Advancing Racial Equity in Higher Education: Lessons from the States

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WE pursue equity for all.

Introduction

Making college affordable, accessible, and equitable is one of Women Employed's top priorities and is critical to building an economy that works for everyone. We know that education is a key strategy for economic mobility, and we advocate for innovating programs and improving student supports and policies that address barriers to college completion and close racial and gender equity gaps. These in turn exacerbate income gaps and contribute to generational wealth gaps as well. We are particularly interested in improving educational outcomes for women of color, student parents, and adult students. While developing recommendations for how Illinois can take a comprehensive approach to racial equity in higher education, Women Employed conducted a landscape scan of states' plans, policies, and initiatives to inform our recommendations. This document highlights efforts that Illinois can learn from and adapt, while specific recommendations for Illinois are available in the companion brief, ["Advancing Racial Equity in Illinois Higher Education."](#)

We find that most efforts are relatively recent and therefore do not have much research or data to confirm their success. Still, the number of states embarking on efforts to intentionally address racial and ethnic disparities is growing, often incentivized by funding or support from national education foundations. Illinois has begun to take advantage of this momentum by strategizing its own approach. To encourage and support those efforts, we recommend that Illinois adapt or draw strategic ideas from efforts in other states related to:

- **Establishing a State Leadership Structure for Racial Equity**

- **Developing a Data-Driven Strategic Plan**

- **Taking a Multi-Pronged Approach**

- **Using Financial Aid as a Lever for Equity**

- **Funding Equity Incentives**

- **Providing Opportunities for Continuing Education and Professional Development**

Throughout this brief we have pulled information directly from other states' websites and embedded links in the relevant sections so that readers can follow-up or investigate more details from the original source.

The National Landscape Around Higher Education

In recent years, some national foundations and associations have developed initiatives to support racial equity work in higher education with research, funding, and technical support.[1] In reviewing state equity plans, the Lumina Foundation found that interpretations of equity fell into two categories: 1) an end goal—with diversity and inclusion as steps along the way, and 2) an overarching lens that guides the work.

The State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) compiled a report on states' efforts for racial equity based on survey results that highlights the processes and plans of this challenging work across different states. While recognizing the uniqueness of different state contexts, SHEEO reminds agencies of the importance of accurate data collection and clear goals in the pursuit of systems change.

The Education Trust put forth a guide for summarizing and assessing state attainment goals in Aiming for Equity: A Guide to Statewide Attainment Goals for Racial Equity Advocates. We would add to their series of assessment questions because we believe these are the questions that should launch Illinois' equity and inclusion journey:

- **Does your state have an REI plan?**

- **Does your state have disaggregated data for benchmarking and assessing progress?**

- **Do individual institutions have commensurate goals to ensure progress is made for students throughout the state?**

- **Is there a support and accountability structure build around both state and institutional goals?**

Establishing a State Leadership Structure for Racial Equity

As mentioned in "Advancing Racial Equity in Illinois Higher Education", Illinois needs vocal, committed leadership in the form of dedicated personnel or a coordinating committee for racial equity. Other states have established either: (a) staff in a statewide office charged specifically to lead racial equity efforts; or (b) a broad-based coalition led by the state education agencies to develop and implement higher education racial equity initiatives. These state agencies or systems with dedicated staff for racial equity work have been able to develop comprehensive and holistic plans for greater impact, and Illinois should look to these states for examples:

Colorado: The Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE) is a state agency and coordinating board for Colorado's public colleges and universities that carries out the state's central higher education policy. As part of their equity commitment, the CDHE established an Equity Champions Coalition comprised of multi-sector, bipartisan key influencers representing each region of the state to serve as ambassadors for Colorado's focus on equity and connectors within communities of color. The Coalition's charge was to:

- Serve as ambassadors for erasing equity gaps

- Host conversations about the importance of equity in meeting the state's needs

- Listen to students and share out lessons on how best to support their success

- Advocate for policies that advance the state's goals

- Sustain the work beyond the current administration

Oregon: Efforts in Oregon include coalition building where:

- A Talent, Innovation, & Equity (TIE) administrator funded by the Lumina Foundation identifies local champions and co-hosts community listening sessions

- A Leadership Council for Equity guides the Higher Education Coordinating Commission in accomplishing the TIE goals and strategically championing reforms to improve outcomes for students of color

- An Adult Learner Advisory Committee (ALAC) of practitioner-leaders, co-chaired by the Higher Education Coordinating Commission and the Oregon Workforce and Talent Development Board was charged with developing strategies and disseminating best practices regarding how adults gain skills outside the traditional P-20 pipeline, and connecting and aligning multiple adult attainment efforts and other responsibilities to address adult attainment goals

Developing a Data-Driven Strategic Plan

National researchers recommend the creation of a strategic plan informed by robust data collection. This data should be disaggregated by race across multiple demographic points, educational and financial entry points and outcomes, and enrollment and graduation rates, often down to the program level. Key components of a robust data-driven plan include the setting of equity targets and ongoing, disaggregated data collection and analyses across institutions and programs.

