State Strategies for Building Equitable Access to and Success in Postsecondary Education

RESEARCH BRIEF

Achieving State Postsecondary Attainment Goals Requires Policymaking with an Equity Lens

When postsecondary education is accessible and pathways to earning a credential are available to all, the economic and personal benefits afforded to both individuals and society are substantial. Improving access and completion using strategies that attempt to support all students—regardless of demographic background—may yield important progress. However, the full transformational effects of education are best realized when state strategies center on the needs of students from populations historically underserved by education. A higher education landscape that serves all Washingtonians is one that deliberately considers how best to support student populations for whom the existing policies and structures have not yet closed state postsecondary attainment gaps.

There are significant and longstanding racial disparities across student populations with respect to college access and completion in Washington. Alongside these racial disparities are disparities in access and completion for other underserved populations, including: adult learners, foster youth, incarcerated and previously incarcerated individuals, low-income students, LGBTQ students, undocumented or DACA students, and veteran learners. The obstacles that these students encounter are unique to their circumstances and, for many, intersect with the structural challenges that students of color disproportionately experience when navigating the education system. Closing state performance gaps requires attentiveness to policies that target these students' needs singularly or in tandem with racial/ethnic and income-based attainment goals.

> Equity grounds differences in outcomes by race/ethnicity in the acknowledgement that individuals and communities do not all start from the same place due to the presence of systemic racism and historical systems of oppression. Achieving parity in outcomes regardless of race and ethnicity requires providing support and resources to individuals and communities based on their needs.
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> In this brief, we focus on state and institutional strategies that advance equity in college enrollment, persistence, and completion as it relates primarily to race and ethnicity.

We identify 4 strategy areas that states or state systems are using to close state postsecondary attainment gaps in higher education:

- Use racial impact statements and funding equity audits to identify structural barriers to achieving equity
- Increase the flexibility of financial aid programs and establish scholarships for populations historically excluded from higher education
- Commit funds for targeted academic and non-academic supports
- Commit resources to faculty hiring initiatives that increase faculty diversity

What we know about achieving equitable outcomes:

- Investing in initiatives that increase teacher diversity in K-12 schools can increase college enrollment for students of color
- Increasing participation in dual credit coursework affects college enrollment and credit accumulation
- Targeting postsecondary transition supports to underrepresented student populations can increase their college enrollment rates
- Aid promises change students' college expectations and increase college access
- Access to racially diverse professors improves academic success for students of color
- Academic and non-academic supports improve persistence and completion
- Overhauling curricular structures helps students progress to degree completion

This research brief chronicles high-level evidence of inequitable access and attainment in Washington higher education and identifies potential state-level efforts to advance equitable outcomes for students from historically excluded and underserved populations. We complement this scan of state strategies with a distillation of the state- or system-supported initiatives that existing evidence suggests can contribute to widescale improvements in equitable access and attainment.

Equity in College Access and Completion in Washington State and Nationwide

Washington is committed to prioritizing racial equity as a necessary part of the goal to increase student postsecondary credential attainment to 70 percent. Considering first the transition from high school to college, initial college enrollment and postsecondary attainment rates for **BIPOC students** are below the state average. Among 2019 high school graduates, only approximately 40% of American Indian/Alaska Native high school graduates and 54% of Latinx students enroll in postsecondary programs within one year.[1] Among Black high school graduates, the rate of immediate college enrollment is 61%—one percentage point higher than the state average. Within 8 years of high school graduation, only 47% of students state-wide have earned a postsecondary credential, and this rate is more than ten percentage points lower for students

who identify as American Indian, Black, Latinx, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander[2]—a significant state performance gap that requires dedicated consideration in policy conversations.

