Equity in CTE & STEM Root Causes and Strategies

SUMMARY TABLE

**ROOT CAUSE + THEORY**

**Access to and Participation in CTE/STEM**

Individual discrimination is only one level where educational limitations exclude underrepresented students. Exclusionary institutional practices and systemic silos cement stereotypes by affecting hiring, partnerships, programming, curriculum, and administrative policies. Honest assessment of these interconnected arenas is necessary to bridge gaps to build equity. Assessing common practices and creating interventions that address all three levels will increase physical, social, community, classroom, school, and district resources for inclusion, participation, performance, and completion.

**Instructional Strategies**

Understanding the root cause of exclusion demands that we think of equity as an educational practice, as well as a value. Without opportunities for personal and professional development for teachers and students, narrow parameters for success in CTE/STEM programming and classroom settings will continue to create silos. Equitable accommodations, skill-building, and culturally responsive content can become lost if schools and school systems maintain outmoded standards. Well-intentioned policies to support the Common Core, Perkins V, and other mandates may nonetheless be applied in ways that increase deficit thinking and embed biases despite acknowledging the increasing diversity of student populations.

**STRATEGIES**

- Assess cultural attitudes, values, strengths, and challenges of your student population and integrate those multicultural perspectives into CTE/STEM curricula and programs to build inclusion and equity
- Integrate teaching and learning strategies to value different learning needs and cultural experiences
- Hire diverse educators and engage community and professional mentors to build rapport and engagement
- Create parallel supplemental programming and equitable work-based learning initiatives, both short and long term to support inclusive curriculum initiatives
- Build whole school assessment to evaluate progress and prevent silos in program development and transition

- Use maker space activities to expand curriculum into student-centered and problem-based learning strategies
- Integrate Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) to increase a sense of belonging for underrepresented students and sustain innovation in the classroom
- Schedule ongoing and regular assessment of student responses and attitudes about new curriculum initiatives. Valuing student voices makes a difference.
- Build equitable extracurricular engagement for underrepresented students to increase professional and personal development in career paths
- Identify funding for partnerships and curriculum development to expand equity innovations into employer and community contexts

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Building diversity in educational settings will bring needed vitality to training and business development in fields requiring CTE and STEM education. Excluding or limiting participation and success of underrepresented students impacts the evolution of professions as well as individuals who might otherwise achieve independence and success. Inflexible and biased educational programming creates workers who will accommodate an inflexible and biased workplace. Although some educators and employers might be initially uncomfortable with inclusion, shifting toward equity in schools and professions increases community building, innovation, and entrepreneurship to meet 21st century challenges.

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Inequities in CTE/STEM career paths begin early in educational settings, with patterns of exclusion paralleled in extracurricular activities, work-based learning (WBL), internships, and employment opportunities. These are embedded in multiple professional contexts for training, certification, and advancement. As cultural practices shift to value increasing diversity in the workforce, educators and employers need to consider the root causes that increase resistance to change.

**ROOT CAUSE + THEORY**

**Challenges of Culture Change in CTE/STEM Fields**

Access, participation, and retention in CTE/STEM workplaces depend as much on the culture of a field/organization as on the skills and resilience of the career seeker. Terms such as “empowerment,” “inclusion,” and “diversity” are defined differently depending on the context, and marginalized employees are often faced with the choice to assimilate or leave. In the sometimes contested and evolving organizational and social frameworks that make applied equity practices challenging, employers and educators alike should create a “safe space” for participation of all workers. This shift means mindfully shaping opportunities for underrepresented employees to engage authentically, feel valued, and contribute in unique ways to the field.

**STRATEGIES**

- Design school/employer professional partnerships in CTE/STEM curriculum and training programs to support cultural shifts toward equity. Do not rely only on participation of students from underrepresented as a solution. Inclusion requires institutions to make climate and cultural shifts that ideally enables individuals from underrepresented groups to be their whole and authentic selves at work.
- Be attentive to cultural differences in needs for work-life balance in training and workplace contexts.
- Use current and comparative statistics to ground equity initiatives in contemporary conditions when working with employees, counselors, mentors, parents, and other stakeholders.
- Include students from underrepresented groups in work-based learning (WBL) and supported employment opportunities.
- Integrate equity-building psychological supports in organizational change initiatives to make them both sustainable and economically innovative.
Training, Recruitment, and Placement
Effective recruitment and hiring practices depend on connections and strategies supported by multiple stakeholders from early career exploration through certification and placement. Access is not only a matter of including diverse candidates who fit unexamined dominant norms; it is about establishing ways of assessing students and career seekers as whole candidates, and creating pathways that recognize multiple qualifications and contributions.