Setting Equity Targets

The Education Trust set forth some key questions to assess best practices in setting racial equity attainment goals:

1. Does the state have a degree attainment goal?

2. Do the materials related to the goal mention race?

3. Do materials related to the goal include data on gaps in enrollment, persistence, completion, or attainment by race?

4. Do the state's attainment goal materials include a goal to improve outcomes for students of color and/or close racial equity gaps?

5. Is the state's goal to improve outcomes for students of color or close racial equity gaps supported by additional numerical targets, goals, benchmarks, and/or data analysis?

6. Do the attainment goal materials identify strategies the state has used, is using, or will use to improve outcomes for students of color or close racial equity gaps?

Kentucky: Through the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, Kentucky, at the time of this writing, was the only state in the nation to tie new academic program approval to outcomes of campus progress toward equal educational opportunity goals. It is also one of the few states that includes equity measures in performance-based funding, with detailed guidelines for performance goals, tracking, and assessment by both program and population in three areas:

- Opportunity (access)

- Success (completion)

- Workforce preparation & economic growth

Colorado: Colorado includes equity targets in its strategic plan by racial group.

Minnesota: The Minnesota Office of Higher Education has set forth equity targets within the context of existing racial gaps in their Educating For the Future strategic plan.

Ongoing, Disaggregated Data Collection and Analysis

While virtually every state highlighted in this brief has robust data collection disaggregated by race, there was great variation by state in terms of what information was publicly available on state agency websites versus what was mentioned in presentations and reports. Massachusetts stands out for its broad scope and public availability.

Massachusetts: The Massachusetts Performance Measurement Reporting System provides a comprehensive examination of the performance of each community college and state university on a set of key indicators focused on Access & Affordability, Student Success & Completion, Workforce Alignment, and Fiscal Stewardship with attention to equity gaps for underserved students wherever possible. This tool is intended to prompt constructive conversations about performance and accountability between and among the Department of Higher Education, the Board of Higher Education, campuses, boards of trustees, legislators, and others, and ultimately to contribute to the discovery of insights that point to actions that lead to results.

Oregon: Oregon's Statewide Higher Education Snapshots feature 24 (one for each of their 17 community colleges and 7 universities) reader-friendly one-page data visualizations that illustrate higher education measures related to enrollment, affordability, and outcomes for all Oregon resident learners in 2017-18, with a particular focus on underserved populations. They also have a Student Success and Completion Model that outlines a formula funding strategy that incentivizes college completion, particularly when related to underrepresented groups.

Minnesota: The Minnesota Office of Higher Education's Education For the Future Policy Guide is notable in that it is one of the few states that reports disaggregated racial data not only for the five largest racial groups, but also disaggregated data within the Asian American and African American populations.

Taking a Multi-Pronged Approach

There are many components to addressing racial equity in higher education, and while focusing on educational outcomes is typically the primary goal, some states took a broad-based approach in their plan. Based on research as well as disaggregated data, these state plans look not just at academic initiatives, but also professional development, human resources, and campus climate.

Minnesota: The Minnesota State University system has two different but related equity plans to focus on both closing educational gaps and addressing additional equity priorities:

- In Equity 2030, Minnesota State, along with its partners, commits to eliminating educational equity gaps at every Minnesota State System college and university. A Fall 2019 report describes their progress.

- Minnesota State's Office of Equity and Inclusion Strategic Plan 2020-2023 focuses on four strategic priority areas:

    - Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Expertise and Strategy

    - Equity in Academic Outcomes

    - Civil Rights Compliance

    - Campus Climate

Additionally, the Office of Equity and Inclusion put together a comprehensive Diversity and Equity Strategic Planning Toolkit to help guide institutions in developing their own campus plans, with issues to consider, suggestions for data collection, and a variety of checklists and worksheets.