Racial disparities result from the longstanding underinvestment in and systemic exclusion of racially minoritized student populations—especially Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students—from American K-12 and postsecondary education. Underrepresentation in higher education also extends beyond race/ethnicity to include many other populations, each of which merits express consideration in a scan of state strategies for advancing equity in higher education access and completion. These populations include:

- **Adult learners.** Despite slight downward trends over time, students 25 and older have comprised close to 50% of all fall enrollments at Washington's two-year institutions and 23% in four-year institutions (9-year pre-pandemic average).[3] In Fall 2020, a similar number of students 25 and older enrolled at the state's public four-year institutions as in the preceding fall (approximately 25,000 students). At the state's public two-year institutions, however, total fall enrollment in this age group fell by nearly 30,000.[4] These enrollment declines point to large numbers of adult learners who might have enrolled in the absence of the pandemic and who may not, as the pandemic subsides, pursue college enrollment. If these learners *do* enroll in college, completion rates for this population are lower than among students who enter college before 21 years old, overall and when examined within racial sub-groups.[5]

- **Foster youth.** A 2009 Washington State Institute for Public Policy evaluation of foster youth in the state found that only 16-20% enrolled in college within a year of high school graduation.[6] An evaluation of a foster youth program in California found that, statewide, approximately 10% of foster youth earn either a two- or four-year degree, suggestive of low postsecondary credential attainment among Washington's foster youth.[7]

- **Incarcerated individuals.** Out of an estimated 30,000 incarcerated individuals in Washington state prisons and local jails,[8] approximately 10% (n=3,129) were served by state colleges in 2020-21.[9] This number has been trending downward since 2015.[10] Nationally, fewer than 5% of **previously incarcerated individuals** aged 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher.[11]

- **Low-Income students.** Although similar percentages of Washington students eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) and non-FRPL eligible high school graduates enroll in two-year/CTC colleges (approximately 30% in both categories between 2009 and 2018), FRPL-eligible high school graduates enroll at four-year institutions at approximately half the rate of their non-FRPL eligible peers (average of 19% and 40%, respectively, in the same ten-year period).[12]

- **Males.** Enrollment in both two- and four-year colleges is lower for males than females, and the pandemic resulted in steeper enrollment declines for males.[13]

- **Sexual identity.** An evaluation of Gallup Daily survey data found that Washingtonians who self-identify as LGBTQ earned bachelor's degrees at similar rates to non-LGBTQ community members.[14] The absence of differences in quantitative measures such as degree completion does not, however, stand as evidence of comparable experiences in higher education. Reported rates of depression and anxiety among LGBTQ students are more than double those of non-LGBTQ students in both the two- and four-year sector.[15]

- **Undocumented/DACAmented students.** An estimated 2,000 undocumented students graduate from a Washington high school each year.[16] In total statewide an estimated 15,000 undocumented students enroll in higher education.[17] Observance of educational attainment for these students is complicated by their immigration status, however a 2014 report from the Migration Policy Institute estimated that nationally only 12% of youth immediately eligible for DACA status at the time of the program's launch were enrolled in college, and only 4% went on to earn either an associate or bachelor's degree.[18]

- **Veterans.** Approximately half a million Washington residents aged 18+ are Veterans (8.2% of all 18+ population).[19] However, only a quarter of Washington veterans have at least a bachelor's degree, as compared to 39% of non-veterans aged 25 and older.[20]

Although the remainder of the document emphasizes state strategies for closing performance gaps by race/ethnicity, embedded throughout are several campus, system, or state strategies that attend to the needs of these underrepresented student populations.

Sampling of State Goals in Attainment Plans

The policy scan conducted to develop this report began by reviewing key states' strategic plans for higher education. In this section, we highlight three states with notably equity-focused approaches to demonstrate how addressing equity begins with a vision.

In **Massachusetts**, the higher education office built a Racial Equity Plan with the overarching goal of eliminating "racial disparities in the Massachusetts public higher education system;" sub-goals and concrete actions focus on improving outcomes in areas related to persistence, gateway course-taking, credit accumulation, transfer, and degree completion.[21] Alongside the launch of its equity agenda, the state also began a three-year policy and program audit to identify changes to policy that can better serve racially minoritized students and advance racial equity in the state's higher education system.[22]

In 2018, **Oregon** received a Talent, Innovation and Equity (TIE) partnership grant from the Lumina Foundation to identify and implement "state leadership activities aimed to improve postsecondary completion success in Oregon for Black/African-American, Latino/a/x/Hispanic, Native American/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander learners, with a particular focus on learners of color."[23] Building on this work, in its Strategic Plan 2021, each Roadmap area

is interwoven with diversity and equity goals, resulting in a plan with no separation between the overall goals and the state's emphasis on racial equity.

