

Inequity in Higher Ed Institutions:

A Review of Key Issues & Equity-Centered Strategies

JANUARY 2022



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January 2022

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Introduction

Ensuring that students of all backgrounds are provided with an opportunity to learn and grow within a safe campus community should be part of any work to build a more equitable post-secondary institution. Institutions of higher education serve as a mechanism along the path toward financial freedom and professional success, and they can help build a foundation for interpersonal growth and development. However, the disparities experienced by Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students in institutions of higher education often prevent them from obtaining the same benefits as their more privileged peers. These disparities do not have to be a permanent state, however; institutional leaders who strive for equity, understand the history of disparity amongst historically excluded students, examine their institutional policies and practices with a critical eye, and employ promising and proven strategies to break down racist and biased systems can ensure that Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students reap all of the promises and benefits of higher education.

This paper was born out of an Equity Working Group comprised of members of national and regional intermediaries in the higher education space. Our organizations work closely with institutions of higher education seeking to transform in support of more equitable outcomes for the most vulnerable students: those that identify as Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income. In our work with institutions, we seek to specifically identify the ways that inequity shows up on their campuses. In order to do that holistically, we engaged in a root cause interrogation of the inequities that we see across the thousands of institutions that we serve. The four focus areas around which this paper is organized were the primary drivers identified in our analysis: campus culture, academic advising and student support, financial aid, and institutional policy. We engaged the support of [Changing Perspectives](#) to review the literature, help us learn how these primary drivers show up on campuses, and identify strategies to mitigate or eliminate barriers caused by the ways our current programs, policies, and practices lead to systemically racist systems.

This paper distills some of the key research findings in these four focus areas then provides concrete strategies that institutions and their intermediary partners can use to further their work toward institutional transformation in support of equitable outcomes for historically excluded students.

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Review of Selected Literature

Key Contextual Trends in Institutional Inequity

Through the Education Data Initiative, Melanie Hanson (2021) compiled historical and present-day trends associated with college student enrollment across 2-year and 4-year institutions. Hanson's tool offers the reader the ability to understand data sets over the last 45 years and helps to shed light on the physical numbers relevant to student enrollment and completion rates. To understand the current state of equity in post-secondary institutions, a review of the numbers allows us to better conceptualize who our most vulnerable students are.

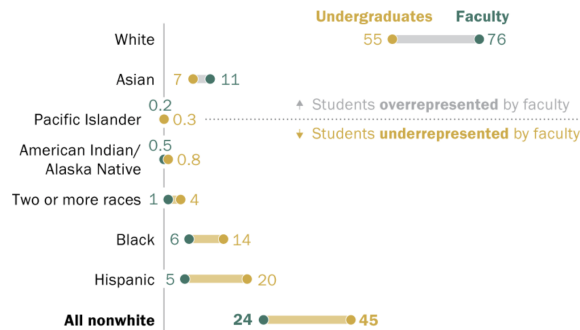
Per Hanson's (2021) research:

- College enrollment rates increased significantly between 1970 and 2010, when enrollment peaked at 21 million students. But rates have declined by an average of 1.67% per year since 2010.
- 19.5% (4.3 million) of the college student population is Hispanic or Latino, a 441.7% increase since 1976.
- 9.6% (2.1 million) of the college student population is Black or African American, a 39.6% increase since 1976. Since 2010, Black or African American students have decreased among the student population by 10.7%.
- 0.7% (152,600) of the student body is American Indian or Alaska Native; this is the same level of representation this demographic had in 1976.
- 56% of Hispanic or Latino and 46% of Black or African American students finish a four-year degree within six years, compared to 72% of White students.
- Black and Hispanic students enroll in higher numbers in community colleges and less-selective four-year institutions.
- 42% of students from the lowest quintile of socioeconomic status pursue a 2-year degree; 32% pursue a 4-year program.
- 78% of students from the highest quintile of socioeconomic status seek a 4-year degree; 13% pursue a 2-year degree.
- 37% of students from high-income status families and 7% of low-income students first enroll at highly selective institutions.

When considering barriers to persistence and completion, an important consideration is the lack of representation in faculty and leadership of color, a lack of comprehensive on- and off-campus resources and support services, and financial issues. For context, Nair (2019) indicated that a 2016 poll showed that only 16.8% of campus presidents were persons of color. A 2019 report completed by Davis and Fry shows that only 24% of faculty, on average, are persons of color, with approximately 0.5% identifying as American Indian/Alaskan Native, 6% as Black, and 5% as Hispanic.

U.S. college students are twice as likely as faculty to be black, four times as likely to be Hispanic

% of undergraduates and postsecondary faculty by race and ethnicity, fall 2017



Note: "Nonwhite" includes blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Pacific Islanders, American Indians or Alaska Natives, and those of two or more races. Those categorized as "non-resident alien" and "race/ethnicity unknown" are not included in this analysis, so shares may not total to 100%.
Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

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Campus Culture

According to one group of scholars, "Culture is the 'invisible glue' that holds institutions together by providing a common foundation and a shared interpretation and understanding of events and actions. Institution-wide patterns of perceiving, thinking, and feeling; shared understandings; collective assumptions; and common interpretive frameworks are the ingredients of institutional culture." (Eckel et al., 1999, p. 26). Per the American Democracy Project (2004), "campus culture include[s] strategies for socializing new students and faculty into the campus community and thoughtful responses to campus conflicts or the violation of important norms—'teachable moments.'" Other scholars point to key strategies that further a strong campus culture:

- Clearly defining, in common language, the meaning of colloquial terms and definitions used throughout postsecondary institutions that are not easily accessible and understood by persons from underserved communities (Museus, 2014).
- Incorporating trauma-informed, culturally responsive teaching pedagogies aimed at ensuring that the in-class culture (and by extension the campus environment) are safe spaces for all.
- Bridging the gap between the communities in which the institution exists and the function of the institution through community engagement.
- Incorporating students' voices to allow our primary stakeholders (those enrolled) to see themselves accurately reflected within the campus environment (Pike et al., 2006).

A study pertaining to retention rates of African American freshman by Schwartz and Washington (2002) found that, in addition to their rank in high school, the way the student perceived their social adjustment while on campus was a strong predictor of retention. Essentially, students who were primed early on for the culture of higher education, had higher academic standing before entering, and felt safe and included in the campus environment were the most likely to make it to the second year. This brings the conversation of early intervention programs into focus, centering a need for institutions to develop and maintain programs aimed at supporting Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students within the culture of higher education, while simultaneously shifting the culture of these institutions to be equitable, inclusive, and full of

stakeholders that represent their most vulnerable members. Students who are committed to their institutions are more likely to persist and graduate (Tinto, 2009). Students want to feel that their goals and interests are congruent with the university's academic mission (Flowers & Pascarella, 2003 as cited in Creighton, 2021). While we know these to be drivers for success and retention for marginalized students, we also recognize that the realities of higher education are often misaligned. Some examples include:

In May of 2018, White Yale student Sara Braasch called the police on sleeping Black Yale student Lolade Siyonbola citing her belief that Siyonbola did not belong on campus. Two officers arrived to question Siyonbola stating, "She [Braasch] called us (and) said there's somebody who appeared they weren't...where they were supposed to be" (Watson, 2018). Though Siyonbola took law enforcement to her room to show that she had a key to the space, she was still required to show ID. However, the name on her ID did not match the name in the system. Furthermore, the name on the ID was Siyonbola's preferred name and not the name on university paperwork. She stated that she pays her tuition like everyone else and deserved to be there. However, "data also shows that too many students of color and low-income students do not receive a higher education experience comparable to their White peers" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p.5).

In August of 2018 at Smith College, Oumou Kanoute was approached by police while eating her lunch in a campus common space after an employee of the university called indicating that she was "out of place" (Whitford, 2018). Kanoute later wrote, "I did nothing wrong, I wasn't making any noise or bothering anyone. All I did was be Black. It's outrageous that some people question my being at Smith College, and my existence overall as a woman of color." After making a request for the name of the individual who called the police, university staff provided Kanoute with the policy, indicating that such information will remain redacted. Smith College policy states, "This policy recognizes the potentially adverse consequences of releasing identifying information, especially in those cases where doing so may discourage the use of this critical safety resource." Smith College President Kathleen McCartney later issued a statement indicating that all faculty and staff would receive mandatory anti-bias training, and that campus police would "strengthen the protocols by which they triage, assess and respond to calls for assistance." Therefore, no policy violations were found when investigated by the institution, and Kanoute was left with nothing more than her trauma. Though these instances of racially motivated violence were cleared by staff, Siyonbola and Kanoute will live with these moments for the remainder of their lives, and it likely colored the remainder of their university experiences. The belief that Black and brown bodies do not "belong" within institutions of higher education is storied throughout history, and these are not isolated incidents.

