

# Improving Equity in U.S. Higher Education: A Call for Equity-enhancing Opportunity Structures

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# Executive Summary

In this paper, I seek to update what constitutes equitable opportunities for college success for historically underserved populations. I argue that we should re-focus efforts on the opportunity structures, rather than solely outcomes, that lead to a college degree. Of importance is how public policy serves as a lever to either enhance or intentionally constrain educational opportunity across various jurisdictions.

One general problem in assessing the prospects for improved equity in higher education is that large-scale interventions to remedy inequities seldom account for the vastly diversifying population in U.S. schools. Scholars have broadly documented four key areas that largely comprise the largest influence on college success: (a) academic preparation; (b) financial constraints; (c) access to information; and (d) access to college quality (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Hoekstra, 2009; Hoxby & Avery; Long & Riley, 2007). While these elements are indeed essential to understanding the factors that facilitate entry into postsecondary education, the complex realities of low-income, racial, immigrant, and non-English speaking underrepresented minority students often remain unaddressed.

Not attending to how racial inequality and opportunity is properly (a) diagnosed, (b) operationalized, and (c) implemented in the new demographic reality of the United States is a formula for either stagnation or regression of any previous progress achieved. I provide an updated vision for equitable pathways for higher education with the following recommendations:

1. Include and attend to the history of marginalized populations in curriculum and public policy.
2. Integrate and design policy interventions that address the harms of racial and income segregation.
3. Design financial aid policy that addresses wealth disadvantages.
4. Provide more policy and financial resources to postsecondary institutions not at the top of the stratification ladder, including Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs).
5. Reduce the gap in racial and ethnic representation between leadership and the student population.

# Improving Equity in U.S. Higher Education: A Call for Equity-enhancing Opportunity Structures

Over the last decade, evidence of the realities of racial and income inequality has become increasingly available to the U.S. public (Bartscher et al., 2020; Horowitz et al., 2020). The shock is not that this inequality exists, but more so that it has continued to increase, especially in regard to wealth gaps between the college degree and the non-college degree, becoming an increasingly prevalent topic of conversation across various levels of governmental and educational institutions (Bartscher et al., 2020). For income inequality, the key narrative is that it has increased consistently over the last four decades. These financial gaps, however, are often discussed in terms of income instead of wealth. Yet the realities of racial inequality are even less voiced until the most atrocious of violations are captured in media or filmed in real life (*Washington Post*, 2022). Indeed, racial inequality is a complex web of inequities distributed and connected by systems that produce wealth, justice, health, housing, and education, and experts have noted that an improvement in one sector is not enough to effectively begin mitigation in the overall level of racial wealth inequality (Emmons & Ricketts, 2017).

While some progress has been made on the advancement of people of color in the nation's education and employment sectors, the progress is not commensurate with the proportion of talent ready to move up the economic and social ladders (Flores et al., 2021). Nor do advancements in law and policy account for the forgone talent that was neither discovered or suppressed—the human capital that has gone overlooked due to a person's skin color, language, immigration status, gender, and/or income. When populations are excluded from the opportunity structure, the path to equity is severely disrupted, and the costs to this disruption have national consequences (Carnevale et al., 2021). In this report, I argue that refocusing efforts on the opportunity structure, rather than solely outcomes that lead to a college degree, may uncover not only increases in the number of college degrees, but also hidden barriers as well as points of innovation from the populations that have not had a seat at the table. A focus on improving opportunity structure will require education stakeholders and policymakers to attend to policy history related to underserved students, the lasting and cumulative harms of racial and income segregation, the incredible battle of wealth inequality, and the realities of institutional stratification in our U.S. college system. We will need to do this while working through one of the largest demographic gaps between leadership and the student population.

One general problem in assessing the prospects for improved equity in education is that efforts to mitigate or remedy the causes of racial and economic inequality have often occurred under premises that do not account for the diversifying population in U.S. schools and the arrival of new and old immigrant communities. The new reality is that children of color now comprise the majority of students in K-12 public schools, with Hispanic students experiencing the biggest growth from 2000 to 2017 (Maxwell, 2014).

Data systems have improved to more appropriately account for this diversity, yet interventions over the last twenty years have infrequently accounted for diversity in race, ethnicity, culture, immigration origin, and language statuses (Flores, Park et al., 2017). The math of this demography yields the following major conclusions—educational solutions can no longer be neutral in population characteristics, solely based on income, or even just for Black and White, English-speaking, U.S.-born audiences. In addition, the K-12 and postsecondary sectors are highly interdependent in their outcomes, meaning that key metrics of success in earlier grades are likely to play a role in long-term outcomes such as high school graduation, which then is essential for college access and completion (Dynarski et al., 2011).

The opportunity to complete a college degree is one of the most important factors for an individual and a nation's economic well-being. While imperfect and often a mechanism of stratification itself, gaining a postsecondary degree is still the most influential lever to mitigate inequality and increase equity for the populations not born into wealth and most in need of additional opportunities to succeed (Carnevale et al., 2010). More importantly, the effects of a college degree are intergenerational in their economic and educational influences. As Carnevale and colleagues (2013) note, "The synergy between the growing economic value of education and the increased sorting by housing values makes parental education the strongest predictor of a child's educational attainment and future earnings" (pp. 7–8). In essence, this synergy creates a cycle in which higher earnings, a likely outcome of the college degree, provide more highly educated parents with the opportunity to pass on their educational endowments to their children. Consequently, these earnings allow families to buy more expensive housing in districts with more advanced educational supports, various forms of capital and networks that are likely to provide an easier, if not guaranteed, pathway to college. In sum, the ability to be financially supported throughout college and attend a college with high-quality supports leads to higher college completion.

The equity question outside of income, then, is why the returns to postsecondary education are less for similarly educated Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans than White students and their families. A report from the Federal Reserve Bank documents that the median White college-graduate family had eleven times the wealth of Black college-graduate families and seven times the wealth of Hispanic college-graduate families (Emmons & Ricketts, 2017). While White families have had the opportunity to attend college for several centuries, thereby passing down the intergenerational wealth acquired from a number of sources including education, the Federal Reserve report casts doubt on whether reaching college degree parity with Whites could ever translate into wealth parity for Blacks and Hispanics (Emmons & Ricketts, 2017).

