



Halting Oppressive Pathways through Education (HOPE)

Bunker Hill Community College
Boston, MA

March 2025

Aspen Forum for Community Solutions
Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP)

What happens when college leaders do more than just name racial equity as a broad institutional goal? What if they put significant staff and financial resources into student empowerment and barrier removal? What if leaders work to ensure that students who identify as Black, Latinx and Indigenous male students have strong connections to advisors, mentors and other campus resources? What if instead of opting into this network of support, it was the default student experience?

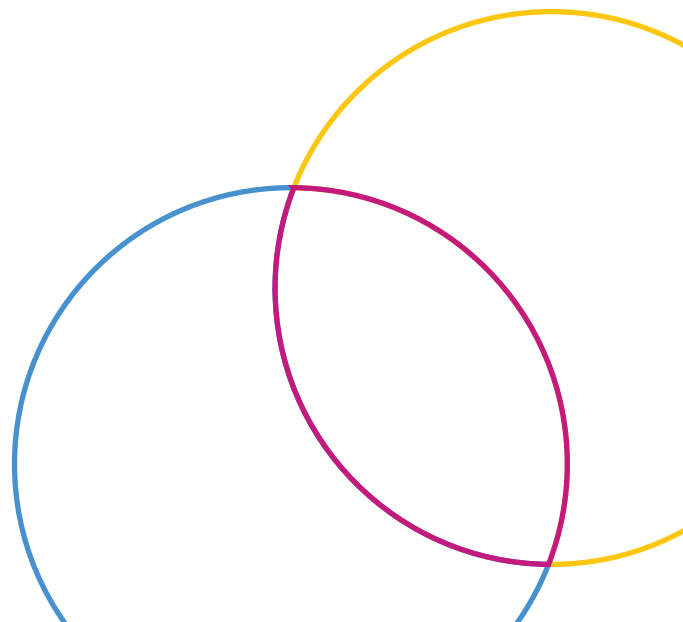
The Halting Oppressive Pathways through Education (HOPE) program at Boston's Bunker Hill Community College embodies the best of belonging practices. Due to societal legacies of racialized oppression, displacement and erasure Bunker Hill Community College has historically struggled to effectively serve Black, Latinx and Indigenous male-identifying students. To address this inequity, college administrators automatically enroll students with one or more of these identities into the HOPE program as soon as they enroll at the college.

HOPE provides students with intimate, individualized advising, mentorship and connection to other services needed to succeed in college. HOPE is expertly managed by a team of committed staff — many of whom also identify as men of color — who ensure that the program is both delivering outcomes for students and reverberating into the broader BHCC culture and organizational structures.

The Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions (AFCS) promotes collaborative, community-based efforts that build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity, and supports communities to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges.

Our next decade of work continues to focus on ending youth disconnection. We endeavor to transform systems and communities in ways that ensure that all youth can thrive. Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP) is the emerging framework that is helping us to get there.

Learn more about AFCS and our work to advance BMWP at <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/bmwp>

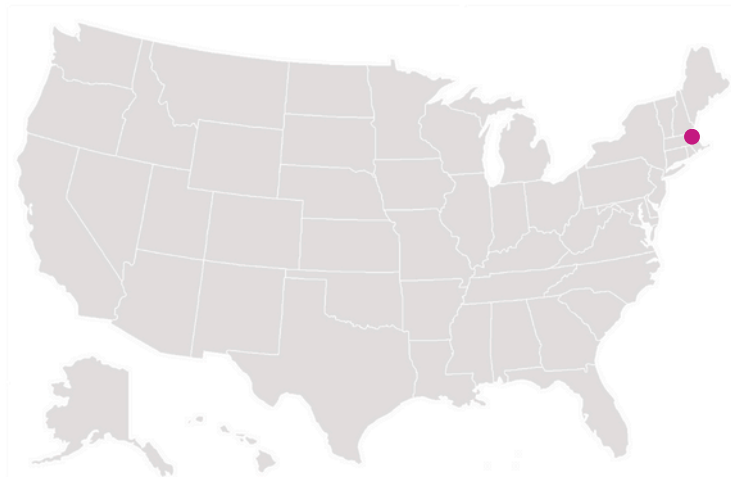


The BMWP in Action Series provides postsecondary practitioners and funders with concrete examples of how a diverse group of leaders are implementing a wide range of approaches to foster belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose (BMWP) amongst their students. The goal of the series is to:

- 1 **Celebrate the work of case study institutions**
- 2 **Increase awareness of BMWP**
- 3 **Encourage the spread of these approaches as a strategy to improve racial equity and student success**



Bunker Hill Community College



LOCATION:

Boston, MA

INSTITUTION TYPE:

Public 2-Year

TOTAL UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT:

8,545*

* Enrollment figure is from fall 2023. Data from US Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics. [College Navigator](#).