- Include underrepresented career seekers into career networks to increase opportunities, awareness and exposure.
- Partner with colleges and universities that have innovative programs for advanced CTE/STEM students underrepresented in their fields of interest.
- Evaluate expectations, certificate requirements and job descriptions to create diverse entry level and customizable employment positions.
- Use whole person, strengths-based career assessment tools to support marginalized career seekers and help them build customized jobs and career pathways.

Role Models and Mentors
Although workplace diversity has significantly increased in the 21st century, workplace cultures change more slowly. This creates challenges for underrepresented workers as they weather discrimination and tensions that might limit their advancement or cause them to leave CTE/STEM careers. Although mentoring programs are valuable tools for retention and advancement, without equity strategies for gradual, practical institutional change, workplace bias remains a deterrent. In any school or employment context, regardless of the percentage of students or workers traditionally underrepresented in CTE/STEM fields, effective role models for marginalized populations are often absent or inadequate.

- Strategically match mentors and their mentees by attending to similarities in background, experience, and skills needed for support.
- Train mentors so that they respect diverse identities as individual, cultural, and intersectional.
- Support all career training and employment transitions for marginalized career seekers with diverse role models and appropriate policies to engage difference with respect.
- Use diverse assessment tools and ongoing assessment to track programs and individual progress regularly during programming to track ongoing challenges and measure effectiveness of strategies.

Individual

Institutions and systems are historically biased, and the assumptions and stereotypes that define a dominant idea of the norm are generally reinforced by the gatekeepers of advancement. These norms are not the skill standards for careers or literacy, but they nonetheless limit the participation of people who are perceived as outsider groups in CTE/STEM career paths. Stereotypes are both imposed and internalized, through interconnected root causes that underestimate or stigmatize marginalized individuals and their cultural groups.

ROOT CAUSE + THEORY

Intersecting Identities
Individual experiences of our identities are varied and layered, but dominant cultural biases oversimplify and underrepresent the complexity of cultures and their contexts. These simplifications support institutionalized systems of power, privilege, and oppression. They shape the assumptions of educators in CTE/STEM programs and the experiences of any marginalized students in these programs, both consciously and unconsciously. Everyone has intersecting social identities that uniquely prepare them for their chosen career paths, but imposed stereotypes can be internalized as part of limiting beliefs and are often experienced as roadblocks or exclusions.

- Use asset-based individual assessments to support equitable advancement.
- In curriculum development, include diverse and nontraditional case studies.
- Identify overlapping vulnerabilities in all students and intervene to build strengths.
- Integrate role models that mirror successful diversity into mentoring and training in your field.
- Track and support changes in mindset in teachers, students, and partners. Be sure to evaluate programs with long-term tools that assess bias and stereotypes in programming and communication.

Self-concept: Agency, Self-efficacy, and Self-determination
An individual’s self-concept shapes their identity development as well as their expectations and behavior in CTE/STEM career paths. A student’s agency, self-efficacy, and self-determination affect their ability to define themselves as independent adults. Whether self-concept is healthy or limiting also affects the vulnerable transition through grade levels, career preparation programs, work-based learning (WBL), and secondary and postsecondary certifications, and into employment opportunities. Ironically, failure in these transitions is often represented as lack of ability, character, or aptitude for individuals in underrepresented groups, rather than as a direct result of the biases in systems that have affected students’ self-efficacy and assessment of their own ability and capacity.

