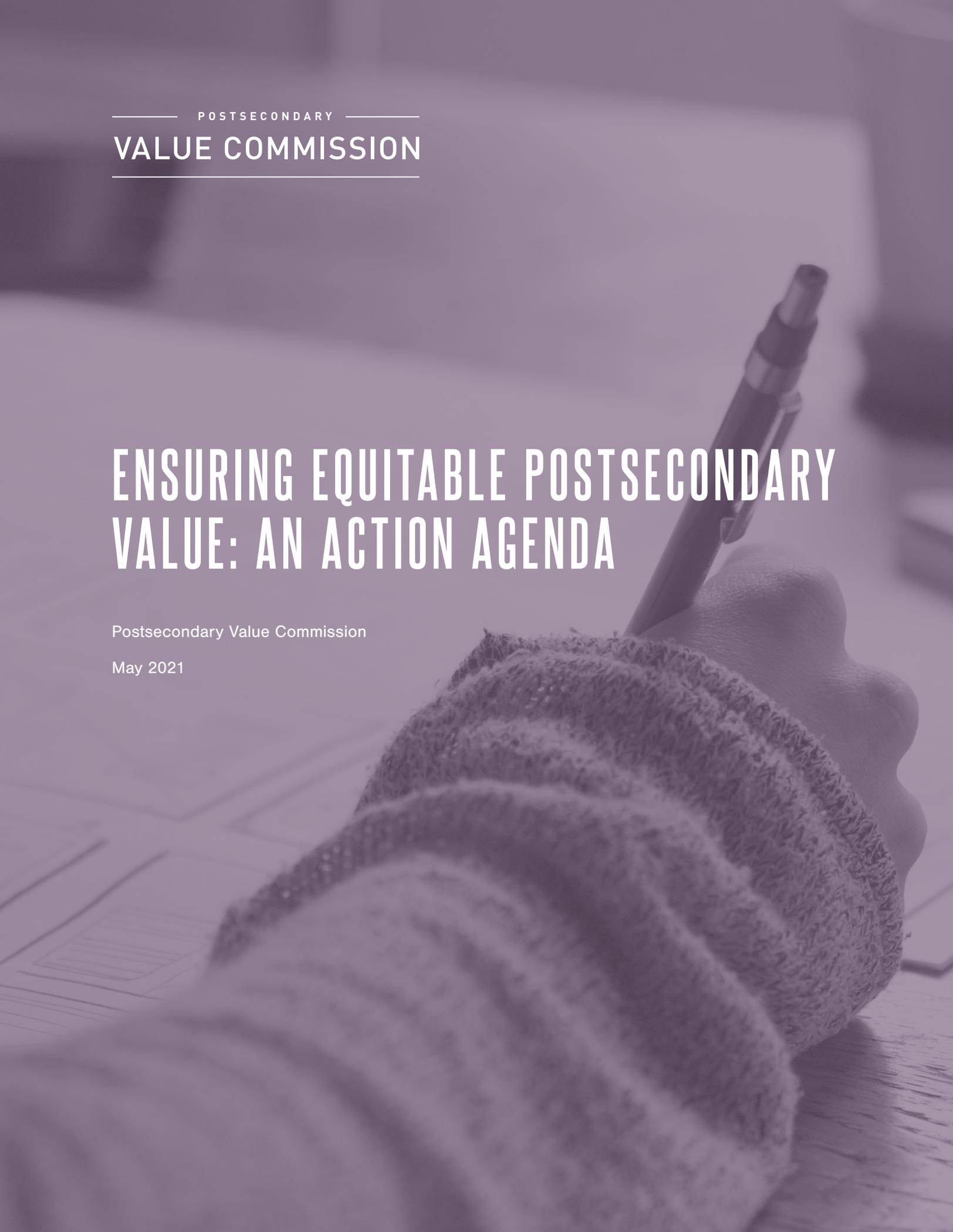


POSTSECONDARY
VALUE COMMISSION

ENSURING EQUITABLE POSTSECONDARY VALUE: AN ACTION AGENDA

Postsecondary Value Commission

May 2021



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While many experts contributed to this report, the views and opinions expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of individual members of the Postsecondary Value Commission, other individuals acknowledged here, or the organizations they represent. The authors also accept responsibility for any errors or omissions.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For millions of Americans, pursuing education after high school is one of the most significant investments they will ever make. This investment—of time, money, and resources—is made with the promise of a high-quality education, expanded opportunities in the workforce, and social and economic mobility.