The authors note that income and education are only partial factors of the wealth gap and suggest that structural and systemic factors related to race and ethnicity are more likely the culprits of ongoing wealth inequality. Incremental changes thus are not likely to make a dent in closing degree completion and wealth gaps, and policy should focus on solutions to structural and systemic barriers, current and future (Emmons & Ricketts, 2017). Moreover, the metrics that comprise these barriers are not static—housing, college, transportation, and health costs continue to rise with little relief in sight given the most recent rates of inflation (Sherman, 2020).

The National Center for Education Statistics (2021) reports that among 4,313 degree-granting postsecondary institutions, 1,485 are two-year schools and 2,828 are four-year colleges. As these institutions have grown in number, they have also become more racially and economically segregated while college tuition has risen at unprecedented rates. In addition, much of the nation's financial aid system at the state and institutional level has transformed into a system of grants for high-scoring, upper middle-class students who likely would have had the resources to attend college without financial assistance. In other words, the financial aid system of the United States now rewards the resourced at a higher rate than the under-resourced. This means those without resources are at even greater disadvantage. Under these conditions, equity gaps—the gaps that prevent the disbursement of resources to those most in need—are growing faster than they should be and are also larger for some groups than others.

Despite this somber news, education, and particularly a college degree, is still at the top of the list of equity solutions. A college degree provides substantial benefits but it is also more likely to provide the tools for recovery during a crisis. What is seldom discussed, however, is how much social and human capital this nation has left on the table by not educating its most underserved populations in the same manner as more privileged groups.

## Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to understand what constitutes equitable opportunities for higher education success. A key argument of this analysis is that to formulate strong and sustainable equity solutions, we must first acknowledge the nature and operation of inequitable structures and practices that influence the pathway to higher education in the United States. While a comprehensive assessment of all aspects of inequality in higher education is outside of the scope of this paper, I focus on key conditions for equity, or inequity, that when identified and exposed for the diverse group of students in our public schools, may lead to the design of more precise and effective solutions to increase overall equity in areas relevant to the higher education journey. These include the identification of policies and programs that are likely to lead to more educational opportunity for higher education success, or alternatively, intentionally or unintentionally block opportunity pathways to and through college.

For the purposes of this essay, I define educational opportunity as elements and processes that construct a successful pathway to and through higher education. As we know, students start school with dramatically different resources and as such have various pathways to and through higher education. In fact, a large proportion of students either (a) start at a community college; and/or (b) do not begin college immediately after graduation from high school (NCES, 2021). The solutions for equity will need to take into account such differences in institutional locations and timing. An assessment of the forthcoming demography of high school graduates also shows that the most important institution for low-income, underserved students will either be the community college and/or a non- to moderately selective, public four-year institution that is also likely to have the identity of a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). HSIs are federally defined as non-profit, degree-granting institutions with full-time equivalent (FTE) undergraduate Hispanic student enrollment of at least 25% (Hispanic Association of College & Universities, 2019). In regard to equity concerns, these identified institutions are also the postsecondary locations likely to have the least political influence, the lowest endowments, and the lowest per-student funding. Thus, as will be discussed, equity in higher education is not only an individual pathway issue but also a matter of institutional operation and access to resources that move students to and through college.

## Roadmap

In assessing what constitute equitable opportunities to succeed in higher education, this analysis begins with a review of critical definitions in the discussion and scholarship around educational equity that includes the factors that are associated with inequality. I follow with a review of the research regarding what factors are most likely to influence college success and provide suggestions on key missing elements of this area of scholarship that more directly reflect and relate to the positions of low-income underserved minority students. Next, I provide a portrait of persisting racial gaps in college enrollment and attainment to set the stage for suggested conditions and recommendations to more effectively move toward an updated vision for equity pathways. These broadly include attention to historical inequalities and myths that continue to provide roadblocks for progress, a deeper look into wealth metrics to begin restoring the spirit of the financial aid system for low-income students and underserved minority students, and finally a clear sense of policies that are either equity-enhancing or equity-blocking.

## Foundational Definitions

Educational inequality refers to the unequal distribution of resources most relevant to schools and colleges that may include funding, the availability of qualified (and highly qualified) teachers, and resources such as books, technology, and family funds to sustain school activities. It also can encompass access to various forms of capital such as financial, social, and cultural networks (McDonough & Abrica, 2021). In the case of access to college, these forms of capital may resemble resources such as the financial ability to pay for and stay in college (financial), networks of alumni and job opportunities to enhance a college application (social), and the presence of multiple generations of college-educated adults that are familiar with the cues of middle- and upper-class behaviors, skill sets, and networks that integrate and sustain the elite nature of many postsecondary institutions (cultural).

Equality and equity are terms with similar sentiments but different processes. A 2019 report from the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Mathematics on educational equity metrics provides a useful differentiation between equality versus equity in educational outcomes. While equality exemplifies the idea that goods and services are distributed evenly to individuals (e.g., students) regardless of individual needs, starting points, or family endowments at school entry, the concept of equity integrates the role of need in regard to resources for students who come to the table with less resources and/or privilege. In this case, goods are purposefully not distributed equally but instead are provided to the most underserved to compensate for different starting points

in life (National Academies of Science, Engineering and Mathematics, 2019). Inequity, as defined by the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Mathematics, refers to situations in which differences in need are not properly accounted for, considered, or mitigated. This concept declares inequitable conditions as those in which there is an excessive disparity between groups in educational outcomes, a poor fit between resources and student needs, and/or inadequate efforts to mitigate the effects of harmful processes such as segregation or structural disadvantages often tied to income, race, language, and in some cases immigration status.

Aside from not appropriately distinguishing between equity and equality, another key challenge is misunderstanding the difference between inequality of *outcomes* versus inequality of *opportunities*. This distinction is especially important because the best intentions for equity may not lead to greater opportunity if the circumstances of students are not properly diagnosed. A key example is the focus on standardized test scores. Unprecedented resources have been dedicated to raising test scores or closing gaps in test scores between White and underserved minority students. Test scores are a particularly important metric because they currently represent and are used as a primary metric for admission into the most important of educational resources (scholarships) and institutions (selective colleges and universities). While we have noted a slight rise in some test score outcomes of the most disadvantaged students, the gap in comparison to their more advantaged student counterparts has not closed and in many cases has grown in magnitude (Reardon, 2011).

