

# THE EQUITABLE OUTCOMES IMPERATIVE

## Strategies for Advancing Racial Equity in Postsecondary Attainment

### INTRODUCTION

In spring 2020, Americans were just beginning to reel from a global pandemic that would go on to claim hundreds of thousands of lives. As the pandemic quickly spread, the country bore witness to acts of racial injustices that sparked widespread protests and re-energized a collective movement for racial equity. These events have caused a fundamental re-evaluation of the status quo in not only individual lives, but of social systems and structures. Previously unengaged citizens are paying attention. Perhaps more than ever before, there is a committed audience for examining existing policies and practices that serve some groups better than others, particularly across lines of race and ethnicity. In order to make America as good as its promise, equity must be the center of educational opportunity and success.

The ambitious postsecondary credential attainment goals set by more than 40 states have the potential to help America reconcile racial injustice because we know that higher educational attainment translates into greater economic opportunity and mobility. Yet, while states have made significant strides toward their attainment goals, achieving equity for marginalized and excluded populations within those goals remains elusive. Statewide attainment goals often lack specificity on attainment targets for students of color. And failing to subsequently

target strategies to those groups that have the most need exacerbates the challenge. In fact, a lack of intentional focus on equity gaps has been shown to perpetuate low attainment rates for students of color ([Nichols and Schak, 2019](#)) and does not move the larger attainment agenda forward. Keeping equity at the forefront, states should push for advancements in attainment that center on the students that systems of higher education have previously failed.

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Our recent brief on Education Strategy Group's (ESG) and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association's (SHEEO) Attainment Academy, [Pivot to Recover: State Postsecondary Attainment Agendas in the Era of COVID-19](#), suggested states deploy equity-minded attainment strategies to not only mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19, but eliminate equity gaps entirely. This brief is a follow-up that dives deeper into examples of how states can make equity a core driver in their attainment agendas, recognizing that in order to reach statewide goals, we must heighten efforts to [increase attainment for students of color](#). How can states and institutions do the work of dismantling systems and structures of higher education that cause racial inequities in attainment? Through an exploration of attainment goals nationwide and interviews with leadership in key states, we have identified promising practices and policies. Equity work is complex and no state has yet implemented comprehensive, concrete solutions that have resulted in scalable, measurable improvement toward eliminating inequitable outcomes. Implementing evidence-based strategies for advancing the attainment of marginalized racial and ethnic populations translates to increased momentum toward broader statewide goals. What is effective for one group will often ultimately have a positive impact on everyone.

The pandemic and ensuing economic crisis have widened equity gaps and reinforced the need for attention and strategic coordination around attainment, particularly for students of color. According to [U.S. Census Bureau data](#) from November 2020, Black and Hispanic students were more likely than White students to report they had completely cancelled all plans to take postsecondary classes—a stark example of the pandemic's inequitable disruption to postsecondary plans and ultimate credential attainment. Data from the National Student Clearinghouse showed [a staggering 21.7 percent drop](#) in direct postsecondary enrollment in fall 2020; the drop for students from high-minority schools was even worse at 26.4 percent. With the inequities in education laid bare in a time of deep uncertainty, now is the time for states to expand their explicit commitment to equity as a way to go further faster with their attainment agendas.

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## THE WAY FORWARD

As access to education has grown in recent decades, so has the diversity of student enrollees. However, evidence of student outcomes by race and ethnicity demonstrates that higher education (in policy and practice) does not effectively meet the needs of all students that attend institutions, hindering equitable postsecondary attainment and success. Services and supports are unevenly applied, policies sometimes become gatekeepers, and outcomes such as attainment vary greatly and are largely inequitable. In order to reach statewide attainment goals and meet the needs of a recovering economy, higher education must re-evaluate current systems and practices to center equity in the attainment agenda. **States can accelerate this work in five ways:**

- 1. Publicly commit to race/ethnicity-specific targets within the broader statewide attainment goal;**
- 2. Rely on evidence and data to make the case for equity in attainment, inform decisions, monitor progress, and course correct;**
- 3. Create space to listen to and build ownership among students, practitioners, community members and community-based organizations, legislators, and other key stakeholders;**
- 4. Foster authentic engagement with equity among policymakers and practitioners at the state and institution levels; and**
- 5. Interrogate policies and practices at the state and institution levels.**

### **1 Publicly commit to race/ethnicity-specific targets within the broader statewide attainment goal.**



To seriously address the equity problem in attainment, states must first name it. Setting attainment targets specific to subpopulations of students calls out the issue of inequity in a way that is hard to ignore. States should define strategic equity goals within the broader attainment goal based on which students are not succeeding within the state or system. These goals should be specific enough that institutions are clear on the definitions of these populations and which students on their campus to target for additional support. Goals and associated strategies should be contextualized and tailored for local or regional populations; what works to create equity in attainment in one part of the state may or may not work for another part of the state. The state of Virginia, for example, considers how disparate communities are best served, applying different equity strategies to areas like Northern Virginia with higher rates of credential attainment compared to other areas of the state, like southwest Virginia, with lower rates of attainment.