While there is overwhelming evidence that college is “worth it,” student experiences and outcomes vary widely. College access remains highly stratified and college success highly unequal. Rising college costs and inadequate financial aid continue to limit opportunities for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students and students from low-income backgrounds. And the quality of education provided by an institution or program makes an enormous difference in the payoff of that credential in the workforce. Exacerbating the inequities in students’ postsecondary return on investment is the fact that for those who do attain a postsecondary degree or credential, racial, economic, and gender-based discrimination in the workforce can hinder the economic and social mobility that a postsecondary education promises. To remedy existing challenges and ensure a more equitable future, postsecondary education must do more than get students to and through college; it must be an instrument for disrupting broader societal inequities.

The **action agenda** is a key deliverable for the Postsecondary Value Commission that outlines policies and practices that institutional leaders, federal policymakers, and state policymakers should implement to address systemic barriers that prevent Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women from reaping equitable returns from postsecondary education and achieving economic and social mobility. The action agenda also provides key questions that students and families should expect institutions to answer related to postsecondary value.

These recommendations are organized around five key focus areas:

- **Equalize Access to Increase Postsecondary Value**
- **Remove Affordability as an Impediment to Postsecondary Value**
- **Eliminate Completion Gaps and Strengthen Post-College Outcomes to Ensure Postsecondary Value**
- **Improve Data to Expose and Address Inequitable Postsecondary Value**
- **Promote Social Justice by Providing Equitable Postsecondary Value**