- Oregon's 2021 legislation HB 2590 established a task force to hold virtual or in-person conversations with "current, prospective, and former students" from underrepresented students identified by the state "to help develop student success and funding proposals that address access, retention, graduation, and entry into the workforce."[24]

Hawaii received Lumina's TIE grant in June 2022 to support efforts to increase postsecondary attainment by 5% in five years among Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and Filipino students. The state plans to use the funds to "develop a statewide strategic plan that focuses on equity, create a professional learning community for faculty to better support students, develop short-term credentials for opportunities in high-demand careers, and conduct an audit of policies and practices around students' basic needs."[25] Notable is the targeted effort to improve outcomes for specific student populations that have been underserved by the state's public higher education system.

WASHINGTON CONTEXT	SBCTC embarked on its Agency Equity Plan in January 2022. Embedded in the plan are four priority areas: re-examining and improving the hiring process, assessing the agency's cultural climate, providing equity-focused professional development, and building system alignment in commitment to equity.[26]

State Strategies for Addressing Inequities in Access and Completion

State efforts to address statewide performance gaps in college enrollment and completion for populations historically underserved by or excluded from higher education range from deliberate integration of equity into the planning process to targeted efforts to support students, faculty, and staff from these same populations.

The strategies outlined in this section are the result of a landscape scan of ongoing state- or system-level initiatives as well as a targeted review of two reports: the Lumina Foundation's State Policy Agenda[27] and EdTrust's report *Aiming for Equity: A Guide to Statewide Attainment Goals for Racial Equity Advocates*.[28] When relevant, included are campus-based strategies that could be scaled to the state or system level through the allocation of dedicated funds.

Strategy #1: Use Racial Impact Statements and Funding Equity Audits to Identify Structural Barriers to Achieving Equity

Oregon's strategic plan is grounding in its Equity Lens, which the higher education coordinating commission uses to "assess how current and proposed policies, programs and practices benefit and/or burden underserved learners and communities to identify where policies, programs, and

practices need to be strengthened or changed."[29] The Equity Lens outlines guiding questions that the agency notes "will be considered for resource allocation and evaluating strategic investments, policies, and practices."[30] (See also guidance from the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system on conducting a policy review with an equity lens.[31])

Oregon's efforts to surface the potential racial equity implications of policies and practices draw on a similar practice that emerged as part of criminal sentencing reforms.[32] This practice, often referred to as, a racial impact statement, has gained traction as a tool that can be used "to evaluate potential disparities of proposed legislation prior to adoption and implementation."[33]

The Government Alliance on Race and Equity's (GARE) Racial Equity Toolkit provides state and local government staff and elected officials with guidance on how to take a similar approach with a broader range of policy issues. The toolkit calls on its users to embed consideration of racial equity into its existing decision framework and, in so doing, create a "structure for institutionalizing the consideration of racial equity."[34]

WASHINGTON CONTEXT Walla Walla Public Schools uses an Equity Analysis Protocol when reviewing policies, programs, and initiatives.[35]

Another strategy recommended by Lumina relates to the increased investment of funds in institutions that serve the highest percentages of students of color.[36] A 2020 evaluation of student enrollment patterns by education and related funding levels found that Native American students disproportionately attend institutions with below-average spending levels. Pell Grant recipients, as well as Black and Latinx students, disproportionately attend institutions with the *lowest* funding levels. As the author notes, "given the compelling evidence that funding matters in higher education, this trend is likely a leading culprit for the racial/ethnic gaps that persist in college outcomes."[37] The author recommends that states require institutions to undergo funding equity audits to identify institution-level inequities. The results of these audits can then be used to identify state-based strategies for remedying these funding inequities.

Strategy #2: Increase the flexibility of financial aid programs and establish scholarships for populations historically excluded from higher education

Alongside expansions in large-scale need-based aid programs, several states and systems are pursuing eligibility-based changes in existing aid programs *or* the establishment of new aid programs targeted at specific student populations. Increased flexibility can improve access by limiting the administrative burdens that students encounter when attempting to receive aid, whereas targeted programs provide dedicated financial supports to specific student populations.

