in a shorter time frame.

- Basic English Course success rates for Umoja participants were 10% point higher than African American students not in Umoja.
- Basic math course success rates were 12% points higher than African American students not in Umoja.

Increased persistence to the next semester

Umoja students persisted to the next semester at a rate 20% points higher than African American students not in Umoja.

- For first time students, 82% of Umoja students persisted compared to 62% on non-Umoja students.
- For non-first-time students, 84% of Umoja students persisted, compared to 62%.

This was a first attempt by Umoja Community to ask consistent questions across college programs and to provide guidelines on data gathering and analysis. The report itself acknowledges “Data limitations which include not having access to the raw data, population totals were not available, and small sample sizes prevented statistical tests for significant differences from being performed.” (Umoja Community, 2016)

These questions and the data are only the beginning of gathering evidence to measure outcomes. As the Umoja Community develops an inclusive database, it will be possible to track students beyond enrollment in classes. Extended outcome questions could examine longer terms trajectories, including Umoja students who serve as mentors and tutors in the second year and following students after enrollment in Umoja classes through completion, degree, and transfer.

Narrative Outcomes

Trends in the quantitative study above illustrate that students benefit academically from participation in Umoja. In the fieldwork for this paper, interviews with more than fifty Umoja students on more than six colleges were conducted. Two qualitative outcomes emerged that perhaps can add texture to the quantitative findings. These two outcomes are 1) patterns of academic growth and maturity and 2) strengthened Black identity.

Academic Growth and Persistence

Student voices: I'm here to be serious

- *The math teacher is now pushing me. The first semester I didn't work; then I came back and got a B. Now she says 'I can see you working.' Now I do homework daily, while it's fresh.*
- *I didn't focus in high school. My transcripts had W's (withdrawals). I was partying. I'm 24; some here are 18. Now I have a kid.... If I didn't have my son, I'd still be partying and having fun. But now I'm here to be serious.*
- *Now I sit in front more often (I used to sit in back) and I talk more in class.*
- *The first semester back, I have a 3.0 GPA. I met my best friend and we study together every night. We do our homework. Before I'd just procrastinate. Now I'm taking 14 units and getting Bs and As.*

- *I've had a fire stirred in me. I'm old. I haven't felt like this since I was a teenager. I always had a thirst for knowledge. Now I have the community to learn with.*

Students participating in Umoja respond to the program's intentional mix of personal support with intellectual challenges. Students describe their own changes in terms of developing stronger academic habits that help them succeed across all their academics. Students internalize and enact new academic behaviors in daily ways: they keep up on homework with friends, they ask questions in class. They have found a way to put into action practical advice that they have heard before that now takes on meaning.

Students' will and willingness to stay with the struggle to learn are viewed as strengths. Umoja educators continually give students messages to keep on, to persevere. They will not give up on students. One teacher relayed, "I often tell our students, 'You can't give up – you can rant, but you can't give up. Failure is not an option.'" And students take the messages to heart.

Umoja consistently provides space and support for students to learn to be students and to be part of a community that mutually supports success. Umoja firmly helps students develop educational plans with ambitious goals in community college and beyond. Students internalize the possibilities as their horizons expand.

Student voices: I want to go further

- *They push you to move on – not stay at community college.*
- *They won't be our teachers forever; we have to motivate ourselves.*
- *I always wanted to be a nurse; I came in thinking I would be a nurse for the rest of my life. Now I'm changing my mind. I'm not giving up nursing, but I want to go further, think beyond, consider other possibilities. I'm open to ideas about political science. I could do different things, maybe law school or teach nursing.*

Umoja uses every opportunity to encourage students to envision their educational and professional futures.

During the regional symposium, a panel of students from University of California Davis and Los Angeles are at the front of the room to answer questions. They have different majors, varied backgrounds, and have taken different journeys to the university. The UC Davis coordinator opens the panel by inviting students in the audience to "picture yourself here, supporting those who come after you."

The invitation from the university students reinforces the students' sense of the possibilities and pathways forward. Umoja teachers realize that their students, particularly first-generation students, may feel ambivalent moving to a four-year institution. They are moving ahead, but they are also seeing others left behind. Knowing there are others who will be there to meet them and welcome them can ease the transition and provide a sense of continuity. And then they can be in a position to reach back and bring others forward.

One student's experience sums up changes in aspirations as his horizons have opened. This student came to college with unformed ideas about what he could do or be. His experience in classes, the support of teachers, counselors and peers, and finding his own passion have all inspired him to reach higher.