Key Actors in Equitable Value

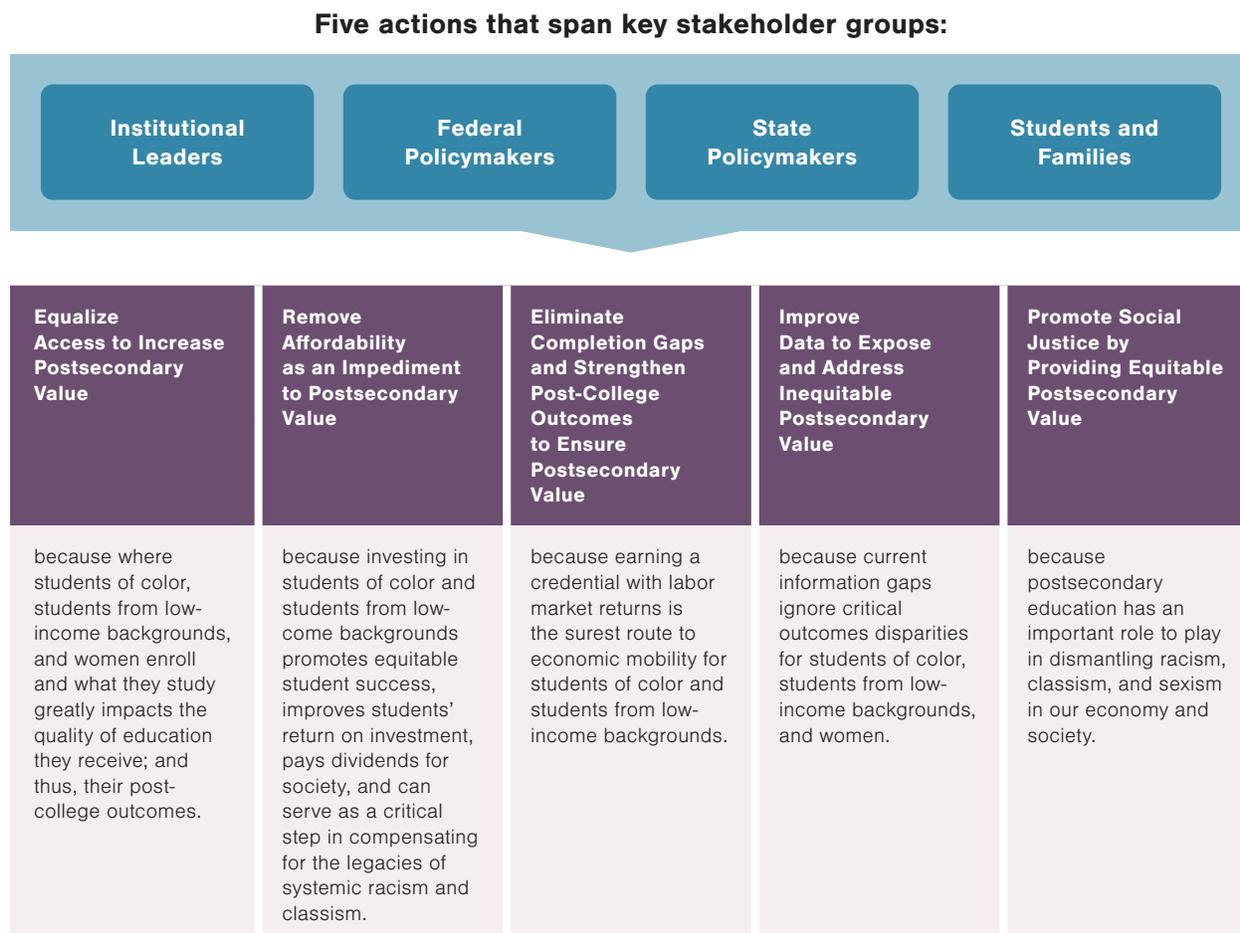
Institutions, states, and the federal government each play a unique role but share a common responsibility to promote equitable economic and social mobility through postsecondary opportunities. This action agenda (Figure 1) is meant to help each stakeholder group identify and correct inequitable postsecondary practices through direct policy and practice changes that will lead to a more just world. It also seeks to inspire stakeholders to work together to share information, align systems, scale best practices, and rebuild our postsecondary system as an instrument for dismantling systemic racial, socioeconomic, and gender-based inequities.

As leaders make important strides to improve our postsecondary system, this action agenda can also guide students and families, as well as intermediary stakeholders like college counselors and advising networks, to identify institutions and programs that provide postsecondary opportunities of value.

The action agenda seeks to help each stakeholder group answer key questions about equitable postsecondary value and to present a **valued-centered lens** to approach postsecondary decisions:

Institutional leaders:	What practices can institutions implement to ensure that they are preparing Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women to gain value in the workforce and to achieve economic and social mobility?
Federal policymakers:	What critical federal policies can help ensure that postsecondary institutions and programs provide equitable value to students?
State policymakers:	What critical state policies can help ensure that postsecondary institutions and programs provide equitable value to students?
Students and families:	What questions should every college or university be able to answer about the value that prospective students can expect to receive from their education?

Figure 1. Action Agenda Overview



Recommendations

The action agenda (Table 1) outlines key challenges to ensuring equitable postsecondary value, along with examples of opportunities for institutional leaders, federal policymakers, and state policymakers to enhance postsecondary value for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women through practice and policy change.

These recommendations are not an exhaustive list of needed reforms, and we encourage all postsecondary stakeholders to pursue these and other bold solutions to promote social and economic mobility and justice through postsecondary experiences.

