STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING DIVERSITY AND OPPORTUNITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Table of Contents

Message from the Secretary

Miguel A. Cardona
U.S. Secretary of Education

This summer, when the U.S. Supreme Court issued its decision in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* and *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina,* President Biden wisely said, "While the Court can render a decision, it cannot change what America stands for." Colleges and universities may have lost a vital tool for creating vibrant, diverse campus communities, but this report makes clear that they need not – and must not – lose their commitment to equal opportunity and student body diversity. Our country's future depends on it.

The American people are more diverse than ever before. Our nation cannot thrive as a multiracial democracy or compete globally if growing numbers of diverse students lack access to our country's most life-changing higher education opportunities. Diversity also enhances the college experience for students of all backgrounds, by enriching campus life, boosting critical thinking, promoting the free exchange of ideas, and preparing students for success in a diverse workforce.

We have seen what can happen when states ban affirmative action: fewer students of color apply, and fewer students of color are admitted, particularly to selective institutions. We cannot afford this kind of backsliding on a national scale, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in plummeting college enrollments nationwide. We must recommit to providing students of all backgrounds with opportunities to develop their talents, unleash their creativity, and reach their potential through higher education.

A college degree remains one of America's surest pathways to a rewarding career, upward mobility, and long-term prosperity. Yet, students of color and other historically underserved students have long faced inequities in educational opportunity, college preparation, and access to higher education. These inequities persist at the postsecondary level, where nearly half of all students of color do not complete their college degrees within six years.

One of the cruelest ironies in America's current higher education system is that our most inclusive and accessible institutions have lacked adequate resources to invest in student success. Meanwhile, highly selective institutions with vast resources to invest in students and propel them to graduation day admit overwhelmingly affluent applicants with a myriad of advantages, from expensive private school education and test preparation to legacy preferences and alumni connections.

The Biden-Harris Administration's unprecedented investments in our nation's most accessible and inclusive colleges and universities reflect our commitment to leveling the playing field, but there's no

denying the considerable benefits that may come from graduating from a selective institution. Whether its access to undergraduate research opportunities, prestigious internships, or powerful alumni networks, these advantages can be game-changing for first-generation students, students of color, and other historically underserved students. As renowned as these highly selective institutions are, they can achieve even greater excellence by renewing their commitment to diversity, equal opportunity, and economic and social mobility.

This report answers President Biden's call on the U.S. Department of Education to provide leaders with a comprehensive look at the most promising strategies for promoting college diversity in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's recent decision. We strongly encourage institutions to consider students' experiences overcoming adversity, as well as their sources of personal inspiration, during the admissions process. Students who have succeeded over challenges and demonstrated resiliency possess qualities that should be valued by our colleges and universities. Institutions should consider placing applicants' achievements in the context of their financial means and the educational opportunities available to them, as well as their personal experiences, whether it be hardship resulting from discrimination or inspiration drawn from their backgrounds.

The report also offers examples of schools that have successfully advanced diversity through strategies such as retiring legacy preferences and investing in the recruitment of applicants from underserved backgrounds. It encourages greater partnership between states, K–12 schools, and higher education institutions to reduce barriers faced by underserved students, including by expanding access to college advising, increasing need-based financial aid, improving acceptance of transfer students' credits, and strengthening supports to boost degree completion. The strategies included in this report are multifaceted, but what they all share in is a need for a sense of urgency and intentional collaboration between leaders at every level of education.

Our country has long struggled to live up to the promise of equality and opportunity for all. Every generation is called upon to renew that promise, and now is our moment to answer the call. It is a moment that demands leadership, innovation, and collaboration. It is a moment that demands higher education leaders demonstrate the same fearless commitment to equal rights and justice displayed by the heroes of the civil rights movement. The Biden-Harris Administration will stand with you and continue to work with you to raise the bar for inclusivity, equity, and excellence in higher education.

Miguel A. Cardona
U.S. Secretary of Education

Executive Summary

Institutions of higher education play a critical role in ensuring that all students have a fair shot at accessing educational opportunity and the economic mobility that it can provide. It is important to ensure that all people have equal access to higher education so they can reap those benefits. Unfortunately, students have unequal access to higher education, particularly at selective institutions. While higher education can be an engine of economic mobility, selective institutions that enroll few students from low-income and underrepresented backgrounds fail to provide that economic mobility and instead perpetuate privilege and increase gaps in wealth across various groups. This report calls on states and college and university leaders to consider taking a variety of actions regarding their recruitment, admissions, affordability, retention, and completion efforts and policies following the Supreme Court's ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* and *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina et al. ("SFFA")*. In *SFFA*, the Court held that the consideration of individual students' race in the admissions practices of two institutions, Harvard College and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, violated the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The Court also reaffirmed that Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires all colleges and universities that receive federal financial assistance – public and private – to comply with the requirements imposed by the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

While the *SFFA* decision limited the ability of colleges and universities to consider an applicant's race in and of itself as a factor in deciding whether to admit the applicant, there remain legally permissible ways to advance the critical mission of socioeconomic and racial diversity in American colleges and universities.[1]

There is a lot at stake. Selective institutions can provide long-term benefits for graduates, including often creating the leaders of tomorrow, but these institutions disproportionately enroll students from high-income backgrounds, lessening the likelihood that these leaders can look like all of America, even though these underrepresented students can have the same academic qualifications as their wealthier peers.[2] In states that have previously restricted the use of race in college admissions, there was a subsequent drop in applications and enrollments of students of color, particularly at selective institutions.[3] The *SFFA* decision may have a greater impact on those institutions that have relied on the consideration of race in admissions to build a more diverse class prior to the Supreme Court's decision.

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[1] The Court noted that its opinion did not address the permissibility of considering race in admissions to the Nation's military academies in light of the potentially distinct interests that military academies may present.

[2] Chetty, Deming, and Freidman, "Diversifying Society's Leaders? The Causal Effects of Admission to Highly Selective Private Colleges"

[3] Backes, "Do Affirmative Action Bans Lower Minority College Enrollment and Attainment?" 2012; Bleemer "Affirmative Action, Mismatch, and Economic Mobility After California's Proposition 209," 2021; Brown and Hirschman, "The End of Affirmative Action in Washington State and Its Impact on the Transition from High School to College," 2006; Hinrichs, "The Effects of Affirmative Action Bans on College Enrollment, Educational Attainment, and Demographic Composition of Universities," 2012; Liu, "How Do Affirmative Action Bans Affect the Racial Composition of Postsecondary Students in Public Institutions?" 2022.

The country's higher education system is stratified by class and race and perpetuates these stratifications across society. While there is still much to learn about how to support low-income students and students of color from institutions across the higher education sector, there are evidence-based strategies highlighted in this report that states and higher education leaders can implement to address inequities. This is an all-hands-on-deck moment that presents an opportunity to affirm commitments to diversity, ensure equal opportunity, and maximize the great potential of each and every student. In this new legal environment, higher education institutions can take strong action to ensure they are engines of opportunity through expanding upward mobility for low-income students and students of color.

As President Biden said in his remarks after the Supreme Court announced its decision, our nation's colleges "should not abandon their commitment to ensure student bodies of diverse backgrounds and experience that reflect all of America," and, importantly, "if a student has…had to overcome adversity on their path to education, a college should recognize and value that." This report highlights evidence-based and promising strategies that institutions can take to accomplish this goal, expand socioeconomic and racial diversity in colleges and universities, and fulfill their missions. Institutions can take steps to:

- Invest in targeted outreach and in pathways programs, including with K–12 schools that serve diverse student bodies and institutions that serve and expand access for high shares of students from lower income and racially diverse backgrounds, such as community colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and Minority Serving Institutions;
- Place meaningful emphasis on student adversity, resiliency, and inspiration in admissions by:
    - Using effective holistic review by evaluating an applicant in the context of opportunities available to their family including their financial means, the conditions affecting quality of life or access to education within a neighborhood in which the student grew up or went to school, experiences with hardships, including racial discrimination, and other sources of inspiration or demonstration of resiliency;
    - Ending practices such as legacy admissions that can hinder socioeconomic and racial diversity and further benefit privileged students instead of expanding opportunity; and
    - Exploring alternative admissions practices that can simplify the admissions process for students, including direct admissions programs, which provide proactive guarantees of admissions for qualified students.
- Increase affordability for students by:
    - Providing need-based aid to students; and
    - Ensuring transparency and simplicity in student aid application processes.
- Cultivate supportive environments and providing material support for students by:
    - Developing comprehensive support programs based on successful models to increase retention and completion rates; and
    - Ensuring campuses are a welcoming and supportive environment for students through affinity groups; diversity, equity, and inclusion programming; and shared, accessible spaces.

States and institutions can consider how they can allocate resources to expand access to students who would not otherwise be able to afford college. State leaders should also consider ways their

states can support institutions' enrollment of underserved students in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision such as:

- Providing sufficient and direct funding to higher education institutions to ensure students receive the support they need to complete their credential;
- Reviewing state financial aid and benefits eligibility requirements and enrollment processes to ensure college students can afford higher education and meet their basic needs; and
- Strengthening relationships across K–12 schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions to create stronger statewide postsecondary pathways, including seamless transfer from associate to bachelor's degree programs.

After *SFFA,* higher education institutions are called on to reexamine how their admissions practices may promote privilege over expanding access to educational opportunity for underserved communities, drawing from evidence-based and promising practices for expanding opportunity for socioeconomically and racially diverse student bodies. Working together, state and education leaders can help ensure underserved students can thrive across diverse college campuses.

Introduction

In June 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court held in *Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* and *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina et al. ("SFFA")* that the consideration of an individual's race in the admissions practices of two institutions, Harvard College and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, violated the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The Court also reaffirmed that Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires all colleges and universities that receive federal financial assistance – public and private – to comply with the requirements imposed by the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. For decades prior, schools could consider race alongside other factors to build diverse college campuses where students can learn from one another. The impacts of this decision are likely to be most severe at selective higher education institutions and thus immediate action by these institutions is critical. The day of the *SFFA* decision, President Biden commissioned this report to outline strategies higher education institutions should consider to recruit, admit, enroll, support, and graduate underserved students.

Diverse college campuses can provide experiences that increase critical thinking, civic engagement, leadership skills, and cross-racial interaction for all students,[4] and they allow students from all backgrounds the chance to pursue and achieve the benefits of higher education, such as economic and social mobility.[5] Several reports have shown how diverse and inclusive teams are more innovative, more creative, better at critical thinking, and, in business, can lead to increased revenue.[6] Ensuring that campuses are diverse and that all students have the opportunity to pursue higher education is critical to ensure a competitive workforce and a strong and thriving nation.

Higher education institutions, particularly selective institutions, defined in this report as those institutions that reject more applicants than they accept, can consider how their policies, including their admissions policies, can lawfully advance socioeconomic and racial diversity consistent with their educational mission.[7] Although selective institutions make up a relatively small share of the entire higher education system, these institutions disproportionately educate society's leaders and enroll students from very high-income families.[8] This is especially true at the most selective institutions. In fact, the Ivy-Plus colleges enroll more students from the top two percent of the

[4] Bowman, "College Diversity Experiences and Cognitive Development: A Meta-Analysis," 2010; Chang, Astin, and Kim, "Cross-Racial Interaction Among Undergraduates: Some Consequences, Causes, and Patterns," 2004; Chang et al., "The Educational Benefits of Sustaining Cross-Racial Interaction Among Undergraduates," 2006; Hurtado, "The Next Generation of Diversity and Intergroup Relations Research," 2005.
[5] Carnevale et al., "The Cost of Economic and Racial Injustice in Postsecondary Education," 2020; Smith, Goodman, and Hurwitz, "The Economic Impact of Access to Public Four-Year Colleges," 2020.
[6] Rock and Grant, "Why Diverse Teams Are Smarter," 2016; Hunt, et al., "Delivering through Diversity," 2018.
[7] In practice, defining selectivity often involves both an analysis of the admission rate of the institutions and the criteria of admission. For example, the NCES-Barron's Selectivity Index measures selectivity based on admission rates, high school GPA, class rank, and SAT score of accepted students. Different researchers use varying cut offs for what might be considered selective, highly selective, moderately selective, and so on.
[8] Chetty, Deming, and Friedman., "Diversifying Society's Leaders? The Causal Effects of Admission to Highly Selective Private Colleges" 2023.

income distribution than the bottom 70 percent of incomes.[9] Even public selective institutions do not always reflect the diverse populations in their state.[10]

Leaders across higher education, in partnership with relevant state entities and K–12 schools when appropriate, should consider strategies in the following areas:

- **Recruitment:** Increase applications from underserved students by instituting or expanding targeted recruitment, outreach, and pathways programs.
- **Admissions:** Improve admissions practices to better reflect individual potential, such as by using holistic review; giving more consideration to adversity a student had to overcome, resiliency, and assets a student brings to their campus community; putting a student's achievement in the context of their family's financial means, neighborhood, high school, and economic disadvantage; and considering alternative admissions programs such as direct admissions.
- **Financial aid:** Increase affordability by investing in need-based financial aid programs and effective and transparent administration of those programs.
- **Completion and climate:** Encourage students to enroll and support completion through promising strategies, including comprehensive student support services and campus climate initiatives.

This report shares strategies that institutions can adopt to promote greater access to educational opportunities for underserved students. In some areas, selective institutions could glean insights from leading under-resourced institutions, such as community colleges, regional colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). Many of these institutions have significantly fewer resources than selective institutions but have prioritized investments to help ensure a welcoming campus community that supports students through the completion of their credential. Some of these strategies are discussed more in this report below. Additionally, there are examples of more selective and well-resourced institutions that have undertaken promising efforts to increase diversity on their campuses. Institutions, particularly selective institutions, can consider both how they might reprioritize resources, as needed, to better fund these strategies, as well as how the strategies may need to be altered to fit their missions. This is an all-hands-on-deck moment to reaffirm commitments to diversity, ensure equal opportunity, and maximize the potential of every student. Creative solutions and continuous assessment of results will need to come from all sectors of higher education, states, K–12 schools, the federal government, and other stakeholders.

