IMPROVING POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT:

Overcoming Common Challenges To an Equity Agenda in State Policy

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FOREWORD

Improving Postsecondary Attainment:
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Evidence shows that the only path to significantly improving higher education completion rates in most states is by increasing the success of all racial, ethnic, and indigenous populations. Yet many of the policies and initiatives developed over the past decade to boost postsecondary success can inadvertently do harm to some groups. To truly support students who traditionally have faced greater obstacles to accessing and completing higher education, states, higher education systems, and institutions need an explicit *equity focus* that informs all related efforts.

What do we mean by equity focus? An equity focus in policy recognizes the need to eliminate disparities in educational outcomes of students from underserved and underrepresented populations. It is deliberately color-conscious, and seeks specifically to eliminate the widening postsecondary gaps for Native American, African American, and Latino students. It prioritizes institutional accountability rather than student deficits, and monitors the impact of all policy on marginalized groups. This perspective is critical because it allows states to see when policies and practices that appear to be beneficial actually are creating or worsening inequality.

In the spring of 2015, Lumina Foundation partnered with the Center for Urban Education (CUE) to develop a Strategy Labs State Policy Academy focused on *Addressing Equity Gaps in State Goals for Postsecondary Education Attainment.* A core goal of the academy was to increase the number of states with higher education attainment goals that seek to close gaps for underrepresented populations. According to Lumina, "no state can meet its workforce demands without attention to long-standing equity gaps."

Researchers from CUE began by interviewing state policy leaders in four states that had already embedded equity in their state attainment goals: Colorado, Indiana, Maryland, and Texas. They also reviewed 13 state strategic plans for equity-related language. The purpose was to understand the processes states have used to address equity, how states gain buy-in from key stakeholders, and how states have framed equity within their strategic plans.

The end product of this intensive and collaborative work is a series of three resources that provide guidance to state leaders and policymakers on 1) overcoming common challenges to conversations about equity, 2) embedding equity in state policy, and 3) assessing existing—and future—policies and initiatives.

This guide, *Improving Postsecondary Attainment: Overcoming Common Challenges to an Equity Agenda in State Policy,* would not have been possible without the support of Lumina Foundation. We hope that it is useful as state leaders work to improve postsecondary attainment in the United States.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Improving Postsecondary Attainment: Overcoming Common Challenges to an Equity Agenda in State Policy describes key strategies and steps that state leaders, policymakers, and higher education officials can take to break down common challenges that frustrate efforts to incorporate equity on state-level postsecondary policy agendas.

Overcoming Common Challenges to an Equity Agenda in State Policy is based on the Center for Urban Education (CUE)'s collaboration in five states where education and policy leaders worked to build and implement equity-focused higher education attainment goals. CUE assisted each state's team by providing feedback on data reports or presentations, guidance on negotiating data disputes, and advice on discussing race.

For more than a year, CUE documented strategies that worked well and analyzed the common challenges encountered by each state team. Some obstacles were political, such as the ability to define attainment goals for historically underserved racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups, or garnering buy-in from key stakeholders. Such challenges often stem from a belief that equal opportunity in America is color blind—a mindset that allows policy to be debated, implemented, and evaluated without examining how it may disproportionately harm marginalized groups, such as African Americans, Native Americans and Latinos, first-generation college students, and low-income students.

Additional technical challenges, such as identifying accurate data to guide goal-setting and decision-making, underlie the political challenges and increase the challenge to leading a productive effort to focus on equity.

Those and other barriers, however, can be overcome with the right approaches. This guide addresses three of the most common challenges: leading conversations about race, overcoming data paralysis, and engaging institutions of higher education. Each section includes a detailed description of the problem, examples from previous or existing efforts, and key action-steps that will help equity become incorporated in state higher education policy agendas.