A Student Voice survey to discern how students across the country expect their institutions to develop healthy campus climates was completed by College Pulse, Inside Higher Ed, and Kaplan (Ezarik (2021). Their data revealed the following:

- 65% of respondents agree at least somewhat that higher education leadership has a role to play in racial justice and racial equality in the United States.
- 60% of students stated that their campuses have evolved in terms of race conversations and relations in the past year. However, there's concern that these conversations may be short lived, as they're at the forefront now due to the Black Lives Matter movement in response to the murder of Mr. George Floyd. Students urge their campus stakeholders to maintain the prioritization of these dialogues to improve campus relations beyond the news cycle.

"Numerous studies have concluded that how students experience their campus environment influences both learning and developmental outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and that

discriminatory environments have a negative effect on student learning (Cabrera et al., 1999, as cited in University of California, n.d.). A sense of belonging, and the safety that comes with it, are a necessity for our most vulnerable students. Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students are historically excluded in all places while simultaneously being over policed, both at home and within their universities. Working to shift the climate and culture of post-secondary institutions to protect the physical safety, mental health, and academic interests of the marginalized is a necessity.

Research completed by MDRC in November of 2020 pointed to the disparate completion rates of men of color within the post-secondary ecosystem, citing early exposure to higher education and campus culture, the influence of barriers outside of their academic performance, and the lack of collegiate support systems as primary barriers. They went on to state, "discriminatory policies and practices and structural racism perpetuate this inequality nationwide" (Manno et al., 2020, p. iii). In unpacking this issue, we have to look holistically at the institution of racism, its influence on higher education systems, and the microaggressions that allow it to flourish.

Systemic oppression by those with power and privilege is synonymous with the achievement gap and serves as a self-reinforcing microaggressive barrier. "Racial microaggressions take various forms, including both verbal and nonverbal assumptions about, and lowered expectations for, African American students" (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 65). It is important to note that these assumptions exist similarly for Latinx and Indigenous students due to their shared experiences with racial and ethnic erasure, colonialism, and systemic racism in their homes, schools, workplaces, and spaces of rest and leisure. To that end, microaggressions in the field of academia are often considered the cultural norm. For instance, basic curricula are Western-European-centric and considered the standard by which all learning is measured. Mastery of subjects related to the deeds of White people looms over every page in text, memo, and citation. In doing so, the triumphs of those belonging to communities of color are often erased or reframed to suit narratives that support Western-European-centric goals. When mentioned, it is typically the same experiences of the hand-selected few "good representatives" of other racial and ethnic groups (e.g., Martin Luther King Jr.) with specific moments, colored by bias, from their experiences that uplift the academic status quo. We miss opportunities to intellectually engage with students and assist them in the development of sound and well-rounded perspectives aimed at diverse, pro-social collectivistic mechanisms of life.

As an example, the [1619 Project](#) (Nikole Hannah-Jones, Pulitzer Prize-winning author, educator, and visionary) and [Critical Race Theory](#) (the collective work of Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, Cheryl Harris, Charles R. Lawrence III, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia J. Williams) have been politically demonized for their teachings on the real experiences of oppression as they relate to racism and the disparate outcomes of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous persons as the direct result of White supremacy within the United States. Each work reveals the holistic nature of past and modern-day racism, its enduring legacy, and the influence of White racial power and privilege. As a result, politicians and school officials have banned the teachings of such works and refuse to update textbooks to reflect these realities. In doing so, colonialism continues to take up residence from the point of an individual's entry into schooling, and it persists through their post-secondary education. For instance, journalist and scholar Nikole Hannah-Jones sought tenure at the University of North Carolina (UNC) and was denied without proper due process for her Pulitzer Prize-winning work. After public outcry and the loss of donor funds to the institution, UNC granted her tenure on the final day. Rather than continue at that institution, however, Hannah-Jones left UNC for Howard University, as the inaugural Knight Chair in Race and Journalism. She stated, "It is not my job to heal the University of North Carolina. That's the job of the people in power who created this situation in the first place." If we are taught to ignore race and racism, we are doomed to continue in a system that demonizes certain

groups, while uplifting others to intentionally cause harm. Decolonizing our academic spaces is essential to improving the campus climates within the postsecondary educational ecosystem.

When choices are made to silence the voices and squash the accomplishments of people such as Nikole Hannah-Jones, everyone who would have interacted with her on the University of North Carolina campus may now miss an opportunity for growth. Though a Pulitzer Prize winner and journalist at the height of her career, she was deemed unworthy in the very same academic space that had used her emotional and intellectual labor for years. Her White peers had not suffered the same experience. Her experiences mirror those of students of color in the same halls. Tim Wise (2008) spoke of his experiences as a White student; he recounted memories of how his perceived privilege allowed him to still be seen as highly capable in the academic setting, where even when his grades were poor, he was still in good favor with his teachers because he was considered to be "underperforming" rather than simply incapable:

I received the psychological advantage of knowing that while I was in those classrooms, if I didn't do well, I never had to worry that that would be ascribed to my race. I never had to worry that someone would say, of course he's not good at that because he's White. For people of color, it's a whole different ball game. Knowing that if they underperform in an academic environment, knowing that if they end a sentence with a preposition when they answer that question in class or if they mispronounce a word or if they simply answer wrong, they have to wonder if they not only dropped the ball for themselves, but for all those coming after them that look just like them, whose presence on that campus or in that job is constantly under scrutiny, being double guessed, second-guessed, and questioned if they belong there. (Wise, 2008)

Wise goes on to state how "dropping the ball" will not have effects on his European group as a whole, and will inherently not affect their future opportunities as a student or professional:

The mere thought of having to worry about your performance on that level is enough to drive down performance on standardized tests and classroom performance, even when they are equally or better qualified. It's easier to not have the burden of representation. (Wise, 2008)

Solorzano, Ceja, and Yusso (2000) found that many of the African American students they studied and interviewed during their research felt a constant sense of discouragement, frustration, and exhaustion from the incessant racial microaggressions they experienced in their academic settings. "Several students commented that racial microaggressions had affected their academic performance in overt ways such as pushing them to drop a class, changing their major and even leaving the university to attend school elsewhere" (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 69). These issues caused a strain on students' academic performance which they would not have had to contend with had they been born White.

Frawley et al. (2017) posited, "research by Jackson (2003, p.34) shows that the transition to university 'represents a period of disequilibrium as students move from a familiar environment into an unfamiliar one', resulting in 'significant life changes' and discontinuity, which can pose threats to self-identity" (p. 4). St. Amour (2020) went on to state that students tend to blame themselves for their lack of college preparedness when, in reality, they were never provided the necessary tools and resources to be successful. This also leads to isolation and doubt, and aids in early college dropout rates within the community.

In line with these ideas, "more than an issue of poverty, the achievement gap is also about race" (Bailey & Dziko, 2008, p. 11). A study completed by the Washington Assessment of Student

Learning (WASL) concluded that White and Asian students living in poverty still score higher than African American and Latinx students who are not exposed to or reside in a state of poverty. "Schools tend to perpetuate systemic inequalities, as well as being mechanisms for maintaining stringent racial hierarchies" (Storer et al., 2012, p. 19).

While the United States population has become more diverse, issues of disparity persist. "Although both BLS [Bureau of Labor Statistics] and U.S. Department of Education data indicate disparities by race and ethnicity, comparing these data sets over time suggests the overall gap in college enrollment appears to be closing" (USDOE, 2016, p. 21). However, it is important to note that enrollment and graduation rates are not synonymous. When considering enrollment trends, we can consider the influence of enrollment rates of Black and Latinx students, particularly in attending community colleges and less selective schools. It leaves us to consider how interpersonal-external expectations and systemic racism influence college choice. According to the USDOE (2016), half of Hispanic degree-seeking students enroll at two-year institutions, while most Black (58%), White (64%), and Asian (62%) students enroll at 4-year institutions. Frawley (2017) found that the major barriers to the participation of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were educational attainment, lower awareness of the long-term benefits of higher education, lower aspiration to participate, and the potential need for extra financial, academic, or personal support once enrolled in higher education courses. Data is limited for smaller racial and ethnic groups of students, and often data collection techniques for these specific groups are limited as well.

To best support these students, we know that there are various mechanisms that best suit the needs of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students. The work begins with recognizing systemic inequity and assessing current patterns to eradicate them from university operations, student relations, and faculty-staff development. We further these efforts through mentorship programs, with mentors reflecting the identity of those they're supporting, building financial security into the student academic experience, developing a robust student support services system, and ensuring students are seeing themselves reflected in faculty and staff (all leadership positions). Therefore, it is important to note that students' perceptions of the quality of their connections with the cultures of their respective campuses might be just as important as considering the quantity of these linkages (Hurtado and Carter, 1997; Museus and Quaye, 2009, as cited in Museus, 2014). Together, these efforts, in addition to the decolonization of academia, work to improve the campus climate, make it safer, and make it more inclusive for students of all backgrounds.