What's At Stake

Before the *SFFA* decision, nine states (Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Texas, and Washington) restricted the use of race in college admissions. These statewide restrictions were associated with declines in applications, admission rates,

[9] Ivy-Plus includes the Ivy League, Stanford University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Duke University, and the University of Chicago; Chetty, Deming, and Friedman, "Diversifying Society's Leaders? The Causal Effects of Admission to Highly Selective Private Colleges," 2023.
[10] Carnevale et al., "Our Separate and Unequal Public Colleges: How Public Colleges Reinforce White Racial Privilege and Marginalize Black and Latino Students," 2018.

enrollments, and in some cases, long-term outcomes like degree attainment and earnings for students of color.[11]

For example, following a statewide ban on the use of race in admissions in California, Black and Hispanic/Latino applicants to the University of California (UC) system declined by 12–13 percent, even though most of these students would have met acceptance qualifications for at least one UC campus had they applied.[12] Many of these students in California enrolled in less selective institutions, suggesting that all sectors of higher education can be affected in some way when the use of race is restricted.[13] Immediate changes in admission rates were also observed in Washington, where admission rates for underrepresented racial minorities fell at the University of Washington immediately after the state's ballot measure passed, by about 13 percentage points for Black students, 7 percentage points for Hispanic/Latino students, and 14 percentage points for Pacific Islander students, before rebounding somewhat in subsequent years.[14] Undergraduate enrollment of underrepresented racial minorities declined at selective or flagship public institutions in California, Texas, and Washington, as well as public institutions in Arizona, Michigan, Nebraska, New Hampshire, and Oklahoma.[15] Enrollment of underrepresented students of color in graduate programs also declined in medical schools, law schools, and graduate programs, including in STEM fields and social sciences, in states that restricted the use of race in admissions.[16]

Institutions should consider taking immediate and effective action, such as the strategies summarized in this report, to increase equitable opportunity and affirm their commitment to diversity following the *SFFA* decision. This report is designed to provide information to and serve as a resource for educational institutions considering new policies or programs to advance or maintain student diversity after the Supreme Court's decision in *SFFA*. It presents many examples of actions that can help advance equitable opportunity in ways that do not consider an individual student's race in and of itself in admissions. These strategies have many benefits and could advance other institutional goals, in addition to diversity. Not every strategy reviewed in this report will be relevant to every institution, and this report is not meant to be exhaustive. For example, it does not

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[11] Backes, "Do Affirmative Action Bans Lower Minority College Enrollment and Attainment?" 2012; Bleemer "Affirmative Action, Mismatch, and Economic Mobility After California's Proposition 209," 2021; Brown and Hirschman, "The End of Affirmative Action in Washington State and Its Impact on the Transition from High School to College," 2006; Hinrichs, "The Effects of Affirmative Action Bans on College Enrollment, Educational Attainment, and the Demographic Composition of Universities," 2012; Liu, "How Do Affirmative Action Bans Affect the Racial Composition of Postsecondary Students in Public Institutions?" 2022.

[12] Bleemer, "Affirmative Action, Mismatch, and Economic Mobility After California's Proposition 209," 2021.

[13] Hinrichs, "The Effects of Affirmative Action Bans on College Enrollment, Educational Attainment, and the Demographic Composition of Universities," 2012.

[14] Brown and Hirschman, "The End of Affirmative Action in Washington State and Its Impact on the Transition from High School to College," 2006.

[15] Backes, "Do Affirmative Action Bans Lower Minority College Enrollment and Attainment?" 2012; Bleemer "Affirmative Action, Mismatch, and Economic Mobility After California's Proposition 209," 2021; Brown and Hirschman, "The End of Affirmative Action in Washington State and Its Impact on the Transition from High School to College," 2006; Hinrichs, "The Effects of Affirmative Action Bans on College Enrollment," 2012; Liu, "How Do Affirmative Action Bans Affect the Racial Composition of Postsecondary Students in Public Institutions?" 2022; Tienda et al., "Closing the Gap? Admissions & Enrollment at the Texas Public Flagships Before and After Affirmative Action", 2003.

[16] Garces, "Racial Diversity, Legitimacy, and Citizenry: The Impact of Affirmative Action Bans on Graduate School Enrollment," 2012; Garces, "Understanding the Impact of Affirmative Action Bans in Different Graduate Fields of Study," 2013; Garces and Mickey-Pabello, "Racial Diversity in the Medical Profession: The Impact of Affirmative Action Bans on Underrepresented Student of Color Matriculation in Medical Schools," 2015.

speak to the benefits to campus climate of recruiting and retaining diverse leadership, faculty, and staff.

Additionally, a combination of strategies rather than a single approach may be needed for institutions to achieve socioeconomically and racially diverse student bodies. While most of the strategies in this report are focused on actions that colleges and universities can consider taking, where appropriate, suggestions for policies and practices that states can consider are also included.

This report does not have the force and effect of law, is not meant to bind the public, states, or recipients, and does not impose new legal requirements. States and institutions should consult with legal counsel regarding any applicable requirements under federal, state, and local laws. Finally, while this report does not expressly discuss the federal role, there are many federal education programs designed to support strategies like those discussed below.

Targeted Recruitment Programs

Low-income students and students of color often attend K–12 schools that do not have adequate staffing to provide high-quality counseling resources to help students navigate college applications, complete the *Free Application for Federal Student Aid* (FAFSA®) form, and understand the costs and completion rates of colleges to which they are accepted.[17] As previously noted, *SFFA* has the potential to make these challenges more acute, as demonstrated by the drop in college applications from underrepresented groups – in both selective and less selective institutions – after some states eliminated the use of race in admissions at their public institutions. Such declines would exacerbate existing inequities in college enrollment among low-income students and students of color.

Nationally, the percentage of high school graduates who enrolled immediately in college has declined from 68 percent in 2010 to 62 percent in 2021.[18] These concerning declines are shown across racial groups but are exacerbated by gaps in rates of enrollment between white and racial minority students. In 2021, 58 percent of Black and 57 percent of Hispanic/Latino high school graduates enrolled immediately in college compared to 64 percent of white students.[19] These gaps are more concerning because there are differences in the types of schools attended by students across racial groups. Underrepresented minority students disproportionately attend under-resourced institutions or for-profit colleges and white students overwhelmingly attend the most selective and highly resourced institutions.[20] Other data show that the gap in college enrollment between high-income and low-income high school graduates also remains persistently large with 79 and 48 percent college-going rates respectively.[21] Mitigating these trends of lower and declining enrollment of high school graduates of color and from lower income households will require targeted recruitment, consistent with applicable law, and reducing barriers to enrollment for qualified students.

Research has shown that early engagement with potential applicants, such as higher education institutions building relationships with underserved students in K–12 schools, can increase the likelihood of enrollment.[22]

To reach a diverse pool of student talent, institutions can:

- Establish, expand, and prioritize targeted outreach and K–12 pathways programs in communities with high proportions of low-income students and students of color;
- Partner with K–12 school educators, including school counselors, college access groups and community-based organizations, to get clear information about higher education options in the hands of students and their families; and
- Admit more transfer students through partnerships with community colleges and other institutions that are more likely to enroll underserved students.

[17] Clinedinst, "2019 State of College Admission," 2019.
[18] National Center for Education Statistics, "Immediate College Enrollment Rate," 2023.
[19] National Center for Education Statistics, "Immediate College Enrollment Rate," 2023.
[20] Taylor and Cantwell, "Unequal Higher Education: Wealth, Status, and Student Opportunity," 2019.
[21] The Pell Institute, "Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States," 2022.
[22] Bowman et al., "Improving College Access at Low-Income High Schools? The Impact of GEAR UP Iowa on Postsecondary Enrollment and Persistence" 2018.

Targeted Outreach and Pathways Programs

Targeted outreach and pathways programs, while resource intensive for institutions, can be effective strategies to encourage underserved students to apply to college.[23] Outreach programs typically include direct contact from a higher education institution to K–12 students, providing information related to the institution, including how to apply. Pathways programs offer experiences, such as programming located on college campuses or earning college credit while in high school, in order to increase the numbers of college-ready applicants in high school and career and technical education programs.

Evidence from one state that previously limited the use of race in college admissions demonstrates that outreach and pathways programs, when implemented with additional comprehensive services, can be associated with positive effects on application and enrollment rates of low-income students and underrepresented minorities.[24] In particular, when selective universities offered financial aid to low-income, high-achieving students, those students were likely to enroll and persist in higher education at similar rates to higher-income peers.[25] Rather than recruiting primarily from private and public high schools composed of predominantly high-income students, institutions can expand and prioritize their outreach to high schools with substantial populations of low-income students and students of color. As part of expanding outreach, institutions can assign admissions recruiters to high schools from which they have not typically recruited to provide equal opportunity for all students.[26]

Strong outreach and pathways programs address comprehensive aspects of a student's college decision-making process. Prior research has shown elements of effective programs include:[27]

- Sharing timely information and providing support and mentoring in applying to college;
- Providing support in applying for financial aid and understanding college costs and financial aid packages, including providing guidance on FAFSA® completion;
- Advising on how to best choose colleges among options;
- Offering opportunities to explore career and major interests;
- Tutoring and test preparation to help with academic preparation and possible entrance exam requirements; and
- Supporting visits to college campuses to gain exposure to a college-going culture.

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[23] Reardon et al., "What Levels of Racial Diversity Can Be Achieved with Socioeconomic-Based Affirmative Action? Evidence from a Simulation Model" 2018.
[24] Andrews, Imberman, and Lovenheim, "Recruiting and Supporting Low-Income, High-Achieving Students at Flagship Universities," 2020.
[25] Hoxby and Avery, "The Missing 'One-Offs": The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students," 2012; Dynarski, et al., "Closing the Gap: The Effect of Reducing Complexity and Uncertainty in College Pricing on the Choices of Low-Income Students," 2018.
[26] Salazar, Jaquette, and Han, "Coming Soon to a Neighborhood Near You? Off-Campus Recruiting by Public Research Universities" 2021.
[27] Bettinger, et al., "The Role of Application Assistance and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment", 2012; Carrel and Sacerdote, "Why Do College-Going Interventions Work," 2017; Castleman and Goodman, "Intensive College Counseling and the Enrollment and Persistence of Low-Income Students," 2017; Tierney et al., "Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do: A Practice Guide," 2009.

Outreach and pathways programs can involve partnerships with K–12 schools or other institutions, such as community colleges. Institutions can work with schools that enroll large numbers of underserved students, such as schools and school districts that serve predominantly low-income students, students of color, and first-generation students, all of whom may have fewer resources to access higher education. The specific measures the institution could consider when seeking partners include schools where large percentages of students receive free or reduced-price lunch or that have low rates of enrollment in higher education.

As explained in the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Justice Questions and Answers resource regarding the Supreme Court's *SFFA* decision released in August 2023, institutions do not have to ignore race when identifying prospective students for outreach and recruitment programs, provided such programs do not give targeted groups of prospective students preference in the admissions process and all students – whether part of a specifically targeted group or not – have the same opportunity to apply and compete for admission. Increasing the pool of talented applicants from underrepresented groups helps improve the likelihood that institutions can advance student body diversity.

Institutions may also explore whether student body diversity could be enhanced by affording a preference in the admissions process for participants in certain pathways programs that, as one example, provide summer enrichment opportunities for high school students from underserved high schools. Institutions may employ such preferences where students are selected for participation in those pathways programs based on non-racial criteria.[28]

Examples of outreach and pathways programs include:

- **College access programs** that advance a "college-going culture" among high school students and support them to take steps toward applying to and enrolling in college. Activities can include helping students complete college and financial aid applications, advising students on making an informed college choice, mentoring students to develop their college and career aspirations, providing transportation to and guidance on college visits, and tutoring and test preparation, among others. These programs can be run by states, high schools, higher education institutions, or non-profit organizations. The federal government supports many of these programs through the federal TRIO Programs and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). AmeriCorps additionally sponsors College Possible, which places recent college graduates as peer mentors for students pursuing higher education in under-resourced schools. College Possible increased applications and enrollment in four-year institutions, including selective institutions.[29] Another example is schools that work to augment their college counseling capacity by partnering with organizations like the College Advising Corps.[30]
    - The Puente Project, headquartered at the University of California, Berkeley, provides culturally relevant college preparatory writing classes, college counseling, and

[28] U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights and U.S. Department of Justice, "Questions and Answers Regarding the Supreme Court's Decision in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. Harvard College and University of North Carolina,*" 2023.
[29] Avery, "Evaluation of the College Possible Program: Results from a Randomized Controlled Trial," 2013.
[30] Bettinger and Evans, "College Guidance for All: A Randomized Experiment in Pre-College Advising," 2019.

leadership development to middle and high school students as well as intensive English courses, mentoring, and counseling to community college students who intend to transfer to a four-year institution.[31]

- **Dual enrollment and early college programs** have been shown to effectively increase college access and enrollment, credit accumulation, and completion.[32] Dual enrollment can help boost postsecondary enrollment and completion through early exposure to college coursework and by covering or reducing the cost of college credits. Early college programs are restructured high school models that can help students earn up to two years' worth of college credit along with their high school diplomas; some newer models help students earn an associate degree by their "13th year."[33] However, these programs are not equally accessible to all students. Research has consistently shown that low-income students and students of color are more likely to attend schools that do not offer dual enrollment and that they are less likely to have access to or participate in dual enrollment than their peers, even when it is available, due to insufficient advising, financial barriers, and other factors that both K–12 and postsecondary institutions can work together to rectify.[34] States like Kentucky are collecting and reporting data on access to dual enrollment by district and student demographics.[35] Several states also include dual enrollment as part of their statewide accountability system under Title I, Part A of the ESEA. For example, Georgia includes a measure of accelerated enrollment in its statewide accountability system that measures the percentage of 12th-graders in the school earning credit for advanced enrollment via dual enrollment and other measures. By including this in the accountability system, the state is emphasizing its importance in how the state measures school quality, and schools are incentivized to increase dual enrollment. The state is required to publicly report measures used in the accountability system on state and local report cards, disaggregated for each school in the state. This type of transparency allows states and institutions the ability to determine where there are inequities in program offerings and make investments to ensure equal access for all students. The U.S Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) is collecting such information nationally.[36]

    - New Mexico is currently working to build the Four Corners College and Career Pathways Partnership, which will allow students in rural regions in the state to earn 12-30 hours of early college credit while in high school as part of a 13th year pathways program. These credits will seamlessly transition to an aligned certificate or degree program, an apprenticeship program, or will prepare students for employment after high school.[37]

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[31] Gándara, "A Study of High School Puente: What We Have Learned About Preparing Latino Youth for Postsecondary Education," 2002.
[32] U.S. Department of Education, "Dual Enrollment Programs," 2017
[33] Berger et al., "Early College, Early Success: Early College High School Initiative Impact Study," 2013
[34] Britton, "Dual Enrollment: Increasing College Access and Success Through Opportunities to Earn College Credits in High School," 2022.
[35] KY Stats, "Dual Credit Feedback," n.d., https://kystats.ky.gov/Latest/DualCredit
[36] U.S. Department of Education, "Civil Rights Data Collection Frequently Asked Questions, n.d., https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/crdc.html
[37] Education Strategy Group, "Case Studies," n.d., accelerate-ed.org/case-studies/

- **Summer programs** expose students to college-level coursework and programming that build their college-preparedness. Unfortunately, many of the programs aimed at middle and high school students charge thousands of dollars in fees, making them inaccessible to low-income students, though some universities offer free programs aimed at underserved populations. These programs can also include summer bridge programs that help prepare incoming freshmen for the college experience and attempt to address "summer melt," which describes the dynamic of high school graduates planning to and ultimately not enrolling in college. More recent research has found that bridge programs can also increase retention and completion rates at community colleges and less selective four-year colleges, though prior research has shown limited effects especially beyond the first year, so further evaluation is needed to understand how these programs can provide low-income students and students of color with a strong start to finishing college.[38]

    - The Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at Cal Poly Pomona offers a five-week summer bridge transition program for first-year students who are first-generation and low-income students. EOP students are exposed to both residential and commuter experiences, receive support through advising services, and take one three-credit course to prepare for the rigors of college. EOP is designed to provide a built-in support system and develop a community for participating students.[39]

Institutions can consider subsidizing these programs or offering them at no cost to ensure access for low-income students.