Table 1. Overview of the Action Agenda’s Recommendations

Institutional Leaders	Federal Policymakers	State Policymakers	Students and Families Questions students should receive answers to about value (all measures should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, and gender)
<p>Equalize Access to Increase Postsecondary Value because where students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women enroll and what they study greatly impacts the quality of education they receive; and thus, their post-college outcomes.</p>			
<p>Interrogate and eliminate admissions requirements that could limit access for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, including consideration of legacy status, standardized test scores, and criminal history.</p> <p>Implement best practices in equitable recruitment and develop robust partnerships with local schools, community colleges, and community organizations serving Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds.</p> <p>Equalize access to all programs and fields of study for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p> <p>Reduce barriers to enrollment for transfer students and improve credit recognition for students with transfer credits or college in high school credits.</p>	<p>Increase federal support for evidence-based college access programs to continue to increase postsecondary enrollment for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds.</p> <p>Offer funding incentives for institutions to increase their enrollment of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds by setting minimum enrollment equity benchmarks that institutions must meet to receive bonus aid or competitive grants.</p>	<p>Build strong, reliable transfer pathways and guarantees between all public two- and four-year institutions, including the state flagship university.</p> <p>Improve statewide dual enrollment policies to prioritize equity, increase program participation for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, and streamline credit recognition and pathways to postsecondary degree completion.</p>	<p>What is the racial, socioeconomic, and gender composition of the student body as well as the faculty and staff, overall and by program of study?</p> <p>How will my previous credits (transfer credits, college in high school credits) apply toward my degree and fulfill requirements for my program?</p>

Institutional Leaders	Federal Policymakers	State Policymakers	Students and Families Questions students should receive answers to about value (all measures should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, and gender)
<p>Remove Affordability as an Impediment to Postsecondary Value because investing in students of color and students from low-income backgrounds promotes equitable student success, improves students' return on investment, pays dividends for society, and can serve as a critical step in compensating for the legacies of systemic racism and classism in our country.</p>			
<p>Allocate institutional aid toward meeting the full cost of attendance and eliminating unmet need, based on students' income and wealth, instead of awarding aid based on non-need factors, like GPA, standardized test scores, or high school ranking.</p> <p>Address basic needs security for students and their families.</p>	<p>Dramatically increase federal need-based aid for students from low-income backgrounds, including doubling the Pell Grant.</p> <p>Create and implement a comprehensive affordability plan, through a federal-state partnership, to stabilize and secure state and federal investment in public postsecondary institutions to promote college affordability.</p> <p>Increase federal investment in Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) to strengthen financial support for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and the institutions that serve them.</p> <p>Revise the tax code to incentivize private contributions to institutions that disproportionately serve students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, including MSIs.</p>	<p>Increase appropriations to public institutions that serve large shares of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, including MSIs and community colleges, to remedy decades of insufficient and inequitable funding.</p> <p>Allocate all state grant aid toward meeting the full cost of attendance and eliminating unmet need, based on students' income and wealth, to remove financial barriers to student success and prevent student loan debt.</p> <p>Moderate tuition increases to promote affordability and increase the predictability of expenses for students with financial need.</p>	<p>How much are students required to pay out-of-pocket to complete their education, and how much is financed through debt?</p>