Academic Advising and Student Support

"Access to college has increased over recent decades, but student success—defined as the combination of persistence, achievement, engagement, and degree or certificate completion—remains largely unchanged" (Manno et al., 2020, p. 1). Having access to a rigorous, high-grade curriculum with teachers that believe in their future success is instrumental in helping Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students understand the importance of their education. One of the major roadblocks for completion is that historically excluded students are required to enroll in developmental core courses. "In 2002, the average African American 12th-grader's reading level was equivalent to that of the average White 8th-grader (The Education Trust). The result is that nearly 25 percent of African Americans who enroll in college require remediation in reading, compared to 7 percent of White students" (Wilkins, 2006, as cited in Bailey & Dziko, 2008, p. 17).

The ability to assist students with their academic success does not solely rest with the institution. The student should be viewed holistically in terms of the opportunities, or roadblocks, that could affect their education. Community support, familial support, and professional development are essential to closing the gap that exists. "[Support services] should include academic and professional career advising, psychological wellness counseling, and elements that build trusting relationships. Such support will ensure that [marginalized] students experience schools as supporting communities enabling their success and not as environments of alienation and hostility" (Bailey & Dziko, 2008, p. 19).

The standard of lowered expectations and covert racial biases have made the academic environment unsafe for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students. The constant feelings of discouragement and stunted support only help to fuel the inequality in the field of education for historically excluded students. As a result, "many African American students believe that the education system does not belong to them, and that they do not belong in it" (Bailey & Dziko, 2008, p. 21). The shift in this mindset requires a sustained holistic effort that includes educators changing their perceptions with intentional repositioning to collaborate with institutional stakeholders that address the trends in matriculation, support utilization, and completion rates for Indigenous, Latinx, and low-income students.

Early knowledge of post-secondary opportunities and assistance with college placement can help Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students become better prepared to access the resources needed to provide a successful post-secondary academic experience. This must be coupled with an environment that encourages communication among educators, students, their families, and the community. "By starting earlier, and by being consistent in communications about life-long expectations, more students of color will have greater opportunities beyond high school" (Bailey & Dziko, 2008, p. 21). This level of integrative involvement will help to strengthen the institution of learning and foster more open communication between all stakeholders.

A key support for historically excluded students is to create spaces and programs in which they can connect with others who share their cultural identity. By establishing identity-based programs, students begin to create a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012) to the institution, and students that feel more connected to the institution are more likely to be retained and matriculate (Museus, 2014). Haudley (2021) posits that Native American student organizations and first-year experience programs are often deciding factors in Indigenous student enrollment, persistence, sense of belonging, and community engagement. "When freshmen do not adhere to this [White dominant] culture, they can become engaged in subcultures that help them develop a sense of belonging, which promotes their retention (Kuh & Love, 2000). These groups are referred to as collective cultural agents; staff, instructors, and peer mentors are cultural agents as well and play an important role in helping students transition into college and navigate through a new complicated system" (Museus & Quaye, 2009 as cited in Hoyt, 2021 p. 2). Hoyt's research further found that high-risk students who engaged in more robust advising and student support programs were more likely to be retained; on average, institutions saw a 7% increase.

Counseling and mental health support services are also critical supports for students who are asked to cognitively process difficult academic content as well as adapt to an unfamiliar cultural setting on a daily basis. "Several existing qualitative investigations illuminate the reality that, while college students, in general, must go through an adjustment process when they enter higher education, undergraduates of color often report encountering significant cultural challenges throughout this adjustment process" (Kuh and Love, 2000; Lewis et al., 2000; Museus, 2008a; Museus and Quaye, 2009 as cited in Museus, 2014, p. 191). This validates the need for these resources, and shows that a supported student is more likely to be retained.

"Academic and student support services play a critical role in retaining students, and in the context of today's data-driven decision-making on college campuses, program administrators need to document the effectiveness of these programs for ongoing funding and support," (Hoyt, 2021, p. 10). There's a direct link between a person's mental health and well-being, their level of connectedness, and their productivity. Counseling services are in high demand. Left untreated, mental health issues can impact college retention and time to degree (Beiter et. al., 2015) as well as increase the likelihood of suicide (Yozwiak, Lentzsch-Parcells, & Zapolski, 2012) or violence against others (van Brunt, 2012).

And yet, there is not equitable access to these services across various types of institutions. While 70% of community college students stated that access to personal counseling would be helpful to them, only 8% of two-year colleges have psychological services, compared to 58% of four-year institutions (Francis & Horn, 2016). 19% of counselors at two-year colleges did not offer mental health services on campus; 58% are required to provide academic advising and registration. Within four-year institutions, 61% of staff time is for direct counseling and 22% for training, supervision, consultation, and outreach. Institutions should retain services in-house. Outsourcing counseling services adds to the financial strain of students, students tend to not have positive experiences with third-party vendors that rely on texting and inconsistent support, and students are less likely to seek support when referred externally; approximately 42% forgo counseling when referred out, with students of color making up 43% of successful referrals and White students making up 58%, also showing a correlation between race and ability to obtain external support (Francis & Horn, 2016).

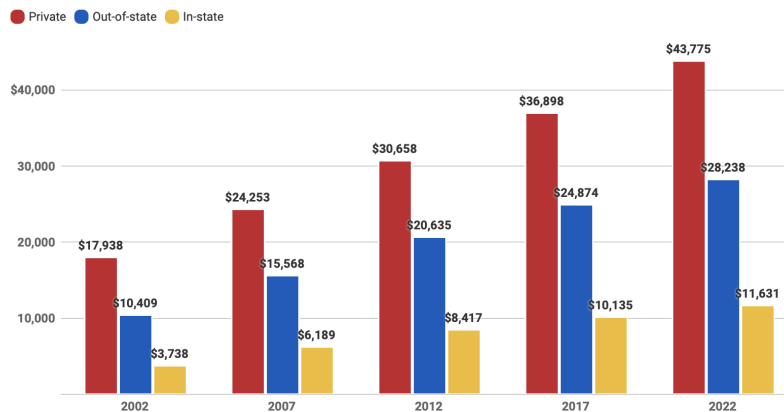
As it relates to housing and food insecurity, "It is critical to understand the prevalence of these challenges because they are associated with mental health functioning, academic success, and graduation rates," (Haskett et al., 2020, p. 109) for our most vulnerable students. Research reviewed by Willis (2019) found that 32% of undergraduate students identified as food insecure, which corroborated the research done at a large Southeastern university. Of their most impacted, both sets of researchers noted that the largest disparities were faced by Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students. While this area of research remains understudied, the limited available data speaks to the ways in which a lack of adequate food sources with diverse nutritional offerings prevented students from being active and healthy, let alone productive academically (Willis, 2019). "It is critical to understand the prevalence of these challenges because they are associated with mental health functioning, academic success, and graduation rates; food insecurity has been consistently linked to worse academic outcomes among college students" (Willis, 2019, p. 170).

Financial Aid

Financially, the cost of education has increased dramatically over the past 20 years, while wages and salaries have stayed the same, making it significantly more difficult for students to pay for their education. Per Boyington, Kerr, and Wood (2021):

- "The average tuition and fees at private national universities has jumped 144%.
- Out-of-state tuition and fees at public national universities has risen 171%.
- In-state tuition and fees at public national universities has grown the most, increasing 211%."

Average Tuition Growth Among National Universities, 2002-2022



Source: U.S. News & World Report • [Get the data](#)

Federal financial aid policy has a convoluted history, in that its inception was to help all students gain access to higher education. On creating the President's Commission on Higher Education in 1947, the Truman administration stated, "it was time for the federal government to play a more prominent role in higher education and provide a large amount of financial assistance to help level the playing field for access" (Gilbert & Heller, 2013, p. 418). Prior to the intervention by the Truman administration, primarily only White, wealthy men entered higher education. Previous attempts at increasing access to higher education through the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (G.I. Bill) of 1944 were not as successful.

Today, federal student loans accessed through the FAFSA are the most prominent financial aid program. The FAFSA has increased enrollment from low-income and minority student groups; however, the complicated processes surrounding the FAFSA can be a barrier to enrollment and matriculation. The FAFSA paperwork can impede success (Deming & Dynarski, 2010) due in part to the fact that the FAFSA, and other application requirements such as the CSS profile, request personal information that many people do not wish to disclose (Dynarski & Wiederspan, 2012) or is difficult for students and their families to gather and input. As one student said, "FAFSA is a family affair. I knew what had to be done, but my mom always has the documents ready for it, so I definitely need her help to complete it." (Tichavakunda, 2017, p. 10). Finally, a hidden barrier for many students—verification of information—disproportionately affects students of color (Douglas-Gabriel and Holden, 2021).