While the above strategies are primarily targeted toward increasing undergraduate student application and enrollment, many could also work for graduate programs. Institutions seeking to promote greater access and educational opportunity in their graduate programs can develop recruitment partnerships with institutions with high populations of underrepresented groups, including HBCUs, TCUs, and MSIs, starting as early as community college. Providing graduate preparation programs, such as undergraduate research experiences, mentoring, and career exploration, may also help recruit students for graduate programs from diverse backgrounds by providing exploration opportunities, building relationships and networks, and allowing students to develop their identity as a future professional in the field.[40]

K–12 College Counseling

As mentioned earlier, K–12 and college access counselors play an essential role in ensuring underserved students can enter and succeed in college. They can encourage students to take college-level coursework, support students in developing college-level skills, build a college-going culture in high school, and assist students in college and financial aid application processes.[41] Research also suggests that college advising increases college enrollment and completion. Using U.S. Department

[38] Douglas and Attewell, "The Bridge and the Troll Underneath: Summer Bridge Programs and Degree Completion," 2014.
[39] Rodriguez and Jacobo, "Educational Opportunity Program, Summer Bridge: A First Year Summer Transition Program," 2021.
[40] Winkle-Wagner and McCoy, "Entering the (Postgraduate) Field: Underrepresented Students' Acquisition of Cultural and Social Capital in Graduate School Preparation Programs," 2016.
[41] Tierney et al., "Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do: A Practice Guide," 2009.

of Education data, one study found that adding one high school counselor leads to a 10 percentage point increase in four-year college enrollment.[42] Evidence from one college advising program has shown that advising students in high school and into higher education results in increased enrollment, persistence, and even degree completion. Students who received advising were 7 percentage points more likely to enroll in college at all, and 10 percentage points more likely to enroll in a four-year college.[43] Those who received advising were also 10 percentage points more likely to remain enrolled in the first three semesters. A follow-up study showed that students who received advising were almost 10 percentage points more likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree within six years.[44]

Despite the important role counselors can play, students in schools with large student bodies and higher levels of poverty are less likely to have access to a school counselor who can offer college information,[45] and the national average ratio of counselors to students is 470 students per counselor compared to the ratio recommended by school counseling professionals of 250:1.[46]

States should consider improving funding for schools and districts so that these types of resource inequities are eliminated. Further, higher education institutions can work more with K–12 schools and systems to help ensure that students are getting the support and information they need to navigate the college application process, including helping students understand what high school courses are aligned with admission requirements. As colleges change their admissions processes, they can communicate these changes to K–12 counselors to ensure there is no confusion about what a successful application requires and when.

K–12 counselors can also provide information to colleges on behalf of applicants, including both individual letters of recommendation and aggregate information on the high school, to provide college application reviewers with a holistic view of each applicant. This is discussed more in later sections of this report. Colleges can partner with schools and districts to ensure students can participate in college fairs hosted at K–12 schools and can also ensure schools and systems have information available about application criteria so that students meet standardized testing requirements, when applicable, and complete the FAFSA®. These partnerships can play a critical role in making sure K–12 counselors have the resources needed to make holistic admissions more effective.

States can play a role by more adequately funding K–12 schools to increase counselor staffing and fund training programs for counselors to address the shortage. They can also play a role in facilitating relationships between K–12 schools and higher education institutions to get the right information into the hands of students while they are in high school.

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[42] Hurwitz and Howell, "Estimating Causal Impacts of School Counselors with Regression Discontinuity Designs," 2014.
[43] Barr and Castelman, "The Bottom Line on College Counseling," 2017.
[44] Barr and Castelman, "The Bottom Line on College Counseling: Large Increases in Degree Attainment."
[45] Bryan et al., "Who Sees the School Counselor for College Information? A National Study" 2009.
[46] Bryan et al., "School Counselors as Social Capital: The Effects of High School College Counseling on College Application Rates," 2011; Patel and Clinedinst, "State-by-State Student-to-Counselor Ratio Maps by School District," 2021; Woods and Domina, "The School Counselor Caseload and the High School-to-College Pipeline," 2014.

Transfer and Community College Partnerships

Nearly 7.5 million students enroll in community colleges, making up 35 percent of undergraduate students nationwide.[47] Many of those students are low-income students and students of color, making transfer admissions an important opportunity to enhance equitable access to four-year selective colleges for those and other students who have less direct access from high school.[48] For example, in 2021, Black and Hispanic/Latino students made up 41 percent of two-year public institution students compared to only 31 percent of four-year public students. These percentages are even starker at private non-profit institutions where Black students make up 33 percent of students at two-year institutions but only 12 percent of students at four-year private non-profit institutions.[49] To encourage transfer admissions, states and institutions can build and maintain a culture committed to welcoming transfer students wholeheartedly and working to improve the success of transfer students, while facilitating clear transfer pathways.[50]

Today's system leaves students behind when their credits are not accepted or they have to retake courses, ultimately extending their time in school or preventing them from ever finishing. Nearly 80 percent of students in community colleges intend to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree.[51] However, actual transfer and degree attainment rates do not match these aspirations. Only 14 percent of students who transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution earn a bachelor's degree.[52] Those students who do successfully navigate the process are not representative of community college students in general: a near-majority of community college students transferring to highly selective institutions come from the top 20 percent of the income distribution.[53] As a result of the broken transfer system in higher education, students may never transfer, may lose momentum from lost credits, or may be unable to earn an intended bachelor's degree or associate's degree, potentially leaving students with debt but no degree to pay for it.

Transfer students can be successful at their initial institution and demonstrate readiness for further college-level work but still encounter barriers when institutions, both institutions from which students transfer and institutions to which students transfer, do not effectively implement credit articulation policies, which provide clear information about credits that will be accepted when a student transfers.[54] Too often, students lose credits when they transfer colleges. For example, the Government Accountability Office estimates that community college students, who account for the

[47]There are more than 100 community colleges that offer four-year degree programs and are therefore classified as four-year institutions by the U.S. Department of Education. An external analysis estimates the number of community college students to be closer to 9 million, or 41 percent of all undergraduates, see Community College Research Center, "Community College Enrollment and Completion," n.d., https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/community-college-faqs.html; National Center for Education Statistics, "Student Enrollment: How Many Students Enroll in Postsecondary Institutions Annually?," n.d. https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/TrendGenerator/app/build-table/2/2?rid=5&cid=9.
[48] National Center for Education Statistics, "Student Enrollment: How Many Students Enroll in Postsecondary Institutions Annually?," n.d., https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/TrendGenerator/app/build-table/2/2?rid=1&cid=65.
[49] National Center for Education Statistics, "Characteristics of Postsecondary Students," 2023.
[50] Lane, Khan, and Knox, "The Emerging Role of Public Higher Education Systems in Advancing Transfer Student Success: Results of a National Study," 2022.
[51] Community College Research Center, "Policy Fact Sheet: Community College Transfer," 2021.
[52] Jenkins and Fink, "Tracking Transfer: New Measures of Institutional and State Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students Attain Bachelor's Degrees," 2016.
[53] National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, "Transfer and Progress: Fall 2022 Report," 2023.
[54] Monaghan and Attewell, "The Community College Route to the Bachelor's Degree," 2015.

largest share of transfer students, lost 22 percent of credits on average when transferring to a four-year public institution. [55]

Some states and institutions have instituted reforms designed to address transfer enrollment and success, including common course numbering, transferable core courses, guaranteed associate degrees for transfer students, retroactive associate degrees, degree maps, guided pathways, dual admission between community colleges and four-year institutions, and general education requirements that are standardized across a statewide higher education system.[56] How these policies are implemented, including technology solutions that make it easy for students to find information on how credits might transfer or improve the ability of an institution to analyze and articulate courses from prior institutions; consistent and quality advising by both the transferring and receiving institutions; and student-centered appeal procedures when an institution declines to accept credits can increase the likelihood of students successfully transferring between institutions.

Higher education institutions, including selective private non-profit universities, should consider increasing their accessibility through transfer initiatives and programs. Institutions can work directly with community colleges and their states to implement the aforementioned solutions that reduce barriers, build transfer pathways, and ensure transfer students are supported so they can complete their degrees. Institutions should be sure to increase slots for transfer students overall, so that more transfer students are afforded the option to attend well-resourced institutions. States have tools, such as legislative mandates and formalized discussions with key stakeholders, they can rely on to implement statewide frameworks such as common course numbering, degree maps across institutions, and transfer associate degrees with guaranteed admission to bachelor's degree programs.

Successful transfer programs demonstrate that leadership and providing the necessary resources can significantly increase the number of students transferring from a two-year to a four-year program, increasing educational opportunity for socioeconomically and racially diverse students. Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) and George Mason University have reported seeing success through their ADVANCE program by providing advising that works to ensure students do not take unnecessary credits that would cost extra money and time and to put students on a path to an associate and bachelor's degree. The program, which is open to all NOVA students who meet eligibility criteria, is comprised of about 40 percent students from low-income backgrounds and a majority are students of color. The two institutions collaborated to provide 100 structured degree program pathways from NOVA courses to George Mason University majors, serving approximately 2,000 students and providing a dedicated student success coach throughout students' associate and bachelor's programs.[57]

St. Edward's University (SEU) has implemented a transfer support program that uses multi-pronged strategy to increase the number of transfer students and improve transfer student outcomes. SEU provides a centralized advising model where students are paired with mentors across academic, career, and financial aid offices. They provide advising guides that help students align credit from

[55] Government Accountability Office, "Students Need More Information to Help Reduce Challenges in Transferring College Credits," 2017.
[56] Baker, Friedmann, and Kurlaender, "Improving the Community College Transfer Pathway to the Baccalaureate: The Effect of California's Associate Degree for Transfer," 2023; Boatman and Soliz, "Statewide Transfer Policies and Community College Student Success," 2018.
[57] American Council on Education, "Reimaging Transfer for Student Success: The National Task Force of the Transfer and Award of Credit," 2021.

their two-year programs to their major at SEU. The university also offers financial aid specific to transfer students to assist with affordability and has a support group for transfer students to provide a sense of community and belonging on campus.

Admissions for Undergraduate and Graduate Programs

As institutions reassess their admissions practices following the Supreme Court's decision in *SFFA*, leaders may consider how to more fully and fairly reflect the potential of all applicants and build diverse student bodies that consider students' potential contributions to campus. The below strategies can inform both undergraduate and graduate admissions, with some distinctions for graduate admissions highlighted below when appropriate.

To increase diversity in admissions, institutions may consider:

- Using effective holistic review to meaningfully take into account an applicant's lived experience by expanding considerations of who can thrive at their institutions;
- Ending practices such as legacy admissions that can negatively impact diversity, are unrelated to a prospective applicant's individual merit or potential, that further benefit privileged students, and that reduce opportunities for students who have been foreclosed from such advantages; and
- Exploring alternative admissions practices that can simplify the admission process for students, such as direct admissions programs.

Admissions Strategies that Advance Diversity

Adopting Holistic Review

Holistic review is a flexible framework that is aligned with the institution's unique mission and that assesses each applicant's contribution to the campus on a range of factors. This framework can be used by all institutions, including selective institutions, to advance diversity on their campus using a variety of factors without consideration of individual students' race. Examples of factors include, but are not limited to:[58]

- Academic, such as high school grade-point average (GPA), class rank, rigor of high school coursework, and standardized test scores in the context of the high school and neighborhood of an applicant;
- Non-academic, such as a student's activities that include but go beyond extracurricular activities (e.g., community service, leadership experience, after school clubs), and include responsibilities such as caregiving and after-school work, as well as skills, personality, or interests; and
- Additional race-neutral background information about a student, such as their family income and wealth, data concerning how the neighborhood where they grew up or went to school affected resources available to them and access to education, and what helps inform who they are today, including adversity they have faced and inspiration from lived experiences.

Particularly for institutions that admit a relatively low percentage of those who apply, a variety of philosophies inform how they might select students to improve equitable opportunity and diversity.

[58] Coleman and Keith, "Understanding Holistic Review in Higher Education Admissions," 2017; Bastedo, "The Urgency of Fair and Equitable Holistic Review of College Applicants," 2023.

Institutions could assess applicants for their record of academic success, personal character or hard work, talent, or potential.[59] Colleges and universities committed to recruiting and retaining a diverse class can review their holistic review processes to better reflect individual potential and opportunity and to advance diversity, including socioeconomic, racial, and other forms of diversity, consistent with their missions including by evaluating an applicant's academic accomplishments in the context of their opportunities and financial means. Many institutions already claim to consider these factors in their admissions process. However, for many selective institutions, the socioeconomic and racial diversity of their classes has not reflected the diversity of our nation. Indeed, Ivy-Plus institutions disproportionately enroll applicants from higher incomes while students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to be enrolled in highly selective four-year institutions.[60] Admissions practices may even penalize students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds in their admissions processes when, for example, significantly more weight is provided to the children of alumni. However, academic researchers have estimated the effect of considering other factors, such as socioeconomic status, on improving diversity on campuses. Using a simulation model, the researchers found that placing a meaningful emphasis on socioeconomic status in a holistic admissions process, alongside targeted recruitment efforts, may potentially remedy some of the losses in diversity observed after race-based affirmative action policies have been reversed.[61]

Emphasizing Adversity, Resiliency, and Inspiration

Institutions can continue to use holistic admissions processes to consider how an individual's background reflects their potential and positions them to contribute to campus. In the *SFFA* decision, the Court stated, "nothing in [its] opinion should be construed as prohibiting universities from considering an applicant's discussion of how race affected his or her life, be it through discrimination, inspiration, or otherwise." When selecting among qualified applicants, institutions can review how factors such as overcoming adversity, demonstrating resilience when facing challenges, and responding to inspiration can contribute to assessing an applicant's potential success in and contributions to the institution's academic programs.

