EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

POLICY GUIDE

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Addressing Inequities in Higher Education

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Preparation for postsecondary education begins long before a student enrolls. Course access, counseling, financial aid, support mechanisms and a litany of other factors drive success as students navigate the process of satisfying admissions requirements, gaining enrollment, and persisting to degree or program completion. Disparities in enrollment, retention and completion indicate that students of color do not have the same opportunities to succeed at each step along the way.

Postsecondary access and completion are complex and multifaceted issues that span multiple education systems influenced by policymakers at various levels of government. Also, postsecondary students are far from homogeneous; they represent a range of ages, backgrounds and experiences. This guide focuses on the college-age population and three primary stages of their experience:

- College readiness.
- Student transitions.
- Degree attainment.

This Policy Guide is not an exhaustive examination of the systemic barriers that continue to face Black, Latinx and American Indian students, as well as other excluded groups. Indeed, it arguably just skims the surface. However, it elevates issues that are actionable for state policymakers — these are some of the places where state policy can make a difference. The guide can serve as a foundation for continuing conversations about inequities in our postsecondary systems.

Key Terms

This guide focuses specifically on racial and ethnic student populations — Black, Latinx and American Indian — that continue to experience exclusion from American higher education. The terms Black and African American, as well as Hispanic and Latino, are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau, but this guide uses Black and Latinx throughout, regardless of the data source being discussed. While there are key distinctions between each racial and ethnic identification, Black is considered more inclusive and representative of current demographics, while Latinx is considered gender and race inclusive. American Indian also includes Alaska Native students. In some cases, this guide refers to these student groups more broadly as students of color.

Although diversity in higher education has continued to increase over the past 20 years, Black, Latinx, and American Indian students are underrepresented in bachelor's programs, more selective institutions and high-demand fields of study, while also being less likely to persist to degree or program completion. These disparities have a significant impact on the long-term employment outcomes for students and maintain the racial and ethnic wealth gap.

Current trends have largely been driven by policies across K-12 and higher education systems that perpetuate racial and ethnic inequities. Racial and ethnic equity is the fairness achieved when systemic disparities in opportunities and outcomes are recognized, addressed and eliminated. State policymakers have an important role to play in addressing these disparities both to further racial and ethnic equity and to meet state attainment goals. This Policy Guide identifies opportunity and outcomes gaps between white students and Black, Latinx and American Indian students and poses questions for policymakers to consider as they explore policies to enhance racial equity in higher education

College Readiness

K-12 education systems play a critical role in setting all students up for postsecondary success, but far too often, these systems fail to provide students of color equitable opportunities and supports — the things they need to successfully transition to postsecondary education. Inequitable access to advanced coursework and college counseling and a lack of information about the cost of postsecondary education and available financial support are just a few of the barriers that disproportionately impact students of color.

Course Access

Students' academic achievement is among the top factors in college admissions decisions. Colleges consider not only grades and scores on college admissions tests, but also strength of curriculum; so equitable access to rigorous coursework — such as Advanced Placement and college-level courses offered through dual enrollment programs — may help level the playing field for students who want to pursue higher education. Beyond admissions decisions, college credits earned through these offerings may increase a student's chance of earning a college degree.

Unfortunately, students of color often do not have access to these opportunities. A recent analysis showed that schools with high percentages of Black, Latinx, American Indian and Pacific Islander students offer significantly less access to accelerated coursework than schools with lower populations of these students. This reality not only puts barriers in front of many students seeking higher education opportunities, but it also may send a message that some students are not capable of more rigorous work, when research shows that students can — and do — succeed in advanced courses when they have access.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Do districts and schools have targeted outreach programs to ensure that students of color and their parents are aware of advanced coursework opportunities?
- Are program-eligibility requirements flexible enough to allow and encourage participation by students who face barriers to participation?
- Are academic and non-academic supports offered to help ensure student success?

- Are cost barriers — such as tuition for dual enrollment courses or AP materials and exams — defrayed by state or district funding?
- Does the state provide assistance in recruiting and preparing educators to provide high-quality instruction in schools that currently lack access to advanced coursework?

College Counseling and Advising

School counselors are an integral part of a school support system. They provide academic and social and emotional supports to students, as well as help them plan for life after high school, whether in pursuit of higher education or the workforce. Research shows that when students have access to — and can meet with — a school counselor to discuss college admissions or financial aid, their chance of attending college is 3.2 times higher than students who did not meet with a counselor.