Another example is in the state of New Jersey, in which all attainment goals and relevant priorities include milestones and outcomes by race/ethnicity (and age and gender identity, in some cases). Specifically, as part of the state's overarching attainment goal to ensure 65 percent of New Jerseyans complete a postsecondary credential by 2025, the state has committed to the goal of an additional 250,000 Black, Hispanic, and Native American individuals attain postsecondary credentials by 2025. States like Colorado, Oregon, Virginia, and Massachusetts, through their participation in Lumina Foundation's [Talent, Innovation, and Equity](#) grants, have similarly set equity goals for specific populations. Through this work, Massachusetts has committed to increase attainment of Black and Hispanic residents ages 25–64 to 43 percent and 32 percent by 2024, representing a five percentage point increase for each of those populations from current rates.

## States Are Setting Equity Goals



### *New Jersey Goal*

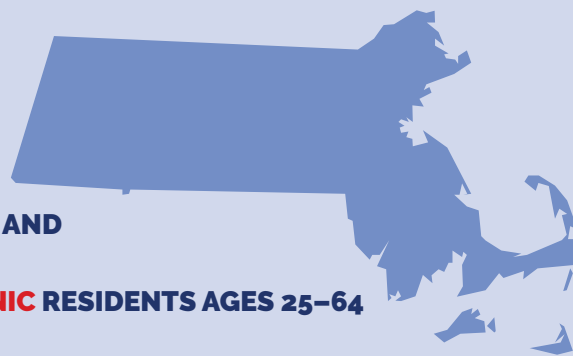
**65%** OF NEW JERSEYANS WITH A  
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### *Massachusetts Goal*

BY 2024, AN ATTAINMENT RATE OF

**43%** FOR BLACK AND  
**32%** FOR HISPANIC RESIDENTS AGES 25–64



## 2. Rely on evidence and data to make the case for equity in attainment, inform decisions, monitor progress, and course correct.



Disaggregated data are essential to all reform efforts. In order to serve students well, states and institutions must know their students well. Data allow those who collect it to provide evidence to build support for the cause and define metrics to monitor progress. Clearly articulated public data and storytelling can be an important state lever for recognizing and growing awareness around shortfalls and wins in terms of attainment. For example, the Tennessee Board of Regents houses a public-facing [data dashboard](#) that equips institutional leaders with disaggregated data to explore student success and other metrics. The Indiana Commission for Higher Education leverages yearly [College Equity Reports](#) as a touchpoint for stakeholders statewide to visualize the challenges and disparities related to race and ethnicity, regularly benchmark progress toward better outcomes, and coalesce around actions to affect change.



Ideally, this emphasis on disaggregated data will be adopted at the campus level as well. Similar to many states, the Colorado Department of Higher Education tracks progress on their attainment and equity goals through a [data dashboard](#), but multiple institutions in the state take it a step further by establishing and tracking equity goals in parallel. For instance, the Community College of Aurora offers an [Equity in Instruction Leadership Academy](#) (EILA) for full-time faculty and department chairs. The purpose of EILA is to give faculty an opportunity to explore their student completion and success equity data in a course of their choosing with their peers. By empowering faculty with data on which they can effect change, like their classroom tasks, norms, and culture, the college and their faculty champions can address inequities at the most granular level.

Important metrics to include extend beyond completion, as there are a number of key success indicators on the pathway to attainment that suggest positive momentum. As evidenced in the dashboards referenced above, these metrics include seamless enrollment rates, persistence year to year, and credits attempted and earned. Metrics should also be defined carefully such that, for example, income is not used as a proxy for race/ethnicity; students of different races at the same income level or socioeconomic status can have immensely different experiences in higher education. In addition, students of color should be referred to using their race or ethnicity rather than

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collectively referenced as “non-White.” Conflating or combining subgroups of students in these ways can be problematic for accurate analyses and interpretation. Clear delineations are critical for correctly identifying group-specific variations and targeting necessary supports. It is necessary to set definitions, high standards, and accountability mechanisms early in this work to allow for action when and where change is needed for forward progress.