If a student has overcome significant adversity on their path to education, institutions can recognize and value these experiences in order to expand opportunity and be engines of upward mobility. Considerations of adversity, resiliency, and inspiration may include factors such as:

- The financial means of a student or their family;
- Whether a student grew up in a low-income community or attended an under-resourced high school; and
- Personal experience of hardship or discrimination, including but not limited to racial discrimination, that a student may have faced.

Personal experiences can also include a student's persistence against challenges, academic or otherwise, and specific motivators that inspire applicants, such as from their home life or communities.

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[59] Perfetto et al., "Toward a Taxonomy of the Admissions Decision-Making Process," 1999.
[60] Chetty, Deming, and Friedman., "Diversifying Society's Leaders? The Causal Effects of Admission to Highly Selective Private Colleges," 2023; McFarland, et al., "The Condition of Education," 2019.
[61] Reardon, et al., "Can Socioeconomic Status Substitute for Race in Affirmative Action College Admissions Policies? Evidence from a Simulation Model," 2017.

A student's lived experience can outline how they demonstrated resiliency in responding to adversity or the inspiration they derive from their community, including how they positively see themselves and what they would like to contribute to campus or society in their future endeavors. For example, a student's career path or interests could be inspired by the cultural assets the student brings to campus, such as languages spoken at home, traditions and cultural practices, commitments to serving their community, or whether they are the first generation in their family to attend or graduate college. A low-income student in an under-resourced school would not have the same access to opportunities as more privileged students, and therefore may demonstrate more perseverance and determination that prepares the student for college-level work.

Consideration of adversity, resiliency, and inspiration allows for evaluation of hardships applicants may have overcome that can be indicative of their capacity for success and persistence in rigorous academic environments. These considerations also take into account that applicants may not have had the same access to college preparatory classes or other school resources. For example, the opportunities available in K–12 schools often reflect longstanding socioeconomic and racial inequities. Disparities in K–12 school funding generally correlate to unequal college attainment and economic outcomes for low-income students and students of color when they reach adulthood.[62] Access to college preparatory coursework can be associated with college admission and future success, and low-income students and students of color disproportionately attend schools with less advanced coursework and that could be more likely to track low-income students and students of color into non-college preparatory classes.[63] Institutions can consider how their admissions processes can identify and admit students who have the perseverance, talent, and potential for college success and how to take into account inequitable access to high school opportunities. Institutions can use information from the application process to understand a student's experience with adversity, resiliency, and inspiration without having to rely on a student raising or discussing their personal experience themselves, as discussed later in the report.

Colleges and universities can continue to consider aspects of a student's lived experience as part of their admissions process. As the Department of Education and Department of Justice Questions and Answers resource regarding the Supreme Court's *SFFA* (August 2023) states:

> [U]niversities may continue to embrace appropriate considerations through holistic application-review processes and (for example) provide opportunities to assess how applicants' individual backgrounds and attributes—including those related to their race, experiences of racial discrimination, or the racial composition of their neighborhoods and schools—position them to contribute to campus in unique ways.[64]

The resource goes on to describe examples of what this might look like, noting that a university could consider how a student being the first Black violinist in their city youth orchestra or

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[62] Jackson, Johnson, and Persico, "The Effects of School Spending on Educational and Economic Outcomes: Evidence from School Finance Reforms," 2015.
[63] Attewell and Domina, "Raising the Bar: Curricular Intensity and Academic Performance," 2008; Long, Conger, and Iatarola, "Effects of High School Course-Taking on Secondary and Postsecondary Success," 2012; Rodriguez and McGuire, "More Classes, More Access? Understanding the Effects of Course Offerings on Black-White Gaps in Advanced Placement Course-Taking" 2019.
[64] U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights and U.S. Department of Justice, "Questions and Answers Regarding the Supreme Court's Decision in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. Harvard College and University of North Carolina,*" 2023.

overcoming prejudice when transferring to a rural high school where they were the only student of South Asian descent could impact a student's life and future goals. An applicant's personal experiences with hardship or discrimination, including racial discrimination, and their ability to overcome those experiences may speak to their perseverance and resilience, demonstrating their ability to thrive academically and more broadly add value to the campus community. An institution could also consider the way a student discusses how learning to cook traditional Hmong dishes from their grandparent sparked their passion for food and connected them to past generations of their family.[65] These sources of inspiration can add to the diversity and vibrancy of the college community and, in so doing, can deeply impact the experiences of their peers.

Taking into Account Adversity, Resiliency, and Inspiration

Institutions can give more consideration to a student's experiences with adversity, resiliency, and inspiration through strategies such as:

- Increasing emphasis on adversity, resiliency, and inspiration in admissions by placing a student's achievement in context based on the educational opportunities available to them;
- Assessing qualitative measures of students' experiences such as through the use of personal statements; and
- Training staff, faculty, and supplemental readers involved in undergraduate and graduate admissions processes on how to assess applications consistently.

Increase Emphasis on Adversity, Resiliency, and Inspiration by Placing Student Achievement in Context. While there is no commonly accepted inventory or weighting of adversity measures, research suggests that providing information on applicants' background, such as their high school or neighborhood, allows admissions reviewers a consistent way to put students in context.[66] Important measures for institutions to consider may include items such as:

- **The financial means of a student or their family** including family income and wealth, whether a student was on free or reduced-price lunch, and in certain cases, whether a student is the first generation in their family to attend or complete college;
- **Whether a student grew up in a low-income community or attended an under-resourced high school** including the percentage of students in a high school receiving free and reduced-price lunch, availability of college preparatory coursework, academic achievement data about the school, or neighborhood socioeconomic indicators such as median family income or college attainment levels; and
- **Experiences of hardship or discrimination, including but not limited to racial discrimination,** including experiences of adversity, resiliency, or inspiration that shape the applicant's contribution to higher education and are often assessed through personal statements and admissions essays, letters of recommendation, and interviews.

One way to understand the context of a student's experiences is to provide application reviewers with useful information about applicants' opportunities and potential access to resources. High

[65] U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights and U.S. Department of Justice, "Questions and Answers Regarding the Supreme Court's Decision in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. Harvard College and University of North Carolina,*" 2023.

[66] Long, "Is There a 'Workable' Race-Neutral Alternative to Affirmative Action in College Admissions?" 2015; Reardon, "What Levels of Racial Diversity Can Be Achieved with Socioeconomic-Based Affirmative Action? Evidence from a Simulation Model," 2018.

school counselors typically provide information sheets on undergraduate applicants to college admission officers that contain background data on the student's high school. Some institutions have started to use more comprehensive information dashboards that provide consistent, standardized information on applicants that is centralized for application reviewers. These dashboards, which can be created internally by an institution or sourced by an external provider, typically draw from publicly available federal data but could have limitations such as only containing information on students who have taken college entrance tests.

Putting student achievement in context is not a new approach. In states that limited the use of race in admissions, institutions often responded by implementing new forms of holistic review that better reflect potential such as changing the weight of admissions factors to better account for student experience or using additional information on applications to put student achievement in the context of their educational opportunity.[67] In California, UC campuses instituted a comprehensive review process where applicants' academic factors would be placed in the context of their available opportunities, with some campuses going further by assigning a score to applicants based on a combination of criteria, such as high school courses taken, but with no single factor receiving a determinative weight. The UC campuses that instituted this kind of review, where students' opportunities provided context to academic indicators, reported 7 percent more students of color enrolled on average over a 15-year period.[68] Additionally, preliminary research in field experiments of admissions officers suggests that when presented with contextual information for each applicant, application reviewers were more likely to recommend applicants from schools and neighborhood contexts with more socioeconomic challenges, particularly when using a holistic rather than formulaic approach to admissions.[69]

While the U.S. Department of Education does not endorse any particular product or service, there may be a variety of tools available to institutions that could facilitate the ability to put students' achievement in context beyond those that have been currently studied. Institutions can also consider how they can leverage publicly available data, such as from the National Center on Education Statistics, to enhance holistic review. The Department's CRDC contains information about high school opportunity such as math and science course-taking, advanced placement, and SAT/ACT taking by high school and school district.

Comprehensive dashboards could include socioeconomic information at both the individual and family-level. Individual-level indicators could include those collected through other benefits and administrative forms, as allowable by law, to which an institution has access, such as familial income and familial assets. Since research suggests that channels of intergenerational wealth transmission are often concentrated in early life investments, especially education, data concerning familial wealth and assets could provide insight into the level of educational adversity faced by an applicant during their formative years.[70] These wealth gaps are particularly persistent for Black individuals and interacts acutely with college access and success.[71] Neighborhood or local level indicators are also important, such as the percentage of a high school's students who receive free and reduced-price lunch,

[67] Long and Tienda, "Winners and Losers: Changes in Texas University Admissions Post-Hopwood," 2008.
[68] Bleemer, "Affirmative Action and Its Race-Neutral Alternatives," 2023
[69] Bastedo, et al., "Admitting Students in Context: Field Experiments on Information Dashboards in College Admissions," 2022.
[70] Pfeffer and Killewald, "Generations of Advantage. Multigenerational Correlations in Family Wealth," 2018.
[71] Levine and Ritter, "The Racial Wealth Gap, Financial Aid, and College Access," 2022.

availability of college preparatory coursework at an applicant's high school, or neighborhood socioeconomic indicators such as median family income or college attainment levels. Institutions could also receive academic achievement data about the school, so they can put an applicant's academic indicators such as test scores in context relative to the high school they come from, in addition to comparing them to the whole applicant pool. This can help institutions understand how a student's achievement compare to their immediate peers given resource differentials between high schools.

It is recommended that institutions do their own diligence in evaluating what kinds of information services may work best for them to achieve the goal of having useful contextual data on every applicant including how they can access publicly available data when appropriate.

Admitting more socioeconomically diverse students can often require both making changes to admissions considerations as well as providing financial aid to more students of limited means. Some research suggests that although applicants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds received increased probability of admission when admissions officers were given additional contextual information, this may not have translated into increased enrollment in the schools that did not also use the background data for financial aid decisions.[72] This suggests that schools will have to also meet students' financial needs to ensure admits become enrollees, as discussed later in the report.

One example of a method to ascertain student's experience with adversity could be when a graduate school uses questions on the application about a student's background, such as whether they received a fee waiver or whether they received need-based financial aid in college.[73] Incorporating this information into holistic admissions processes could help place an applicant's undergraduate GPA and/or required graduate admissions tests in context as a way to account for differences in opportunity that are related to academic achievement. While the specific approach used should be carefully studied and approached, including through institutions doing appropriate modeling and simulation, colleges and universities can consider how ascertaining measures of adversity and considering them appropriately can work in admissions going forward.

Qualitative Measures of Students' Contributions. Beyond placing academic achievement in the context of students' neighborhood and school, institutions can also still understand students' lived experience through more qualitative components of an application process, such as personal statements and admissions essays, letters of recommendation, and interviews. These application components can serve as another source to assess students' experiences, including their experiences with adversity, resiliency, and inspiration, that may contribute to the campus community and institutional needs. Institutions can consider how they can provide opportunities for students to express their whole selves, including what inspires them to pursue further education, the adversities they may have overcome, and the perspective they will bring to enrich the student body. Institutions can also make clear to applicants that they do not need to avoid discussing inspiration or adversity, including racial discrimination, as these experiences may be an important part of what has shaped the applicant's preparation for higher education.

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[72] Mabel et al., "Can Standardizing Applicant High School and Neighborhood Information Help to Diversify Selective Colleges," 2022.

[73] Fenton et al., "Reducing Medical School Admissions Disparities in an Era of Legal Restrictions: Adjusting for Applicant Socioeconomic Disadvantage," 2016.

There is little research on the characteristics of an effective essay prompt or how institutions should best use the personal statement. Institutions have reported re-evaluating their essay questions for the coming admissions cycle to gather more information on students' lived experience.[74] After Florida and Washington limited the use of race in college admissions, institutions in those states added essays to their application to assess students' experiences with adversity.[75] Some evidence has called into question whether the content and style of college essays might signal the opportunities associated with socioeconomic class, given that high-income students often can have more access to college counseling and coaching that can enhance their personal statement.[76] As institutions look to the personal statement as a source of information on students' lived experiences, they can consider how to work together to build the information base on how to design effective prompts and ensure that essays are evaluated holistically to take into account a student's educational opportunity and access to college counseling resources.

Effective Training of Admissions Reviewers. Institutions can also consider how they can provide training and support to admissions officers and application reviewers to ensure that all individuals involved in undergraduate and graduate admissions decisions are aligned with the institution's mission of increasing opportunity and diversity.

While there is limited research on the effectiveness of admissions training on diversity outcomes, admissions officers have reported in surveys and interviews that they either do not receive enough professional development or that they doubt the effectiveness of training they do receive, particularly training regarding diversity and inclusion.[77] Some research conducted in field experiment settings has suggested that, when admissions officers are primed, or informed ahead of time, about the use of background information, they are more likely to recommend students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds particularly if they are at a school that uses a more holistic rather than formulaic model of admissions.[78] This suggests that the use of holistic review and context data could be enhanced by admissions officers and application reviewers becoming informed on how the financial means of a student, whether a student grew up in an under-resourced neighborhood or attended an under-resourced high school, and the experiences with hardships a student had helps put their achievement in context.

Training is also an important consideration at the graduate level, particularly in academic fields where faculty lead admissions processes. Faculty involved in graduate admissions programs can use and define terms like "fit" and "merit" to describe applicants in ways that emphasize indicators of privilege and affect how students from diverse backgrounds are evaluated and recruited.[79] For example, applicants may be judged on the perceived quality of their undergraduate institution, such

[74] Hartocollis and Edmonds, "Colleges Want to Know More About You and Your 'Identity'," 2023.
[75] Long, "Affirmative Action and Its Alternatives in Public Universities: What Do We Know?," 2007.
[76] Alvero et al., "Essay Content and Style Are Strongly Related to Household Income and SAT Scores: Evidence from 60,000 Undergraduate Applications," 2021; McDonough, *Choosing Colleges: How Social Class and Schools Structure Opportunity*, 1999.
[77] Lee et al., "More Than Marketing: Professional Development and Learning to Integrate Diversity," 2022; National Association for College Admission Counselors, "DEI Challenges in the College Admission Counseling Profession," 2022.
[78] Bastedo et al., "Admitting Students in Context: Field Experiments on Information Dashboards in College Admissions," 2022.
[79] Posselt, *Inside Graduate Admissions*, 2016.

as when medical schools are less likely to admit applicants who started at community colleges.[80] Research on graduate admissions has also described the tendency for some faculty and applicant reviewers to evaluate applicants based on how similar they are to current faculty or reviewers.[81]

In doctoral program admissions, one promising practice has been the strong use of rubrics, or tools that guide consistent reviews of materials.[82] Rubrics help standardize what information faculty receive on applicants and how faculty reviewers can consistently assess the information.[83] These processes are designed to contribute to more equitable assessments of students' potential contributions to the program, rather than relying on measures that may be more tied to privilege.[84] Given the decentralized nature of many graduate admission programs, institutions should ensure consistent training of faculty and staff on the evaluation processes of graduate program applicants.