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Since 1999, the Center for Urban Education (CUE) has led socially conscious research and developed tools to help institutions of higher education produce equitable student outcomes. Located in the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education, CUE is committed to closing racial–ethnic equity gaps and improving student outcomes in higher education. Rather than remediate students, CUE remediates practices, structures, and policies.

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1. **LEADING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE.** Long-term improvements to postsecondary attainment require a shift in the approach to addressing racism, from discussions of personal bias to the structural inequity hindering educational opportunity. This section provides advice on framing conversations about race, and tips for pushing back against resistance.

2. **OVERCOMING DATA PARALYSIS.** Various sources offer different data purporting to address the same questions, yet they rarely provide the same answer. The result often is legitimate disagreement about which data are best suited to inform policy decisions. While evaluation of methodologies, sources, data definitions, and other factors are important to ensure the validity of policy goals and strategies, disagreements too often paralyze action. The volume and complexity of data—without a roadmap to identify key points—can also disorient policy leaders. This section includes strategies to focus discussions, and guidance for developing key equity indicators that can help build the foundation for effective policy development.

3. **ENGAGING INSTITUTIONS.** The challenges to implementing an effective equity-focused postsecondary policy agenda continue beyond the development of a strategic plan and the enactment of attainment goals. Policymakers need strategies for cementing an equity focus in state methodology and structures that are viable across short-term political cycles—and in tumultuous policy terrains. This section provides examples of successful practices based on the experiences of states that have sustained an equity focus in policy.

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LEADING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE

The United States will not be able to significantly reduce the disparities in postsecondary attainment, even controlling for income and other factors, without explicit discussions about racial inequity. Confronting patterns of educational inequities for African American, Native American, and Latino communities, however, is challenging in any context. The tragic violence between police and communities of color across our communities in the past year have made it riskier—yet also more critical—for policy leaders to engage in open and candid discussions about the effect of structural racism on educational opportunity. Such conversations are often politically volatile, particularly when efforts to embed an equity focus in state policy get conflated with debates about affirmative action—or when some perceive discussion of race as supplanting a focus on the needs of other disadvantaged groups.

Productive conversations require carefully framing equity in terms of *structural inequities* that negatively affect communities of color. Below are common negative reactions to discussions of race in higher education policy, and ways to rethink the fundamental concerns and sentiments they reflect.

"WE CAN'T TALK ABOUT RACE IN OUR STATE."

When policymakers say "we can't talk about race here," they often really mean "we can't afford the political capital to make race an issue," or "we tried that once and it didn't work." Leaders are naturally sensitive to the political cultures and traditions in their state, and make assumptions (often well-informed) about what topics are preferred, acceptable, or taboo. For example, in a recent study, Valant and Newark (2016) found that Americans are more willing to prioritize achievement gaps based on income than on race, and more willing to support initiatives that remediate poor-wealthy disparities than Black-White or Latina/o-White disparities. While this study shows a preference for income-based solutions, the assumption that "we can't talk about race *here*" is often based on additional assumptions about who makes up the policy audience (e.g., a conservative electorate) or about past experiences the state has had in targeting racial/ethnic groups in social policy (e.g., affirmative action or immigration policy).

Additionally, the political sensitivities surrounding race discussions often stem from the tendency to understand racism as personal bias rather than as structural inequities entrenched in social structures that circumscribe educational and economic opportunity. Alicia Dowd and Estela Bensimon (2015) make an important distinction between institutional and structural racism. "*Institutional racism* refers to seemingly objective standards of academic life that are racialized, because they take their existing form due to historical racial discrimination and contemporary amnesia about race policy" (p. 15). For example, admissions policies, student assessment and placement, faculty

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and staff hiring and promotion, pedagogy and curricular content, and degree qualifications. "*Structural racism* refers to the stratification of educational opportunity among members of different racial and ethnic groups produced by formal systems and structures of education" (p. 15-16). For example, guaranteed transfer policies that advantage full-time students and fail to take into account that students of color will be penalized because they are more likely to be part-time students (Chase et al., 2014). Institutional and policy leaders, because they are not in the habit of asking the "race" question, are often not aware that well-intended practices and policies maintain inequality in opportunity. To be effective, policy leaders need to find ways to intentionally and strategically *reframe* discussions of race in terms of these inequitable structures and based on a shared vision for the state's future.