Institutional Leaders	Federal Policymakers	State Policymakers	Students and Families Questions students should receive answers to about value (all measures should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, and gender)
<p>Eliminate Completion Gaps and Strengthen Post-College Outcomes to Ensure Postsecondary Value because earning a credential with labor market returns is the surest route to economic mobility for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.</p>			
<p>Reform developmental education to strengthen pathways to completion.</p> <p>Bolster institutional supports, including robust, culturally responsive academic advising programs, to address barriers to equitable completion for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p> <p>Match robust advising models with additional financial assistance, including microgrants, emergency grants, and in-kind benefits to remove financial and non-financial barriers to completion in a comprehensive way.</p> <p>Strengthen students' pathways to degree completion and into careers by setting high standards for rigorous learning and offering opportunities that both expand students' minds and prepare them for success in the workplace.</p>	<p>Incentivize institutions to close equity gaps in college completion and post-college outcomes by assessing their performance on key value metrics.</p> <p>Invest in the development and expansion of evidence-based programs that provide for enhanced academic advising, career counseling, and financial aid and in-kind assistance to eliminate financial and non-financial barriers to completion and post-college success.</p> <p>Reform and target federal funding for employer incentives, supports, tuition reimbursement programs, and other non-tuition accommodations (e.g. childcare, transportation support) toward low-wage workers to narrow race and income gaps in college completion and improve college-to-career pathways.</p> <p>Incentivize employers to expand their workforce pipelines to include more Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, including by recruiting aggressively from the institutions that serve them.</p>	<p>Develop or refocus statewide attainment goals to promote mobility and equitable value for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds.</p> <p>Incentivize institutions to close equity gaps in college completion and post-college success by adopting or enhancing outcomes-based funding policies for public institutions, prioritizing institutions that equitably enroll, graduate, and deliver strong post-college outcomes for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds.</p> <p>Allocate state workforce development resources to create industry partnerships between employers and institutions that serve students of color and students from low-income backgrounds to strengthen career pathways and promote strong post-college outcomes.</p> <p>Develop a statewide strategy for expanding the workforce pipeline that includes and prioritizes institutions and programs that serve Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p>	<p>What are the average completion rate and time-to-credential for students in my program, including for students who transfer in and out?</p> <p>What are the career and employment outcomes for students who attended my program?</p>

Institutional Leaders	Federal Policymakers	State Policymakers	Students and Families Questions students should receive answers to about value (all measures should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, and gender)
Improve Data to Expose and Address Inequitable Postsecondary Value because current information gaps ignore critical outcomes disparities for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.			
<p>Leverage data assets, develop a culture of data-use, and create systems dedicated to using data to identify and remedy gaps in enrollment, completion, and value for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p> <p>Use data to reorient institutional strategic plans and institutional self-evaluations required by accreditors toward the goal of providing equitable value.</p>	<p>Create and implement a federal student-level data network (SLDN) that provides disaggregated information about all students' pathways and post-college outcomes, including employment, earnings, and loan repayment outcomes.</p> <p>Enhance the College Scorecard and other federal information websites to provide transparency into which colleges are providing value to students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p> <p>Revive accreditor data dashboards to include measures of equitable completion and value.</p> <p>Require greater disaggregation of AAPI student groups in postsecondary data collections to capture the diversity of AAPI students' experiences and outcomes and to uncover inequities in college access, completion, and success.</p> <p>Increase transparency in the awarding of need- and non-need-based financial aid by states and institutions.</p>	<p>Strengthen connections across education, labor, and public benefits data systems to calculate value metrics for all students, programs, and institutions.</p> <p>Provide institutions with secure access to workforce outcomes data to monitor value for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p> <p>Report disaggregated value-related student outcomes data publicly.</p>	<p>What do graduates from my program earn at 1, 5, and 10 years out?</p> <p>What is the debt-to-earnings ratio for graduates of my program?</p> <p>How long does it take graduates at this institution to see a return on investment or experience value?</p>

Institutional Leaders	Federal Policymakers	State Policymakers	Students and Families Questions students should receive answers to about value (all measures should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, and gender)
Promote Social Justice by Providing Equitable Postsecondary Value because postsecondary education has an important role to play in dismantling racism, classism, and sexism in our economy and society.			
<p>Proactively conduct and report on an equity audit—a comprehensive evaluation of policies and practices relating to admissions, enrollment, student supports and engagement, completion, post-college outcomes, and leadership, faculty, staff, and contractor diversity—to identify racial, socioeconomic, and gender-based inequities in access, participation, and success.</p> <p>Foster a safe, welcoming, and unbiased learning environment that facilitates excellence and attainment for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p> <p>Promote a more just society by preparing students to combat racial, socioeconomic, and gender-based injustice in their workplaces and communities.</p> <p>Institute equitable hiring, career advancement, and pay practices for all faculty and staff members.</p> <p>Actively engage with local community stakeholders to promote equity and justice, and actively work to remedy any harms caused to the local community in the past.</p>	<p>Require all Title IV institutions to conduct and report on an equity audit that assesses the impact of their policies and practices on Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women, and offer financial incentives to institutions that show evidence of improvement.</p>	<p>Conduct a statewide equity audit that assesses the impact of all state postsecondary policies on Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p> <p>Require racial and gender diversity, including diverse student representation, in appointments to gubernatorially appointed boards, state higher education agency leadership, and institutional leadership roles in public postsecondary education.</p>	<p>Has this institution examined its own role in perpetuating and combating inequality?</p> <p>Are students welcomed into conversations about how the institution should design equitable curricula, policies, and practices?</p>