- In 2020, student debt hit an all-time high of \$1.6 trillion, second only to mortgage debt (Friedman, 2020).
- Over 70% of individuals with bachelor's degrees graduate with student loan debt, with Black women holding the highest average amount of debt per gender and ethnicity (Friedman, 2020).
- Undocumented students are not able to apply for the FAFSA and are eligible only to receive state and college financial aid and private scholarships (Federal Student Aid, 2020).

Many other factors contribute to students' challenges to accessing financial aid, including perceptions that costs are too high; challenges accessing information on institutional websites and understanding the language, terms, and requirements detailed on those sites; and debt aversion (De La Rosa, 2006; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006; Hoxby & Turner, 2015; Ikegwuonu, 2020; Markowitz, 2017; Perna, 2006; St. John et al., 1996). Research also shows that students have difficulty differentiating between costs associated with tuition and fees, which can exacerbate students' overestimation of costs (Barber & Ikegwuonu, 2018). Because students from historically excluded communities are more likely to learn about higher education institutions and financial aid policies via social media and the Internet, and by themselves without guidance from parents, guardians, or individuals who have previously attended a higher education institution (Markowitz, 2017), they understandably have less context and more difficulty understanding the complicated steps required to access financial aid.

An early alert system, or "nudging," can help students start and complete their FAFSA at higher rates than peers who do not have access to such a service. Early alert systems, which are still relatively new but which are being tested for everything from financial aid to encouraging students to access academic or mental health supports, can be set up to remind students to apply for aid, the websites to start the application process, and what information is needed for annual reapplication. The nudging process can also be utilized if a student is selected for the verification process. Tools like these can be supportive in helping students re-enroll for financial aid, which leads to a greater likelihood of retention and completion. Full-time first-year college students that file their FAFSA within the first year of their postsecondary education are 72% more likely to persist (Novak & McKinney, 2011).

Institutional Policy

There are a broad range of policy areas associated with post-secondary institutions; compliance and behavior, academic, technological, general governance, student activities and residency, research and review, business operations, and financial. When considering policy, it is important to consider four key levers for change:

- the process for designing policy
- the process for implementing policy
- the equity content of the policy
- the cohort fit of the policy

It's important to unpack the process of policy development and implementation to ensure that all stakeholders have a strong foundation of design, implementation, and enforcement. Institutional policies have an adverse impact on the overall student experience and degree completion of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students. These students are more often than their White, Asian, and financially secure peers to be penalized for not adhering to university policy, and to be over-represented in the number of students who've had negative action taken against them by faculty and staff, a trend that begins in primary education and continues throughout the individuals' experience within the higher education system (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

Institutional policy is a broad category, spanning issues from who is allowed to matriculate to how credit is earned to how safety—or simply behavior—is enforced. In the latter, policy enforcement is often enacted by campus police departments. Without policies streamlined to account for bias in reporting to campus officials, and bias from law enforcement toward Black and brown students, these systems are doomed to perpetuate various forms of cultural and systemic violence within their student body. "Programs that vaguely advise people to act on

poorly articulated feelings that someone is out of place—most notably the 'See Something, Say Something' programs—often result in race-based 'suspicious person' calls and put an official stamp of approval on these biases" (Takei, 2018). With the rise in police calls against students of color simply for existing on campuses in which others perceive them to not belong, it is imperative to clarify such policies and improve training related to their enforcement.

Often, there are factors that impact how different groups interpret university policy and, when coupled with racial bias, attempts at equitizing them still leave marginalized populations receiving the bulk of negative interactions with enforcement officials and punitive action, thus adversely affecting their academic experience and perception of safety. Policies must be clear and concise, with guidance from policy developers on how to interpret policies accurately. Petry (2020) noted, "common code of conduct features were also largely missing: only 20% included an opening letter from leadership, just 13% included questions and answers, and 67% omitted the most basic resource for navigating [the] code[s] table of contents. Most were written with extensive use of legalese, and had a compliance-based approach; best practice codes present a blend of values and compliance" (p. 1) Without the ability to truly comprehend policies, individuals from diverse backgrounds can't adhere to them without risking a penalty.

Policies often lack clarity, are not developed with all students in mind or by a diverse group of individuals (faculty and staff with student input), and are not equitably enforced. Protecting students from weaponized bias in the form of university policy is a necessity, and policy review and reform should begin with a diverse body of individuals capable of adequately assessing this impact, which requires buy-in from campus leadership. "More importantly, the power to change policies is concentrated in the office of the college or university president, which makes quick adoption of the policy easier" (Takei, 2018), but which leaves out voices critical to fairness and equity.

Due to the foundational lack of diversity within the faculty, staff, and upper administration, we recognize that there is a lack of comprehensive training in support to ensure that students of color are not overpathologized and suffer the consequences of incident-reporter bias at the intersection of racism, classism, and a lack of cultural competence. "Higher education can't solve racism and societal inequity on its own. But the industry can take steps to be part of the solution, like by supporting and helping more Black students to become teachers. Black students are less likely to face the kind of discipline that would take them out of the classroom and disrupt their learning if they have a Black teacher" (Constance Lindsay, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Assistant Professor, as cited in St. Armour, p. 4). For instance, The National Center for Education Statistics completed a review of human resources information from various postsecondary institutions across the United States in the fall of 2018. They found that only "3% percent each were Black males, Black females, Hispanic males, and Hispanic females" (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). They also found that 7% identify as Asian/Pacific Islander males, 5% as Asian|Pacific Islander females, and less than 1% identified as Native American|Indigenous (NCES, 2018). No data was presented to show the representation of identity that also acknowledges individuals who do not identify along the binary (i.e, individuals who identify as non-binary, gender non-conforming, two-spirit, agender, etc.). Without adequate representation, students within our target population are destined to continue the tradition of being historically excluded and disenfranchised. Increasing administrator and faculty representation serves to aid in institutional environments that allow all students, specifically Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and low-income students, to be educated in a space that truly honors them holistically.

The aforementioned disparity in policymaking is systemically reinforced by the fact that those who are less likely to attend and graduate from post-secondary institutions are also less likely to

take up positions as faculty, administrators, and leadership. Without diversity in faculty, staff, and leadership, institutions create a self-fulfilling prophecy: those with decision-making power make choices that continue to prevent others from being able to access those rooms to assist in the very policy development solutions that impact who may, or may not, be able to access their institutions.

Diverse representation at all levels influences "who" is seen and valued in the halls of academia. Policies cannot be made with all students in mind if there's no one to speak to their unique needs and areas of concern; that requires the inclusion of student voice in decision-making and diverse staff representation. Policies are often constructed to be colorblind and universal, yet their application has proven to be less than effective in being enforced equitably.

A review of several university policy development protocols for this project conducted by Changing Perspectives found that language is ambiguous; does not emphasize creating diverse, equitable, and inclusive campus climates; does not include student voice and/or review; and does not offer guidance on who is selected to have decision-making power based on variables such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. They also have an internal policy of allowing the committee to review their developed policies, with final review and approval being done by Student Affairs/Dean of Students Leadership, the President, and Board of Trustees.

The realities of policy development also connect to their review and assessment, as the same bodies that have agency on which new policies are necessary, or which current policies require review, are the same or similar bodies that assess their efficacy over time. Many policies simply indicate that an individual, or body of individuals, will assess the need for the policy, complete an internal review, potentially send the policy to "relevant university members," and then send it to "executive officer(s)" for final approval (University of Michigan, 2020). If policies need to be reviewed or changed, some institutions complete an annual audit, with no clarity on who the auditors are, what they're looking for, or how they will make decisions on efficacy and effectiveness (University of Michigan, 2020).

Specific policies that need attention are those related to course-taking and discipline. With regards to course-taking, the US Department of Education (2016) noted that "regardless of [the] type of institution they attend, Black and Hispanic students are far more likely to be placed in remedial courses during their first year of college than their White peers (30 and 29 percent compared to 20 percent;" p. 6). Remedial courses are usually non-credit-bearing and impact timely graduation rates, which likely contributes to degree attainment rates for Black and Latinx students being approximately half that of their White peers. They further note that "Well-designed course placement strategies mitigate the time students spend in remedial education without making progress toward a credential" (USDOE, 2016, p. 3). Reflecting on the financial implications associated with degree attainment, the correlation between taking introductory-level courses without paths to graduation increases the financial burden for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students.