Regrettably, access to counselors is not equitable. For example, compared with their white peers, Black students are more likely to "identify their school counselor as the person who had the most influence on their thinking about postsecondary education." They, and other students of color, are least likely to have access to a school counselor. School counselors in high schools serving predominately students of color serve an average of 34 more students than counselors in high schools with fewer students of color.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Do schools meet the American School Counselor Association's recommended ratio of 1 counselor for every 250 students?
- Does the state provide funding to increase availability of school counselors?
- Is there a strategy for ensuring that schools serving predominately students of color have an adequate number of counselors?
- Are school counselors supported in assessing student needs and barriers to better serve students equitably?
- Are there policies in place to ensure that school counselors are able to spend the majority of their time providing direct services to students?
- Are school counselor education programs effectively preparing counselor candidates to support students in their college goals?

FAFSA Completion

The cost of postsecondary education stops many students in their tracks, but it has been estimated that college applicants leave unclaimed $24 billion in state and federal grants, loans and work-study funding because they did not know they were eligible. Completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid helps students — particularly students who might otherwise think that a postsecondary education is unattainable — learn about the financial support that might be available to them, perhaps alleviating some of their fears.

Students generally complete the FAFSA in the fall and spring before they intend to start postsecondary education. Many students who complete the FAFSA during this time frame enroll in college that fall. However, there are a host of barriers to FAFSA completion, some of which disproportionately impact students of color. For example, because the FAFSA is generally completed online, access to reliable internet and devices is key, but American Indian, Black and Latinx students are least likely to have this access. In addition, because high school counselors are an important support for students in completing the FAFSA, the inequities in access to counselors also present a significant barrier.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Are there state policies in place to alleviate the digital divides, including access to reliable and affordable broadband and access to devices?
- Are there state policies in place that require high schools to communicate with students, parents and families about the FAFSA?
- Given the complexity of the FAFSA, are targeted support services available to students and families completing the form?
- Are there pre-service and/or professional development requirements for school counselors related to financial aid counseling?
- Does the state collect and report disaggregated FAFSA completion data in real time to support local education agencies in identifying equity gaps and targeting supports?

Student Transitions

Transitioning from the K-12 system to an institution of higher education consists of important decisions, requirements and obstacles that impact student success. Over the past 20 years, the overall enrollment share for students of color in two- and four-year colleges and universities has grown roughly 15%, in large part, because of the increased enrollment of Latinx students. Although the enrollment of students of color has increased, these general trends do not tell the whole story. Black, Latinx and American Indian students continue to experience exclusion when enrollment data are disaggregated by institution and degree characteristics. These students are also more likely to be directed into developmental education coursework, which poses an immediate barrier to a successful transition into postsecondary education. Exclusion from college-level coursework, bachelor's degree programs and highly selective institutions contributes to the persistence of racial and ethnic economic inequality.

Enrollment

DEGREE LEVEL

Credential attainment is invaluable to long-term employment and earning prospects for graduates, but the type of degree makes a difference. More than half of Black (56.4%), Latinx (62.5%) and American Indian (65.6%) students are enrolled in credential or associate degree programs, while more than half of white students are enrolled in bachelor's programs.

The impact of degree level on employability and future earnings emphasizes existing disparities in postsecondary enrollment. Individuals with bachelor's degrees earn higher median wages than people with an associate degree or no credential, which results in greater lifetime earnings. Additionally, bachelor's degree earners have an unemployment rate almost 3 percentage points below those without a degree.

Disparate access to bachelor's degree programs and their long-term benefits is caused by inequitable access to opportunities needed to build college readiness, insufficient financial aid and limited access to academic advising, incomplete academic advising or undermatching, all of which impact the postsecondary choices that students of color make.

INSTITUTIONAL SELECTIVITY

The impact of enrollment disparities is amplified when exploring student enrollment in highly selective institutions. According to a report from the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, selective public institutions receive twice as much public funding and spend three times more per student than public open-access institutions. The funding disparities manifest themselves in the form of additional faculty and student services, which contribute to improved graduation rates and long-term student outcomes, not to mention the social capital that comes with a degree from selective colleges.

Selective institutions continue to exclude Black, Latinx and American Indian students, especially when enrollment is compared with their growing proportion of the college-age population. On the other hand, the population of white students at open-access colleges has significantly declined, while they have maintained a majority of seats at selective institutions. This data points to a trend of white students concentrating in selective institutions with more resources and better student outcomes, while Black and Latinx students enroll in open-access institutions that may be ill equipped to meet their needs. These enrollment gaps maintain racial inequity despite increased access to higher education.

