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## Policy Briefs

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# Performative vs. Authentic Equity Work: How the California Transportation Sector Can Continue to Do Better

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## Overview

Transportation equity is a priority for agencies across the state. This study highlights the importance of distinguishing between performative and authentic equity work. Performative equity refers to actions, words, or gestures that claim to do equity work, but in practice do not improve matters for those historically oppressed, and in turn, reinforces root systems of dominance and status quo. Authentic equity work results in meaningful change to those most impacted by historical racism and oppression.

Performative Equity	Authentic Equity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From...Defensiveness                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guilt</li> <li>• Comfort</li> <li>• Emotional Isolation</li> </ul> </li> <li>• From...Tokenism                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hiring</li> <li>• Voices disregarded</li> <li>• Identity as reductionistc</li> <li>• Position with no power</li> </ul> </li> <li>• From...Checklists                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retrofitting equity</li> <li>• Under-investment</li> <li>• White-led</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To...Collective Support                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Honesty</li> <li>• Discomfort</li> <li>• Collectivity</li> </ul> </li> <li>• To...Dignity                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retention</li> <li>• Voices amlified</li> <li>• Identity as intersectional</li> <li>• Dignity-infused workplace</li> </ul> </li> <li>• To...Long-Term Engagement                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equity-led agenda</li> <li>• Fully resourced</li> <li>• Community-led</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## Research Methodology

Twenty-eight transportation professionals who also identify as Black or people of color (BPOC)<sup>1</sup> were interviewed to learn of their assessment of transportation equity work in California. The life experiences of being BPOC combined with expertise as transportation professionals gives them a unique and highly valuable lens through which to assess equity work. Interviews were analyzed based on recurring themes.

## Results

The practice of authentic equitable planning and policy development requires a commitment to a long process of individual, interpersonal, cultural, and organizational reframing. Valuing transportation equity requires considering culture and history when building new infrastructure or integrating new mobility technologies. It also fosters dignity and humanizes mobility users and asks agencies to consider how they can atone for past harms done by their institution and profession. What follows are key findings from coding and analysis of interviews.

<sup>1</sup> No Indigenous professionals participated despite recruitment efforts, thus we refer to BPOC in this report.

**Know the history.** Local communities know the history of transportation inequity because they lived it. Transportation planners need to know it too, at both the local and national level. It is also helpful to know of past local community engagement efforts and their outcomes. Learning and reflecting on the ongoing impacts of these histories and engagements can better equip transportation planners to have honest and difficult conversations. Without this prep work, planners are more likely to respond to community critique from a place of defensiveness rather than support.

**Learn about inequity in the profession.** BPOC transportation professionals continue to experience discrimination, microaggressions, tokenism, and other forms of bias in the workplace. Good allyship includes listening to them, noticing the input and reactions of BPOC colleagues, and elevating the voices of BPOC staff. It also requires giving BPOC staff more power and leadership. Finally, support the creation of affinity groups as a site for learning. This reduces the emotional labor burden of BPOC professionals.

**Maintain a “learner’s mindset.”** Open curiosity and reflection on one’s own behavior can create a mindset more receptive to critique. Cultivating this “learner’s mindset” sets the stage for honesty and transparency, a precondition for the changes needed in transportation. It can also lead to more humility, another important element of authentic equity work.

**Focus on retention.** Retention of BPOC professionals within transportation planning, policy, and advocacy remains a challenge. Authentic equity work may require culture change to retain these talented staff. This requires strong institutional buy-in for and investment in equity practitioners.

**Shift funding structures and priorities.** Equity requires a redistribution in who gets funded, more flexibility in how funds can be spent, and expanded opportunities for programmatic and “human infrastructure.” Authentic solutions arise from ongoing community engagement with those communities who have been most neglected and residents who are most vulnerable. Creating and maintaining continuous relationships with historically neglected communities is a complex and resource intensive process. And yet, it is requisite for equity work that addresses past injustices and creates more just futures.

**Public transit is part of new mobilities.** Conversations about shared mobilities and other new technologies need to occur alongside improvements to existing public transportation infrastructure. New innovations should emerge from local community needs.

**Safety solutions must be community driven.** Too often, law enforcement is seen as the answer to safety concerns. This equivalency downplays the disproportionate violence BPOC communities face at the hands of police. Community-based solutions that value existing safety networks offer innovative solutions.

**Define equity.** Institutional equity work benefits from having a clear and precise definition and vision driving the work. Below is an example of one definition and vision exemplar from the study.

*“Equity is being invited to the process or the process coming to you, but also a real sense of agency attached to your voice, not performative inclusion... I think real equity in this field is going to have to mean intentionally removing power from where it is within [the] transportation field and redistributing it or re-creating it collectively.”*

The full report, “Assessing the Impact of Equity Work in Transportation” can be found at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2sg7k9cn>.

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