Reconsidering Practices That May Negatively Impact Diversity

As institutions re-examine their admissions policies and practices to continue building a diverse campus community post *SFFA*, they can examine whether admissions processes run counter to efforts to provide equal opportunities for all students. Many admissions practices give a leg up to privileged students who come from highly educated families; those who come from families with substantial economic means; those who are children of alumni of institutions, or legacies; those who have the ability to take standardized tests multiple times; and those who attended well-resourced elementary and secondary schools that offered coursework and college preparation that low-income students may not have access to. Higher education institutions can consider re-examining these practices for their alignment with increasing diversity. Leaders can consider actions such as:

- Reevaluating legacy admissions preferences;
- Reassessing the use of entrance exams (e.g., SAT, ACT, GRE);
- Reconsidering the use of early acceptance programs; and
- Implementing alternative assessments for K–12 coursework pre-requisites.

Reevaluating Legacy Admission Preferences

Institutions are encouraged to assess whether admissions practices are consistent with institutional goals and missions related to recruiting, admitting, and graduating diverse student bodies. There is a growing body of evidence that some practices, such as preferences in admissions for legacy candidates or the relatives of alumni, may further advantage privileged communities in a manner that is at odds with expanding educational opportunity. (There are other While the exact number of institutions with legacy admissions is not well documented, one analysis of the Common Data Set,

[80] Talamantes et al., "Community College Pathways," 2014.
[81] Posselt, *Inside Graduate Admissions,* 2016.
[82] For more on general discussions of evaluative rubrics in education, see: Culpepper, et al., "Do Rubrics Live up to Their Promise?" 2023; Quinn, "Experimental Evidence on Teachers' Racial Bias in Student Evaluation," 2020.
[83] Posselt et al., "Evaluation and Decision Making in Higher Education: Toward Equitable Repertoires of Faculty Practice," 2020.
[84] Posselt et al., "Equity Efforts as Boundary Work: How Symbolic and Social Boundaries Shape Access and Inclusion in Graduate Education," 2017.

which asks institutions to indicate what factors they consider in admissions, suggested that over 700 colleges and universities reported having preferences for children of alumni.[85]

Research on legacy admissions shows that legacy status is associated with a boost in admissions rates compared to non-legacy students.[86] An analysis of selective colleges suggests Asian American applicants have lower odds of acceptance than similarly qualified white students, attributed in part to white students being more likely than Asian students to have legacy status.[87] At Ivy League and "Ivy-Plus" institutions, research suggests that high-income legacy admits are five times more likely to be admitted than similarly qualified non-legacy applicants.[88]

For selective institutions where every detail on an application can help a student stand out from their peers, using admission practices that favor legacy students can perpetuate the cycle of excluding underserved students from higher education opportunities and can run counter to institutional goals of creating a socioeconomically and racially diverse campus.

Johns Hopkins University ended its legacy admission preferences in 2014 as part of its efforts to make the university more accessible to qualified students from all backgrounds. A third-party analysis has shown that, since ending legacy admissions, Johns Hopkins University increased the share of Pell Grant recipients from 13 percent to 22 percent and increased the share of Black, Latino, and Native American students from 18 percent to 34 percent of their student body. The percentage of legacy admits decreased from 9 percent to less than 2 percent of all students.[89]

When institutions decide to end their legacy admissions practices, they should consider exploring opportunities for targeted outreach and additional financial support for low-income and first-generation students. In July 2023, after the *SFFA* decision, Wesleyan University also announced its decision to end the practice of legacy admissions. Wesleyan, for example, coupled its announcement with highlighting its efforts to strengthen outreach to community-based organizations, college access programs, Title I high schools, its community college and veteran recruiting programs, and its prison education program. Ending legacy admissions could be just one step to diversify the applicant pool, and institutions are encouraged to combine this step with other strategies described throughout this report to ensure students from all backgrounds have the opportunities and resources available to seek higher education. Institutions can also consider how other admissions practices, such as donor preferences, may benefit more affluent students.

Reassessing the Use of Entrance Exams

In addition to reevaluating legacy admissions, institutions can analyze the impact of entrance examinations such as the SAT and ACT, as well as graduate admission exams such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), Law School Admission Test (LSAT), or Medical College Admission Test (MCAT).

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[85] Murphy, "The Future of Fair Admissions Issue Brief 2: Legacy Preferences," 2022.
[86] Espenshade, Chung, and Walling, "Admission Preferences for Minority Students, Athletes, and Legacies at Elite Universities," 2004; Hurwitz, "The Impact of Legacy Status on Undergraduate Admissions at Elite Colleges and Universities," 2011.
[87] Grossman et al., "The Disparate Impacts of College Admissions Policies on Asian American Applicants," 2023.
[88] Chetty, Deming, and Friedman "Diversifying Society's Leaders? The Causal Effects of Admission to Highly Selective Private Colleges," 2023.
[89] Svrluga and Anderson, "Racial Diversity Surged at Johns Hopkins in the Last Decade. Will it Last?" 2023.

Institutions reevaluating their reliance on entrance exams may have some concerns that high school GPAs and other measures of academic success are not consistent across high schools. However, research suggests that high school GPA can have strong predictive validity in assessing students' academic potential for college.[90] Institutions can consider test-optional or test-free policies as a practice to diversify their applicant pool while still maintaining rigorous academic environments. While the adoption of test-optional policies is relatively new, there has been initial research showing a 3 to 4 percent increase in Pell Grant recipients and a 10 to 12 percent increase in students of color admitted.[91]

Students who retake the SAT remain at a competitive advantage due to admissions practices at most universities that apply "super scoring" where only the highest score achieved within each section of the exam is used. While retaking the SAT is associated with increases in scores, low-income students are less likely to retake the exam. Retake rates increase with income, and many low-income students do not use the available fee waiver.[92] Retake rates are slightly lower for the ACT than for the SAT, but there are similar indicators of socioeconomic and racial gaps among students who do retake.[93] Differences in scores and retake rates between groups may also reflect differential access to test preparation opportunities and high school curriculum that aligns with the test topics. Black students, on average, score lower on the SAT than their white peers, and low-income students on average score lower than high income students.[94] In addition, students of color are 9 percent less likely to retake the SAT than white students.[95]

While institutions may have some interest in standardizing measures of student achievement, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of four-year colleges and universities that reduced their emphasis on standardized tests nearly doubled to more than 1,300 institutions.[96] Test policies that institutions could consider include:

- **Test-optional**: applicants can choose whether or not to submit their scores; for those who do submit, those scores will be considered as a part of the admission process.
- **Test-flexible**: applicants can choose to submit ACT, SAT, or scores on a range of other tests that will be considered in the admission process.
- **Test-free**: applicants may submit test scores, but those scores will not be considered in the admission process.

Institutions can consider various approaches to testing as they think through their admissions processes.

While the GRE may have some predictive validity for first-year graduate grades, it has limited association with long-term outcomes of graduate education, such as productivity and completion,

[90] Allensworth and Clark, "High School GPAs and ACT Scores as Predictors of College Completion: Examining Assumptions About Consistency Across High Schools," 2020.
[91] Bennett, "Untested Admissions: Examining Changes in Application Behaviors and Student Demographics Under Test-Optional Policies," 2021.
[92] Goodman, Gurantz, and Smith,"Take Two! SAT Retaking and College Enrollment Gaps," 2019.
[93] Harmston and Crouse, "Multiple Testers: What Do We Know About Them?" 2016.
[94] Dixon-Romàn, Everson, and McArdle, "Race, Poverty and SAT Scores," 2013.
[95] Goodman, Gurantz, and Smith,"Take Two! SAT Retaking and College Enrollment Gaps," 2019.
[96] Lovell and Mallinson, "How Test-Optional College Admissions Expanded During the COVID-19 Pandemic," 2021.

and is less valid when study samples contain more diverse students.[97] Thus, when these scores are a major factor in admissions criteria, institutions may be limited in how they can fully assess the contributions of underrepresented students to graduate programs, which may make it more difficult to recruit students to apply to the program moving forward.[98] Institutions can consider how they may in some cases change the policies regarding the use of graduate entrance exams, such as graduate programs that have stopped using the GRE; provide flexibilities, such as law schools that allow students to submit either the GRE or the LSAT; or change emphasis on test scores, such as when medical schools use holistic admissions criteria to place MCAT scores in context.

Reconsidering Early Application Programs

Institutions should consider evaluating the impact of early admission policies, as well as the practice of prioritizing applicants who have shown "demonstrated interest." Colleges that reward demonstrated interest, often shown through campus visits or interviews, may want to consider the impact these practices have on low-income students, as well as rural students, for whom it is more difficult or not financially possible to make multiple college visits. Institutions can broaden how they measure "demonstrated interest" to be more inclusive of students from underrepresented backgrounds (e.g., by considering virtual visits and engagement).

Many selective colleges and universities set multiple deadlines for application. Those applicants who apply early decision receive early notification of the admissions decision and make a commitment to attend if admitted. Early action programs offer similar early acceptance notification but are nonbinding. Previous research has found that the characteristics of students associated with enrolling through an early admissions program include markers of privilege: being from a higher socioeconomic background, receiving private college counseling, or attending a high-resourced high school.[99] Low-income students may wish to compare financial aid packages across institutions before committing, making it more difficult to take advantage of early admission programs, particularly those with binding decisions like early decision.

Reconsidering early admissions programs that require students to commit to an admissions decision without the ability to compare financial aid packages could be part of a comprehensive strategy for institutions looking to advance diversity. In early August 2023, Virginia Tech announced it would end legacy admissions and replace its early decision program with early action, with the institution stating that it was doing so to attempt to level the playing field for students regardless of income.[100] While it is too early to know the impact of these changes, these kinds of announcements suggest the kinds of considerations institutions can make in the coming school years to expand opportunity for a more socioeconomically and racially diverse student body.

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[97] Feldon, et al., "The Predictive Validity of the GRE Across Graduate Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis of Trends Over Time," 2023.
[98] Posselt, *Inside Graduate Admissions*, 2016.
[99] Park and Eagan, "Who Goes Early? A Multi-Level Analysis of Enrolling via Early Action and Early Decision Admissions" 2011.
[100] Virginia Tech University, "Virginia Tech Implements Changes to Undergraduate Admissions Process for 2023–24 Admissions Cycle," 2023.

Consider Implementing Alternative Assessments to K-12 Prerequisites

In addition to reforming admissions practices to attract a diverse applicant pool, institutions should also consider the implications of policies on students who have the qualifications to contribute to a higher education institution and come from under-resourced elementary and secondary schools. Thirty-seven percent of Black students and 38 percent of Hispanic students attend a high poverty school, compared to 13 percent of Asian students and 7 percent of white students.[101] High poverty schools are less likely to offer AP courses and other advanced level classes that both help a student prepare for college or even more importantly, meet admissions requirements or major prerequisite requirements.[102] The most recent Department of Education CRDC College and Career Readiness Data show that nearly 15 percent of high schools do not offer Algebra I and 20 percent of high schools do not offer Algebra II. Only 50 percent of high schools offer calculus courses.[103] Students from under-resourced schools can still demonstrate readiness and preparation for college.

While completion of high school coursework can be one way to ascertain college readiness, higher education institutions with admissions requirements that include certain advanced coursework, such as a calculus course, can be narrowing opportunities for students who attended schools where these courses are not offered. In the state context, coursework requirements for high school graduation that are not aligned with postsecondary entrance requirements could be another barrier. To open the door for a more diverse pool of low-income students and students of color to be considered for admission, institutions can consider how they can put completion of high school courses in the context of available opportunities including by allowing for alternative ways for students to demonstrate mastery of subject matter or potential for college-level work. For example, the California Institute of Technology recently announced that it would remove admissions requirements for calculus, chemistry, and physics courses due to unequal access to these courses in high school. The university will provide alternative ways students can demonstrate they have mastery in these subjects, including through taking an approved free online course or passing an approved alternative assessment.

Alternative Admissions Policies

States and institutions can also consider how they can streamline admissions processes to make the college application process easier for students, particularly for first-generation students or low-income students who may have less access to or familiarity with college application processes. Some strategies states have pursued entail automatic or near-automatic admission for students if they meet pre-determined criteria. While the ultimate impact of these programs is still being evaluated, what is clear is that students face a difficult maze of admissions and financial aid requirements on the road to college.[104] Alleviating these burdens can help facilitate an easier path to college by making confusing admissions policies more transparent. However, states and institutions should exercise caution in how they design these programs to ensure they are not reinforcing inequity by benefiting

[101] National Center for Education Statistics, "Concentration of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch," 2023; Note that there are typically substantial differences in educational and economic outcomes among Asian American subgroups.
[102] US Government Accountability Office, "Public High Schools with More Students in Poverty and Smaller Schools Provide Fewer Academic Offerings to Prepare for College," 2018.
[103] U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, "Civil Rights Data Collection," 2018.
[104] Klasik, "The College Application Gauntlet," 2012.

predominately students from higher income families or those with the most educational opportunities.

Direct Admissions

One promising strategy for increasing enrollment is direct admissions. Several states have direct admissions programs that provide guaranteed admission for students graduating from in-state high schools if they meet minimum admission requirements set by colleges, such as a threshold high school GPA or class rank. States can facilitate the identification of qualified students from shared data systems between the K–12 and higher education systems. Students then receive communication as early as fall of their senior year that they will be proactively admitted to the institutions for which they qualify.

In one model, for example, all students who graduate from a high school in the state could be admitted to open-access or broad-access institutions such as community colleges, while students who surpass minimum achievement levels are automatically admitted to more selective state institutions.

Because of the recency of direct admissions programs, evidence is only just now emerging on their effectiveness. Early outcomes from Idaho, one of the earliest adopting states, show first-time undergraduate enrollments increased by 4 to 8 percent after the establishment of a direct admissions program, though these enrollment gains were mostly concentrated in the two-year sector.[105] In another study on institutions in four states implementing a direct admissions model, students created a Common Application profile with their preliminary information including their high school achievement information. Students who met their state university's minimum GPA requirement and received a direct admission offer were 12 percent more likely to apply to college.[106] These application effects were higher for first-generation students, low-income students, and students of color. Importantly, however, this practice did not affect enrollment of these groups, suggesting that financial aid still plays a factor in students' college decisions even when receiving guaranteed admission.