- *I went to the symposium at UCLA. It was a good experience to see schools come together, everyone with the same goal, to be successful, and to meet people. The first year in college, I thought I would just do what I can. Now with guidance I can strive for more. My goal now is to go to UCLA. When I came to college I said that I was a psychology major, but that was just something to say. Then I took graphic arts and that's my passion. Now I'm aiming for UCLA, it's the top ranked program in graphic arts. I grew up in LA and thought UCLA was for rich kids. With support and the program that helps students transfer, and the network--I met students who are at UCLA--I think I can do it. I'm the first in my family to go to college, my parents didn't finish high school.*

Rooted in Black Identity

Student Voices: This is a Way for Me to Love Myself

- *As an African American, this is a way for me to be successful as a person, a way to love myself. Being here, we shed light on things that aren't usually discussed outside in public.*
- *In Umoja classes I feel comfortable--there are students like me so I feel more comfortable on campus.*
- *As a black woman, here I don't feel like I'm different. We have the same struggles. I know other people have different struggles. Here we can relate. We're all learning and moving forward. This is the best place for me. ...This is for us as African Americans, but everyone should have some place like this.*

Umoja provides space on campus where students feel they belong academically, and emotionally. Students' self-confidence grows as they develop a deeper and more connected identity as African Americans, connected to the richness of culture and community.

- *Umoja puts pride inside you. In high school I didn't learn about my own history. [Learning it now] It's breathtaking.*

One student described how powerful it was to be at the regional symposium, with so many other African Americans.

- *I walked in, looked at all the people... they are so beautiful, these many shades of brown. I hadn't been in a room with so many other African Americans.*

Participating in Umoja gives students both a connection to the richness of African American culture and a community of peers and teachers with shared values. In Umoja, students in a setting with other Black students; their classmates may have widely varied backgrounds, but they share a common cultural perspective. Moreover, students appreciate having visible role models: African American professors, counselors, mathematicians, social scientists, scholars, and university students.

The Umoja community of students and educators together share experiences across levels: the macro-socio-political-historic analysis, the local environment and community, and the internal personal realm of emotions and feelings. Using the languages of academic discourse and personal conversation, students can talk about complex issues of race in America and how it affects them in school and in life.

As Umoja students grow more confident and more determined, as they feel they belong at college, as they succeed, they look for ways to reach back, to encourage others.

Student Voices: This is a Way for Me to Love Myself

- *This will inspire my siblings – if I go to college and get a good career.*
- *A lot of people are lonely at college; they drift through. I would recommend Umoja, to develop friends and it makes it easier to go through college.*
- *It's been a lifesaver, lots of students go through college without it; they're left in the dark. Umoja provides help when you need it. It gives you support to succeed.*
- *This (experience in Umoja) strengthens my resolve, and how to present myself. I am more comfortable to promote education and books and reading.*

VI. Conclusion: Unity and Community

Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.

----Martin Luther King Jr., 1967

Umoja is the Kiswahili word meaning unity. The Umoja Community brings together campus programs, educators, and students in a growing and unified whole. Through experiences in Umoja programs, students know they are connected to a deep culture and a rich network of people in their daily lives and across the world.

In the face of national and local data that makes clear the hard fact that Black students are still being lost at every point in the educational system, Umoja illustrates the many way to bring Black students into the relationships and communities that give them the chance to grow and support others around them.

As California community colleges write their mandated Student Equity Plans, and address hard questions of disproportionate impact, what can the experiences of Umoja students, programs, and educators contribute to the colleges' need to make equity more than a plan?

Community colleges as institutions, and the individuals who make up the institutions, need to acknowledge that African American students have not been well served by the educational system as it is, including their own college. Across the community college system, the achievement gap persists: African American students are at the lowest level of

academic achievement in the system. Continuing to do what has been done in the past, even with minor tinkering to the status quo, is not an effective way to address long-standing inequities. The societal roots of racism are too deeply embedded to yield to minor interventions.

Understanding the ways that African American students feel included and supported—or more explicitly at many colleges, not included and supported—on campus can inform a college’s conversation about equity. The Umoja Community provides abundant examples of what comprehensive support for African American students entails.

When participating students are asked what they gain from Umoja, they answer without hesitation. Umoja practices speak directly to Black students’ personal needs. High expectations in the Umoja classroom counterbalance prior educational experiences where as students they encountered low expectations and tepid challenges. The community they are part of in Umoja helps them shape their identities as students, as African Americans, as citizens, as future professionals, and as individuals who are part of an extended community with shared responsibility.

Umoja programs systematically create a structure and space and, more importantly, a human environment, where Black students can explore the richness of African American culture and feel safe, seen, and heard. Umoja educators nurture relationships and community to support students’ growth in skills, confidence, and determination to succeed academically. When these Black students succeed, they advocate for themselves, their families, and their communities. And they can be a visible resource to the campus community working for equity.

Educators at the growing number of California community colleges that have Umoja programs can draw on the strengths of Umoja students and educators to make their campus more welcoming for African American students overall. Faculty including counselors and staff can collaborate with the local Umoja program and expand the community fostered by Umoja to make the successes of African American students visible and to include more students.

Educators at community colleges that do not have Umoja or other programs for African American students can learn from the Umoja experiences as well. Umoja practices can be applied in any classroom and in any interaction with students. Educators who care deeply about equity and care about the academic success of African American students can intentionally listen to students, build relationships, and create environments that support the success of their African American students.

The principles and practices of the Umoja Community address both the strengths and needs of African American students. Colleges—as institutions and as communities of individuals—can make equity alive in personal terms.

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