This passage from the 2012 Colorado Department of Higher Education's state plan, *Colorado Competes,* serves as an example of how a state acknowledges the systemic nature of inequity: "Colorado has the second-largest degree attainment gap in the country—that is, the gap between the educational attainment of white students and the attainment of the next-largest ethnic group, which in Colorado is Hispanic/Latino. In other words, Colorado's system performs far better for white students than it does for Hispanics or those from low-income families."

"ECONOMIC INEQUALITY IS MORE IMPORTANT IN OUR STATE THAN RACIAL INEQUALITY."

Many policymakers believe that disparities in postsecondary opportunity in the 21st century are tied primarily to socioeconomic class—that race alone is no longer a disadvantaging factor. They hope that developing better strategies for access and degree completion for low-income students will resolve racial disparities. Unfortunately, evidence shows that this is not accurate.

Income-based equity strategies are important, to be sure. Increasing access to financial aid, reducing student-loan burdens, and favoring the use of need-based over merit-based aid helps more students—including many students of color—enter and succeed in higher education. But even across racial and ethnic groups of the same socioeconomic class, disparities for minority groups still exist (Carnevale and Strohl, 2013). For example, using data from the Community College Research Center (CCRC), Carnevale and Strohl (2010) demonstrate that 39 percent of white students in the "bottom SES tier" who start in community colleges go on to earn certificates, associate degrees, and baccalaureate degrees. For students of color, that figure is below 30 percent, suggesting that there is at least a 9 percentage-point gap between low-SES white students and students of color. Thus, the disparity cannot be explained by SES alone.

Students of color in every socioeconomic group fare worse than their white counterparts. The challenge of framing a discussion about race in postsecondary policy is therefore to emphasize the idea that advancing equity is not about putting race- and class-based disadvantages in competition, but rather *addressing different forms of inequity differently* in order to achieve a stronger and more

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unified state. Policy discourse should recognize that barriers facing poor white communities and those facing communities of color are different and require different policy strategies and separate acknowledgement.

"FOCUSING ON THE SUCCESS OF ALL STUDENTS IS FAIRER."

Singling out racial groups as beneficiaries of policy raises fears about preferential treatment. However, the urge to claim color-blindness and be generically inclusive ignores the painful history of racial subjugation and stands in the way of efforts to close racial gaps. For instance, the discomfort with naming racial groups as the intended targets for additional resources or benefits is evident in the insistence by some to counter a focus on specific racial and ethnic groups, such as Black and Latino with statements like "I care about *all* students." Caring for "all" students would be egalitarian in an ideal world, but in a society with as much inequality as we currently face in the United States, the reality is that focusing attention on those with the greatest needs is a fair and appropriate approach.

This tension can be addressed by providing examples of data that clearly display how inequity in higher education is the result of immense differences in the educational resources available to students of color compared to white students. For example: Nationally, close to three-fourths of Black and Latino K-12 students attend segregated schools. Less than one percent of White students attend 90-100 percent minority schools while about 40 percent of Black and Latino students attend such schools. In contrast, on average, White students attend schools that are comprised of almost 80 percent White students (Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003). Allowing equity discussions to focus on interventions that support "all" students without acknowledging these systemic disparities for minorities increases the risk that higher education inequality will not only persist, but continue to grow. In fact, degree attainment among white and Asian students has increased so much faster than for Blacks and Latinos that the gaps in 2015 are bigger than they were in 1995. Such examples have the power to shift discussion about equity from individual racism to real systemic and structural disparities that impact communities of color.