### 3. Create space to listen to and build ownership among students, practitioners, community members and community-based organizations, legislators, and other key stakeholders.



In many states, making good on equity promises may require looking beyond the typical sphere of influence at the state level. In developing their equity leadership council, the Oregon Coordinating Commission first asked the question, “How can we better tune in to the needs of Oregonians?” To start, they conducted equity roundtable discussions all over the state, which were then used to identify equity champions at the community level to form their 22-person leadership council on equity. By looking beyond the higher education community, the Commission was able to more successfully align their equity advocacy with that of influential community-based organizations in the state. In some instances, this led to joint legislative asks on key issues around housing, policing and education.

No change is possible without engaged stakeholders and sustained commitment. However, states should first elicit the student perspective to better understand the change that is needed and then focus transformation on key barriers students face whether inside or outside of the classroom. For example, Amarillo College, a two-year college in Texas, created a “[culture of caring](#)” to reduce the non-academic barriers to completion. The institution inquired with students representing a range of backgrounds and experiences—first generation in college, students of color, part-time students, parenting students, students

over age 25—and used those lessons to educate faculty and staff college-wide, and shift the institution’s policies and practices. Further, Amarillo deployed a No Excuse Poverty Initiative, and implemented case management, additional academic support, curriculum development, and college-wide hiring and evaluation practices. As a result of these institutional transformation efforts, President of the College, Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart, points to [increased attainment rates](#). Since the work began around 2012, the three-year completion rate at the college has doubled.

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States should gather together, educate, and deploy champions at the campus level, in the legislature, and in the community to galvanize excitement among important education players statewide. Colorado, for example, created an equity coalition to collectively review data and services through an equity lens and make recommendations for shifts. The purpose of this coalition is to, “develop a vision and strategic plan to drive

improvements in success and completions for students of color in Colorado in order to erase equity gaps in who completes a degree or credential, and who does not.” As part of this work, the coalition will be conducting a needs assessment, identifying promising practices, and taking part in a detailed implementation plan for the vision.

Additionally, states should consider state funding support and advocacy for early adopters of equity strategies as an important step toward ownership, incentivization of further adoption, and ready participation. As is the case in most states, funding will signal to the field that racial equity is a leadership priority. States have taken small steps to support equity such as applying weights for particular groups in funding formulas. However, there is limited evidence on whether these efforts are adequate and there are opportunities for states to do more. For example, what if states provided the most financial resources and support to institutions serving the most students of color? A Third Way [report](#) suggests this kind of financing approach could impact inequity in completion statewide. In the coming year, states will likely experience cuts to higher education budgets and there may be opportunity to direct future stimulus funds to equity-focused efforts. States may also choose to leverage philanthropic funds for equity-related work. Lumina Foundation’s [Talent, Innovation, Equity](#) initiative extends grant funds to states that have engaged in efforts to center equity in their attainment agenda and want to make further progress. The initiative aims to promote and raise awareness around equitable outcomes in postsecondary attainment.

## 4. Foster authentic engagement with equity among policymakers and practitioners at the state and institution levels.



Representation matters. It is critical to engage and deploy those with lived experiences similar to the populations states hope to impact and serve at the state and institution levels. Leadership should ensure staff are diverse, as these individuals provide needed perspective, grounding, and forethought to any equity agenda. In Illinois, for example, all state agencies must develop [action plans](#) for achieving equity in their employment process.

States and institutions should consider conducting thoughtful professional development for all staff and coaching for leaders with the help of community-based or national organizations that specialize in diversity, equity, and

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inclusion. Such training takes time and should be ongoing to enable staff to develop a greater awareness, appreciation, and understanding of the range of racial inequities that exist in our system. Continued conversation about, engagement with, and problem solving around equity issues will ultimately build capacity for leaders and staff to articulate and address challenges and deliver on statewide attainment goals relative to equity.

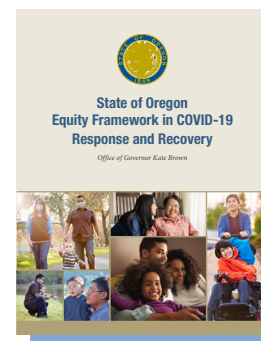


At the institution level, leadership and practitioners should make sure that students have the opportunity to see themselves in every aspect of their academic experience. This includes hiring diverse faculty and staff, making available population-specific centers, and offering curriculum/areas of study relevant to students of color and their history (e.g., African American studies). In addition, institutional leadership should regularly measure and keep the pulse of campus climate to monitor any unrest and ensure that students of color feel a sense of belonging. Representation across all facets of institutions, systems, and states is key to centering equity and communicating a commitment to the work.