Impact

Improving our postsecondary system to deliver equitable value for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women will require the focused efforts of key postsecondary stakeholders—including institutional leaders, federal policymakers, and state policymakers.

These policies—from equitable admissions policies to robust need-based financial aid to building a better postsecondary data system—can help students achieve economic mobility by ensuring that students have equitable access to degrees and credentials of value and programs of study that align with their goals, their interests, and workforce demands. These policies can help prepare students to thrive in the workforce after graduation and find fulfillment in meaningful work opportunities where they can pursue their passions and give back to their communities. These policies can create a stronger, more dynamic workforce, with employees who are equipped with key skills, like critical thinking, quantitative literacy, and intercultural knowledge. These policies can translate into greater economic returns for communities, states, and our nation by increasing GDP, increasing the tax base, and decreasing the need to spend resources on health care, corrections, and public assistance.¹ And these policies can create a healthier, happier, and more civically engaged populace.

Importantly, these federal, state, and institutional policies also influence which students and communities are strengthened through our postsecondary system and which communities will be ignored, excluded, or even harmed; if we will harness our postsecondary system to disrupt the legacies of systemic racism, sexism, and classism, or if we will sustain them.

We hope this action agenda will inspire key postsecondary actors at the federal, state, and institutional levels to rethink existing policies and practices, rebuild a postsecondary system centered around ensuring equitable value for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women, and reimagine our postsecondary system as an instrument to create a stronger and more just society together.

INTRODUCTION

For millions of Americans, pursuing education after high school is one of the most significant investments they will ever make. This investment—of time, money, and resources—is made with the promise of a high-quality education, expanded opportunities in the workforce, and social and economic mobility. This value proposition has never been more critical, as individuals and families navigate the COVID-19 health and economic crises, weather historic job losses, and confront the realities of racial injustice in our country. Those hit hardest by these crises are also those for whom a postsecondary education can make the biggest difference: our nation’s Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women. In a recent national poll, 40 percent of respondents—and 49 percent of both Black and Latinx respondents—feel that the COVID-19 pandemic has made improving the value of a postsecondary degree more important than ever.²

While there is overwhelming evidence that college is “worth it,” student experiences and outcomes vary widely. College access remains highly stratified and college success highly unequal. Rising college costs and inadequate financial aid continue to limit opportunities for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds. And the quality of education provided by an institution or program makes an enormous difference in the payoff of that credential in the workforce. Exacerbating the inequities in students’ postsecondary return on investment is the fact that for those who do attain a postsecondary degree or credential, racial, economic, and gender-based discrimination in the workforce can hinder the economic and social mobility that a postsecondary education promises. To remedy existing challenges and ensure a more equitable future, postsecondary education must do more than get students to and through college; it must be an instrument for disrupting broader societal inequities. The pursuit of a more fair and equitable system is the charge of the Postsecondary Value Commission.

The **Postsecondary Value Commission** set out to create a **conceptual definition of postsecondary value** (Figure 1) and a corresponding equity-focused **framework to measure postsecondary returns**. These tools are designed to gauge how programs create value—particularly economic value—for students, guide institutional improvement, and spur key stakeholders to advance conversations beyond improving college access and completion. These economic returns operate hand-in-hand with a number of non-economic benefits to education, such as fostering the development of skills that will help individuals be successful in their personal and professional lives; exposing them to new ideas, peoples, and cultures; and preparing them to be engaged, equity-minded members of society. These benefits are delivered by a diverse group of higher education institutions, each with their own mission, focus, role in their community, and opportunity to provide experiences of value, while navigating differences in funding, governance, and history. By shifting the focus to both these critical economic and non-economic returns, the framework will usher in an expanded focus on social and economic mobility through postsecondary education.