Rather than investing in interventions aimed directly at test scores themselves, an alternative option may be to invest in the metrics that are most likely to influence test scores such as family needs, quality of teaching, the opportunities to take rigorous coursework, and levels of racial and income segregation. When organizations allocate a significant portion of decision-making on test scores alone, this practice is likely to emphasize an outcome-based decision in which equity practices are assumed to have taken place on the pathway to that outcome when instead individuals do not come to the table with the same level of material wealth or living conditions or other curricular opportunities likely to influence that outcome (test scores) (Afonso et al., 2015). Alternatively, organizational focus on equity of opportunity for the goal of college success might emphasize improving school quality factors and/or levels of segregation and the context in which students perform rather than emphasis on single outcome-focused metrics. Thus, a focus on segregation and school quality might be interpreted as focusing on equalizing the opportunities of schooling and living that give people the freedom to pursue a life of their choosing (Afonso et al., 2015).

While there are situations in which a focus on outcomes alone may be merited, I argue that an emphasis on *inequality of opportunity* is particularly important for the formulation of more sustainable equitable educational solutions in order to more effectively disrupt unequal conditions (Flores, 2021).

Utilizing an evaluation strategy focused on the inverse of inequality of opportunity—equity of opportunity (rather than outcomes), we can highlight factors a student is more likely to be responsible for rather than what they are assigned at birth (e.g., gender, race, inherited wealth and economic situation). In a country where factors such as race, ethnicity, and gender have precluded individuals from the most basic rights and freedoms relating to education, voting, and economic prosperity, a focus on operationalizing equitable opportunity for college success seems inherently necessary.

## Expanding the College Success Formulas

The evidence regarding the value of access to and through college, or college success, has become increasingly important given the increased economic demands of higher skill sets that require some form of postsecondary education (Carnevale et al., 2013). Scholars have broadly documented four key areas that seem to comprise the largest influence on the college success story: (a) academic preparation; (b) financial constraints; (c) access to information; and (d) access to college quality (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Hoekstra, 2009; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Long & Riley, 2007). While these elements are indeed essential to understanding the factors that facilitate entry into postsecondary education, we are still missing key elements that comprise the more complex realities of low-income and underrepresented minority students, especially populations that have been historically excluded from educational opportunity. In addition, the traditional and newly suggested key factors operate under key educational myths that all students are provided equal opportunity in U.S. schools and that the American Dream is reached and awarded based on merit and colorblind solutions that do not need to consider the role of race in those pathway opportunities (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Johnson, 2015).

Simply stated, and continuously evidenced by research and law, schools and colleges do not operate under a colorblind pathway of opportunity (Massey, 2007). Moreover, in order to build more efficient, effective, and sustainable equity programming and policies for college success, we must acknowledge that merit, denial of racism, and social reproduction of wealth have played a role for groups that have had rights and privileges to the education system for centuries as well as populations such as Black, Latino, and Native American groups that did not have access to a basic high school degree—the foundation of eligibility to enter college. As historian James Anderson (2007) writes, the 1960s generation of African Americans was the first generation to have access to even limited universal secondary education; in various Southern states, namely Mississippi and South Carolina, eighth grade was the terminal grade for at least 75 percent of Black individuals. Equal conditions to succeed in higher education thus have never truly been part of American history. As Imani Perry

(2011) notes, the misunderstood dilemma about the equal treatment of all races and racial inequality broadly remains at the core of the U.S. education system (Perry, 2011). An amended understanding and expansion of the factors that comprise equitable college success should also consider the following:

1. **Attention to history:** The lack of attention to historical factors and policies that created legal and policy barriers to college participation for some and cumulative advantage to others often by race and gender;
2. **The harms of racial and income segregation:** The levels of racial and economic segregation that create significant harm through highly inequitable learning opportunities, instruction, and human and social capital at the pre-K-12 levels;
3. **Income rather than wealth-conscious financial aid:** Federal and state financial aid systems that are based largely on income rather than wealth, which is more likely to account for disadvantages from legal and historical barriers as well as the trend to increasingly serving “merit-based” students—based on test scores—who are much less likely to be classified as low-income;
4. **Institutional stratification and inequity:** A postsecondary institutional system that is deeply stratified by income, wealth, legislative favor, location, and historical discriminatory practices that ultimately disadvantage community colleges and non-selective colleges in funding and resources despite educating the highest proportion of low-income, minority, and first-generation college students; and
5. **Demographic mismatch between leadership and the student population:** The new racial and economic mismatch between college leadership/legislative officials and the new student demography in public schools. This mismatch also includes the role of public policy (Perna, 2006) where legislators, boards of governors, and voters may create and/or block pathways to opportunity for college success for the nation’s students (Flores et al., 2021).

The role of state policy in higher education is particularly important for student success. While the federal government plays an important role in college access through the funding of financial aid, pre-college programming, and tax incentives relating to tuition, the state role in funding higher education has an increasingly larger influence on student enrollment and completion (SHEEO, 2021). State policies of interest with noted impact on the educational attainment gap include:

1. **Race-conscious admissions.** Approximately nine states in the nation now ban the use of race as one factor of consideration in college admissions, which leads to outcomes such as drops in college applications, enrollment, and graduation for many underrepresented minority students.

2. **Merit scholarships for high-scoring students regardless of financial need.** While merit scholarships range in the criteria of qualifications, those based on primarily test scores are more likely to benefit students who are not low-income, which then shifts the balance of assistance from low-income students to those who are not likely to qualify for federal or state need-based aid.
3. **Mandatory non-credit-bearing remediation courses relegated to community colleges with lower resources.** While many students are in need of additional academic help upon college entry, the current system of remediation requirements across a number of states has not yielded positive results. In turn, many states have exercised an option to not require remediation as the first course of practice or removed the option of remedial coursework altogether, as in California and Florida, respectively.
4. **Admission and aid based on citizenship status and other residency.** While nearly half of all states now have legislation that allow undocumented students to attend college at in-state rates (state DREAM Acts) (National Conference of State Legislators, 2020), some states have enacted admissions and financial aid bans for students who do not have proof of residency or citizenship. Interestingly, state DREAM Act policies are perhaps one of the most successful policies benefitting Latino students likely to be undocumented, as well as a state’s overall Latino college admission and completion rate becoming one of the more successful equity policies since the turn of this century (Flores et al., 2021).

These commonly adopted state policies are in operation in states experiencing the most profound demographic change of students in the United States, as well as in states experiencing the arrival of new populations in their public schools. These policies are also in operation in a context of declining White student enrollment in higher education, primarily due to the age status and fertility rates of White families, and the growing proportion of minority high school graduates, particularly Latinos (Grawe, 2018).