This is not an issue of student qualifications. In fact, research indicates that the college-entrance exams used by many selective institutions for admissions decisions may be racially biased and are not a predictive measure of student success. The use of these exams helps to maintain racial inequity in postsecondary access under the presumption that it is a merit-based system. Even when a Black student's score or a Latinx student's score makes them a strong candidate for a highly selective institution, they are far less likely to apply or enroll than qualified white students. The undermatching of qualified students is caused by a variety of factors, including recruitment practices.

Affirmative Action

The concept of affirmative action emerged under President John F. Kennedy and was reaffirmed under President Lyndon B. Johnson to ensure that equal opportunity is provided to individuals regardless of racial or ethnic identity. This commitment led colleges and universities nationwide to consider race in admissions decisions to enroll previously excluded students.

In its 1978 landmark ruling Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, the Supreme Court prohibited the practice of reserving enrollment spots for specific student populations, but it did permit the use of race as a factor in admissions. This precedent has been upheld, but it is currently facing another legal challenge.

Ten states have moved to ban the practice at their own institutions. Although some of the states that have banned affirmative action have pursued other initiatives to enhance institutional diversity, research indicates that these bans negatively affected enrollment levels for students of color.

For-Profit Institutions

The rapid expansion of for-profit colleges and universities over the past 20 years brought increased scrutiny to the sector as questions of program quality and student outcomes emerged. Black students are substantially overrepresented in both two- and four-year for-profit institutions, while Black and Latinx students also represent 51% of all for-profit enrollment.

Although some for-profit institutions represent high-quality and innovative options for students, misleading and aggressive recruiting and lending practices have perpetuated inequitable outcomes, especially for Black and Latinx students. Additionally, for-profit colleges have low graduation rates and poor employment outcomes, which also contributes to higher student loan default rates for students who attend.

Perhaps the most significant factor in college enrollment decisions for students of color is the growing cost of earning a degree without the requisite increase in financial aid. The burden of rising postsecondary costs has largely been shouldered by students with the greatest need as institutional financial aid is directed away from need-based initiatives. Among college enrollees, Black, Latinx and American Indian students have the greatest amount of unmet financial need across institution types. Not only does this stand to increase the debt that these students take on to graduate, it may also discourage students from enrolling entirely or lead to undermatching with lower-cost institutions and degrees.

As currently constructed, enrollment policies and processes perpetuate and exacerbate racial and ethnic inequities, and state policymakers may consider multiple avenues for remedying them.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Are students required to submit college entrance exam scores for admission?
- What factors are included in admissions decisions?
- Do financial aid programs prioritize need?
- Is admission guaranteed for qualified students?
- Have institutions set explicit equity goals and an equity agenda?
- Are universities encouraged or incentivized to enroll a diverse student body?

Student Placement

Developmental education requirements direct students who have been identified as underprepared for college-level courses to complete noncredit coursework at a postsecondary institution to gain entry into credit-bearing coursework. In practice, developmental education is rooted in racially biased structures, processes and mindsets and represents a major barrier to equity in higher education. A substantial portion of students in associate and bachelor's degree programs are placed into a developmental education course, but oftentimes, the placement drastically reduces persistence without increasing their likelihood of success in college-level courses. Coupled with research that indicates that developmental education placement tests are inaccurate, students are faced with multiple systemic barriers to attainment immediately upon enrollment in a postsecondary institution.

The negative effects of developmental education disproportionately impact Black, Latinx and American Indian students. In addition to having lower attainment rates after a developmental education placement, these students are also more likely to be placed in one or multiple developmental education courses in both reading and math. In some cases, students spend more time and resources on courses that do not earn credit, potentially resulting in additional student debt and no credential. The challenges that students face in navigating developmental education have led state policymakers to consider actions aimed at reforming developmental education.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How are students assessed for developmental education placement?
- Do institutions use multiple measures to assess student readiness for college-level coursework?
- Are students able to access accelerated coursework?
- Is developmental education relevant to students' degree programs?
- Can students earn credit while completing developmental education coursework?
- How are students supported while enrolled in developmental education coursework and beyond?

Minority-Serving Institutions

MSIs and MSI designations were created to expand access to postsecondary education to students who have been historically underserved by postsecondary education systems. These institutions play a unique role in meeting the needs of specific student populations. There are two types of MSIs: institutions established in federal law and institutions that meet certain enrollment thresholds, student-body characteristics and average expenses per full-time equivalent. Both types rely heavily on local, state and federal appropriations and grants, including federal capacity-building grants under Titles III and V of the Higher Education Opportunity Act.