School disciplinary violation information is subjective and inconsistent and undermines national efforts to expand access to higher education (Weissman & NaPier, 2015). Weissman and NaPier (2013) discusses that 73% of post-secondary institutions collect high school disciplinary information, and 89% use this in admissions decision-making, but only 25% of colleges that collect this data for usage have a written policy to guide its use, and only 30% train their admission staff to interpret disciplinary violation findings. This leads to one-third of those students admitted to receive special supervision through offices such as the Dean of Students or Student Affairs for a brief probationary period; 45% place housing restrictions on students (34% prohibit students from residing on campus; p. iii). Because we know that students of color,

especially males, are disproportionately disciplined in their K–12 schools, we see the pipeline continuing into postsecondary education. Per the Pathways to Postsecondary Success report, students who identify as male (27% compared to female students at 13%), and low income (34% compared to 24% in middle/upper income) are at greater risk of expulsion and suspension due to the creation of zero-tolerance policies in primary and secondary education systems (Terriquez, Chlala, & Sacha, 2013). More than half of these punitive actions were related to behavior enforcement: cell phone use in class, regular tardiness, the use of profanity on school grounds, failure to complete homework as assigned, and 'willful defiance' of a school authority, which is subjective to that specific authority (Petry, 2020).

Further, data associated with their high school actions (which are more connected to subjective messages on defiance, phone usage, truancy, and homework completion) are not correlative to college-based behaviorism. "No research has been conducted on the relationship between screening based on disciplinary history and safety on college campuses. However, the limited number of studies examining criminal history screening and campus safety found no relationship between the two" (Weissman & NaPier, 2015, p. 24).

Equity-Centered Strategies to Address Inequities

How To Use These Strategies

This briefing paper has multiple strategies that can help institutions support outcomes that enhance the experiences of historically excluded students. It is organized around four key focus areas: campus culture, advising and student support, financial aid, and institutional policy. Unpacking where to begin and which strategies to implement can be a difficult task, but the structure of the paper allows stakeholders to consider which topic area is most salient for their department, working group, or institution(s), and begin integrating concrete interventions to make positive, meaningful change.

This briefing paper was developed for and informed by intermediaries in the postsecondary sector, but it can also be used by committed institutional leaders acting as transformation leads. In order to use these strategies, we recommend some or all of the following steps:

1. Build a team or a set of teams who can examine an institution's systems within each of the four key focus areas. Ideally, this would be four separate teams, with a fifth "integration" team composed of representatives from each focus area to ensure that as problems are uncovered and solutions are chosen, those solutions work in concert—not in competition—with one another. Each team should include a cross-section of stakeholders, such as Junior and Senior faculty, staff from across the institution, administrators, and—most importantly—students, families, and community stakeholders.
2. Leverage the associated briefing paper to understand their system or identify key aims. We hope that as network teams begin forming, that they review the literature in that report pertaining to how inequities show up on campuses, and couple that with their own go-to sources (literature, narratives, historical data) that contribute to the team's understanding of the issue and the root causes of the problems they see.
3. Consult the detailed strategies in this paper, and incorporate them into the development of a theory of improvement and the implementation of new practices through improvement cycles. Many of the strategies in this paper have a strong research base and/or are heavily used in practice, but implementation must be done with a critical eye toward equity to ensure that they truly serve the students who need their support the most. Having a diverse team, an equity screen, students as part of the implementation team, and integration across other new strategies and longstanding initiatives within your institution will be critical to ensuring equity in implementation.

The approach we recommend is not to reinvent the wheel, but to slow daily functions to allow stakeholders to truly examine the systems and processes that are causing disparities, take inventory of available resources, and put in place lasting solutions that fix systems, not symptoms. The research-based strategies in this paper focus on systems-level solutions centered around students as they are, without asking them to change their behaviors to fit into outdated or dominant-culture preferencing systems, structures, and programs.

Key Terms

Term	Definition
Marginalized Communities	"Groups and communities that experience discrimination and exclusion (social, political and economic) because of unequal power relationships across economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions," (National Collaborating Center for Determinants of Health [NCCDH], 2021).
Minoritized	"...to be pushed to the margins often by means out of your own control (Paniuagua, 2015). The authors choose to use this word intentionally in lieu of the term "minority," as it is not due to the lack of representative numbers that disenfranchises people of marginalized experiences, but rather the socio-cultural hierarchies and policies that negatively impact them. For example, white billionaire women who independently gained their financial success are a minority within the United States. However, their experience in the world is not minoritized nor disenfranchised, given that their race and economic status holds power," (Paniuagua, 2015 as cited in Horton, 2021, p. 284).
Historically Excluded	"The term historically excluded group, or HEG, refers to any group of people that has been historically excluded from full rights, privileges, and opportunities in a society or organization. The label is used in an effort to get around the controversy concerning the use of minority to the extent possible and because it is inclusive of other underrepresented groups. Any group that has been historically disenfranchised is deserving of the HEG label. In this way, the term includes the range of diversity groups that meet the criteria, such as race, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation, ability differences, class, etc.," (Glover, 2021).
BIPOC	<p>Black, Indigenous, and other Persons of Color; The term is used to "highlight the unique relationship to Whiteness that Indigenous and Black (African Americans) people have, which shapes the experiences of and relationship to white supremacy for all people of color within a U.S. context" (The BIPOC project: A Black, Indigenous, & People of Color Movement, n.d.).</p> <p>"This is a term specific to the United States, intended to center the experiences of Black and Indigenous groups and demonstrate solidarity between communities of color. The term "BIPOC" is more descriptive than people of color or POC. It acknowledges that people of color face varying types of discrimination and prejudice. Additionally, it emphasizes that systemic racism continues to oppress, invalidate, and deeply affect the lives of Black and Indigenous people in ways other people of color may not necessarily experience. Lastly and significantly, Black and Indigenous individuals and communities still bear the impact of slavery and genocide. BIPOC aims to bring to center stage the specific violence, cultural erasure, and discrimination experienced by Black and Indigenous people. It reinforces the fact that not all people of color have the same experience, particularly when it comes to legislation and systemic oppression" (Davidson, 2012).</p>

Microaggressions	"Originally coined in the 1970s by Chester M. Pierce, a Harvard psychiatrist, today's definition of a microaggression can be credited to Derald Wing Sue, a professor of counseling psychology at Columbia University." (Yoon, 2020); "Microaggressions are the everyday slights, indignities, insults, put-downs, and invalidations that people of color experience in their day-to-day interactions with well-intentioned individuals who are unaware that they are engaging in an offensive or demeaning form of behavior" (Sue, 2010 as cited in Yoon, 2020).
Cultural Relevance	The term culturally relevant teaching was created by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), who says that it is "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes." (p. 20).

Campus Climate Strategies

As detailed in our accompanying briefing paper, a strong campus culture that celebrates and promotes students from historically excluded backgrounds leads to students feeling more connected to their institution and peers, and to greater retention and graduation, especially for those historically excluded students. The following strategies can help build a strong campus climate for all students:

CC Strategy 1: Student Experience Survey (SES) (also called Campus Climate Assessment)

As many practitioners across the sector know, data capacity and frameworks for analyzing and measuring campus culture are limited, leading to accountability ambiguity and lack of ownership. With these as recognized challenges, institutions should still take the opportunity to implement a centralized assessment measure to understand the lived-student experiences of those on our campuses, their perceptions of—and experiences with—student resources, faculty, staff, their peers, resident life (if applicable), and other connection points throughout their matriculation.

Student Experience Surveys have the added benefit of providing a framework through which institutions can better address diversity, equity, and inclusivity throughout all facets of their campuses. A starting framework, as developed by Samuel Museus at Indiana University at Bloomington's Culturally Engaging Campus Environment Project, is based on nine principles broken into two categories: Cultural Relevance, or how well does the campus environment reflect the student's background, and Cultural Responsiveness, or how well do the campus support systems respond to the needs of a diverse student body?