- **Delaware** expanded eligibility for its Student Excellence Equals Degree (SEED) program, which provides residents with free tuition at the state's technical and community colleges or in the University of Delaware's AA programs.[38] Now, individuals with non-violent felony convictions

and individuals who are more than 25 years old can receive the scholarship for as many as ten semesters. Students also now maintain eligibility for up to a year after stopping out of college.[39]

- **Colorado** signed legislation in 2021 that extends in-state tuition to any Indigenous student who is a member of a federally recognized tribe with ties to Colorado.[40] In spring 2022, Metropolitan State University – Denver established the Indigenous Grant, a last-dollar program which provides in-state Indigenous students with funds for tuition and fees.[41] However, the program's design as a last-dollar scholarship not to exceed the cost of tuition and fees, could limit its retention and completion effects given survey results that point to affordability as a topline concern that leads to college dropout among Indigenous students.[42]

- **Tennessee**'s Reconnect scholarship offers free tuition at eligible institutions for adult learners; nearly 20,000 residents received the scholarship in its first year,[43] with a positive effect on overall enrollment among the adult learner population.[44] Since there is no single definition of adult learner or post-traditional student, one suggested approach is to target scholarship funds or expand aid eligibility based not on age but FAFSA filing status (e.g., ensure scholarship eligibility for Independent students).[45]

- The **University of California** system announced in April 2022 that it would waive tuition and fees for Indigenous students who are state residents and members of a federally recognized tribe. Limiting the waiver to students in federally recognized tribes allows the system to sidestep California's Proposition 209, "which bars universities from providing special benefits based on their race, sex, or ethnicity."[46]

There are embedded challenges in constructing targeted aid programs that need to be attended to early and as new barriers become evident. For instance, with UC's tuition and fees waiver for Indigenous students, the requirement that students be a member of a federally recognized tribe limits potential reach of the scholarship both by establishing administrative hurdles that likely-eligible students must clear (i.e., applying for and receiving membership status) and by excluding students from tribes without federal recognition but clear historical verifiability.[47]

WASHINGTON CONTEXT

The Washington College Grant offers flexible eligibility; there are no age requirements, and it is open to both recent high school graduates and adult learners who have not accessed the WCG or exhausted scholarship eligibility. This broad-based eligibility allows the grant to be accessible to the populations for whom state enrollment and attainment gaps are most pronounced. Across all recipients, regardless of race/ethnicity, 70% are lower income and therefore eligible for the full award amount. When examined by race/ethnicity categories, over 30% of recipients identify as Black, Latinx, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Of these BIPOC recipients, 75% are eligible for the full award amount.[48]

Strategy #3: Commit Funds for Targeted Academic and Non-Academic Supports

In several states, resource investments by the legislature, governor, or the college and university system emphasize the need to prioritize the needs of historically underserved students when designing strategies for increasing enrollment, retention, and/or completion.

- **Minnesota** State, the system that includes the state's two- and four-year colleges, partnered with United Way to expand the non-profit's 211 helpline, which offers access to campus and community resources and referrals. The goal of the hotline is to help students meet basic needs related to food, housing, transportation, childcare, emergency financial support, and mental health support.[49]

- **California** community colleges have received over $300 million in state funds and **Illinois** has allocated $3 million for institutions to use at their discretion in support of targeted initiatives to increase enrollment and retention.[50] In both states, there is an explicit emphasis on targeting students who are historically underserved by higher education—first generation students, low-income students, and racially minoritized students.

- **Oregon** invested $5 million for colleges to hire Benefits Navigators who will provide direct support to students eligible for social services.[51] This model has been employed elsewhere, and early evidence suggests that accessing these services increases retention for students of color and adult students (see What We Know below). **Illinois** passed legislation in June that requires the state's public colleges and universities to identify benefits coordinators, however institutions were not allocated funds to support additional hiring.[52]

- **Maryland** launched a grant program to eradicate food insecurity on college campuses.[53] Campuses that provide matching funds and that demonstrate actionable commitment to addressing food insecurity, including with designated staff, are eligible for up to $150,000 in FY 2023.[54] In support of this grant program, a recent survey by the Community College Center for Student Engagement (CCCSE) found that nearly a third of students—including 43% of Black students, 36% of Latinx students, and 41% of American Indian/Alaska Native students—reported running out of food and not being able to purchase more.[55]

WASHINGTON CONTEXT

Northwest Indian College will receive up to $5 million from the U.S. Department of Energy's Minority Serving Partnership Program. The funds will be used to support the college in its efforts to develop a more diverse STEM workforce.[57]

Evergreen State College received a $2.1 million Title III grant from the U.S. Department of Education to offer additional advising and new wrap-around services, as well as develop an early alert system. The funds are expressly in support of the college's efforts to better support students from populations historically underserved by higher education.[58]