As additional states consider the adoption of direct admissions programs, it will be important to align implementation with emerging best practices and evaluate the effectiveness of programs when implemented. To date, proponents of direct admissions programs argue that those programs should have practices that ensure the program lives up to the promise of streamlining the application process for students. For example, direct admissions programs should be proactive, guaranteed, universal, transparent, simple and personalized, low-cost, and involve trusted adults (i.e., parents/guardians and school teachers are involved in the process).[107] These practices can offer students clear opportunities to enroll while also clarifying for students, teachers, and school leaders the academic expectations for college readiness more broadly.

[105] Odle and Delaney, "You are Admitted! Early Evidence on Enrollment from Idaho's Direct Admissions System" 2021.
[106] Odle and Delaney, "Experimental Evidence on 'Direct Admissions' from Four States: Impacts on College Application and Enrollment," 2023.
[107] Delaney and Odle, "Direct admissions: Proactively pushing students into college," 2022.

Top Percent Plans

One strategy state governments may want to consider is implementing top percent plans. These programs, which have been implemented in states such as California, Florida, Texas, and Washington guarantee admission to the public universities in the state to the students at the top of their high school classes. These plans can leverage socioeconomic and racial stratification across schools within the state, regardless of resources, to increase admissions of high-performing students from under-resourced schools to state institutions. These plans can increase admissions of high-performing students from under-resourced schools to state institutions rather than those institutions serving only select schools and communities.

Evidence on the outcomes associated with top percent plans with regard to enrollment of low-income students and students of color is limited. California's Top 4 Percent Plan was associated with an estimated increase in enrollment of students of color of less than four percent (while the previous use of race in admissions increased underrepresented racial minority enrollment by nearly 20 percent).[108] Other studies of top percent plans find that the plans recover approximately one-third of the racial diversity lost after adoption of state-level restrictions on the consideration of race in admissions.[109] Research on the Texas Top Percent rule has also shown that top percent plans can not only increase enrollment, but there is also evidence of earnings gains for some students due to attending a flagship university.[110]

[108] Bleemer, "Affirmative Action and Its Race Neutral Alternatives," 2023.
[109] Long, "Race and College Admissions: An Alternative to Affirmative Action?," 2004; Long, "Affirmative Action and Its Alternatives in Public Universities: What Do We Know?," 2007.
[110] Black, Denning, and Rothstein, "Winners and Losers? The Effect of Gaining and Losing Access to Selective Colleges on Education and Labor Market Outcomes," 2020.

Lowering the Cost of College and Providing Equitable Funding

The cost of college has become one of the biggest obstacles for many individuals interested in pursuing higher education, especially for low-income students and students of color.[111] College costs and borrowing, especially for graduate school, have increased substantially in recent decades. The average tuition and fees at public four-year colleges rose from $4,040 in the 1990-1991 academic year to $11,180 in the 2020-2021 academic year, even after accounting for inflation.[112] Tuition at private non-profit institutions, which have substantially higher prices, has more than doubled.[113] The average amount borrowed in Federal loans annually has nearly tripled over that same time period, from $2,210 to $6,307 (in 2021 dollars).[114] As more students have had to rely on loans to pay for postsecondary education and have subsequently struggled to manage and repay their loans, there is growing concern among students and families about the value of a college degree when accompanied by burdensome debt.[115] Even before a student applies to college, there is evidence from academic research and public polling that students are price sensitive and experience "sticker shock" and the high price of tuition dissuades them from pursuing higher education.[116]

The rising cost of college affects students differently. Students from low-income backgrounds lack the financial resources needed to pay for college, but they are not the only students who struggle to afford higher education. Because of a legacy of systemic racism, lack of wealth-building opportunities, and ongoing disparities in access to economic security, students of color often struggle, even those who might not be considered low-income. Students from underrepresented minority backgrounds whose families have middle-incomes often face substantial gaps in wealth compared to their white peers with similar incomes, making it more difficult to afford higher education and leaving them to bear the brunt of the student loan crisis.[117] For example, Black students completing an undergraduate degree are nearly 40 percent more likely to borrow, and graduate with nearly 80 percent more debt, than white students.[118] Black and Hispanic borrowers default on student loans at a rate that is two to three times higher than white borrowers.[119] Furthermore, low-income students and underrepresented minority students are more likely to face substantial unmet financial need, even after accounting for loans.[120]

Given this context, institutions and states should consider how they can increase affordability for underserved students. Potential strategies may include activities such as:

- Investing in more need-based aid for students;

[111] NORC, "Survey: Americans See Cost as the Biggest Barrier to Higher Education," 2022.
[112] College Board, "Trends in College Pricing, Table CP-3," 2022.
[113] College Board, "Trends in College Pricing, Table CP-3," 2022.
[114] College Board. "Trends in Student Aid, Table 3," 2022.
[115] Gallup, "The State of Higher Education 2023," 2023.
[116] AP-NORC, "Young Americans' Views on the Value of Higher Education," 2019; Hermelt et al., "The Impact of Tuition Increases on Enrollment at Public Colleges and Universities," 2011.
[117] Addo, Houle, and Young, "Young Black, and (Still) in the Red," 2016.; Levine and Ritter, "The Racial Wealth Gap, Financial Aid, and College Access," 2022.
[118] National Postsecondary Student Aid Study 18-AC
[119] Scott-Clayton, "The Looming Student Loan Default Crisis is Worse Than We Thought," 2018.
[120] Long and Riley, "Financial Aid: A Broken Bridge to College Access?" 2007; Walizer, "When Financial Aid Fall Short," 2018.

- Implementing college promise programs;
- Ensuring institutions have the resources needed to keep tuition low, provide sufficient financial aid, and giving students the support they need to complete their credentials; and
- Ensuring transparency and predictability throughout the financial aid lifecycle, from recruitment to graduation.

Need-Based Aid

The evidence shows that lowering the cost of college for students and families through need-based aid increases enrollment, persistence, and completion in higher education.[121] For example, a need-based scholarship for Nebraska students has been shown to increase four-year degree completion by approximately 8 percentage points, and the increases in degree completion were concentrated among students who were otherwise less likely to pursue a four-year degree program.[122] Research has also shown that enrollment of students can increase when institutions provide easily understandable and certain need-based aid.[123] Despite the importance of need-based aid to recruiting and retaining students from diverse backgrounds, research suggests that close to half of financial aid provided today at public universities goes to students who do not need financial support, with universities increasing non-need based aid faster than they do need-based aid.[124]

Institutions should consider increasing their investments in need-based aid as part of their strategy of recruiting and retaining underserved students. Institutions can consider this in their fundraising plans and could consider how their existing endowment funds could be used to accomplish this strategy. While institutions can prioritize their resources to provide need-based aid, because public institutions are heavily reliant on state funding, states should also consider increasing their need-based state financial aid programs to meet this goal. Depending on the state, this also helps students attend private non-profit institutions. Increasing investments in need-based aid is important if institutions and states want to increase enrollment and completion for underserved students.

Several institutions, both public and private non-profit, have implemented no-loan programs that result in increased enrollment of first-generation and low-income students. [125] Generally, these programs provide sufficient grant and scholarship aid to admitted low-income students who choose to enroll to cover any unmet need. Institutional programs have varying degrees of generosity and scope. For instance, some no-loan programs are restricted to students below a certain income threshold, while others are open to all aid-eligible students. Some programs may offer fully funded need-based aid packages, while others place a cap on the costs students must cover using student

[121] Abraham and Clark, "Financial Aid and Students' College Decisions: Evidence from the District of Columbia Tuition Assistance Grant Program," 2006; Dynarski, "Does Aid Matter? Measuring the Effect of Student Aid on College Attendance and Completion" 2003; Nguyen, Kramer, and Evans, "The Effects of Grant Aid on Student Persistence and Degree Attainment," 2019.
[122] Angrist, Autor, and Pallais, "Marginal Effects of Merit Aid for Low-Income Students," 2020.
[123] Dynarski, Page, and Scott-Clayton, "College Costs, Financial Aid, and Student Decisions," 2022.
[124] Burd, "Crisis Point: How Enrollment Management and the Merit Aid Arms Race are Derailing Public Higher Education," 2020.
[125] Bennett, Evans, and Marsicano, "Taken for Granted? Effects of Loan-Reduction Initiatives on Student Borrowing, Admission Metrics, and Campus Diversity," 2021; Hillman, "Economic Diversity in Elite Higher Education: Do No-Loan Programs Impact Pell Enrollments?," 2016; Ortagus and Kramer, "The Impact of No-Loan Program Participation on the Likelihood of Graduate School Enrollment Among Low-Income, First-Generation Students," 2022.

loans. Some institutions may also couple their program with additional student support services and requirements.

Need-based programs, including no-loan initiatives and other grant funding for students that base eligibility or aid levels on the student's demonstrated financial capability, should strive to eliminate or reduce student debt for low-income students. Institutions can craft need-based aid programs that encompass the full spectrum of student need, including by evaluating both parental income and wealth and accounting for gaps in federal and state eligibility determinations that do not capture the full picture of a family's financial situation and therefore a student's ability to pay. Ultimately, institutions should work to ensure they are meeting the full need of underserved students and that students are not penalized in the admissions process because of their ability to pay.[126]

Additionally, some evidence suggests that eligibility requirements in state need-based aid programs, such as including only full-time students, can contribute to racial disparities.[127] States should also consider reviewing their policies on need-based aid to identify unnecessary barriers to access the programs and consider how their programs can fill important gaps in unmet need. As detailed elsewhere in this report, institutions and states can work to make these programs well-known to students and make the process for obtaining aid as simple as possible.

Tuition-Free Programs

One way to lower the cost of college is by creating tuition-free programs, also known as "college promise" programs. College promise programs provide financial aid, typically through a tuition-free guarantee to students within a specified state or locale. More than 400 local college promise programs and more than 30 statewide promise programs currently exist and have been created by states, local governments, and philanthropic efforts. Some programs are limited to community colleges, while others include public and even private non-profit four-year institutions. In some instances, they are targeted towards specific programs, such as those that train students for employment in high-demand fields.[128] Promise programs vary in eligibility requirements and the generosity of the aid provided. For example, they may have income limits or academic requirements. In terms of generosity, some are "first-dollar" where they eliminate tuition before other aid is applied, while others are "last-dollar" and cover remaining tuition not covered by federal or other aid money.

Generally, research finds that promise programs are associated with increases in enrollment and can specifically drive increases in enrollment among students of color.[129] Most of the research has been focused on promise programs that eliminate tuition at community colleges, as those are the most prevalent, though four-year programs have expanded in recent years. Taken together, those studies

[126] Heller, "Financial Aid and Admission: Tuition Discounting, Merit Aid and Need-aware Admission," 2008.
[127] Baum, "Students of Color May Be Disproportionately Harmed by States' Need-Based Aid Eligibility Requirements," 2023.
[128] Work Ready Kentucky, "Work Ready Scholarship Program," 2023.
[129] Andrews, DesJardins, and Ranchhod, "The Effects of Kalamazoo Promise on College Choice," 2010; Bartik, Hershbein, and Lachowska, "The Effects of Kalamazoo Promise Scholarship on College Enrollment and Completion," 2021; Gándara and Li, "Promise for Whom? 'Free College' Programs and Enrollments by Race and Gender Classifications at Public, 2-Year Colleges" 2020.

have found increased enrollment, completion, and even rates of transfer to four-year institutions.[130] Some studies have also shown an increased likelihood of bachelor's degree completion.[131] Moreover, the evidence suggests these results may be particularly promising for students of color.[132] This evidence demonstrates that these programs may be a vital investment to help students, including those who want to ultimately transfer and complete a four-year degree. However, evidence suggests that the different design components of the programs discussed above are likely to be related to how big of an effect they can have.[133] The evidence also suggests that students are more responsive when aid is guaranteed, so these programs may be more effective than other aid programs at inducing students to enroll in higher education.[134]

Direct State Funding for Higher Education Institutions

At a time when states and institutions are assessing how to better recruit and support underserved students, state funding plays a critical role. Most importantly, state funding directly impacts the tuition that students need to pay. Research has shown that for every $1,000 in per student funding that is cut from state higher education appropriations, students pay $257 more in tuition and fees, on average.[135] When states provide sufficient funding to institutions, they help keep higher education more affordable for students. Direct appropriations to institutions can reduce or eliminate tuition, or they can enable institutions to invest in their need-based aid programs. Reducing college costs is also critical to ensure that students enroll and persist in higher education. Research has shown that for every $1,000 decrease in community college tuition, enrollment increased by 5.1 percentage points.[136] Reducing tuition has also been shown to increase transfer from community colleges to four-year colleges and universities. [137] Furthermore, research shows that state investment in higher education provides substantial benefits for states through increased tax revenue and reduced reliance on social programs due to increased earnings of individuals with higher educational attainment.[138] One estimate suggests that governments received more than twice what they would have in tax revenue over the lifetime of an individual who earned a bachelor's degree compared to only having a high school diploma.[139]

Beyond financial aid, state funding for institutions is also important so that colleges and universities have the resources to invest in programs and support services that help students persist and complete their programs. As discussed throughout this report, with adequate funding, institutions

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[130] Bell, "Does Free Community College Improve Student Outcomes?" 2021; Bell and Gándara, "Can Free Community College Close Racial Disparities in Postsecondary Attainment?" 2021; Carruthers and Fox, "Aid for All," 2016.
[131] Bell and Gándara, "Can Free Community College Close Racial Disparities in Postsecondary Attainment? How Tulsa Achieves Affects Racially Minoritized Outcomes" 2021; Bell, "Does Free Community College Improve Student Outcomes?" 2021; Swanson and Ritter, "Start to Finish: Examining the Impact of the El Dorado Promise Program on Postsecondary Outcomes," 2020.
[132] Swanson and Ritter, "Start to Finish: Examining the Impact of the El Dorado Promise Program on Postsecondary Outcomes," 2020; Bell and Gándara, "Can Free Community College Close Racial Disparities in Postsecondary Attainment? How Tulsa Achieves Affects Racially Minoritized Outcomes" 2021.
[133] Swanson, Watson, and Ritter, "Promises Fulfilled? A Systematic Review of the Impacts of Promise Programs," 2020.
[134] Burland et al., "The Power of Certainty: Experimental Evidence on the Effective Design of Free Tuition Programs, 2022.
[135] Webber, "State Divestment and Tuition at Public Universities, 2017.
[136] Denning, "College on the Cheap: Consequences of Community College Tuition Reductions," 2017.
[137] Denning, "College on the Cheap: Consequences of Community College Tuition Reductions," 2017.
[138] Blagg and Blom, "Evaluating the Return on Investment in Higher Education," 2018.
[139] Trostel, "It's Not Just The Money: The Benefits of College Education to Individuals and Society," 2015.

can invest in proven programs to support students, including emergency grant aid, advising, and more. Research has shown that increasing expenditures on higher education to improve quality can increase both enrollment and degree completion.[140] However, while state investment is essential to addressing college affordability, institutions may also need to re-prioritize resources and expand their fundraising efforts and partnerships.