Figure 1. Conceptual Definition and Core Principles

Students experience postsecondary value when provided equitable access and support to complete quality, affordable credentials that offer economic mobility and prepare them to advance racial and economic justice in our society.

<p>Equity matters.</p>	<p>In a country where college is crucial to economic and social mobility, it is not acceptable that some students—especially Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women—face systemic barriers as costs continue to grow, completion rates remain low, and wage inequities persist that prevent them from realizing the full value of postsecondary education.</p>
<p>Institutions and programs matter.</p>	<p>While there is overwhelming evidence that a college education is indeed “worth it,” institutional leaders, faculty, and staff must deliver a quality education by intentionally constructing valuable learning experiences and career pathways with employers to ensure all students develop the knowledge, skills, and networks needed to be successful in work and life, including the ability to navigate and influence society to promote equity and justice.</p>
<p>Policy matters.</p>	<p>To remove systemic barriers to equitable postsecondary value, federal and state policymakers should work with institutional leaders to develop funding, financial aid, and accountability mechanisms that incentivize creating coherent K-12, postsecondary, and workforce pathways and improving educational experiences and outcomes for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p>
<p>Public returns—and investment—matter.</p>	<p>While equitable postsecondary value yields clear returns for students and families, public investment in closing racial and socioeconomic attainment gaps also benefits the broader society through increases in tax revenues and GDP, decreases in public health and other expenditures, and increases in voting, volunteerism, and civic participation, which builds a more just society.</p>
<p>Measuring value matters.</p>	<p>Collecting and using the necessary data to understand whether and how institutions and programs deliver value to Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women, in comparison to their peers, is critical because the nation can no longer afford to ignore inequities in the system if we are to fulfill the promise of postsecondary education to students and society.</p>

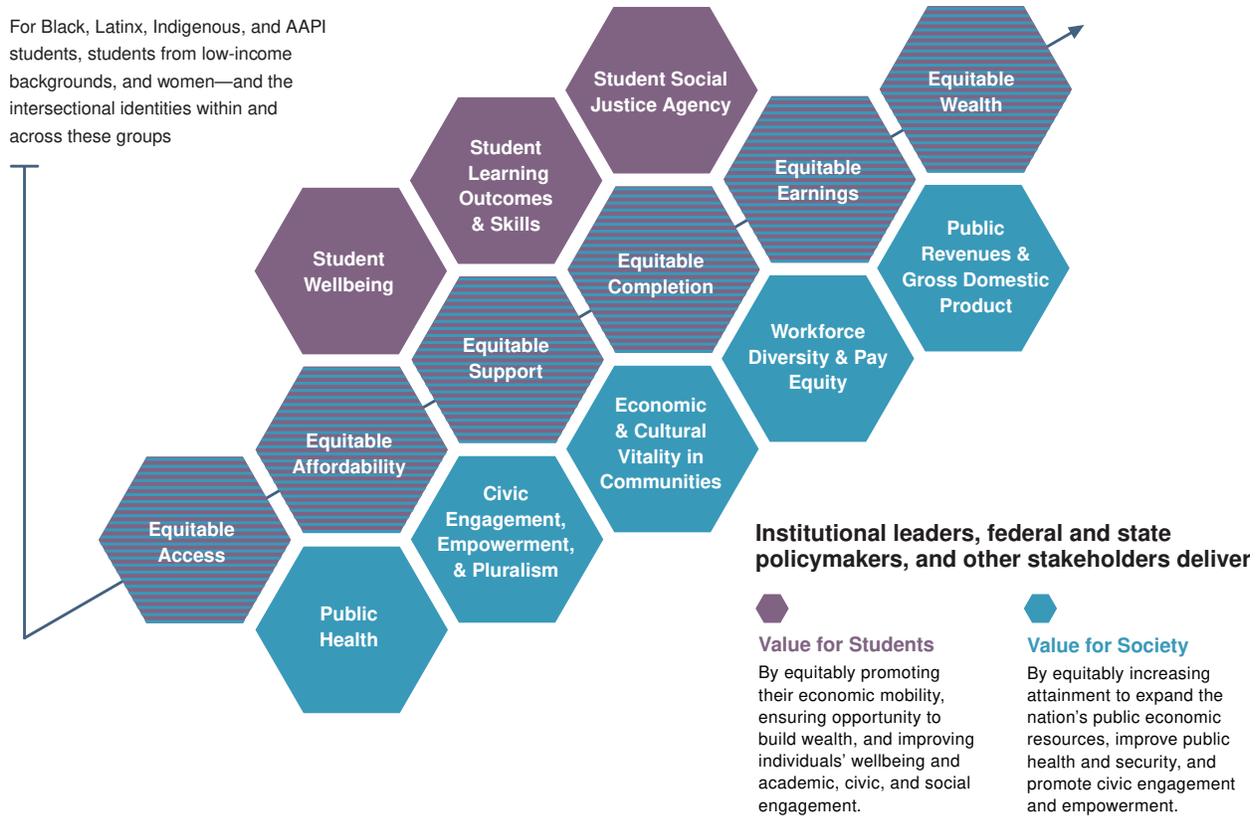
The commission has conducted nearly two years of research to operationalize the value definition through the framework, which seeks to outline the clear value-add that quality postsecondary education can provide to students and society (see Figure 2).^a