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☑ TO DO: PREPARE TALKING POINTS TO HELP LEAD DISCUSSIONS ABOUT RACE.

Use data and historical context to help reframe discussions about race in terms of structural inequity.

☐ Before beginning discussions about the need to focus on *equity* in state policy, clearly define equity to clarify how it is different from *equality* and *diversity*, and contextualize it within the state's history and demographic trends.

☐ Defuse concerns about quotas by defining *equity* as distinct from policy and legal debates about diversity and affirmative action in higher education admissions.

☐ Identify precedents in existing state policy for targeting groups based on unequal resources—in tax codes, or K-12 school funding equalization, for example.

☐ Defuse the race vs. income debate by highlighting data to illustrate that both disparities exist and both matter, but have different causes and different solutions. (See Ching, 2013, for talking points.)

☐ Draw on the resources of scholars who study race and income inequality to develop talking points that are supported by historical facts on discrimination, segregation, redlining, and unequal public-school funding. (See Ching and Liera, 2016, for talking points.)

☐ Consider proposing an "equity lens" for higher education policy that can make it easier for constituents to see how an equity focus can be operationalized. Without that perspective, conversation can be derailed by abstract notions of preferential treatment. The equity lens/policy review criteria can clarify how and why equity is a priority for the state given its economic and demographic contexts. For example, see the Oregon Education Investment Board's "Equity Lens" policy.

OVERCOMING DATA PARALYSIS

Effective, equity-focused postsecondary policy must begin with an understanding of *how much and for whom* higher education access and success must improve. That means that the planning, goal-setting, and policy development processes must be supported by continuous data analysis. For most state policymakers, the challenge in developing effective, equity-focused policy is not a lack of data. In fact, most policymaking organizations are so awash in data that it can be overwhelming and difficult to find a starting point. The challenge is harnessing the right data at the right time and—even more importantly—having a clear sense of what questions to ask.

To support effective, equity-focused planning, data analysis should be guided by a clear set of questions that help planners understand the current state of attainment, equity in attainment, and trends over time.

Questions your state should ask:

- *What career fields and occupations in the state have strong labor market demand currently? In five, 10, 15 years? What are the levels of educational attainment required for those jobs? What are the projected shortfalls of adults with those credentials?*

- *Which populations have the lowest rates of postsecondary attainment historically?*

- *Which populations are the fastest-growing in the state?*

- *What are the racial/ethnic and gender patterns of attainment across different disciplinary and certificate pathways? Do pathways differ by race/ethnicity and gender?*

- *Projecting current rates of educational attainment across groups, will the state have the educated workforce it needs five, 10, 15 years in the future?*

- *How far would closing gaps in attainment (e.g., for Latinos, African Americans, low-income adults without a college education) advance the state towards overall attainment needs?*

- *At current rates of educational attainment, will some populations in the state be disproportionately excluded from opportunities in high-wage, high-demand jobs?*

- *What is the potential return-on-investment—in terms of economic growth, increased tax revenue, and other measures—of increasing postsecondary access and success for underserved populations?*

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SORTING THROUGH THE DATA

States with strategic plans that include a clear focus on equity have conducted such rigorous data analyses, often with the assistance of state demographers or external organizations. They have demonstrated that conducting rigorous data analyses and investing time in communicating, vetting, and revising interpretations of those analyses will pay off over time. Without knowing specifically what—and who—attainment strategies should address, strategic plans will reflect general goals rather than the necessary frameworks for action supported by robust and defensible state objectives.

This process, however, is often fraught with challenges: Policy leaders too often find themselves swamped with data, trying to make the case for equity with a thousand Excel spreadsheets—the data equivalent of "death by PowerPoint." Using data strategically can reinforce an equity narrative, but doing so requires mapping out a clear set of defensible data points that answer critical policy-relevant questions.