However, state disinvestment in higher education is a serious concern. Recent reports show that 28 states provide less higher education funding than prior to the 2008 Great Recession.[141] Additionally, states have not always provided equitable funding across institutions. States allocate disproportionately lower funding to community colleges and public regional colleges, including HBCUs and MSIs, in comparison to selective universities, despite these open- and broad-access institutions enrolling larger shares of Black, Hispanic/Latino, Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students.[142] This is despite the contribution these institutions make in helping us understand what works to ensure our most underserved students attend and complete college. Yet, in 2015, selective public colleges received per student appropriations that were more than twice that of open-access public colleges.[143]

Many states have also historically failed to invest equitably in public HBCUs relative to the predominately white flagship institutions.[144] A recent analysis by the U.S. Department of Education showed that states provided between $172 million to $2.1 billion less in state funding to land-grant HBCUs created under the Second Morrill Act of 1890 than to the land-grant institutions founded in 1862 in the state.[145] States have also failed to provide sufficient funding required to receive federal funding under the Second Morrill Act of 1890. For example, one analysis showed that 61 percent of those HBCUs did not receive all of the matching funds from their state.[146] This failure cost those institutions nearly $200 million between 2011 and 2022, according to one estimate.[147] Despite being underfunded and under-resourced, HBCUs have been essential to providing higher education opportunity to Black students and other students of color. For example, 26 percent of Black STEM PhD graduates received their undergraduate degrees from an HBCU.[148] They have also had a significant economic impact for their alumni and the economy.[149]

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[140] Deming and Walters, "The Impact of Price and Spending Cuts on U.S. Postsecondary Attainment," 2017.
[141] State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, "State Higher Education Finance FY 2022," 2023.
[142] Carnevale, et al., "Our Separate and Unequal Public Colleges: How Public Colleges Reinforce White Racial Privilege and Marginalize Black and Latino Students," 2018; Hillman, "Why Rich Colleges Get Richer and Poor Colleges Get Poorer: The Case for Equity-Based Funding in Higher Education," 2020.
[143] Carnevale, et al., "Our Separate and Unequal Public Colleges: How Public Colleges Reinforce White Racial Privilege and Marginalize Black and Latino Students," 2018.
[144] Harris, *The State Must Provide*, 2021.
[145] U.S. Department of Education, "Secretaries of Education, Agriculture Call on Governors to Equitably Fund Land-Grant HBCUs," 2023.
[146] Lee and Keys, "Land-Grant But Unequal: State One-to-One Match Funding for 1890 Land-Grant Universities," 2013.
[147] Smith, "Nourishing the Nation While Starving: The Underfunding of Black Land-Grant Colleges and Universities," 2023.
[148] Einaudi, Gordon, and Kang, "Baccalaureate Origins of Underrepresented Minority Research Doctorate Recipients," 2022.
[149] Saunders and Nagle, "HBCUs Punching Above Their Weight: A State-Level Analysis of Historically Black College and University Enrollment and Graduation," 2018.

TCUs also face funding inequities from states. States have no obligation to fund TCUs and the majority of states provide no funding to them at all.[150] Additionally, federal funding for TCUs is limited and is further exacerbated by only allocating funds based on the number of Native students enrolled. According to Department data, approximately 20 percent of TCU students are non-Native, meaning the formula for federal funds does not account for approximately one-fifth of students at TCUs.[151]

Transparency for Applicants

Some students are discouraged from applying to schools based on the sticker price, which is often higher than a student's true cost after financial aid. Additionally, transparent, clear information on a student's net price can be difficult to find or interpret.[152] The Department's College Scorecard is a free online tool to help students of all ages, families, educators, counselors, and other college access professionals make data-informed decisions when choosing a college or university to attend. States, high schools, and institutions can encourage applicants to use the Scorecard to better understand college costs, student debt, graduation rates, admissions test scores and acceptance rates, student body diversity, post-college earnings, and much more.

Students may also be deterred by onerous financial aid application processes. Applicants need clear information about the intricacies of financial aid, including how to apply and what aid is available. Federal Student Aid is working to launch an improved FAFSA later this year, which will include a more streamlined application process, expanded eligibility for federal student aid, and a new user experience for the FAFSA form. States and institutions can similarly simplify forms that applicants are required to submit. Institutions should better distinguish net price from sticker price on their websites. In addition, they can ensure that potential students are able to easily find understandable information on what need-based aid is available and the criteria for eligibility and selection.

Institutions should also work to ensure that students and families are able to review their financial aid offers, understand the aid they are offered, and the cost to attend so they can make decisions about where to enroll and how to pay for their education. One analysis of financial aid offers found confusing and inconsistent information that made it difficult to interpret the true cost of attending and understand the differences between types of aid such as grants and loans.[153] Financial aid offers should be clear, easily understandable, and adequately reflect all costs, including non-tuition costs, associated with attending the institution. Institutions should review the Department's guidance on financial aid offers and consider adopting the Department's College Financing plan.[154] States can also require that institutions follow best practices on financial aid offers, ensuring that offers are easily understandable and standardized, as much as is practicable, across institutions.[155]

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[150] Nelson and Frye, "Tribal College and University Funding: Tribal Sovereignty at the Intersection of Federal, State, and Local Funding," 2016.
[151] National Center for Education Statistics, "Digest of Education Statistics, Table 312.50," 2022.
[152] Levine, "College Prices Aren't Skyrocketing—But They're Still Too High For Some," 2023; Levine, Ma, and Russell, "Do College Applicants Respond to Changes in Sticker Prices Even When They Don't Matter?" 2020.
[153] Burd et al., "Decoding the Cost of College: The Case for Transparent Financial Aid Award Letters," 2018.
[154] U.S. Department of Education, "GENERAL-21-70: Issuing Financial Aid Offers—What Institutions Should Include and Avoid," 2021.
[155] Cummings et al., "Investigating the Impacts of State Higher Education Appropriations and Financial Aid," 2021.

While providing sufficient need-based aid is important, institutions can also ensure that the availability of aid is widely communicated. For instance, institutions can help ensure that prospective students, their families, and their school counselors are aware of their aid programs and engage in early direct outreach to all stakeholders. Institutions should also consider guaranteed tuition programs that lock in a student's tuition for a specific period of time, typically four years, without increase. While these particular programs come with tradeoffs in their design, having predictable, transparent prices is important for students to understand their upfront costs.[156] For example, researchers found that an upfront guarantee of aid without a complex application at a selective flagship public university increased the application rate of low-income students by 42 percentage points and increased their rate of enrollment by 15 percentage points.[157] By providing an explicit and guaranteed aid package for four years and using regular communication early and throughout the application cycle, institutions can be better positioned to increase the number of low-income, high-achieving students who both apply and enroll.

[156] Delaney, Kearney, and Hemenway, "Balancing Tuition Predictability and Affordability: The Pitfalls of Guaranteed Tuition Plans," 2016.
[157] Dynarski et al., "Closing the Gap: The Effect of Reducing Complexity and Uncertainty in College Pricing on the Choices of Low-Income Students," 2021.

Completion and Climate

A positive and welcoming campus climate can attract students from diverse backgrounds. However, ensuring a diverse campus community is inclusive can be difficult if underrepresented students do not feel like they belong and are not supported through the completion of their credential. By providing comprehensive support to students from under-resourced K-12 schools or who are the first in their family to attend college, colleges and universities can deepen their commitment to diverse student bodies.

While 64 percent of white students graduate with a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution within six years, 54 percent of Hispanic/Latino students, 51 percent of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students, 40 percent of Black students, and 39 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native students do so.[158] Students do not complete their degrees for many reasons, including balancing work and family, childcare costs, needed academic supports, and more. Research shows that, in addition to financial aid, the combination of integrated and intensive advising and support services provided over multiple years can help students overcome barriers and ensure timely progress toward completion.[159] Closing gaps in college completion could have both individual benefits, through increased earnings of graduates, and societal benefits, through increased tax revenue that would pay for the cost of investing in student success.[160] Institutions benefit when students are retained through to completion, as the cost per student decreases (see the discussion below for more details).

To support students' sense of belonging and their college completion, institutions should consider activities such as:

- Developing comprehensive support programs to increase retention and completion rates, particularly for students with the greatest needs;
- Providing support to students to ensure basic needs are met, including offering emergency aid for unexpected expenses; and
- Ensuring campuses provide a welcoming and supportive environment for students from all backgrounds through affinity groups; diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programming; and shared, accessible spaces.

Comprehensive Support Services

Comprehensive support services for student success are designed to improve student completion outcomes by addressing the full range of student needs: academic, social, health, emotional, and economic. Institutions can inventory the supports they currently offer and consider how they can be more comprehensive and coordinated to ensure students who need them can easily understand and

[158] National Center for Education statistics "Indicator 23: Postsecondary Graduation Rates," 2019.
[159] Karp et al., "Effective Advising for Postsecondary Students: A Practice Guide for Educators," 2021; What Works Clearinghouse, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, "Supporting Postsecondary Success Intervention Report: Accelerated Study in Associate Programs," 2020.
[160] Carnevale, et al., "The Cost of Economic and Racial Injustice in Postsecondary Education," 2020.

access them.[161] See the discussion under Data-Driven Retention and Completion Strategies for how to identify which students would benefit from these support services.

There are numerous evidence-based programs being implemented by institutions that can serve as models, even for selective institutions. The City University of New York's (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) model is one of the most researched and well-known models of comprehensive support. An independent evaluation of the program showed this model nearly doubled graduation rates over three years.[162] Another evaluation conducted in 2023 showed strong results at three Ohio community colleges that replicated the CUNY ASAP model—program participants' earnings increased an average of 11 percent and program graduation rates increased over 50 percent.[163] These programs do require an investment from an institution but have been shown to be cost-effective. One analysis on ASAP found that despite the increases in costs needed to implement the program, ultimately the cost per degree decreased. The cost per degree for those in the control group was $25,781 versus $42,065 for ASAP participants. However, 40.1 percent of ASAP participants had earned a degree in three years versus 21.8 percent in the control group. Specifically, the 18.3 percentage point increase in earning a degree was large enough to lower the cost per degree earned by $13,423 (11.4 percent).[164]

The What Works Clearinghouse's Practice Guide on Effective Advising for Postsecondary Students provides evidence-based recommendations to help institutions implement advising reform to improve student outcomes. These include designing and delivering comprehensive, integrated advising that incorporates academic and non-academic supports; transforming advising to develop sustained, personalized relationships with students throughout college; using mentoring and coaching to enhance advising; and embedding positive incentives, such as scholarships connected to specific academic milestones, for students in advising structures.[165]

Some selective institutions are taking steps to implement promising and evidence-based practices to help increase belonging and support for students, although more work needs to be done to ensure these practices are having an impact on the retention and completion rates for underrepresented students. For example, Brown University is making institutional shifts to level the playing field for students once they are admitted.[166] The institution has established an Undocumented, First-Generation College and Low-Income Student Center to ensure students who identify with the experiences of these populations have shared physical space and programming that connects students with each other and opportunities and resources around campus.

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[161] American Association of State Colleges and Universities, "Senior Leadership Guidebook for Holistic Advising Redesign," 2021; Community College Research Center, Implementing Holistic Support: A Practitioner's Guide to Key Structure and Processes," 2017.

[162] Scrivener, et al., "Doubling Graduation Rates: Three-Year Effects of CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for Developmental Education Students," 2015.

[163] Hill, Sommo, and Warner, "From Degrees to Dollars: Six-Year Findings from the ASAP Ohio Demonstration," 2023.

[164] Scrivener, et al., "Doubling Graduation Rates: Three-Year Effects of CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for Developmental Education Students," 2015.

[165] Karp et al., "Effective Advising for Postsecondary Students: A Practice Guide for Educators," 2021.

[166] During the National Summit on Equal Opportunity in Higher Education hosted at the U.S. Department of Education on July 26, 2023, President Christina H. Paxson spoke about these changes being implemented on campus.

The University of Texas at Austin made efforts to create an inclusive climate supporting a large population. They expanded their typical counseling support programs to also provide specialized services through identity-based support groups, faculty and staff diversity trainings, and outreach to students to make them aware that these resources exist.[167]

Data-Driven Retention and Completion Strategies

Using data and early warning systems to identify and provide targeted support to students at risk of dropping out can be another method of increasing completion rates. Data can be used to identify students who need additional supports or advising and to promote equity and inclusion to close achievement gaps. Comprehensive advising typically also requires institutions to assess and upgrade their ability to collect and use real-time data and technology to connect the right supports to the right students at the right time.

Institutions can focus on a wide array of data points that inform additional supports and outreach that students may need. Key focus areas that have been shown to be useful in early warning systems include pre-enrollment data such as high school GPA, academic data once enrolled, self-reported data about motivation, information on use of campus resources such as a writing or career center, and attendance at campus events and on-campus engagement.[168] This information can be helpful to identify students who are at risk of dropping out and connect them to campus academic and non-academic resources.[169]

Georgia State University created a graduation and progression system advising tool that allows advisors to provide students with individualized academic guidance. Their data-informed student success initiatives have been estimated to have saved students approximately $12 million in tuition by accelerating their graduation timeline.[170] They were also able to eliminate completion gaps for first-generation students, low-income students, and students of color. Key principles for the success of Georgia State's initiative were buy-in from leadership and system-wide commitment to supporting underserved students, which involved cross-functional teams, and effective data warehousing.[171] The Georgia State model has influenced and guided the use of data and predictive analytics for institutions across the country.