Recommendations:

- Decide whether the institution will work with an intermediary partner to administer the survey, facilitate working groups, and help the institution make use of data.
- Convene an in-house task force made up of diverse staff, faculty, and students to evaluate and select a survey instrument and build a plan for implementation, analysis, and use of the data once available. For implementation, ensure that:
 - The survey is administered annually to see change over time
 - The survey is anonymous, though incentives for participation are encouraged
- Include institutional leadership in the process. Survey implementation and systems changes as a result of data are time-consuming and costly, but high-ranking leaders at the institution should be eager for the opportunity to hear the voices of students and to use that feedback to drive their agenda. Upon collection of student, faculty, and staff feedback, leadership must be proactive and transparent when translating data for a response. If a clear direction on how the institution will move forward is not communicated directly to campus stakeholders, it will lead to greater frustration from students and other aggrieved parties.
- Create an action planning process that involves students, leaders, faculty, and staff at all levels and touches on all of the following areas for improvement, and more:
 - Policy review and change
 - Additional programmatic support, i.e., if students are calling for additional supports, those findings must be reported back to the community and a plan needs to be developed to implement them, ideally as part of a continuous improvement cycle

- Punitive action toward those who have harmed individuals and/or the campus climate as a whole when critical incidents are reported via the SES. Leaders must be encouraged and supported to take a direct stand against issues of oppression in all messaging (email, social media, town house meetings, etc.)
- Improvement of professional development, training, and/or support for faculty and staff at all levels, ideally including equity-related metrics for performance, feedback, and growth.
- Realignment of budgets to deliver additional resources to areas of need, and potentially reduce resourcing of outdated or unhelpful programming or systems.

CC Strategy 2: Decolonize the classroom

Per Frawley (2017), institutions are encouraged to center communities of color and social justice through their curricula. This can be done by strengthening African American studies departments and requiring all students to take a course on ethnic studies or racial justice. This will also teach White students about racism and inequity, so that they can use their positions of power to create more change (Jones, 2021). For Nakata et al. (2008), this action shifts the responsibility of combating inequity from the individual student to a shared experience, where academics come to understand the Indigenous students' struggle with course content in "ways that are meaningful and purposeful for their future professional goals and collective Indigenous ends" and to a teaching position "that provides better opportunities for negotiation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous meanings" (p. 142). These are the challenges for higher education to ensure that each university is a welcoming place for everyone.

Implementation

- Utilizing inclusive pedagogies assists in the removal of barriers for historically excluded students. Georgetown University defines this construct in the following way: "Inclusive pedagogy is a method of teaching in which instructors and classmates work together to create a supportive environment that gives each student equal access to learning" (n.d.) Our overall goal is to be intentional about the content, source material, and delivery of information presented, with opportunities for students to provide feedback on course provision to enhance and develop the collaborative learning environment. Improving campus climate through decolonization includes:
 - Being intentional about materials chosen to teach the course (review whether textbooks are written by diverse authors, with inclusive mindsets, and were completed within the last five years to ensure up-to-date data).
 - Using social media, videos, guest lecturers, and creative exercises to provide diverse ways to absorb information and to engage in practical applications of the material.
 - Being prepared to be challenged, and not meeting said challenge with defensiveness. Be open to discussing decision-making with students, including how and why assignments were chosen to assess mastery of the material.
 - Examining biases to prevent conscious and unconscious negative impacts on students.
 - Structuring courses with five minutes of social time at the beginning to check in with students, and five minutes after class to debrief to build relationships and rapport.
 - Addressing the power dynamic by giving students input. "When feasible, involve students directly in shaping your syllabus and pedagogical choices" (Burnham, 2020).
 - Collect data from your students using in-class dialogue, Zoom polling, Wal-rus polling, and anonymous surveys throughout the course to better understand how the material is being absorbed and where students are feeling challenged.

- Culturally Responsive Teaching (Burnham, 2020)
 - Activate students' prior knowledge.
 - Make learning contextual.
 - Encourage students to leverage their cultural capital.
 - Reconsider your classroom setup.
 - Build relationships.
- Hybrid In-Class Teaching Methodologies, (Belenky, 2021; University of Colorado, 2021):
 - Stream courses live via Zoom or other university-supported systems.
 - Record streamed courses in order for students to rewatch the lecture for further review.
 - Students with diverse knowledge acquisition abilities are now provided with an opportunity to absorb data in a way that's congruent with their learning styles.
 - Use the closed caption and transcription functions to allow students an opportunity to read along with the recording.
- Employ various assignment submission methods, when appropriate, to allow students an opportunity to provide instructors with their highest quality of work (Belenky, 2021):
 - Allowing video, podcast, and multimedia submissions in lieu of paper-only options.
 - Allow students an opportunity to complete papers or multimedia submissions in place of traditional exams and quizzes.
 - Personalize assignment submission opportunities based on student learning outcomes.

CC Strategy 3: Early-engagement family programs

Family programs are not a new phenomenon for many higher education institutions, and many have used them to help increase the enrollment of marginalized students. These programs, such as the Hispanic Mother-Daughter Program ([HMDP](#)) at Arizona State University, walk students and their caregivers through the collegiate process and facilitate the success of the student from enrollment to graduation. The strongest programs help prepare students as early as eighth grade to understand the necessary classes and test scores to matriculate at the higher education institution, and build connections with admission officers and financial aid professionals. Programs like these are adaptable and are highly effective because they are designed for the student community they serve. Furthermore, these programs help acclimate students to the campus culture and facilitate appropriate behaviors/norms that support student success.

The drawbacks of specific community-oriented programs are cost and head count. Because the best of these programs require staff from the institution and partnerships with K-12 schools, districts, and/or community partners, institutions must invest personnel resources to conduct these programs. Due to these costs, the short-term gain is not felt for institutions that cannot afford to have these students enroll years later into their institution, a particular barrier for systematically under-resourced community colleges, HBCUs, HSIs, and TCUs. However, because these programs require such intensive partnerships, the costs are spread across all partners, with the long-term benefit to the community of higher representation by historically excluded students, and often their families as well.

CC Strategy 4: Implement mandatory anti-bias and anti-racism training for all university community members

While many institutions have no doubt been through their share of "cultural competency" or "diversity" training, these types of training have historically not gone far enough and have not

focused on the systemic root causes of the inequities we see today. Training needs to be overhauled to include transparent data sharing from incident reports, as well as protocols on how reported infractions are investigated, how decisions are made and by whom, and details on punitive action taken by the institution. This should include how post-incident communication from campus leadership will be handled, and the responsibilities of campus stakeholders.

The institution should hire a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO), preferably to lead a department within the institution capable of spearheading these endeavors, and give them the authority to make concrete changes rather than just performative gestures.

“The CDO serves as a nexus of information on climate issues and on [the] work of academics who have studied diversity and equity in higher education. Through a collaborative, unit-based, or portfolio model (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2013), the CDO works with colleagues across the institution to create a campus climate that affirms the value of diversity and equity as vital aspects of the learning environment, while also articulating the importance of actively engaging diversity as part of the intellectual development of graduates who will compete in a global marketplace” (Muñoz and Murphy, 2014).

But institutions should not wait until this person is on board to begin; there are a plethora of highly skilled DEI consultants and intermediaries who can help facilitate important conversations about race and racial equity before full training programs are established. As one student called for in a recent student survey (Ezarik, 2021), “Conversations about race need to be had at every level in order to build better trust.”

Advising and Student Support Strategies

As the costs of college rise and society works to promote economic mobility by encouraging and supporting more low-income students and historically excluded students to enroll on campuses, the needs for student support services increase. While career pathway advising and counseling/mental health/social support are different disciplines and needs, they are often lumped together on college campuses, and so we take them together here. Community support, familial support, and professional development are essential to closing the gap that exists. “[Support services] should include academic and professional career advising, psychological wellness counseling, and elements that build trusting relationships. Such support will ensure that [marginalized] students experience schools as supporting communities enabling their success and not as environments of alienation and hostility” (Bailey & Dziko, 2008, p. 19).

Adv and SS Strategy 1: First-year experience programs with an embedded mentorship support system that follows the student from enrollment through graduation.

Historically excluded students tend not to be as familiar with navigating higher education institutions as their dominant-culture peers, so they need structures to help them acclimate to the postsecondary environment. First-year experiences support intentional services and activities that connect students to higher education resources. Also, through first-year programs, students interact with faculty and staff, which facilitates the students' ability to learn how to engage with professionals in the collegiate environment. This allows us to ensure cross-utilization of support services, ensures the student has tangible personalized connection points across the institution, and assists in data collection/dissemination about resources utilized by our most vulnerable.

Components of strong first-year experience programs include:

- Connecting students to on-campus student support services early in their first year, or even the summer before, for an initial introduction, with a needs assessment to be completed by program mentors during each meeting time to ensure that student-tailored support connections are made.
- A first-year experience course that counts as an elective toward the participant's degree completion, to be led by culturally sensitive faculty members who are trained in trauma-informed teaching practices.
- Development of mentorship programs, with mentorship to continue throughout the length of the student's enrollment; mentors should also reflect the student's identity in terms of race, with added representation in terms of gender, sex, sexual orientation, and personal background (Manno et al., 2020).
- Regular cohort meetings, cultural field trips, and connections to students at other institutions (Manno et al., 2020), with added opportunities for career dialogues with professionals within fields chosen by participants to discuss career paths, salary/wages, potential barriers, the influence of privilege and access, networking skills, and how to access internships.
- Community engagement via working with participant's support systems on- and off-campus to ensure a collectivistic approach to success (Manno et al., 2020; [HMDP](#); USDOE, 2016; Frawley, 2017).
- Opportunities for scholarly projects that can be used to enhance applications to graduate programs or work opportunities; projects such as these provide students with robust experiences to add to resumes and curriculum vitae when pursuing graduate-level academic programs, job placement, and internship opportunities.
- Annual program evaluation with a metrics assessment completed at the end of each semester and annual mentor evaluation that relies heavily on participant feedback.
- Exceedingly strong centralized program management, with clear standards for communication from staff to students, training and support for those staff and mentors, and quality standards for identifying mentors from intersectionally diverse backgrounds, and maintaining their participation consistently.