Discussion about differences in methodologies, sources, data definitions, and other factors is important to ensure validity of the data that states use to craft policy goals and strategies. But these conversations often fail to produce any significant gain in clarity or defensibility. While data is intended to convey real-world facts, different data from different sources often do not provide the same answer.

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STRATEGIES TO STAY ON TRACK

Policymakers need strategies for getting through these discussions and moving forward with the data best suited to inform important policy decisions. Those who have found their way into—and out of—disagreements about the "right" data to use in building an equity-focused postsecondary policy agenda described three common strategies as essential to keeping them on track.

1. *Understand the differences between competing data sources.*

Data disagreements often are politically driven, based on conceptual differences underlying the methodologies and definitions. But these differences are rooted in sometimes simple variances in methodology. Surfacing those small technical factors can resolve the disagreements so that the conceptual questions at stake are clearer.

A good example of a common data challenge for states is understanding and explaining the difference between two sets of projections that show the educational attainment needs for the state's future workforce. Projections by the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University have been broadly accepted in the field and adopted as the rationalizing data for ambitious national and state postsecondary attainment goals. However, these projections differ in key ways from those produced by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), which indicate a much lower need for postsecondary attainment over the same timespan as the Georgetown data. The differences between the two

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projections stem from differing assumptions and methods for measuring educational requirements for occupational groups. While the BLS—and many state workforce data experts who use BLS data or follow similar methods—examine the *minimum* educational requirements for a given occupation, the Center on Education and the Workforce uses a more dynamic analysis of the average level of postsecondary credential required for entry into an occupational group, taking into account wage premiums and other considerations to reflect a more realistic rendering of actual postsecondary requirements for new career entrants. For most state policy planning and goal-setting purposes, then, the Center on Education and the Workforce's assumptions and methods are both more accurate and more reflective of the economic growth most states aspire to achieve. For more information about the key methodological and conceptual differences between BLS and Georgetown data, contact the Center on Education and the Workforce at cewgeorgetown@georgetown.edu.

2. *Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.*

It is common for data discussions to get bogged down by concerns over perceived flaws. The fact is, data are almost always imperfect, no matter how well-established and routine reporting measures become. There is a lot we simply do not know, or are unable to learn, because we lack the right data systems or measures—particularly when it comes to equity. For example, *how many students of color who grew up in conditions of economic adversity are enrolling in college in our state?* Or simply, *how many students of color from low-income families who start at community college are graduating with a bachelor's degree*? Most states don't have statewide data easily available to answer such questions. What we have are enrollment rates by race/ethnicity, graduation rates that often are flawed, and Pell Grant eligibility as a proxy for income. But even with their imperfections, these measures typically provide reasonable approximations of policy-relevant information.

As states move through initial data discussions, it is helpful to point out these limitations transparently at the outset and remind stakeholders that the goal is to achieve the best possible picture of trends and the current state of affairs. Recognizing that all the data we have are imperfect approximations, leaders should not let this reality hinder informed policy decisions.

3. *Avoid the weeds: Balance accuracy, clarity, and immediate relevance.*

Another common challenge policymaking teams encounter in the use of data is the desire to drill "into the weeds" to explore equity challenges. There are always more ways to disaggregate data and more variables to include in analyses, but often, when we seek more answers from data, we end up with more questions. *Why aren't our students of color graduating? Do they have adequate access to financial aid? Are they taking unnecessary credits? At what points in their academic progress do we lose the most students of color?* In many cases, questions should be explored and answered. But during the policy-planning and agenda-building stage, policymaking teams have found that it helps to be intentional about focusing on the immediate key questions. Doing so is necessary to build a clear, actionable agenda that can be easily communicated to the public and other stakeholders.

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To that end, policymaking teams tasked with developing goals or strategic plans must from the outset define a limited number of important questions, with answers that are vital to creating a big-picture, equity-focused postsecondary attainment agenda. Then, policymakers need to develop and maintain a regularly updated set of core charts that serve as "vital signs" for equity in postsecondary outcomes. These indicators may become the backbone of a state-level dashboard to measure and report on progress. We describe below some of the indicators states have used for these purposes.