Morgan State University is also taking a data-driven approach to increasing completion rates through its "50 by 25" Initiative. The initiative uses predictive analytics and early warning systems to proactively identify students in need of targeted support and subsequently provide such services. Morgan State reports that its graduation rate rose from 29 to 46 percent in ten years.[172]

While predictive analytics and early warning systems show promise for aspects of higher education like improving retention and completion and distributing intuitional aid, institutions should be

[167] Lipson et al., "Investing in Student Mental Health: Opportunities & Benefits for College Leadership," 2019.
[168] Burke et al., "Predictive Analysis of Student Data: A Focus on Engagement and Behaviors," 2017.
[169] Klempin, Grant, and Ramos, "Practitioner Perspectives on the Use of Predictive Analytics in Targeted Advising for College Students," 2018.
[170] Gagliardi and Turk, "The Data-Enabled Executive: Using Analytics for Student Success and Sustainability," 2017.
[171] Kurzweil, Martin, and Wu, "Building a Pathway to Student Success at Georgia State University," 2015.
[172] Wilson, "Legislative Testimony: FY 2023 Operating Budget," 2022.

cautious and intentional when employing such models. Concerns over student data privacy and whether these types of models embed bias into their processes should be carefully considered, including having a clear understanding of the design, data, and associated weights that undergird these models and their assessment of student risk.[173]

Basic Needs and Emergency Aid

Basic Needs

Despite receiving some financial aid, many college students struggle to afford housing, health care, transportation, food, books, child care, or some combination of these and other basic needs.[174] Among undergraduate students, nearly 35 percent of Black students, 33 percent of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students, and 30 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native students reported food insecurity in a recent Federal survey.[175] This can make persistence and completion difficult and unaffordable. With such financial insecurity, too many students are just one emergency—be it illness or a car breakdown—away from being forced to make difficult decisions about how and whether they can afford to continue in higher education.

Institutions can play an important role in helping to ensure that the basic needs of underserved students are met. This includes strengthening institutional capacity to comprehensively address student basic needs, including by conducting audits and identifying gaps in institutional resources; investing in evidence-based interventions, best practices, or promising practices; developing a long-term, campus-wide strategy; coordinating with communities, states, and state entities to identify and help students access relevant local, state, and federal resources, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and the Affordable Connectivity Program (broadband); expanding staffing and providing evidence-based training and professional development to coordinate resources; and upgrading their data and technology capabilities to target supports to students in real-time.[176] Public colleges in California receive state funding to encourage them to provide resources such as those listed above to their students. These state dollars allow them to establish food pantries, share information about SNAP with students, and create meal point donation programs where students with extra meal points can donate to students experiencing food insecurity.[177]

Campus-based interventions that coordinate access to basic needs, such as Single Stop, have been shown to have a positive effect on student retention.[178] Institutions can also dedicate resources to

[173] Acosta and Ositelu, "The Automation of Admissions: Predictive Analytics Use in Enrollment Management," 2021; Ositelu and Acosta, "The Iron Triangle of College Admissions: Institutional Goals to Admit the Perfect First-Year Class May Create Racial Inequities to College Access," 2021.
[174] McKibben, Wu, and Abelson, "New Federal Data Confirm," 2023.
[175] McKibben, Wu, and Abelson, "New Federal Data Confirm," 2023.
[176] Karp et al., "Effective Advising for Postsecondary Students: A Practice Guide for Educators," 2022; American Association of State Colleges and Universities, "Senior Leadership Guidebook for Holistic Advising Redesign," 2021; Advising Success Network, "Success Factors for Advising Technology Implementation," n.d.
[177] U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits," 2019.
[178] U.S. Department of Education, "Intervention Report: Single Stop USA's Community College Initiative," 2020.

addressing student mental health including by auditing existing campus mental health supports for effectiveness, to identify gaps, and to tailor interventions to better meet the needs of vulnerable populations and by hiring additional mental health providers who, whenever possible, and in accordance with federal law, have similar backgrounds to their student bodies.[179] Institutions can ensure they are prioritizing funds, including fundraising and endowments, for these efforts.

The University of California, Los Angeles, takes a comprehensive, multi-tiered approach to campus mental health and basic needs insecurities. The University begins by screening students through a brief survey measuring mental health symptoms. The students are triaged and assigned levels of care while the university monitors their ongoing health through continuing surveys. The program offers various treatment recommendations based on that monitoring progression, which can include crisis intervention, preventative therapies, and addressing other insecurities including housing and food to connect students with available resources.[180]

The University of Massachusetts, Amherst, takes a holistic approach that incorporates mental health into their curriculum by offering two courses on wellness; providing suicide prevention and intervention trainings to students and those who interface most with students; and making counselors available for informal, confidential conversations 24/7.[181]

States can also help meet the basic needs of students. In addition to providing direct funding for these initiatives, states should consider whether changes are needed to ensure college students are eligible for statewide benefits programs; whether to adopt promising practices for how to make students aware of their potential eligibility for benefits programs; and how to simplify forms and processes so students can easily access state benefits. Students should be able to quickly and easily find information through the state on what aid is available and the criteria for eligibility and selection. The process to apply for such aid should be simple and clear.

In 2021, Oregon passed legislation to require a new benefits navigator position in all public universities and community colleges in order to better support students in meeting basic needs. The state also provided supplemental funding to establish these positions that are designed to assist students in determining eligibility for benefits programs and applying for assistance under benefits programs.

States can help institutions build capacity by providing training to help ensure those working with students understand benefits eligibility requirements and application processes. States can also facilitate partnerships between the state-level agencies to provide coordinated support across transportation, health care, and housing.

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[179] Abelson, Lipson, and Eisenberg, "What Works for Improving Mental Health in Higher Education?" 2023.; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), "Prevention and Treatment of Anxiety, Depression, and Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors among College Students," 2021.
[180] SAMHSA, "Prevention and Treatment of Anxiety, Depression, and Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors among College Students," 2021.
[181] SAMHSA, "Prevention and Treatment of Anxiety, Depression, and Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors among College Students," 2021.

Emergency Aid

Emergency aid programs offer another way that institutions can support and retain students, many of whom may find themselves struggling with unexpected expenses at some point during their higher education enrollment. Generally, these programs provide small grants ranging from a few hundred to a thousand dollars or more to cover unexpected expenses. These programs usually require an application and for students to demonstrate or certify some level of emergent need.

One of the most comprehensive analyses of the outcomes associated with these types of programs stems from the distribution of funds during the COVID-19 emergency. Higher education institutions carried out one of the largest and most comprehensive emergency aid programs by using the funding made available through the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF). In a survey of institutions receiving HEERF funds, nearly 90 percent of institutions agreed or strongly agreed that the program allowed them to keep students enrolled who were otherwise at risk of dropping out by providing financial support.[182]

Some institutions distribute a specific form of emergency grants to help students complete their programs.[183] These completion grants are generally awarded to students in their last year of college to cover expenses when other need-based financial aid or other sources of funds are unavailable or insufficient. They are designed to provide students with some financial cushion to enable them to finish their studies. Some programs also provide these emergency grants to students throughout their education. One example is Georgia State University's Panther Retention Program which provides up to $2,500 to clear a student's debt each term. An analysis of that program found large and significant positive effects on graduation and reduced time to completion, resulting in reduced debt for students.[184] Other variations of completion grants are emerging in the form of grants given to students earlier in their career and grants provided to students who have dropped out to support them in returning and finishing their degree. Because financial need can serve as a barrier for many students throughout their time in postsecondary education, not just at first enrollment, institutions should consider exploring how aid given at various points during a student's college career can help ensure that students are able to remain enrolled and complete their degrees.

Institutions should consider creating completion and emergency aid programs that are flexible and accessible, with eligibility criteria that account for all students who are often most likely to need aid and the infrastructure to easily and quickly disburse aid. Institutions can work to ensure that all potentially eligible students are aware of the availability of completion and emergency aid programs and that any application processes are not unduly burdensome. This may include clearly communicating the eligibility criteria, application process, and approval and disbursal timelines. Institutions can evaluate existing completion and emergency aid programs to measure impact and outcomes.

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[182] U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development and Office of Postsecondary Education, "Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund: 2021 Annual Performance Report," 2023.
[183] Association of Public Land-Grant Universities, "Completion Grants: A Practitioner's Guide," 2023.
[184] Rossman, Karon, and Alamuddin, "The Impacts of Emergency Micro-Grants on Student Success: Evaluation Study of Georgia State University's Panther Retention Grant Program," 2022.

Campus Climate and Sense of Belonging

The environment that students experience throughout their higher education career is an important consideration for institutions. Particularly for underrepresented students, campus climate, or the perceptions and feelings students have about a campus environment, can influence enrollment and retention rates by shaping their sense of belonging at an institution.[185] Research has documented the difference in perception of racial campus climate, with students of color often reporting prejudicial and alienating environments.[186] College leaders can focus on the student experience and retaining students from underrepresented backgrounds once they have enrolled.

Leadership Responsibilities

Creating a positive campus climate begins with leadership setting a tone of inclusiveness in all aspects of a student's life across the entire campus community, from curriculum to programming to hiring diverse faculty and staff. While the responsibility for campus climate does not belong to one person, college presidents and chancellors play a critical role in building the culture that allows student success strategies to develop and sustain themselves.[187] Campus leadership can also set policies and practices such as using climate surveys to assess the current perceptions of climate on campus and set goals for improvement.[188] Without leadership showing a commitment to student belonging, efforts are unlikely to be viewed by the rest of the campus community as a priority – both for students looking for a welcoming place and by faculty and staff who are tasked with implementing initiatives.[189]

The University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) made intentional efforts to recruit and serve first-generation, low-income, and underserved minority students by taking a holistic approach to creating a campus-wide culture change to make all students feel welcome. These efforts were led by the university president and carried out from the top down. UMBC called for a collective responsibility for student success. Leadership set the tone that students from underrepresented backgrounds should feel welcome in all spaces on campus and all parts of campus life. They reviewed data and information about students, created dialogue through campus-wide focus groups with students, and audited policies and practices that were exclusionary or might impede change.[190] One example of a program that UMBC had implemented is the Meyerhoff Scholars Program, which focuses on highly able students who seek to become leading research scientists and engineers. The program is open to students of all backgrounds and has 13 components, financial aid, a summer bridge program, tutoring, mentors, and more.[191] This program and the broader institutional efforts were centered around the concept of inclusive excellence with the goal of examining inequities to create a lasting, positive change for all students.

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[185] Hurtado et al., "Enacting Diverse Learning Environments: Improving the Climate for Racial/Ethnic Diversity in Higher Education," 1999.
[186] Harper and Hurtado, "Nine Themes in Campus Racial Climates and Implications for Institutional Transformation," 2007.
[187] Wyner, "The Role of Presidents, Trustees, and College Leaders in Student Success," 2021.
[188] Elliot and Jones, "Ensuring a More Equitable Future: The Role of Colleges in Educating Students to Become Change Agents," 2021.
[189] Kezar et al., "Shared Equity Leadership: Making Equity Everyone's Work," 2021
[190] Kezar, "Creating a Diverse Student Success Infrastructure," 2019.
[191] UMBC Meyerhoff Scholarship Program, "13 Key Components," n.d.

Academic and Curricular Initiatives

Institutions should also consider how their academic offerings and policies advance diversity and foster a sense of belonging among all students. Institutions should both consider implementing new initiatives and re-evaluating existing policies that may inadvertently harm underrepresented students. For example, offering diversity courses, or classes with content and instructional methods that reflect society's diversity such as ethnic studies, gender studies, or diversity general education requirements,, to all students can facilitate positive learning outcomes and equip students to participate in a global society.[192] Conversely, academic achievement restrictions or requirements on entering certain majors could lead to racial stratification by program of study preventing students who did not have access to pre-requisite coursework in their K-12 schooling from pursuing their interest, particularly in high-earning fields.[193] Institutions can consider whether these pre-requisites are indeed indicative of future success in the institution or if they are a barrier to underserved students. Institutions can eliminate unnecessary requirements and provide supportive developmental coursework and programming to ensure all students who show the potential to succeed have access to the same degree opportunities. Leaders at institutions can also invest in training for faculty to improve teaching practices that would allow students to feel a greater sense of belonging, a practice that has evidence of improving overall student outcomes. One analysis showed that providing professional development to faculty targeted at creating more supportive and equitable learning environments was strongly associated with an increase in students reporting globally positive experiences in their learning environments, as well as an increase in academic outcomes and engagement.[194]

Extracurricular Initiatives

To fully support a diverse student body, campuses may also decide to invest in programming and activities to support students' sense of belonging, including campus cultural centers, affinity groups, DEI offices, clubs, and other programming that addresses issues relevant to student identity groups.

In August 2023, the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights released a Dear Colleague Letter (DCL) on Race and School Programming that clarified how institutions can lawfully engage in activities that promote racially inclusive school communities under federal civil rights law.[195] As stated in the DCL, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 does not generally restrict a school from sponsoring or recognizing extracurricular activities and spaces with race-related themes as long as they are open to all students regardless of race. Activities intended to further objectives such as diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion are not generally prohibited under federal civil rights law. In fact, these activities and spaces may demonstrate to current and prospective students that the campus has a supportive, welcoming environment.

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[192] Denson, et al., "Do Diversity Courses Improve College Student Outcomes? A Meta-Analysis," 2020; Nelson Laird, Engberg, Hurtado, "Modeling Accentuation Effects: Enrolling in a Diversity Course and the Importance of Social Action Engagement, 2005.

[193] Bleemer, Davidson, and Mehta, "Restricted Access to Lucrative College Majors Harms Underrepresented Students Most," 2023.

[194] Student Experience Project, "Increasing Equity in College Student Experience: Findings from a National Collaborative," 2022.

[195] U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, "Race and School Programming," 2023.

Affinity groups, cultural centers, and DEI offices are among the most requested resources by students to create a sense of belonging and welcoming space for students who desire a place where they can be themselves.[196] These spaces are designed to provide a place for students to explore their full identities, particularly at predominantly white institutions. Students of color may be discouraged from applying to or enrolling in selective institutions if they do not see their identities reflected at the institution.

Institutions should consider how they can create a campus climate where students feel welcome and accepted. These actions may require examining the underlying policies and practices that shape an institution from the leadership level down and putting resources into programs and facilities, such as cultural centers or spaces to host affinity groups, that provide students with spaces to feel safe and included.

[196] Patton, *Culture Centers in Higher Education: Perspectives on Identity, Theory, and Practice,* 2010.

Conclusion

This report reviews strategies that institutions can implement to advance diversity in higher education. States can also support the efforts of colleges and universities. Establishing targeted outreach programs, reimagining holistic admissions to give greater emphasis to considerations of adversity and resilience and less to considerations of privilege, increasing investments in need-based aid and in institutions that serve diverse students, and expanding completion and campus climate programming can be part of a comprehensive plan to recruit and retain underrepresented students.

Institutions can analyze their student admissions, enrollment, and success efforts to ensure their admissions framework, targeted outreach strategies, financial aid offerings, campus climate, and institutional policies are aligned with the goal of creating vibrant and diverse college campuses. Policies and practices producing inequitable outcomes can be revisited to ensure all students receive the opportunity to fully benefit from the educational opportunities available to their peers. It is possible that no one strategy alone can fully achieve these goals. As Secretary Miguel Cardona has said, "For higher education to be an engine of equal opportunity, upward mobility, and global competitiveness, we need campus communities that reflect the beautiful diversity of our country." The strategies in this report can enable institutions to advance equal opportunity and the promise of social mobility.

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