Adv and SS Strategy 2: Create identity-based support departments

Programs, centers, and departments such as Northeastern Illinois University's [Proyecto Pa'Lante](#) program, Roosevelt University's [Multicultural Student Success Center](#), Harper College's [One Million Degrees](#) program, and Yale's [Native American Culture Center](#) provide spaces that affirm student's identities and allow them to "let their guard down." These departments or programs can be a gateway to help students matriculate at the institution and an anchor to help students navigate the collegiate environment.

Recommendations:

- Work in collaborative partnership with advisors, counselors, the institution's Chief Diversity Officer, and any and all departments focused on multicultural student success. Seek student input on what works or doesn't work about existing programs.
- Start small: physical spaces need not be vast at the outset, but having one gives students a place to gather and to build something that is lasting and worth investing in and committing to. It is worth noting that identifying space for cultural communities can be expensive and agitate public opinion, as taxpayer dollars are supporting specific cultural groups. Furthermore, governing identities may not approve these spaces and feel students should engage in the spaces identified for all students. By connecting the research related to disparate outcomes and treatment for these students, and emphasizing communication of values connected to diversity, equity, and inclusion,

leadership can address these potential points of contention while still protecting the historically excluded.

Adv and SS Strategy 3: Evaluate and reduce caseloads for academic advisors, and support advisors with technology

The national standard for advisor-to-student ratio is 300 to 1. If your institution exceeds this ratio, reduce it to meet the national standard. Advisors should also review their practices to ensure that they are not leveraging a deficit model as the primary means of understanding student success, and instead focus on strengths, reframe weaknesses as areas of opportunity, and ensure that students are not only aware of resources across campus, but also that they know how to use them effectively. Moreover, advisors and staff who interact with students should receive culturally congruent coaching to understand their needs and identify their methods of cultural communication so that advisors can effectively communicate with the diverse populations they serve.

Further, as with the rise of early warning programs in high schools, institutions must have sufficient data to encourage proactive outreach to determine when academic advising appointments are needed. For example, Georgia State University found that, of the Political Science students that received an A or B in their courses in the field, more than 75% graduated within six years. In addition, students that received a C reduced their likelihood of graduating within six years to 25% (Renick et al., 2012). Because institutional gradebooks are online, and because technology exists that can comb through gradebooks and identify needs, it should be leveraged to nudge students toward visiting their advisor.

Adv and SS Strategy 4: Ensure access to on-campus counseling, medical, and psychopharmacological Services

Seventy percent of community college students stated that access to personal counseling would be helpful to them (Francis & Horn, 2016). There's a direct link between a person's mental health and well-being, their level of connectedness, and their productivity. Counseling services are in high demand. Left untreated, mental health issues can impact college retention and time to degree (Beiter et. al., 2015) as well as increase the likelihood of suicide (Yozwiak, Lentzsch-Parcells, & Zapolski, 2012) or violence against others (van Brunt, 2012).

Recommendations:

- Institutions should be clear that mental health, psychopharmacological services, and academic career advising are separate areas of expertise and should be treated as such, to ensure that each of these therapeutic professionals are able to maintain the integrity of their specialization (Francis & Horn, 2016). This needs to be coupled with a strong referral system among service departments, as well as externally for students whose needs cannot be met on campus. However..
- Institutions should retain services in-house. Outsourcing counseling services adds to the financial strain of students, students tend to not have positive experiences with third-party vendors that rely on texting and inconsistent support, and students are less likely to seek support when referred externally: approximately 42% forgo counseling when referred out, with students of color making up 43% of successful referrals and White students making up 58%, also showing a correlation between race and ability to obtain external support (Francis & Horn, 2016).
- Ensure that the counseling center is appropriately staffed: 1 mental health professional per 1,000–1,500 students (standard for university and college counseling services; Francis & Horn, 2016), and a minimum of 1 prescribing psychologist and/or psychiatrist on staff to handle medication management needs.

- Develop a structured campus crisis prevention and management system to address urgent care needs, develop a comprehensive notification system for those listed on Release of Information paperwork, establish communication and support through campus security for students at risk of harming themselves and others, and provide debriefing for the appropriate parties.
- Provide services at no additional cost to the student.

Adv and SS Strategy 5: Ensure access to housing and food resources on campus

Research reviewed by Willis (2019) found that 32% of undergraduate students identified as food insecure. Researchers also noted that the largest disparities were faced by Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students. While this area of research remains under-studied, the limited available data speaks to the ways in which a lack of adequate food sources with diverse nutritional offerings prevent students from being active and healthy, let alone productive academically. "It is critical to understand the prevalence of these challenges because they are associated with mental health functioning, academic success, and graduation rates; food insecurity has been consistently linked to worse academic outcomes among college students" (Willis, 2019, p. 170).

One solution is the establishment of a food and hygiene pantry, often in partnership with a student union or co-located with other student resource offices to ensure a wider range of utilization. Pantry staff can work with local departments of human services to request SNAP/WIC representatives come to campus regularly to assist students with signing up for services, and they can work with community food banks to find nearby locations, a model that is being used successfully by Roosevelt University and the Greater Chicago Food Depository. Finally, pantries should work closely with offices providing housing support, as there is a correlation between food insecurity and housing insecurity (Haskett et al., 2020).

Institutional Policy Strategies

Institutional policy is a broad category, spanning issues from who is allowed to matriculate to how credit is earned to how safety—or simply behavior—is enforced. Often, different groups interpret university policy differently and, when coupled with racial bias, attempts at equitizing these differences still leave marginalized populations receiving the bulk of negative interactions with enforcement officials, thus adversely affecting their academic experience and perception of campus safety.

Policy Strategy 1: Ensure diverse representation among policy developers and reviewers to craft accessible, equitable policies

Diverse representation of policy reviewers and developers should include faculty, staff, and students that make up a representative sample within the institution(s), with added involvement from those in the smallest represented groups (e.g., Indigenous students). It is important to clearly define this principle within written policy development process templates to ensure that it is maintained as a requirement by those working to implement the process successfully. It sets a standard to be maintained, continuously, throughout the life of the policy.

Specifically, institutions should:

- Create panels of policy reviewers that represent the full spectrum of identity on campus, including students identifying as Black, Latinx, and Indigenous, to ensure a holistic approach.

- Review current policies by a diverse panel to discuss areas of opportunity, any potential inequity that may be faced by historically excluded students, and suggestions on how to move forward in terms of policy revision and enforcement.
- Develop clear and concise policies, written in plain language, and include guidance on how the policy should be interpreted, enacted, and enforced. Most policies are written with extensive legalese. Without the ability to truly comprehend policies, coupled with the campus environment being unfamiliar, individuals from diverse backgrounds can't adhere to them without risking a penalty.
- Review data regularly on policy violations, including detailed accounts from all parties involved, to assess questions such as: are we seeing more students from marginalized communities being reported and penalized for policy adherence issues? Are historically excluded students being reported more often by faculty and staff from majority or marginalized groups? Are there any correlative factors based on the data gathered at the time of report? Consider the suspension and expulsion rates for Black, Indigenous, Latinx and low-income students in comparison to their White, Asian, and financially secure peers.

Policy Strategy 2: Use plain language across policies, practices, programs, and information within institutions

Define colloquial terms/phrases, explicitly define campus culture and goals within mission statements/website landing pages/etc., and work proactively with student groups to assess levels of understanding. A practice as simple as articulating what office hours are can help decode language that more privileged students take for granted. Students also need to understand that they can ask for help, which is something Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and low-income students struggle to do as a result of being unaware of how the system functions, or feeling shame and guilt for needing support.