Policy and Practice Highlight

This document contains several **policy and practice highlight** callout boxes. Each box highlights a specific approach that this college is taking to help students cultivate a deeper sense belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose.

Context

Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) is the largest public two-year postsecondary institution in Massachusetts. The College offers over 100 academic programs across two campuses and a network of instructional centers located across the greater Boston area. The College's president — Dr. Pam Eddinger — often cites its diverse student population as one of its core strengths. According to college data, sixty-five percent of Bunker Hill students identify as people of color. The college holds the designation of Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI). “The story of Bunker Hill,” says Eddinger, “so closely tracks the student success movement and social justice movement going on across the country.”

Reflecting on the work underway at Bunker Hill, Eddinger points back to its origins in the 1990s. At that time, Bunker Hill was taking a deep look at developmental education. “The data was telling us that we were losing 25% of the students at every level of developmental education. The college had six levels of developmental math...nobody ever finished.” Bunker Hill's struggles did not exist in a vacuum. They were related to broader societal factors present in Boston and across the country — legacies of chattel slavery and settler colonialism that have ossified into structural racism and created persistent racial wealth gaps and gaps in educational attainment.¹

The College owned up to its responsibilities to better serve its students and noted their particular struggles to effectively empower men of color. This led to over a decade of reform across a wide range of interventions and system changes, including the creation of a statistics pathway at the college. But the needle did not move enough, so they entered into a second wave focused on factors outside of the classroom — advising, high school transition coaching, dropout prevention and recovery. Bunker Hill also tuned into the growing student basic needs movement focused on student wellbeing — things like food and housing insecurity — as a root cause of low persistence and completion rates in American community colleges.

During this second wave, Bunker Hill's services evolved to meet changing student needs. The college started offering wraparound services to improve food security, housing security, access to childcare and other basic needs. In addition to these programmatic changes, the second wave also brought about shifts in the core of BHCC's culture and overall student success philosophy. Eddinger explains that the College, “began looking into the power of cultural and community wealth. We can say ‘social justice’ all we like...we can say ‘all of these things are not fair. We're oppressed.’ And we are. There are systemic disinvestments in education. But unless we see the gifts of our students within these communities and what strengths are there, it is really hard to do the work from a negative place.” Summing up BHCC's current disposition, Eddinger says that, “if you're at Bunker Hill, your affinity and race and ethnicity and the social wealth that you carry with you are important to us.”²

HOPE rooted in fertile ground

Bunker Hill's cultural wealth era provided fertile ground for the emergence of efforts to advance belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose in service of racial equity and student success. In 2018 - one year after establishing a small scale version of HOPE - BHCC established the [Center for Equity and Cultural Wealth](#) (CECW), which centralized related but previously disconnected efforts to promote cultural inclusion, racial healing and culturally relevant instruction on campus. Evans Erilus — Director of the [Halting Oppressive Pathways through Education \(HOPE\)](#) program — views CECW and other efforts that emerged during that time as critical in HOPE's formation: "you had these different pockets of activity and these affinity spaces organically formed. I believe that is what mobilized folks to express their concerns and their perceptions of specific things that we could do more to address."

**"If you're at Bunker Hill,
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Dr. Pam Eddinger

In collaboration with CECW, the AANAPISI program and other kindred efforts, faculty, staff and students expanded HOPE in 2021 by adding a team of full-time staff. The effort received crucial seed funding for the first set of student advisors through a grant from the [Boston Private Industry Council \(PIC\)](#). Following this initial implementation phase, Nuri Chandler-Smith — Bunker Hill's Dean of Academic Support and College Pathway Programs (ASCPP) — and others then led an effort to secure funding for the program from the State of Massachusetts under the newly formed [Supporting Urgent Community College Equity through Student Services \(SUCCESS\)](#) allocation. Bunker Hill is now one of 15 colleges in the state receiving SUCCESS funds so that they can, "invest in wraparound supports and services using models proven to strengthen outcomes for students facing systemic barriers."³ While the effort specializes in empowering and removing barriers to success for Black, Latino, and Indigenous males, HOPE serves any interested student, and plans to expand services and specializations over time.