Finally, the recent COVID-19 epidemic and the calls for racial justice are also requiring higher education leaders and the sector as a whole to contend with issues of health, racism, and security that were historically the jurisdiction of other sectors. As I discuss, health and justice concerns have now taken their place in the calculus of equitable practices in higher education (California Governor’s Council for Postsecondary Education, 2021).

New technology, new populations, expanded options for non-selective postsecondary institutions, rising tuition, and a changing economy with at least three recessions since 2001 have contributed to the new college access puzzle, including the need for innovative interventions to close long-standing opportunity gaps by race and income. The following figures and table provide a sense of the progress, stagnation, and

other forms of “needle movement” for postsecondary access and completion rates by race and set the stage for why updated forms of understanding the nature of inequality in the pathway to college are needed. To offer only similar strategies to date or strategies that are not designed for the new demographic body of students entering and exiting high school with aspirations for a college degree do not seem like a step in a wise or fortuitous direction.

## The Equity Gap Picture: Diagnosing Demographic Progress in Education Over the Last Few Decades

### 1. Enrollment Progress Has Not Led to Completion Success

What is the current context of higher education under which a reformed vision for equity in college success can occur? Figure 1 shows the status of college access and attainment post-turn of the century, with an additional focus of the gaps over time that underrepresented minority groups face as compared to their White and Asian student counterparts (Table 1) (Flores et al., 2021). Using data from the American Community Survey’s microdata from IPUMS USA (Ruggles et al., 2020), for ages 18 to 24 for enrollment and ages 25 to 34 for BA attainment (excluding adult arrivals from other countries; BA attainment captures anyone whose highest degree is a BA or higher), Flores and colleagues (2021) found that while enrollment increased particularly for Latino students, completion gaps remained large with their White student counterparts despite a decline in this majority population. Native American student enrollment progress consistently fluctuated, although still with the lowest rates, with a small uptick in more recent years. Black student enrollment remained relatively stagnant, falling below the surge in Latino student enrollment in recent years. Asian and White student enrollment largely mimicked the trends with one another although Asian-origin students far surpassed the enrollment of other racial and ethnic groups. However, not all Asian-student groups have similar rates of access and completion as evidenced by higher-quality data operations (Teranishi et al., 2020). Melguizo and colleagues (2021) found that Pacific Islander students have academic and access outcomes similar to many Latino and Black students in California, which also highlights the need for disaggregated data among various racial groups.

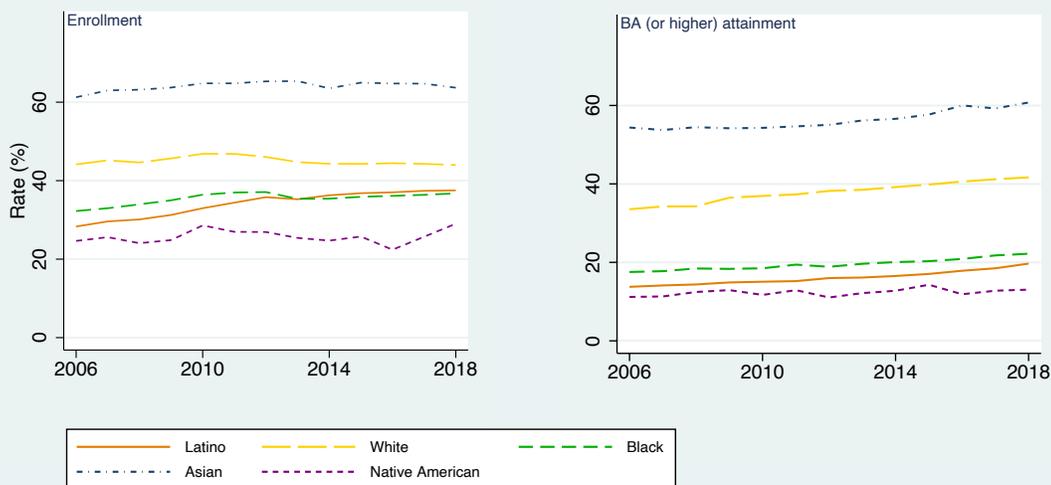
### 2. A Growing Racial Gap in College Completion

The college completion story takes on a different character in that White students are closing the gap in regard to their Asian student counterparts. However, there is little progress in completion for the three major underserved groups—Black, Latino, and Native American students. Black students are the only group to reach a graduation rate of 20% after hovering at 19% for nearly 10 years. Latino and Native American students do not cross the 20% graduation rate threshold in the 12 years examined. Completion gaps are particularly pronounced in Table 1 where we see the gaps in completion between underserved minority groups and White students. Only White students make any progress in closing their completion gap with Asian students. In particular, 2012 represents a particularly negative year in regard to racial gap growths for Black, Latino, and Native American groups. It is also the year in which White students made the most progress in closing their racial gap with Asian students.

Diagnosis of student opportunity pathway outcomes since the turn of the century is also particularly relevant in casting a clearer view of the interplay between the schooling and legislative forces that construct equity-promoting or equity-blocking solutions. This includes a consistent evaluation of demographic changes across state contexts as well as a review of policies and research that present successful, efficient, or poorly performing interventions to date. Based on this assessment presented above, I offer the following set of conditions and recommendations to move forward toward a new and sustainable pathway for equity in higher education for our most underserved students.

Fig. 1: Enrollment and attainment by race/ethnicity

Enrollment universe: age 18–24 excluding adult arrivals  
 Attainment universe: age 25–34 excluding adult arrivals



Source: Authors' calculations from Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) USA ACS samples; survey weights applied.  
 Enrollment trends include enrollment at 2-year and 4-year colleges.