Oregon: Oregon has a wide range of initiatives related to equity and student success which started with the Oregon Equity Lens, a document which began to clearly articulate a shared goal for an equitable education system, to put into place the intentional policies, investments, and systemic changes necessary to reach this goal and to create clear accountability structures to ensure active progress and correct past inequities. These include:

- First generation student success grants

- Statewide higher education snapshots of outcomes with disaggregated data

- Updated official statement of mission, vision, values, beliefs

- Performance metrics redesigned to focus on equity and student success

- Funding formula incentives that support underrepresented students

- Redesigned and new financial aid support programs

- Streamlined transfer pathways

- A variety of equity-related legislation

Using Financial Aid as a Lever for Equity

In many cases, states use financial aid as the primary vehicle through which to address racial equity gaps, though in different ways. Many years ago, Illinois was a national leader in focusing need-based financial aid on low-income students, many of whom are students of color. At one time, Illinois fully funded the Monetary Award Program (MAP) and made it available to less than half-time students. Years of state disinvestment in higher education resulted in many thousands of eligible students denied aid each year. A new administration in the state has begun to turn this trend around and restore investments. With years to go before MAP is fully funded, other states' financial aid initiatives may be useful to learn from.
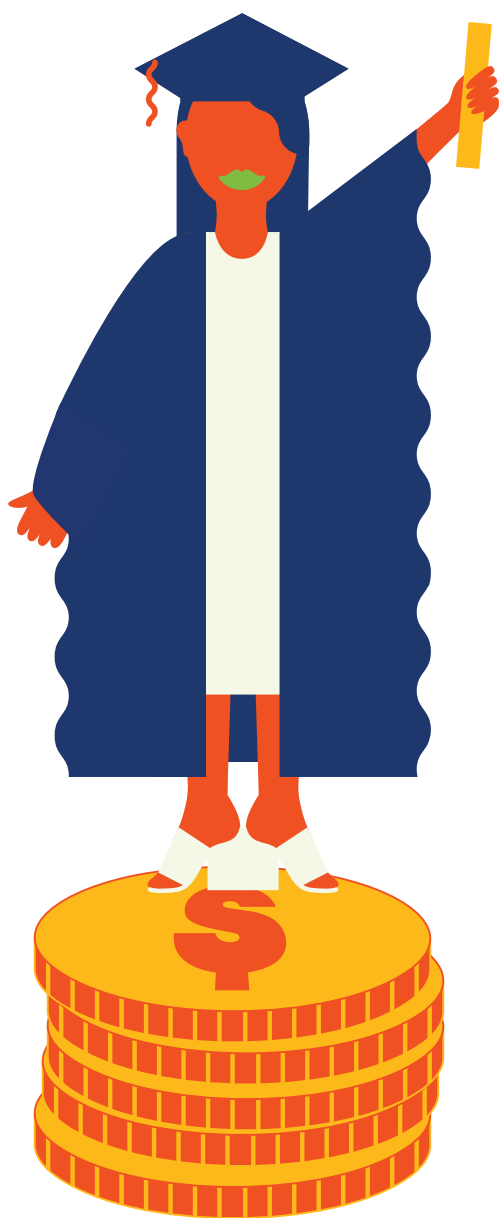
Oregon: Oregon has a number of financial aid programs, but one of unique interest is the Oregon Student Child Care Grant established to assist parents enrolled in postsecondary education obtain safe, dependable care that supports their children's development while allowing completion of the parent's academic programs.

Indiana: Indiana's 21st Century Scholars college promise program covers tuition and fees for low-income residents who sign up in 7th and 8th grade. It is not only a scholarship program but also includes a variety of academic supports, college engagement, and career preparation throughout high school and college. Established in 1990, it has received increased attention in recent years due to its success in closing equity gaps.

Massachusetts: Massachusetts' Financial Aid Redesign initiative and Equity Agenda, "Advancing the Equity Agenda Through Financial Aid Redesign and Beyond" has recommendations framed in five areas; the affordability section (p.13-18) has high-quality disaggregated racial and program data.

Funding Equity Incentives

Some states have used funding to further incentivize racial equity work on specific campuses or in systems by developing an internal mini-grant competition of sorts based on equity priorities. These allow for campuses to tailor initiatives to their unique situation, yet work toward state equity goals.

Minnesota: The Office of Minnesota Higher Education funded Equity in Education and Job Connection Grants. To receive a grant, institutions must have focused on increasing attendance, retention, and graduation rates for historically underrepresented students. The goal of the grant was to help the state reach its 70 percent postsecondary attainment goal and close gaps in attainment by race and ethnicity.