- Use interdisciplinary and entrepreneurial training/teaching strategies to build student resilience.
- Shift group work from task-based to creative problem-solving that honors diverse experiences, perspectives, and ways of learning to build belonging and self-awareness.
- In institutions, create leadership teams that are diverse and systemically supported to build equitable CTE/STEM inclusion initiatives.
- Address gaps in equitable participation, performance, and persistence early in schools and programs.
- Build teacher and administrator self-efficacy training into professional development as a way to make student self-efficacy support more coherent and sustainable.
- Even when accommodating identified deficits for students with disabilities, be attentive to individual student interests and strengths.
- Build institutional career path processes to give all students an active role in making choices, and remove systemic barriers for underrepresented students.
**Mindset**
Current mindset theory offers insight into one way teacher assumptions are reflected in student experiences in CTE/STEM career paths. When educators, counselors, and other gatekeepers assume that intelligence, skills, and abilities are fixed, their biases assign permanent deficits to specific underrepresented groups based on cultural stereotypes. Students in these groups often develop a fixed mindset about their own skills and abilities, mirroring gatekeeper bias. A growth mindset, the belief that skills and abilities can develop as people learn, is one strategy to support equity in career paths and build self-efficacy and agency in underrepresented students. When students are blamed for their failure to thrive, because their performance confirms an existing bias, they may struggle both with a fixed mindset and oppressive institutional and systemic limitations justifying stereotypes and undercutting equity. Being attentive to mindset in the classroom, the school, and in systemic structures supports strength-based individual development.

**Stereotype Threat**
Stereotype threat is a mirroring process that students adopt unconsciously, performing negative cultural, racial, ethnic, or gender stereotypes that have been imposed on them and that they have internalized as personal beliefs and fears. In academic and career path activities, underrepresented students may perform these stereotypes in behaviors, expectations, and academic contexts. It is a common root cause for self-selected exclusion from CTE/STEM pathways and other self-sabotaging behaviors. Stereotype threat is also connected to classroom climate as individuals, responding to stereotypes, internalize assumptions about capacity, underestimate their potential, underperform on important assessments, or fear to participate fully. These behaviors are often interpreted as confirmation of discriminatory practices and attitudes, confirming stigmas and increasing the likelihood of bullying and inequitable treatment of marginalized learners. It is critical for people in education working with students who have been affected by stereotype threat to recognize and address the ways that the educational environment as a system has affected a student’s internalized self-assessment in the context of CTE and STEM.

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**Community**
Current theory and evidence-based research on community development support the need for a significant mindset shift in CTE/STEM career path preparation to include meaningful community-building. Conventional community development is limited to building bridges for a few exceptional individuals. Active engagement in marginalized communities requires educators and leaders to be aware of systemic power structures that limit social and economic access for underrepresented populations. Recent calls for justice and equity recommend decentering unexamined biases embedded in unexamined cultural ideas of individualism, community outreach, and CTE/STEM inclusion. The requirements in Perkins V for stakeholder input and engagement open the door to greater reciprocity in relationships with the community our institutions ultimately serve.

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**STRATEGIES**

**Parent and Family Engagement**
Families frequently have a distant role in their students’ CTE/STEM career paths, with family networks marginalized, unacknowledged, or excluded. Conventional strategies for connection tend to focus on informational contexts such as career fairs and conferences to discuss problems or accommodations. Parents are rarely engaged as leaders or collaborators. Biases about families mirror biases about underrepresented students. Systemic and economic inequities also block family participation in career path development.

- Be aware that educator biases can alienate parents of marginalized students
- Gather stories from a student’s network to identify cultural values and contexts
- Recognize how families and communities of marginalized individuals have been affected by a history of tracking and other biased systems that have limited access and opportunity in the past. Recognize the need for validation and reciprocity in future relationship and bridge-building.
- Initiate culturally relevant CTE/STEM projects that involve family members, and build social and cultural capital for all participants
- Evaluate parent engagement initiatives with ongoing participatory action research, and include participating families and students in the evaluation process
Employer Engagement

Employers may have consulting or mentoring roles in CTE/STEM classrooms and training programs, but they are rarely effectively included as part of the educational institution or local community for pathway development beyond recruitment efforts. This limited role blunts innovative problem solving in curriculum equity as well as workplace equity expansion through community development. Often, employers do not feel they are full participants in WBL and curriculum initiative partnerships, which affects their expectations and willingness to support equity initiatives.

Student Voice

Too often, students are excluded from the opportunity of addressing the equity gaps that ultimately affect them most. Students’ lived experiences navigating educational systems and STEM and CTE curriculum should greatly influence evaluations of policies, procedures, and practices that cement biases into educational systems. Engaging students in decision making that directly affects them is a powerful and effective way to build relationships and solutions that can authentically address equity gaps in outcomes for marginalized groups. Students must be put at the center of the equation, and they must be directly engaged in identifying and addressing the systemic barriers that limit access and opportunity in CTE and STEM programs of study.

Endnotes


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