Table 1

Enrollment and BA+ Attainment Gaps by Race/Ethnicity (vs. White Students), 2006–2018

College Enrollment

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
White enrollment rate	44.1%	45.2%	44.6%	45.7%	46.8%	46.8%	46.1%
White-American Indian e-gap	-19.5%	-19.6%	-20.6%	-20.8%	-18.2%	-19.9%	-19.1%
White-Latino e-gap	-15.8%	-15.6%	-14.5%	-14.4%	-13.9%	-12.4%	-10.3%
White-Black e-gap	-11.9%	-12.2%	-10.7%	-10.7%	-10.4%	-9.9%	-8.9%
White-Asian e-gap	+17.1%	+17.8%	+18.6%	+18.1%	+18.0%	+18.0%	+19.3%

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
White enrollment rate	44.7%	44.3%	44.3%	44.4%	44.3%	44.0%
White-American Indian e-gap	-19.3%	-19.6%	-18.5%	-22.0%	-18.6%	-15.0%
White-Latino e-gap	-9.5%	-8.0%	-7.5%	-7.4%	-6.9%	-6.5%
White-Black e-gap	-9.4%	-8.9%	-8.4%	-8.3%	-7.9%	-7.2%
White-Asian e-gap	+20.6%	+19.2%	+20.7%	+20.3%	+20.4%	+19.7%

BA (or higher) attainment

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
White BA+ attainment rate	33.5%	34.2%	34.3%	36.5%	36.9%	37.3%	38.2%
White-American Indian a-gap	-22.3%	-22.9%	-21.8%	-23.5%	-25.2%	-24.4%	-27.2%
White-Latino a-gap	-19.8%	-20.1%	-19.9%	-21.6%	-21.9%	-22.1%	-22.2%
White-Black a-gap	-16.0%	-16.5%	-15.8%	-18.1%	-18.5%	-17.9%	-19.4%
White-Asian a-gap	+20.8%	+19.5%	+20.2%	+17.7%	+17.3%	+17.3%	+16.8%

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
White BA+ attainment rate	38.5%	39.2%	39.9%	40.6%	41.2%	41.7%
White-American Indian a-gap	-26.4%	-26.4%	-25.5%	-28.8%	-28.4%	-28.6%
White-Latino a-gap	-22.4%	-22.7%	-22.8%	-22.7%	-22.7%	-22.0%
White-Black a-gap	-18.9%	-19.1%	-19.6%	-19.7%	-19.4%	-19.5%
White-Asian a-gap	+17.6%	+17.4%	+17.8%	+19.4%	+18.0%	+19.1%

Source: Authors' calculations from Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) USA ACS samples; survey weights applied.  
 Enrollment trends include enrollment at 2-year and 4-year colleges.

# Conditions and Steps for Moving Toward a New Vision for Equity Pathways

## 1. Confronting the Colorblind Narrative Around Equal Access to Higher Education

Before presenting the factors most likely to construct barriers and opportunities for success in U.S. higher education, educational and legislative sectors should confront a key myth about equal opportunity—namely, that only colorblind solutions can resolve the color-exclusion of higher education opportunity. The dilemma is further complicated by use, and misuse, of the term “colorblind” as it applies to social and political policies and outcomes. A central tenet of a colorblind philosophy is that racial classification does not affect a person’s opportunities in society. Moreover, not acknowledging skin color is considered an effective way to avoid racial discrimination altogether. In response to colorblind thinking, civil rights advocates in the 1960s noted the weaknesses of this approach and urged others to take race into account in education and employment in order to ensure that the legal definition of equal rights and privileges as stated in the Constitution was indeed applied (Perry, 2011). Under this latter race-conscious approach, it is nearly impossible to change outcomes if the realities of bias and discrimination—historical or current—are ignored and/or denied. Bonilla-Silva (2015) argues that in employing a colorblind approach, what he terms as the new racism, one is required to ignore past and present patterns of discrimination and rely instead on an individual’s behavior and cultural patterns to explain racial inequality.

The consequence of the colorblind approach is that, if institutional or systemic racism is not part of the diagnosis, then the main culprit is the individual’s traits or behaviors. That is, organizational decisionmakers are not regarded as biased, and disparities thus are a result of the internal traits of a particular racial group (Block, 2016). It is with this knowledge that educators, policymakers, investors, and parents should consider the effects of past, current, and future educational interventions for equity in education settings with a focus on opportunity structures and not simply outcomes. Ultimately, the evidence base from multidisciplinary research strongly suggests that colorblind policy, such as those used to replace affirmative action in college admissions, is ineffective at increasing racial diversity (Chan & Eyster, 2003; Fryer et al., 2008; Long & Bateman, 2020). A critical choice for the education sector and its practitioners becomes a choice between myth and evidence.

Do we, as practitioners and researchers, create solutions under the architecture of a prized and palatable but deeply dishonest American Dream framework, or do we use multidisciplinary evidence to confront the uncomfortable truth to create more effective, efficient, and responsive solutions for educational progress.

## 2. Redesigning the Structures for Academic Preparation

Numerous studies have documented the high relevance of academic preparation for college access and success (Long & Riley, 2007). The role of academic preparation—particularly rigorous preparation that includes upper-level math courses—has remained constant over time for the outcome of enrolling in a four-year college (Flores et al., 2017; Long et al., 2012).

What does equitable academic preparation look like in the best-case scenario? The key area of execution would be the public high school, although pathway information as early as late elementary or junior high school would need to be presented especially in districts where there is any form of school choice or selective entry into high schools. From the opportunity framework, students and their families would have had the opportunity to be counseled on the benefits of enrolling in rigorous coursework—including the intangible and tangible benefits, such as entry into colleges—that would provide a high-quality education or are likely to produce graduates who earn more in the labor market.

Currently, however, a high percentage of students still require remedial or developmental coursework despite having graduated with their state’s high school degree requirements, which then leads many students to enroll in community college to regain skill sets for credit-bearing courses (Park-Gaghan et al., 2020). In addition, states and institutions are deeply divided on what is the best course of action to mitigate underprepared students; the evidence on the effect of developmental coursework is mixed at best. For example, a number of states require students who are deemed in need of remedial coursework to first enroll in a community college as per institutional policy, such as the City University of New York system. This form of postsecondary tracking means that as many as 40 percent of Black and Hispanic students graduating from New York public high schools must first enroll in a community college because they have been identified in need of remedial coursework (Roland & Herman, 2020). In other states, such as Tennessee and now Texas, institutions allow students to take both remedial and credit-bearing coursework simultaneously (Boatman & Long, 2018). Florida has made developmental coursework optional as a statewide initiative, and California has made enrollment into credit-bearing courses a first option unless the student is deemed in need of particular academic supports.

Equity on the pathway to higher education is not just a composite of academic preparation. Focusing on preparation alone without addressing the metrics that comprise preparation opportunity and the context in which preparation is created and delivered has prevented educational attainment. The U.S. Department of Education cites the ABCs central for predicting high school completion—Attendance, Behavior, and Course Performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Research indicates that Black and Latino students are more likely to have higher absentee rates, more disciplinary infractions, and lower test scores (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). Focusing on outcomes rather than the context in which underserved minorities—Black, Latino, Native American, and some Asian students—attend school is likely to perpetuate patterns of disadvantage. A focus on equity of opportunity would include an attention to and mitigation of racial, economic, and linguistic segregation as well as the structural inequity that led to these high levels of under-preparation for college.