Oregon: Oregon's First-Generation Student Success grants have awarded $3.1 million in competitive grants to 13 public community colleges to support strategies to serve underserved first-generation populations. These grants supported first-generation, low-income, and college-bound students to enroll in community colleges statewide and make progress toward a certificate or degree. The grantees and the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Committee (HECC) worked in conjunction with the Gateway to College National Network which has contributed funding to some of Oregon's community colleges.

Providing Opportunities for Continuing Education and Professional Development

Another component of a statewide equity plan that would be helpful to Illinois is a statewide convening or conference focused specifically on equity issues for continued learning and professional development. By focusing a conference on equity—including in the keynote address and program sessions—more administrators and instructors could receive critical professional development on equity issues. This would give a wide range of Illinois educators and policy makers a chance to learn from local, regional, and even national experts, as well as each other in terms of sharing research, best practices, and policy proposals. Links to some states' equity conferences are below (note that several states had others planned but were cancelled due to COVID-19).

Colorado's Equity and Excellence Conference: Strengthening Opportunities for Historically Underserved Students: Effective Programs and Practices. Speakers and breakout presenters included school and district leaders with a developing or demonstrated record of effectiveness. The goal of the conference was to provide district and school leaders the opportunity to deeply explore and learn about evidence-based practices in a collaborative setting and walk away equipped to advance equity.

Kentucky: The Kentucky Higher EdQuity Symposium provides an environment for postsecondary faculty, staff, students, and administrators to discover new strategies for improving diversity, equity, and inclusion on their campuses. It featured nationally recognized keynote speakers, and plenary and breakout sessions designed to discuss the importance of helping campus leaders produce culturally competent graduates by creating communities of belonging and engagement.

Massachusetts: Massachusetts' Department of Higher Education (DHE) hosted the Looking in the Mirror: Equity Institute, an internal training for over 60 DHE staff to inform and further work on their Equity Agenda with a significant time commitment and follow up working groups and projects throughout the year.

Tennessee: The College System of Tennessee's We All Rise, The Biennial Conference on Diversity, Equity and Completion, focuses on issues and opportunities related to increasing completion rates for all students, with emphasis on best and promising practices for eliminating equity gaps.

About Women Employed

Women Employed's mission is to improve the economic status of women and remove barriers to economic equity. Women Employed (WE) relentlessly pursues equity for women in the workforce by effecting policy change, expanding access to educational opportunities, and advocating for fair and inclusive workplaces so that all women, families, and communities thrive. Making college affordable, accessible, and equitable, as well as strengthening career pathways to family-sustaining wages are two of WE's key Policy Priorities.

- WE is a leading advocate for low-income students. Recent work includes successfully advocating for a $50 million increase in state need-based financial aid, as well as partnering with the Illinois Attorney General's office to pass a Student Loan Bill of Rights ensuring students are protected from predatory lenders.

- WE serves on the Illinois Developmental Education Task Force and works with the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), the Partnership for College Completion, lawmakers, and advocates to crate new developmental education policies that better serve students, and ensure those policies are implemented across the state.

- WE worked with the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) to develop a Workforce Education Strategic Plan, which charts a path to aligning the statewide community college system and the state's workforce development system with economic development directions and workforce needs.

- WE co-leads the Illinois Higher Education Network, which strives to coordinate efforts around shared policy priorities, pursue equitable higher education funding, and engage student-facing organizations in advocacy efforts in supporting low-income students, student parents, and students of color.

Endnotes

[1] States receiving [Lumina Foundation Talent, Innovation, & Equity (TIE) Grants](#) (2017-2019) were Colorado, Oregon, Tennessee, Virginia. "To be a Lumina TIE state, a diverse leadership team must share a public commitment to redouble its efforts to raise attainment by focusing on closing equity gaps by five percentage points through well-integrated policy, budget, and practice changes." States receiving [Lumina Foundation Equity Leadership Acceleration Grants (](#)2019) were Alabama, Hawaii, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Texas, and Washington with "Six month grants up to $50,000 for states that focus on some of the essential practices needed to grow equitable educational attainment." States receiving Lumina Foundation Attainment Challenge Grants (2017) were Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Iowa, Maine, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Vermont. "To support states with funds for developing and implementing policies to improve student success, close equity gaps, and reach robust postsecondary attainment goals, the foundation created the program to motivate states both to adopt a rigorous attainment goal and then design a robust action plan focused on equity and improvement."