- Approximately 30 **college campuses nationwide** have opened Undocumented Student Resource Centers, which include services for undocumented/DACAmented students' initial college enrollment/registration, legal support services, advocacy workshops, and academic and mental health counseling. These centers offer a safe place for accessing necessary academic and personal resources, and the October 5, 2022 federal court of appeals decision that ruled against DACA amplifies the necessity of the centers' legal services resources.[56]

- **California** made an ongoing investment in the California State University's Project Rebound Consortium in 2019 to develop and sustain programs to support previously incarcerated individuals at fourteen campuses across the state. Rebound scholars—who are more diverse in age and race/ethnicity, and more of whom are Pell eligible than the general student population—can receive access to dedicated on-campus spaces, academic and non-academic support services, university housing, and job search and employment supports.[59] Descriptive evidence points to substantially lower recidivism rates among Rebound Scholars than among previously incarcerated individuals state-wide (less than 1% versus 46%).[60]

  o In 2021, California continued its investment in helping previously incarcerated individuals gain access to education by signing AB 417. The law established and allocated funding to "the Rising Scholars Network, a network of 50 community colleges dedicated to serving justice-impacted students."[61]

Strategy #4: Commit resources to faculty hiring initiatives that emphasize faculty diversity

Although numerous states call out the need for increased faculty diversity in their higher education strategic plans, a smaller number commit funds to this work, typically in the form of selective graduate school scholarship or forgivable loan programs. **Illinois** established the Diversifying Higher Education Faculty in Illinois (DFI) program in 2004, which provides scholarship funds to underrepresented graduate students with demonstrated need.[62] Fellows who do not gain employment in a teaching position at an Illinois college or university must repay 20% of the cumulative award amount.[63] **Kentucky** invests in the development of early career minority faculty and staff members interested in leadership roles through the Academic Leadership Development Institute.[64]

WASHINGTON CONTEXT

SB 5194, which became law after the 2021 session, requires SBCTC to "develop a model faculty diversity program designed to provide for retention and recruitment of faculty from all racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. The faculty diversity program must be based on proven practices in diversity hiring processes." [69]

As part of this process, SBCTC districts now submit DEI strategic plans, and the first priority in the system's Equity Plan 2022-2024 emphasizes hiring practices.[70]

In addition to privately-funded and institutional scholarship programs—including the Southern Regional Education Board's Doctoral Scholars Program,[65] The Big Ten Academic Alliance and Associated Colleges of the Midwest's Undergraduate and Faculty Fellows Program for a Diverse Professoriate,[66] and the Carolina Postdoctoral Program for Faculty Diversity[67]—institutions nationwide continue to test cluster hiring as a way to diversify the professoriate. For instance, the **University of California – Irvine** established the Black Thriving Initiative in 2020. Embedded in the initiative is Faculty Cluster Hiring Program, which "aims to recruit scholars that focus on understanding anti-Blackness and interrogate structural racism in its myriad forms."[68]

What We Know

Pursuing state-based strategies that target student populations historically underserved by higher education directly supports Washington's college attainment goals. The range of strategies highlighted above point to the important work that stakeholders must embark upon to identify and implement equity-minded policies that close statewide performance gaps and better support these students. In this section, we outline what we know about strategies that can target historically underserved students and, in so doing, advance racial equity in Washington's higher education outcomes.

Investing in initiatives that increase teacher diversity in K-12 schools can increase college enrollment for students of color[71]

Research shows that students taught by same-race teachers perform better on assessments and have more positive perceptions of their teachers. In the long-term, students who have even one same-race teacher in their elementary years have been shown to be less likely to drop out of high school and more likely to enroll in college.[72] Recruiting and retaining a teacher workforce that mirrors the K-12 population's increasingly diverse racial composition may help reduce racial disparities that have persisted in the state over time.

Increasing participation in dual credit coursework affects college enrollment and credit accumulation[73]

Research indicates that students who participate in dual credit coursework are more likely to enroll and persist in postsecondary education, accumulate more credits, and earn a higher GPA.[74] However, Washington and national data suggest gaps in dual credit participation by race. Particular focus on providing equitable access and support for dual credit opportunities is needed for students who are currently underrepresented in dual credit courses. This may include conducting outreach to underrepresented students, ensuring equitable opportunities at high schools across the state, and reducing or eliminating out-of-pocket costs for students to participate.