Segregation, in particular, maintains barriers to educational success although most local, state, and federal educational plans, innovation, and investment strategies fail to address this issue. When districts have engaged in desegregation plans, they have faced court challenges and rulings that prohibit some of these actions (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1, 2007*). In sum, racial segregation in schools is one of the nation's largest elephants in the room, and schools alone cannot remedy this without significant financial, community, policy, and legal cooperation.

Why should we care about racial segregation in schools? In predicting college completion outcomes, racial segregation represents the largest factor of the racial college completion gap between White and Black/Latino students (Flores et al., 2017). Nonetheless, a racially (and economically) segregated school system, particularly high schools, are the context in which students receive their foundational preparation for college success. For Latino groups, these students face up to four levels of segregation—racial, economic, linguistic, and citizenship (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). How might we begin to build the metrics for a more equitable and successful pathway to college within the umbrella of academic preparation? While it is important to have some focus on outcomes utilized for college entry—grades, test scores, etc.—the opportunity structure needs considerable renovation. Building on recommendations from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2019), an equitable context would include investment in the following:

- The causes and barriers from [racial, economic, and linguistic] segregation;
- Effective teaching that includes providing a breadth of curricular options;
- Academic supports that match the demographic character of the student body, as well as access to rigorous curriculum that prepares students for the opportunity to succeed in higher education; and
- An understanding and skill set that works with school communities to increase academic engagement and reduce disciplinary actions and targeting of minority students.

Ultimately, these actions should be in deep connection with postsecondary institutions that train teachers and leaders that serve these schools and communities. To do this, colleges will also have to contend with inequitable practices in their recruitment, admissions, and persistence practices. State leaders will need to be trained and held accountable for the interconnections between K-12 and higher education. Business groups interested in attaining a higher educated and skilled workforce will also need to be part of these conversations and solutions. An important need is the cross-sector engagement with housing, health, and justice as practices in these areas relate to the opportunity structure in higher education. No sector is wholly responsible, though, which means all sectors must contribute to the solutions. Moreover, these investments are likely to yield long-term economic and social benefits for the nation (Carnevale et al., 2021). Not addressing racial inequalities in many of these sectors has cost the nation approximately 16 billion dollars over the last two decades (Stevens, 2020). Alternatively, remediating the metrics that lead to racial inequality as wage gaps, job loss, and other practices with discriminatory effect, would add 5 trillion dollars to the national economy over the next five years (Stevens, 2020).

### **3. Addressing the Layers of Financial Advantage and Need in the American Financial Aid System: Some Success, Failed Promises, and the Role of Institutional Support**

Financial aid as a mechanism for college access for low-income students became highly prominent in the 1960s with the passing of the Higher Education Act under President Johnson. While this legislation remains one of the most studied interventions in higher education research, its heavy focus on income rather than the role of wealth and racial barriers over time may have slowed, reversed, or at least diminished its true purpose for helping those in need of access and resources for college. A focus on income in this case resembles an outcome-oriented frame.

On the other hand, an opportunity-focused equity frame would more closely consider the role of wealth, its generation, accumulation, and regeneration over time, as well as its exclusion from some families. A financial aid system focused on equity would consider, for example, the role of wealth metrics such as housing status and other endowments passed on over generations, debt ratios, and the likelihood that despite equal conditions of achievement and eligibility, minority returns to higher education are still less than those of returns experienced by White students (Emmons & Ricketts, 2017). In sum, the average Black and Latino racial wealth is one-tenth of White wealth, while the average Asian wealth is two-thirds of White wealth (Emmons & Ricketts, 2017).

Some economists argue that addressing the racial wealth gap in the United States that includes generations of wealth accumulation is beyond the scope of mitigation with individual choice and small policy changes (Emmons & Ricketts, 2017). However, research does highlight some success when aid is targeted specifically toward low-income and minority students on a consistent basis and not just at the time of initial enrollment (Bettinger, 2004). The financial aid research of the last decade has turned to behavioral and assisted interventions that involve the role of professionals to assist families with these complex processes (Bettinger et al., 2012). Although impactful, the degree of positive impact is not enormous and it is unclear if the design of these interventions could be helpful to non-English-speaking communities.

Some progress is not to be underestimated. Nonetheless, an equity-focused framework for financial aid and the interventions built to support this system might entail a greater focus on attending to factors that continue to reproduce disadvantage such as practices in housing, school assignment, and the labor market, in addition to small individual changes in behavior. We have learned a great deal about the individual response to aid interventions of some communities. However, future aid interventions should consider the diversification of students and their families. State and federal governments should also consider the role of the institution in the aid process during the access, as well as the persistence stages beyond individual response to aid. Next, I elaborate on the equity implications for current financial aid process at the individual and the institutional levels for college success.

#### **4. The Role of the Individual: Merit Versus Need-based Aid**

Financial aid for college enrollment and persistence has been a major source of assistance for many low-income families for decades, although to whom it was originally granted has varied based on gender, race, and other factors tied to admissions and state policy as with the original GI Bill (Massey, 2007). In addition, the original character of aid has transformed over time to

become more of a grant program for higher-resourced families by prioritizing key eligibility criteria of “merit” which has largely been presented in the form of test scores. Other transformations of original aid purposes include tax breaks for middle-class families. Dynarski and Scott-Clayton (2013), in fact, note that nearly half of the federal aid available now goes to tax incentives for families that would likely have invested in college without additional federal support. Universities, through institutional aid, and state governments, through merit-focused priorities, have also engaged in this behavior of including and rewarding the financially capable for well over a few decades, often using aid to offer discounts to students with high scores and the ability to pay a significant share of the costs. State funding for higher education has declined and then rebounded to some extent, but still has not recovered to original levels seen before the last few recessions (SHEEO, 2021). These are average percentages as states vary in their contributions to higher education and even more so on the level of aid to community colleges versus four-year universities (SHEEO, 2021). Meanwhile, income gaps between high and low earners have only grown more severe.