Core services and operational pillars

HOPE scholars receive at least three core services:

- 1 **Personalized academic advising**
- 2 **Belonging-building events**
- 3 **Cohort-based learning community**

1 Personalized academic advising

Upon enrollment at BHCC, all Black, Latino and Indigenous male-identifying students become HOPE Scholars and are assigned a staff advisor (HOPE Navigator) and a mentor (HOPE Ambassador). The default is that Scholars participate in the program, though they have the option to opt-out. Ambassadors are near peers — a male student of color with experience at the college — and complement other advising that Scholars receive. Ambassadors proactively contact enrolled students and make sure that Scholars know that they are available to help navigate their college experience. Ambassadors connect with Scholars as needed each academic term to help identify and address key challenges in their academic and personal lives as they arise.



The use of HOPE Ambassadors is a meaning-making strategy and component of Greg Walton and Timothy Wilson's [Wise Interventions](#). Peers help cultivate meaning and sense of belonging by helping Scholars understand that people like them belong in college.

2 Belonging-building events

Research has established that entering college can be a time of “belonging uncertainty” for students wherein they question whether or not they belong at the institution. Such uncertainty can lead to disengagement and poor academic outcomes.⁴ To counteract this phenomenon, HOPE proactively builds community amongst HOPE scholars through community-building events. HOPE Director Evans Erius explains that these events — which can range from off-campus group meals to celebrations with live DJs to video game nights — all serve to “cultivate a safe space for our students to be their most authentic selves.” In so doing, they promote a sense of belonging for HOPE scholars and increase their odds of completing college.

3

Cohort-based learning community

Using the well-established framework of cohort-based [learning communities](#), HOPE scholars are placed into a series of first-year courses together, which further deepens their sense of belonging. The model helps strengthen relationships within the cohort and is especially important to help scholars persevere through their critical “gateway” math and English courses — a common site of student attrition. Faculty who teach HOPE cohorts participate in training led by HOPE staff that is designed to ensure that their pedagogy is culturally responsive and attuned to the needs of HOPE scholars.



By modifying curriculum — even in small ways — faculty who teach HOPE cohorts increase the meaning-making opportunities for HOPE scholars. When students can see themselves in the curriculum, they can better make sense of themselves and their context.

Conversations with HOPE staff have revealed that the program is about more than its component parts. The team views its work as culture building and invests as much time into ensuring that how they show up for the work has as much integrity as the program’s services. The HOPE program is guided by four operational “pillars” that define how staff work.

- **Asset-based.** HOPE rejects the ways in which white-supremacy culture defines students of color by fixed and often fictional deficits (e.g., poor academic achievement, low-income communities, etc.). HOPE replaces the deficit lens with a cultural wealth framework that acknowledges the diverse assets that all students possess.
- **Student-centered.** HOPE Scholars help inform all aspects of the program’s operations. As HOPE’s Assistant Director Misael Carrasquillo puts it, student voices are, “the most valuable piece to our program. Students know themselves better than we do so everything that we’re doing is incorporating what they would like to see.” To stay student-centered, HOPE surveys all program participants each semester. Additionally, HOPE surveys students who are participating in the cohort-based learning community to understand their experience in those courses. To provide even greater insights into Scholars’ academic experiences, HOPE also asks instructors to share periodic feedback on Scholar performance so that Navigators are able to quickly identify which students need tailored services or resources.

- **Data-informed.** HOPE staff partner closely with their institutional effectiveness team to make sure they have access to data that helps them effectively contact students and understand their academic journeys.
- **Equity-minded.** HOPE operationalizes Dr. Estela Bensimon’s definition of equity-mindedness as, “a cognitive frame that is characteristic of individuals who possess the knowledge and are willing to assess their own racialized assumptions about historically minoritized people.”⁵



Given that it is individualized and involves introspection, operationalizing this definition of equity-mindedness is itself a meaning-making practice.

System transformation, one relationship at a time

HOPE staff understand that their program is currently limited in the number of students that it can reach. They have aspirations to eventually expand service specializations and they also think about scale through the lens of system transformation.