Targeting postsecondary transition supports to underrepresented student populations can increase their college enrollment rates

College access and advising programs for high school students, specifically aimed at low-income students and students of color, can increase college enrollment for these groups. Assisting

students in applying for college, understanding financial aid, and developing a college-going mindset can reduce barriers to entry for historically underrepresented student populations.

One successful pre-college program geared toward Latinx and low-income high school students utilized a near-peer model by hiring college students to aid high schoolers in the college application and enrollment processes. The study showed positive effects on postsecondary enrollment for Latinx students in the program.[75]

As it relates to affordability, when personalized FAFSA filing assistance is coupled with assistance for tax filing, college enrollment rates for high school seniors and recent high school graduates increase by 8 percentage points. The effects on college enrollment are positive but less pronounced for Black students with independent status and no prior college experience.[76]

Aid promises change students' college expectations and increase college access

Either through scholarship guarantees, universal free programs, or programs that offer funds alongside concrete tasks, evidence points to financial aid promises' powerful effects on enrollment for low-income students and students of color.

- Free college programs and early aid commitments increase students' expectations for attending college and completing a credential, especially among low-income and racially minoritized students.[77]

- The University of Michigan's HAIL Scholarship, now the Go Blue Guarantee, provides eligible high school seniors with a commitment of free tuition if they apply and are accepted. The commitment more than doubled application and enrollment rates for high-achieving, low-income students,[78] though student surveys point to institutional challenges related to fostering a sense of belonging among recipients.[79]

- The introduction of the Tennessee Promise program, which provides free tuition at the state's community colleges, increased college enrollment overall and among Black and Latinx student populations. The state's four-year colleges experienced modest short-run declines in enrollment resulting from the state policy change.[80]

Access to a racially diverse professoriate improves outcomes for students of color

Research on community college faculty diversity shows that students of color benefit when they can take courses with faculty of color. As compared to students of color without such access, students of color who enroll in courses taught by faculty of color benefit from higher course grades and course passage rates in the short term. In the long term, these students experience positive benefits with respect to retention and degree conferral.[81]

Building and maintaining a diverse professoriate requires steady financial investment, as evidenced by the downstream consequences of the Great Recession on faculty demographics. Tenure-track hiring declined by 25% during this period, with the most pronounced declines occurring at public colleges and among new faculty of color hires.[82] If the current economic

climate gives way to a recession, institutional responses to budget cuts could lead to decreased diversity in the professoriate—which could in turn affect retention and completion for students of color.

Academic and non-academic supports improve persistence and completion

A range of support services can provide historically underserved students with the necessary safety net to remain enrolled even as academic or non-academic challenges arise. Targeted academic coaching can increase first-year GPAs and decrease stop-out by as much as 8.5 percentage points for first-year students on academic probation, especially for lower-income students.[83] Wrap-around services, such as those provided to CUNY ASAP participants, can increase graduation rates, and cohort-based learning can lead to increased persistence among students of color, as evidenced in the Meyerhoff Scholars Program at the University of Maryland Baltimore County.[84]

The City Colleges of Chicago System partnered with the non-profit One Million Degrees in a $20 million four-year expansion of a wrap-around services and mentoring program dedicated to supporting low-income students navigate academic barriers on the way to college completion.[85] Early evidence from a randomized controlled trial that evaluates the program finds positive effects with respect to community college enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment. Although effects are not reported separately by race/ethnicity or income, the population of students served is predominantly students of color and almost 70% Pell-eligible, suggestive of positive outcomes for students from these historically underserved populations.[86]

Addressing non-academic barriers to success also supports state efforts to advance racial equity in outcomes. When Rio Hondo College, a Hispanic-Serving Institution in LA County, offered students free bus passes, the number of credits that students earned increased, as did persistence rates.[87] An evaluation of the Single Stop USA Community College Initiative identified a modest increase in credit accrual among students who used their services, with much of this effect concentrated among nonwhite, older, or financially independent students.[88] A preliminary evaluation of Georgia's Panther Retention Grant, an emergency grant aid program to support students with immediate financial needs, found that grant receipt decreased time to degree for Pell Grant recipients and students of color.[89]

Overhauling curricular structures helps students progress to degree completion

Developmental education (DE) remains a barrier to college persistence, especially for Black and Latinx students who are disproportionately placed in DE coursework. In the past decade, Florida, Georgia, and California have overhauled their DE requirements—either making the courses optional, shifting to co-requisite models,[90] or forcing colleges to demonstrate students' need for DE coursework. Relatedly, community colleges across the country have implemented the Guided Pathways framework to better support students as they "explore, choose, plan, and complete"[91] transfer- or career-ready programs. DE and Guided Pathways reforms can increase enrollment by getting students into and through credit-bearing courses more quickly.