## 5. Interrogate policies and practices at state and institution levels.



In order to conceptually guide the work, states may adopt an equity framework that lays out the core tenets and aims of a statewide equity agenda. [Oregon's equity framework](#) signals the Governor's commitment to equity across all functions of state government and emphasizes the idea that race should not predict one's success, particularly with access to education and work. Oregon has gone further to publicly declare itself an "anti-racist agency." With this public stance and leadership comes accountability to "directly confront the racial inequities that pervade our postsecondary education and training systems and to take proactive measures," according to [Executive Director Ben Cannon](#). Lumina Foundation models this behavior as well, setting an example in their "[Equity First](#)" approach to prioritize racial justice in their grantmaking and human resources.




Using the framework as a guide, states and institutions can then re-evaluate current policies, especially those that make up a large part of the state budget. Many public policies that were designed to advance attainment and achievement have not had as much of a positive impact on equity as they should have because of the way in which they were designed and implemented. Periodic review and assessment of relevant attainment policies is critical. Some states are engaged in this work; for example, policy and practice audits are underway in Massachusetts. The audit acknowledges harm done to students of color and seeks to explore potential solutions around campus engagement and climate, programming and outreach, and admissions and financial aid, among other functions and systems of higher education. Policies must meet some degree of the nine core principles of equity the state has set. If the policy does not, it is either changed or eliminated.

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Generally, institutions should leverage audits to remove policies and practices that do not serve students and further, implement approaches that are attentive to race. Critical areas of policy reform include admissions, where access is the primary challenge to attainment, and financial aid, where affordability is often a barrier to persistence and completion. For example, institutions often rely on merit-based financial aid in ways that significantly disadvantage students of color. Rather, systems and institutions should consider need-based aid as a more equitable approach. Organizations like The Education Trust suggest racial disparities in attainment remain despite efforts to eliminate equity gaps because of a dearth of [race-conscious policies](#) in higher education. In some cases, state law or lack thereof can support equity in attainment. For example, Illinois is explicit about race in university admissions statewide—setting disaggregated goals at the state and institution level. Setting and yielding results on specific, equity-focused goals requires coordinated efforts between the state and its institutions to implement sound policies that do not harm or exclude any particular subset of students.

States are well-positioned to provide cover and incentive for change in the form of political will, support, and funding that signals the importance of this work. For example, the state might provide performance-based funding for completion gains within certain populations, deemphasizing or removing rewards for enrollment. In addition, states can and should provide more equitable support to institutions that serve students of color—primary examples being Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Minority Serving Institutions. These institutions are often serving these populations well with extremely limited resources. Scaling [solutions](#) implemented at these institutions that have been proven effective and creating accountability for institutions to implement changes will create a path toward greater and more equitable attainment statewide.



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## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Maintaining progress toward statewide attainment goals in this time of crisis can be accomplished if we stay attuned to racial equity. States can and should radically shift policy and practice to eliminate barriers to completion for students of color. This will ultimately result in more equitable outcomes and significant gains in attainment. Improving equity is more important and relevant now than ever; rather than hoping to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic on higher education, now is the time to leverage the widespread attention on racial disparities and take action on behalf of students at the margins to create a better system for all.

## THE EQUITABLE WAY FORWARD: QUESTIONS FOR STATE AND HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS

- Has your state set explicit targets or benchmarks for racial equity in attainment? Do these targets align with your state's postsecondary attainment goal? Why or why not?
- What does your data say about students of color relative to attainment outcomes? To what extent have you examined disaggregated data on key indicators of attainment such as gateway course completion and retention, and high-impact practices such as dual enrollment and participation in experiential learning opportunities?
- Who, beyond your SHEEO agency staff, is engaged on issues of diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education institutions in your state? Do students of color and community-based organizations have a say in how policy is shaped?
- To what extent do SHEEO agency staff feel prepared to identify and address policies and practices that harm Black, Indigenous and people of color? What about institutional administrators and faculty?
- Which policies act as potential gatekeepers for attainment among Black, Indigenous, and people of color? Are your state funding structures advancing or inadvertently impeding attainment for these populations?