☑ **TO DO:** CREATE STATE POSTSECONDARY EQUITY *VITAL SIGNS*.

Maintain a set of critical indicators that tell your state's equity story.

Start by selecting a small set of key indicators that help tell a data-based story about the state's need for greater postsecondary attainment—and greater equity in attainment. Often the most effective story starts with the state's future needs and works backward to address the increases in both access and completion that are required to achieve greater attainment. It should focus in on how closing gaps between demographic groups would contribute to those goals.

Based on CUE's Equity Scorecard, *Vital Signs* are a set of critical equity indicators that provide a foundation for planning and action. (For more info on CUE's *Vital Signs* and other data tools, see https://cue.usc.edu/tools/data/.) These indicators illustrate the story about the state's need for greater postsecondary attainment—and equity in attainment.

Indicators that states commonly use to help craft their story:

☐ **Current participation and attainment rates**

Current levels of postsecondary attainment, by degree type and level, and by sector, disaggregated by race/ethnicity and age. *What is our state's current level of educational attainment and are there disparities by race/ethnicity or by age? How many working adults are there in our state without postsecondary education? What are the levels of attainment by*

region, county, or metropolitan area? [See Lumina-Stronger Nation, Center on Education and the Workforce, NCHEMS, PolicyLink Equity Atlas]

Trends in postsecondary attainment over time, disaggregated by race/ethnicity and age. *Are our rates of postsecondary attainment level increasing over time or staying flat? Are disparities growing or shrinking? Are we on course to meet our goals?* [See Lumina-Stronger Nation, NCHEMS]

☐ **Demographic changes**

Current and projected state demographic composition, by race/ethnicity and age. *What is the current demographic composition of our state and counties or regions within the state? How will this change in the next 5, 10, or 20 years? What are the fastest-growing (or declining) demographic groups within our state, and what will our future workforce look like?* [See PolicyLink Equity Atlas]

Projections of demographic composition of high school graduates. *What does the "pipeline" of students moving through K-12 education in the state look like? What are the fastest growing populations among the students headed toward high school and college?* [See WICHE-Knocking at the College Door]

Demographic contexts related to educational attainment: poverty, immigration, military-affiliated populations, and disconnected youth. *What other critical demographic trends impacting our state may affect (or be affected by) postsecondary attainment? Are poverty rates rising or declining (and for whom)? What contribution are immigrants making to our state's population growth? How many military-affiliated adults are there in our state and how many without postsecondary education? How many young people are disconnected from education or employment, and what strategies do we have to re-engage them?* [See NCHEMS, PolicyLink Equity Atlas]

☐ **Economic and workforce contexts**

Current and projected workforce demand and educational needs. *What are the fastest-growing occupations in the state? In what fields will the greatest number of new job openings emerge over the next decade? What are the educational requirements for access to those jobs?* [See Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce]

Current unemployment rates. *What are the current rates of unemployment among adults in the state? Are there differences in unemployment rates by race/ethnicity? By age group? Are unemployment rates increasing or decreasing over time? Are differences between groups increasing or decreasing over time?* [See NCHEMS, PolicyLink Equity Atlas]

Current per capita or median family income in the state. *How does median family income differ by region of the state or by race/ethnicity? Are there disparities in wealth or earnings between different populations in the state? Are disparities growing or shrinking over time?* [See NCHEMS, PolicyLink Equity Atlas]

Net in-migration and out-migration of educated workers. *Does the state import a large number of educated adults to its workforce? Are adults with college education leaving the state to find work elsewhere?* [See NCHEMS]

☐ **Access, retention, completion, and policy-related indicators of student success**