In sum, the state of financial aid as a tool for those in need is not well. Aid for higher education has increasingly been predominantly granted to those with the ability to pay when states make outcomes based on metrics focusing primarily on test scores as key determinants of receipt. The picture of aid is further blurred as aid eligibility remains largely based on income versus wealth, despite evidence that the wealth gap between White and underserved populations such as Blacks and Latinos has increased over time. College degree completion rates among low-income minority populations have not increased dramatically, leaving a perfect storm of disadvantage not significantly disrupted for decades. The wealthy continue to be able to attend and graduate from college, which then adds to family legacies of previous college graduates. If the low-income are able to attend college, though, they most likely do so at lower-resourced institutions whose college “quality” is not deemed as likely to earn higher wages in the labor market with the exception of some majors.

Thus, individual wealth is not the only advantage in higher education. Institutional wealth reflected in endowments, spending per student, resources for student success, networks to graduate and professional schools, and prominent labor market positions have significant effects on a student’s trajectory to, through, and after college. Research over the last twenty years has provided evidence regarding the role of attending a selective college, and various interventions have been constructed to provide greater access to these colleges and universities. While many have been successful (Dynarski et al., 2021; Hoxby & Avery, 2012), this represents more of an outcome-oriented equity solution. In contrast, an opportunity-oriented equity solution might

entail distributing more funding and resources to the institutions most likely to serve low-income and minority students—community colleges, non-selective four-year colleges, and a majority of Minority Serving Institutions.

## Public Policy as Intervention: Levers with Long-lasting Effects

In 2021, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities released its top 10 policy issues for state higher education (AASCU, 2021). Of the 10, approximately 9 could be considered closely tied to equity issues ranging from COVID-19 and state economies (rank #1), to racial justice (rank #5), to free college (rank #10). Other top 10 policy issues focused on the interconnection between federal and state government funding, state financial aid reform, consumer protections, workforce development, partisan politics among governing boards, and campus sexual assault (AASCU, 2021). Additional higher education policy outfits have noted demographic changes in higher education such as enrollment drops, the student loan forgiveness movement, and the need for recruitment and retention of international students to fuel institutional budgets as critical issues to the recovery of higher education (InsideTrack, 2021; Rosowsky, 2021; Wiley Education Services, 2021). Given the context of higher education's demographic changes, the interconnection between the future of higher education, the economy, and minority student college success has likely never been so critical, especially in light of the high percentage of minority individuals affected by COVID-19 as a result of their exposure to this virus as front-line workers as well as lower access to health care. As such, equity-based solutions have never been more important than in a post-pandemic society that is trying to renovate its state economies. At this point in time, quick fix solutions, or solely outcome-oriented practices that do not address systemic and structural barriers related to racial and economic inequality, will likely not lead to an effective recovery.

The pandemic has altered the face of schools, colleges, health care, and economies for the foreseeable future, highlighting the level of racial and economic inequality that has been in operation for centuries, both directly and indirectly. As we move forward in hopes of achieving a more equity-conscious infrastructure and future, the nation's decisionmakers and stakeholders of education should be aware of whether a policy is equity-enhancing, equity-neutral, or equity blocking (Flores et al., 2021). As state policy remains a key vehicle for postsecondary opportunity, whether a policy enhances, blocks or stays neutral regarding the likelihood of college enrollment and completion is important to know in regard to further economic, social, and moral development of a nation.

Flores and colleagues (2021) empirically evaluate the effects of state policy examples with these varied outcomes regarding opportunity for equitable outcomes in higher

education for Latino students. Thus, when state, local district, and postsecondary stakeholders enact policy, knowing the opportunity structure for success and whether a policy's intent is equity-enhancing, equity-neutral, or equity blocking should be a foundational consideration. While it may be clear that some policies are equity-blocking for underserved students (such as affirmative action bans), equity-neutral policies, those that don't give particular consideration to underserved students, may in fact be more harmful. Equity-neutral policies may not be harmful in intention. However, they may either yield negative effects for underserved groups or not extract the full potential of benefits without attention to legal, structural, or systemic discrimination or bias practices. (Flores et al., 2021). Moreover, these policy intents may vary across populations as issues of finance, language, immigration status, and culture also differ across groups. Next, I describe some of the more rigorously evaluated higher education related policies and their equity value and classification as per research to date.

## Equity-blocking Policies: Affirmative Action Bans

Legal challenges to the use of race in college admissions date back to the 1978 Bakke decision that ruled racial quotas as illegal but permitted the use of race as one factor of consideration in college admissions. Affirmative action has been challenged a handful of times since then, but its core allowance for using race as one factor of consideration remains legal for now as per the U.S. Supreme Court. The evidence on this equity-enhancing policy is well-established in that minority students who attend highly selective institutions are more likely to graduate and are much more likely than similarly qualified students who attend a non-selective institution (Bowen et al., 2009; Melguizo, 2008). Perhaps more powerful is the evidence that race-neutral admissions policies that come in the form of bans on the use of race in college admissions, or alternative admissions plans that utilize a proxy for race such as income, zip code, or another student background factor, do not work effectively to racially diversify student bodies. In a long-term evaluation of flagship institutions that have implemented bans on affirmative action through voter, state legislative, or governing board decisions, Long and Bateman (2020) found that the elimination of affirmative action has led to persistent declines in the share of underrepresented minorities among students admitted to selective flagship institutions even when the share of eligible high school graduates has increased. Among institutions where declines appeared neutral or slightly positive, the effect was from demographic growth in the share of students (such as growth of Latino population in Texas) and not the policy itself, an outcome found by other scholars (Harris & Tienda, 2012).

## Equity-enhancing Policies: In-state Resident Tuition Policies (State DREAM Acts)

The ability to attend college at in-state tuition rates for undocumented immigrant students who have attended a U.S. high school has been at the center of policy issues regarding Latino students broadly in the United States. Known as state DREAM Acts, these equity-enhancing policies have been passed through various jurisdictions in 19 states as of 2020 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019). The policy, which is primarily in the form of a tuition discount, has gained wide support in the last two decades as well as become a staple issue of the AASCU's top state policy issues to watch over the last ten years in the form of a key economic or justice issue.

In sum, over half of all states have introduced a version of this policy with high success and some states have extended financial aid benefits to qualifying undocumented students or students with similar eligibility requirements as in Texas, California, Illinois, and now New York. In an analysis looking at the influence of these policies broadly, researchers found that states with this policy option were more likely to have higher Latino student enrollment controlling for population changes (Flores et al., 2021). At the other end of the spectrum, a number of states and governing boards have elected to not allow this policy for undocumented students representing an equity-blocking policy. In some cases, as in South Carolina, undocumented students are not allowed to even apply for admission. Finally, some states with no legislation have gone in the direction of an outcome representing perhaps an equity-neutral average state of affairs regarding the state DREAM Acts. In Michigan, one major flagship, The University of Michigan, allows in-state tuition for undocumented students through institutional prerogative while another, Michigan State University, has not elected to do so. North Carolina reported similar fluctuations within and across their postsecondary institutions (Flores & Oseguera, 2009).