ESTABLISHED IN FEDERAL LAW

- **Historically Black Colleges and Universities** are defined in federal law as colleges or universities that were established prior to 1964 and whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans. HBCU graduates, when compared with Black graduates of non-HBCUs, are much more likely to report that their professors cared about them, that they felt supported and that they had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their goals.
- **Tribal Colleges and Universities** are chartered by tribal governments and serve students from more than 250 federally recognized Indian tribes. Cultural identity, tribal self-determination and community service are central to the mission of TCUs. Compared with college graduates nationally, TCU graduates are much more likely to report that their institution prepared them for life outside of college. Also, many remain in American Indian communities after graduation.

ENROLLMENT THRESHOLD-BASED DESIGNATIONS

- **Hispanic-Serving Institutions** have an undergraduate full-time equivalent student body that is at least 25% Hispanic. HSIs serve many students who face systemic barriers that decrease access to postsecondary education. About two-thirds of all Hispanic undergraduates are enrolled in an HSI.
- **Alaska Native- and Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions** include both Alaska Native-Serving Institutions that enroll at least 20% Alaska Native students and Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions that have at least 10% Native Hawaiian students.
- **Asian American- and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions** have an undergraduate-student enrollment that is at least 10% Asian American and Pacific Islander.

Degree Attainment

Inequities in access to college readiness opportunities and barriers to enrollment negatively impact the long-term outcomes of Black, Latinx and American Indian students. These inequities continue to play out when students of color get to campus. Financial need and experiences with racism on campus, among other factors, disproportionately impact these students and potentially drive them to stop out prior to earning a degree. This trend may leave students with high levels of debt and without a credential.

Retention and Completion

When Black, Latinx and American Indian students enroll in postsecondary education, they face additional obstacles to successful completion and degree attainment. These barriers contribute to higher rates of attrition and substantially lower completion rates across institutions, leaving some students with additional student debt and without the benefits of a postsecondary credential to show for their efforts.

A variety of factors lead students to stop out, especially for groups excluded from postsecondary education. Research indicates that student experiences with racism, with curriculum that is not culturally responsive, with a lack of faculty diversity and with an exclusionary campus climate lead to feelings of isolation and diminished motivation. The persistence of unmet financial need and limited social, emotional and academic supports and services compounds the challenges that students of color face and leads to higher stopout rates. States and institutions may pursue a multifaceted approach in addressing the retention of Black, Latinx and American Indian students.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Do institutions evaluate and address campus climate?
- Are course offerings and instruction culturally relevant and responsive?
- Are institutions recruiting and retaining diverse faculty?
- Do institutions have supports in place specifically for students of color?
- Do students have access to consistent and meaningful academic advising?
- Are financial aid programs targeted to support retention?

Student Debt

Student loan debt disproportionately falls on Black borrowers. These disparities are caused by and reinforce the racial wealth gap, which is rooted in a history of exclusionary and discriminatory policies. The wealth gap is one factor that pushes Black students to take out larger loans at higher rates to fund postsecondary education. This puts these students in a position where they are more likely to default on these loans even when controlling for income.

This, when considered in the context of retention and completion, creates a situation in which a student amasses debt, without the income associated with degree completion. The disadvantage created by the racial wealth gap is worsened by higher rates of unemployment and underemployment as well as inequitable pay. Student debt and loan default can have severe economic consequences, made more difficult by the complexity of repayment mechanisms. The student debt crisis and its effects reinforce the importance of need-based financial aid to address unmet need for students of color throughout the postsecondary pipeline.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Do students have access to academic and financial advising?
- Does the state hold institutions with poor student outcomes accountable by establishing standards for participation or limiting their access to student loan programs?
- Are repayment mechanisms borrower-friendly?
- What loan oversight mechanisms are in place?
- Can students access loan forgiveness opportunities?

Final Thoughts

While the opportunity barriers facing Black, Latinx and American Indian students are long-standing and systemic, state policymakers have numerous policy levers available to begin to address them. With equity as a lens, state policymakers can use the questions that are enumerated throughout this Policy Guide to craft policies to advance equity and better serve these students.

Education Commission of the States continues to support state policymakers interested in pursuing integration efforts in postsecondary institutions. Stay tuned for more work in this area, and in the meantime, policymakers can reach out to the ECS team with specific questions or requests.

This guide is a companion resource to "State Policy Options to Promote K-12 Integration," which explores three types of K-12 segregation — across districts, between schools in a district and within schools — and provides policy considerations and current state initiatives that address each.

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