Florida's SB 1720, implemented in 2014, recategorized DE coursework as optional for most students. After this change, Black and Latinx students enrolled in gateway math and English coursework at higher rates.[92] Furthermore, passage rates in DE courses increased after the law, likely due to changes in existing DE course structures designed to accelerate progress (as required by the law).[93]

Preliminary findings suggest that the co-requisite model implemented state-wide can begin closing some institutional performance gaps by race/ethnicity, though evidence of its effects on longer-term outcomes such as attainment is mixed.[94] The progress report released by the University System of **Georgia** calls out improvements among Black students: a 61% passage rate in a college-level math course, as compared to 26% in the DE delivery model with the second-highest passage rate. Although sub-group comparisons are not available across all racial/ethnic groups, as well as among low-income students and adult learners, the report notes that similar improvements were observed among these populations: Students in the co-requisite model have passage rates in college-level math and English that are approximately twice as high as rates for students in non-co-requisite DE courses.[95] Transfer-level placement and course completion rates in **California** increased for students from every racial/ethnic group after the passage of AB 705. However, Black and Latinx students disproportionately enroll at community colleges with persistently higher rates of DE placement, suggesting uneven implementation.[96] AB 1705, passed in 2022, seeks to remedy these campus-level inequities.[97]

As of April 2021, there are sixteen states with statewide Guided Pathways initiatives—including the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.[98] Colleges that implement Guided Pathways will often rely on evidence-based strategies in their implementation (e.g., academic coaching). Evidence on Guided Pathways implementation specifically is limited to observational assessments of increased credit accrual in the first year: Across Tennessee's community colleges, the percentage of Black and Latinx students earning at least 12 credits in their first year increased by 10 percentage points and 15 percentage points, respectively, over a six-year period during which the colleges were implementing interventions aligned with the Guided Pathways framework.[99] Causal evidence of the reform's effects on STEM student enrollment, academic progress, and persistence—in Washington, Tennessee, and Ohio—is due to be released in late 2022.[100]

Endnotes

[1] Education Research & Data Center. (2021, September). High School Graduate Outcomes Dashboard. See Race/Ethnicity in First Year Enrollment sub-tab. https://erdc.wa.gov/data-dashboards/high-school-graduate-outcomes

[2] Education Research & Data Center. (2021, September). High School Graduate Outcomes Dashboard. See Race/Ethnicity in Completion sub-tab. https://erdc.wa.gov/data-dashboards/high-school-graduate-outcomes

[3] See Tables D1 and D2 in Kwakye, I., Kibort-Crocker, E., Lundgren, M. & Pasion, S. (2021, January). *Fall Enrollment Report: Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 on Postsecondary Enrollment in Washington*. https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2021-01-12-Fall-Enrollment-Report.pdf

[4] Kwakye, I., Kibort-Crocker, E., Lundgren, M. & Pasion, S. (2021, January). *Fall Enrollment Report: Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 on Postsecondary Enrollment in Washington*. https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2021-01-12-Fall-Enrollment-Report.pdf

[5] Causey, J., Huie, F., Lang, R., Ryu, M., & Shapiro, D. (December 2020), Completing College 2020: A National View of Student Completion Rates for 2014 Entering Cohort (Signature Report 19), Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Completions_Report_2020.pdf. For six-year completion rates by race/ethnicity, see Appendix Table 22. Fall 2014 Entering Cohort Six-Year Outcomes by Race and Ethnicity and Age at First Entry (N=1,786,230).

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[7] Okpych, N.J., Park, S.E., Courtney, M., & Powers, J. (2021). *Majority of CalYOUTH participants enrolled in college, with 10% attaining degree by age 23*. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. https://www.chapinhall.org/research/calyouth-degree-completion-age23/

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