HOPE staff advance this more ambitious goal through two strategies that strengthen relationships with administrators, faculty and staff across campus. First, HOPE staff “push” into the college’s academic program areas by setting up meetings each year to learn about relevant changes in program requirements, student learning outcomes and other areas. This helps ensure HOPE’s work is visible to faculty leaders across campus. Second, HOPE “pulls” faculty, staff and administrators into its mission by offering professional development opportunities. These events focus on a range of topics pointing to ways that all members of the campus community can help create an environment of belonging and success for men of color. Through these two efforts, HOPE is building a broad coalition of support for its mission. When new members join the HOPE coalition, they are added to a metaphorical “[Green Book](#)” that helps HOPE staff, “figure out who our champions and allies are around the institution at all levels who can help get our work done.”





Let the students tell it

Quantitative data demonstrate the impact that HOPE has had at BHCC. Between Fall 2021 and Fall 2023, HOPE engaged students had a 75% persistence rate — 5 percentage points higher than HOPE eligible students (70%) and 2 percentage points higher than the overall rate for degree-seeking students (73%).

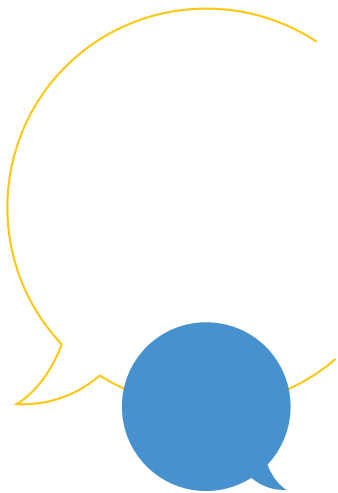
But the real impact of the program is even more palpable in the testimonials of students who have experienced it. HOPE participants point to the value of the program’s proactive communication approach.

As one HOPE scholar shared:



75%

persistence rate for HOPE engaged students (fall 2021-fall 2023)



“During my time at BHCC, I was challenged with the management of my personal life and educational life. I struggled and wasn’t sure where to go. I was contacted by a HOPE Ambassador, who would tell me about events HOPE was having for students. I mentioned to my HOPE Ambassador that I was struggling in one of my classes...To my relief, the Ambassador reassured me that they would connect me with someone who could arrange tutoring for me. True to his word, just a day later, I received a call from a student tutor from HOPE who was willing to work with me via Zoom. Their support and guidance had a positive impact on my grade in the class. This personalized support demonstrates the network that HOPE provides each semester.”




This student references proactive outreach and checking in, which is a strategy that can foster belonging.



In addition to empowering HOPE scholars, the program serves a secondary function of providing Scholars with an employment opportunity serving as HOPE Ambassador.

As one Ambassador shared:



“I was blessed with an opportunity at HOPE as a Business Gateway Specialist. I met many people, helped students, and gained valuable skills. I discovered resources I didn’t know existed and found job opportunities within HOPE that complimented my schedule. Helping students who were once in my shoes kept me motivated. HOPE believed in me and provided the foundation for my career. I’ve been part of student panels, traveled for conferences, and shared my experiences with other students. HOPE is a community that supports and inspires. They’ve impacted my life in ways I never imagined.”



This quote illustrates how near peer advising interventions can benefit both the recipient of advising and the advisor. Here the Ambassador describes how the act of delivering service to students like him helped make meaning of his current position.

Gratitude

The authors would like to thank Dr. Pam Eddinger, President of Bunker Hill Community College, and members of the Healing Oppressive Pathways through Education (HOPE) team - Evans Erilus, Misael Carrasquillo and Jacob Jones - for the generosity of time spent sharing the resources, stories and perspectives used to create this document.

The authors strived to represent the vibrancy of this effort with accuracy. We take full accountability for any errors.

End notes

¹Recent research by Brookings finds that, “between 2019 and 2022, median wealth increased by \$51,800, but the racial wealth gap increased by \$49,950—adding up to a total difference of \$240,120 in wealth between the median white household and the median Black household.” Brookings Institution (2024). [Black wealth is increasing, but so is the racial wealth gap.](#)

² Aspen Forum for Community Solutions (2024). [OYF Convening Spring 2024: Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing & Purpose : A Path to Equity & Justice.](#) Video. Accessed on October 18, 2024.

³ Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges (2022). [SUCCESS: Supporting Urgent Community College Equity through Student Services.](#) Accessed on October 17, 2024.

⁴ Walton, & Cohen. (2007). [A question of belonging: Race, social fit, and achievement.](#) Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92(1), 82.

⁵ Bensimon, E.M. (2024). [What is Equity-Mindedness?](#) Los Angeles: Bensimon & Associates.