## Equity-neutral Policies: Remediation/Developmental Education in Colleges and Universities

A growing number, if not a majority, of low-income and underserved students start their postsecondary journey at a community college. Decisions to attend these institutions are often due to cost, proximity, but also due to lack of preparation in high school to take college-credit bearing courses. In a number of states, students who are deemed in need of remedial or developmental coursework must begin their schooling at a community college. These students, on average, must pay for these courses although they do not count for credit for a college degree. Originally designed to assist underserved students strengthen the skills for college-

level coursework, the developmental coursework process is expensive, has been noted as a multi-billion-dollar industry, and has had at best mixed results (Bailey et al., 2009). Some states have maintained a traditional developmental education pathway, while other states such as Florida have made developmental coursework optional. Known as Senate Bill 1720 in Florida, this legislation allows students to directly enroll in college-level courses in their first year of study despite qualifying for developmental education. The result to date is that institutions are seeing a greater enrollment of incoming students in these college-bearing courses and passing them in their first year of study (Park-Gaghan et al., 2020). More impressive is that achievement gaps for Black and Latino students narrowed in comparison with their White student counterparts.

In the case of Florida, the removal of mandatory developmental coursework has translated into an equity-enhancing policy. The authors caution that there are other components of the legislation such as the requirement to infuse additional resources into student supports, so the removal component of the policy on its own may not be the causal mechanism for success reported. However, attention to the structures that lead to this positive outcome rather than just a focus on improving test scores might be interpreted as an opportunity-oriented equity policy (structures and student supports) rather than an outcome-oriented equity policy (raising test scores). California recently adopted Assembly Bill 705 which makes entry into credit-bearing courses a default in the California Community College system, placing students in developmental coursework only if the student is highly unlikely to succeed in credit-bearing coursework or if placement in the pre-transfer/developmental regimen of courses is likely to increase the odds of success in college-level courses (Memorandum, California Community Colleges, June 23, 2020). The goal of the legislation is to increase requirements that lead to transfer to a four-year institution or an associate's degree. The legislation requires collaboration from various offices and professional staff as well as adherence to a sequence of critical deadlines. However, the pandemic stalled the full implementation of this legislation bringing to bear the importance of institutional resources that serve the most underserved of students. This circumstance also illustrates the reality that for a policy to be truly *opportunity-oriented* and effectively *equity-enhancing*, proper legislative, budgetary, professional, and timely support must also be available.

Designing, implementing, and sustaining equity-enhancing policies and practices will likely take considerable attention and skill, but these steps are already in place in many although potentially scattered arenas. How to operationalize equity as a process that can lead to authentic opportunity to earn a college degree should remain center-stage, but additional lines of research and collaborations—traditional and non-traditional—are likely required.

## Additional Research Trajectories to Consider for the Study of Equity-building Solutions

The research field has become more adept at working across interdisciplinary boundaries to address issues of inequality. Many of these collaborations have sought to develop interventions to increase college opportunity and success as well as expand these solutions to scale for the benefit of more students. However, a lower-than-expected return to many interventions has led other researchers to examine the representation of students in these educational experiments, the nature of whether these interventions are culturally inclusive, and whether they address the true reality of students in poverty. Future research on equity-building and inequality-reducing solutions should be more attentive to student cultures, their histories in the United States, and the cumulative advantages that have not been part of their everyday lives. Examining the advantages of intergenerational wealth is important, but understanding the cost of intergenerational exclusion of opportunity that also includes wealth generation must be part of this equation. In an era where historical facts regarding race are being blinded in many school districts and soon some postsecondary institutions, understanding the role of inequality historically as well as its remaining cumulative effects on particular student populations should not be driven out of our research and practice conversations (Addelman, 2022; Chavez, 2021). Moreover, acknowledging the values of diversity, the new educational world of students in which we teach and learn from should also be a primary force in research. This will require research teams to engage in greater inclusivity by working with individuals with skill sets related to inequality identification and equity-building.

Finally, policy solutions for our nation's greatest problems regarding inequality are a multi-sector responsibility. Disciplinary boundary crossing is not enough. Crossing industry boundaries for innovative intervention design will likely be uncomfortable for many at first. However, ultimate outcomes for equity-enhancing and effective solutions for educational attainment will be worth the discomfort. Restructuring and re-engaging our attention to the future of U.S. educational progress with equity in mind at every step is likely the most important and lucrative investment we can make in the nation.

## Conclusion

In this report, I sought to illuminate what we mean by equity in higher education by deciphering structures of inequality on the pathway to and through college. Highlighting traditional factors found to play a role in this endeavor—academic preparation, financial aid and information, and college quality—the report explores what structures within these factors also need to be brought to the forefront. In addition, I discuss other critical components of the college success narrative that need further attention such as the historical barriers that have led to cumulative advantage and disadvantage for various groups, the role of wealth as an intergenerational, self-reproducing advantage, and the ever-present role of public policy at the federal, state, and institutional level that suggests each state will need to have different formulas for equitable pathways to college based on their level of equity-enhancing or equity-blocking policies. Finally, at the foundation of this report is the call to look at college success pathways using an evaluation strategy that emphasizes equity of opportunity versus solely equity of outcomes. This evaluation strategy centered on opportunity is recommended to focus on the systemic structures, operations, and metrics that are biased, inappropriately informed and diagnosed, and racialized. Not attending to how opportunity is not properly (a) diagnosed, (b) operationalized, and (c) implemented in the new demographic reality of the United States is a formula for either stagnation or regression of any previous progress achieved.

As noted, the U.S. higher education system is experiencing unprecedented changes that include response to a pandemic that has decimated budgets, the ongoing racial diversification of high school graduates entering college, and a decline in student enrollment, primarily from White students, that is or will be leading to a closure of a number of postsecondary institutions. The most recent calls for justice in policing, diversity and inclusion, and climate change are other forms of calls that are becoming necessary agendas for all of higher education. This has led to what appears to be the new normalization of “equity” not only in the education sector but from various corporate entities, national groups, and foundations. While this represents an important window for advocates and researchers of justice and equity, the authenticity in which equity practices are activated and sustained will require significant investment from the community to corporate levels.

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