Implementation

- Ensure that all policies and their supporting information (FAQs, plain-language explanations, enforcement mechanisms) are centrally located in a space that is easily accessible. Policy changes can and should be made available via social media, institutional websites, and communications from leadership.
- Encourage syllabi to be written in common language, with definitions of colloquial terms. Encourage faculty members and administrators to detail how to access readings, use office hours, turn in assignments, and more. Provide added training for faculty and sample language of common terms for syllabi, create syllabi templates with campus resources listed and hyperlinked, give direction on how to best use office hour time, and reinforce these principles during retreats and full-staff meetings.
- Provide universal definitions that can be understood by everyone related to academics, culture, policy, and diversity and inclusion. Ensure that these definitions are represented in policy and across all institutional materials.

Policy Strategy 3: Create a more efficient pipeline and transition support system for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students

Specific policies that need attention are those related to course-taking and discipline. For course-taking, Per the U.S. Department of Education (2016), "Regardless of the type of institution they attend, Black and Hispanic students are far more likely to be placed in remedial courses during their first year of college than their White peers (30 and 29 percent compared to 20 percent). Remedial courses are usually non-credit-bearing and impact timely graduation rates, which likely contributes to degree attainment rates for Black and Latinx students being approximately half that of their White peers" (p. 6). "Well-designed course placement strategies

mitigate the time students spend in remedial education without making progress toward a credential" (USDOE, 2016, p. 3). Reflecting on the financial implications associated with degree attainment, the correlation between taking introductory-level courses without paths to graduation increases the financial burden for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that the pipeline process starts earlier than high school to ensure that pathways are equitable and inclusive. Early academic connections make it more likely that students meet the minimum guidelines for accessing higher education, such as course-taking and extracurricular requirements.
- Take a hard look at admissions and course placement policies. Admissions serves as the primary gatekeeper to postsecondary education for historically excluded students. For instance, reframing college admissions tests as optional increases early access and interest. College entrance exams have historical roots in systemic racism dating back to their development as a military aptitude test tool during World War I eugenics programming. Though they have been proven to be predictors of first-year grade point averages (likely because similar markers of "aptitude" show up in grading), and whether or not students are retained into their second year, many institutions have opted to make tests optional to reduce the barrier to higher education. In lieu of foundational academic equity, when admissions tests are utilized, admissions staff should consider how to offer mentorship and support to students without additional costs or extensions of degree completion. A centralized policy outlining the flow of admissions information into concrete pathways to success would help to eliminate barriers while also providing safer and inclusive spaces. This strategy also can direct students to the appropriate on-campus resources, which may reduce enrollment into non-credit entry-level courses.
- Give students the option to select into credit-bearing courses. Although many institutions are forgoing placement exams and using high school transcripts to determine how to place students in first-year courses, prior grades are not always an accurate predictor of potential. This is especially true for historically excluded students who may have had confounding issues in high school that negatively affected their grades. As with admissions, data should not be used to penalize students or put them on a dead-end track but rather to advise them on the support they may need to succeed in credit-bearing courses.

Policy Strategy 4: Remove high school disciplinary action records from admissions requirements.

School disciplinary violation information is subjective and inconsistent and undermines national efforts to expand access to higher education (Weissman & NaPier, 2015). Data associated with students' high school actions (connected to subjective messages on defiance, phone usage, truancy, and homework completion) are not correlative to college-based behaviorism.

Recommendations:

- Refrain from including questions about high school disciplinary violations on college applications.
- Remove early punitive intervention associated with high school disciplinary actions (e.g., housing restrictions, especially at universities with first-year residency requirements, and monitoring requirements).
- If these options are not available, institutions should, at a minimum:
 - Develop a written policy with training on disciplinary action interpretation and potential risk.

- Interview students with prior written notice about concerns related to their disclosed disciplinary action. One of the goals of the interview is to better understand circumstances around disciplinary action, but the primary goal is to truly get to know the person behind the application.
 - Consider completing interviews only for more serious infractions such as distribution of drugs, assault resulting in injury, in-school arrest, and weapons violations. Not all institutions define "weapon" in the same way, however. In some cases, a "weapon" could be used to describe common objects like a cell phone, so understanding details on what weapon may have been used and in what context is a necessity.
- Consider the time frame of the enforcement, especially how much time has passed since the incident and the person's development and maturity since then. For example:
 - "Well, it was all an incident on a bus where my little brother brought a knife on the bus. And he and another student got into a disagreement, which turned into a physical fight. My little brother pulled out the knife and was attempting to use it on the student. So I literally broke up the fight and tried to take the knife away from my little brother. So the knife was in my possession. So they [school officials] literally had no choice but to suspend me for a year because it was in my possession. I was crying because I didn't understand that the fact that I was trying to help and do the right thing didn't make a difference. I still got suspended and had to serve time in the alternative school just for trying to do the right thing. It really hurt me because I was just trying to help." (Weissman, 2015, p. 130)—Student identified as Roland.

Financial Aid Strategies

Finance Strategy 1: Provide targeted information to students and their parents

As more students from marginalized communities enter the higher education ecosystem, information should be catered to them specifically. FAFSA forms and other information for the application process are often only available in English and via online platforms, which may not provide enough assistance for first-time filers.

Strategies:

- Ensure that financial aid process and access information is available in a variety of languages, and that individuals who speak those languages are available to help students and their families complete the financial aid process. Partnerships with libraries, middle and high schools, shelters, food pantries, and community-based organizations can help support families through this process.
- Provide financial information, as well as legal and navigational support, to documented and undocumented students, as many undocumented families are reluctant to reveal their status, and especially to fill out forms that are or appear to be official government documents.

Finance Strategy 2: Use early alert text message systems and verify 30% of students only.

An early alert system, or "nudging," can help marginalized students start and complete their FAFSA at higher rates than their peers. The early alert system can remind them how and when to apply for federal aid, find the websites to start the application process, and what information is needed. Furthermore, the nudging process can be utilized if a student is selected for the verification process. The selected students can be assisted either remotely or in-person to ensure that they submit all

required documents. Moreover, the higher education institution can assist students by not selecting more than the recommended 30% of students for verification (AlQaisi et al., 2020).

Implementation

- Verify only 30% of the student population for federal aid recommendation
- Increase contact with the financial aid administrator for these students
- Develop email or text messaging systems that remind students when to apply for FAFSA
- Provide students with an online bill summary that shows each step they have completed concerning their financial aid

Finance Strategy 3: Provide specific and transparent information to address students' perceptions of cost.

Many other factors contribute to students' challenges to accessing financial aid, including perceptions that costs are too high; challenges accessing information on institutional websites and understanding the language, terms, and requirements detailed on those sites; and debt aversion (De La Rosa, 2006; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006; Hoxby & Turner, 2015; Ikegwuonu, 2020; Markowitz, 2017; Perna, 2006; St. John et al., 1996). Research also shows that students have difficulty differentiating between costs associated with tuition and with fees, which can exacerbate students' overestimation of costs (Barber & Ikegwuonu, 2018). Because students from historically excluded communities are more likely to learn about higher education institutions and financial aid policies via social media and the Internet, and by themselves without guidance from parents, guardians, or individuals who have previously attended a higher education institution (Markowitz, 2017), they understandably have less context and more difficulty understanding the complicated steps required to access financial aid.

Recommendations:

- Provide financial information about the costs of higher education and ways to pay for it, in multiple formats and with supports for students such as: websites with information in multiple languages, videos, interactive graphics and calculators, webinars for students with specific financial situations (i.e., those selected for verification), visualizations that provide real examples of items and how to understand them (e.g., a mock bill summary and what each section means), and more. This increased transparency will help students understand the actual cost of their education and help students and their families plan ahead.
- Develop equitable working groups that involve students in the process of setting tuition and fees so that students have an understanding of the true costs, and so that faculty and administrators can hear directly about the types of costs that may not be yielding expected benefits. Provide information to these working groups and the public about how total costs are calculated, with detailed visualizations. In many cases, students and their families are frustrated by their large tuition bills in the face of what seem like massive institutional endowments and public funding streams. In many cases, institutions are not flush with cash, but the black-box nature of this situation causes frustration and a lack of understanding about where tuition dollars are being spent.

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Appendix A - Equity Working Group Members

Content direction and major input for this paper was provided by members of the Equity Working Group of the Intermediaries for Scale community.

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- Glen Price, Tides

Intermediaries for Scale

- [American Association of State Colleges and Universities \(AASCU\)](#)
- [American Indian Higher Education Consortium \(AIHEC\)](#)
- [Association of Public Land Grant Universities \(APLU\)](#)
- [Achieving the Dream \(ATD\)](#)
- [Complete College America \(CCA\)](#)
- [E3 Alliance](#)
- [Excelencia in Education](#)
- [Gardner Institute](#)
- [Growing Inland Achievement \(GIA\)](#)
- [Jobs for the Future \(JFF\)](#)
- [MDRC](#)
- [Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities \(NWCCU\)](#)
- [United Negro College Fund \(UNCF\)](#)