Longitudinal rates of participation (enrolled adults relative to total adult population without a college degree)**, retention, and completion; disaggregated by sector** (2-year and 4-year)**, by race/ethnicity, gender, geographic location, income, and age group, and distinguishing between certificates and certifications** (where possible)**.** *How well are institutions serving students? Are there disparities in rates of student success among different groups?* [See Lumina-Stronger Nation,

NCHEMS, CCA (for participating states/systems), or state/institutional data systems]

Rates of placement and success in developmental education, time-to-degree, and other policy-relevant indicators related to factors that contribute to disparities in attainment. *How are the state's policies and structures impacting completion and attainment? Where are most students lost? What are the most critical drop-off points or "bottlenecks" for students in the state's postsecondary system?* [See CCA (for participating states/systems), or state/institutional data systems]

Higher education financing and financial aid disbursement. *What is the average net cost of college in the state, by sector? How much is distributed in state financial aid annually? How have financial aid allocations changed over time? What share of family income is required to pay for college, by income group?* [See NCHEMS, state data systems]

See Selected Data Sources at end of guide, after References

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ENGAGING INSTITUTIONS

Engaging institutions of higher education is one of the most difficult steps in building an effective postsecondary policy agenda—particularly one that is equity-focused. But the goals and values of an equity-focused agenda must be effectively integrated into the practices and policies of institutions if they are to be viable beyond short-term political cycles. **Thus, for policy goals to be met, and for policy measures to be effective, institutional leaders must be given authentic, meaningful opportunities to engage in dialogue and planning about ways to achieve the desired outcomes.**

Research consistently shows that the values and priorities embedded in policy (e.g., outcomes-based funding) rarely diffuse into institutional practice in ways that bring about real change. In states with higher education coordinating boards that don't have funding-related authority, moreover, the ability to engage institutional actors in working toward policy goals relies entirely upon strategies to build a commitment to change that aligns with—rather than runs counter to—the institutions' many incentives and missions.

There are ways for policymakers to effectively engage institutional leaders, and vice versa, in collaborative discussions and strategies for pursuing agreed-upon goals. This is especially true with respect to equity, though discussions about equity also present unique challenges (see section one). Such strategies require state policymakers to design policy by starting with a focus on student impact, and then carefully considering the conditions the policy creates for institutional actors as the intermediaries.

For example, a policy such as outcomes-based funding imagines that the link between appropriations and outcomes will push institutions to change practices in order to improve student experiences. But if not carefully designed, such policies may incentivize institutions to limit access and narrow opportunity for the most marginalized students. Outcomes-based funding policy that is thoughtfully designed with student impact in mind balances access and completion measures, and includes equity "safeguards" that prevent or disincentivize institutions from exacerbating inequities in pursuit of stronger completion outcomes.

Another strategy for policy development and design strategy involves creating a shared framework and set of goals for equity, using data to build a common baseline for understanding historical inequities and workforce needs. The framework and goals also help to create conditions in which institutions are expected and enabled to develop unique equity interventions from the ground up. California Community Colleges' Student Equity Policy (SEP) exemplifies this strategy: The SEP, instituted in 1993, requires California's community colleges to develop "student equity plans" to address disparities in student access and success among racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups. In 2014, the state

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allocated $225 million to fund implementation of the SEP, providing funds to help colleges develop their own local interventions.

The Colorado Equity in Excellence project is another example of a policy strategy designed to create a shared framework in which institutional actors are empowered to develop local equity interventions. The Equity in Excellence project started with state policy leaders and institutional leaders joining in collaborative data analysis of inequities in postsecondary attainment statewide. Policymakers (with the support of the Center for Urban Education and WICHE) then translated statewide equity data on postsecondary outcomes to the institutional level—showing for each participating institution where their particular gaps existed, and how they could contribute to closing the statewide gaps. At the institutional level, teams of practitioners were then engaged around those "local" data and asked to dig even deeper into institutional practices and policies that might contribute to those gaps (i.e. development education placement and delivery, teaching in gateway courses, equity in support for transfer, etc.). Read more about the Equity in Excellence initiative in *Change Magazine,* "Moving the Attainment Agenda from Policy to Action" or *Developing Agency for Equity-Minded Change* (Witham, Chase, Bensimon, Hanson, & Longanecker, 2015; Felix, Bensimon, Hanson, Gray & Klingsmith, 2015).

> ☑ **TO DO:** DESIGN POLICY THAT FOCUSES ON STUDENT IMPACT AND EMPOWERS INSTITUTIONS TO ADDRESS INEQUITY LOCALLY.

Establish a clear definition of what equity means for the state.

States that have effectively engaged institutions in addressing inequities in postsecondary outcomes have established clear definitions of what equity means at the state level. It may seem counterintuitive to establish a statewide definition when the goal is to encourage institutions to address equity at the local level. But state or system policy leaders play a critical role in establishing the guiding principles. Without a shared "North Star," equity may be interpreted in a variety of ways by institutions (e.g., increasing diversity, equity in completion but not access, or vice versa.). A common definition avoids disparate and diffused efforts that don't contribute coherently to statewide improvement.

Tips to guide the process:

☐ Understand the institutions' existing incentives, missions, and challenges.

☐ Use data to understand where students with lower rates of attainment are being served in the state currently and where they are not.

☐ Drill down with additional data to understand which certificates and degrees have value for specific groups; engage with institutions and Workforce Development (unemployment insurance, wage data systems) to conduct institution-level data analysis that makes attainment goals meaningful for institutions and contextualizes equity goals within specific programs and fields.

☐ Ensure that any accountability frameworks (1) make institutions compete against themselves, not each other; and (2) ensure that access and completion are high priorities in order to avoid giving institutions incentives to limit access.

☐ Start with data: Translate goals to the institutional level, then ask institutional leaders to reflect on how those goals align with their own institutional priorities (don't prescribe goals from the top down). Help institutions understand how they can contribute to the state's big-picture needs.

☐ Create opportunities for institutional leaders, faculty leaders, and others to explore promising practices related to equity; in other words, help institutions understand—and get credit for— the good work they're doing, and intentionally facilitate the sharing of that knowledge across institutions and sectors.

☐ Build urgency for scale and acceleration of promising strategies; use small pockets of money to incentivize equity innovation; hold convenings; award bonus funding to institutions that make equity improvements.

☐ Enlist the support of regional foundations to target funding for scholarships or other grants to institutions that demonstrate strong outcomes for students with the largest attainment disparities.

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SELECTED DATA SOURCES

Lumina Foundation: Stronger Nation through Higher Education. Provides current- and trend-data on postsecondary attainment at the national, state and county levels, as well as for the 100 most populous metropolitan regions. http://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger_nation
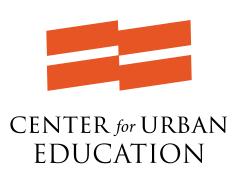
WICHE: Knocking at the College Door. Provides projections of high school graduates by race/ethnicity through 2028. http://www.wiche.edu/knocking-8th

PolicyLink National Equity Atlas. Provides data and downloadable graphic illustrations for a comprehensive set of equity indicators at the state, regional and national level, including demographic change, income inequality and unemployment, educational attainment and job requirements, poverty and GDP gains related to racial equity. http://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators

Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce: Provides state and national projections of educational attainment required to meet future workforce needs. https://cew.georgetown.edu/

Complete College America: Provides state or system-reported data on critical completion indicators including developmental education progress and credit accumulation rates. http://completecollege.org/college-completion-data/

CENTER *for* URBAN EDUCATION

Since 1999, the Center for Urban Education (CUE) has led socially conscious research and developed tools to help institutions of higher education produce equitable student outcomes. Located in the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education, CUE is committed to closing racial–ethnic equity gaps and improving student outcomes in higher education. Rather than remediate students, CUE remediates practices, structures, and policies.

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