a For a more detailed explanation of the framework, please see: Postsecondary Value Commission (2021a). Equitable value: Promoting economic mobility and social justice through postsecondary education. Retrieved from: <https://www.postsecondaryvalue.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/PVC-Final-Report-FINAL.pdf>

Figure 2. The Postsecondary Value Framework

Pipeline to Equitable Value

For Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women—and the intersectional identities within and across these groups



Because postsecondary value—especially the provision of *equitable* value—varies across institutions and programs, it is critical to measure value at the institution and program levels. Bringing data to bear on equitable postsecondary value, the framework measures whether students meet different economic value thresholds over time (Figure 3), specifically Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women, in comparison with their peers. These thresholds—which are grounded in the work the field has conducted as part of, before, and alongside the commission’s research—are listed below.^b

^b For a detailed explanation of the thresholds, please see: Postsecondary Value Commission (2021a). Equitable value: Promoting economic mobility and social justice through postsecondary education. Retrieved from: <https://www.postsecondaryvalue.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/PVC-Final-Report-FINAL.pdf>

Figure 3. Measuring Economic Returns Via Thresholds

Threshold	
0	Minimum Economic Return: A student meets this threshold if they earn at least as much as a high school graduate plus enough to recoup their total net price plus interest within ten years.
1	Earnings Premium: A student meets this threshold if they reach at least median earnings in their field of study (or, if field of study data is unavailable, the median earnings for the institution’s predominant degree type). ¹
2	Earnings Parity: This threshold measures whether students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women reach the median earnings of their systemically more advantaged peers (White students, high-income students, or men). ²
3	Economic Mobility: This threshold measures whether students reach the level of earnings needed to enter the fourth (60th to 80th percentile) income quintile, regardless of field of study.
4	Economic Security: While sufficient earnings can create a stable life, wealth is key to building the type of security needed to withstand life’s financial shocks. This threshold therefore measures whether students reach median levels of wealth.
5	Wealth Parity: Mirroring the earnings parity threshold, this threshold measures whether students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women reach the level of wealth attained by their more privileged White, high-income, or male peers.

Notes: Thresholds 0-3 can be estimated at the national level using College Scorecard data with some caveats. Institutions and systems with advanced data collections can measure these thresholds with greater specificity. Due to a lack of quality data to measure wealth, Thresholds 4 and 5 are currently understood as conceptual goals rather than operable analyses.

¹ *If field of study data is not available, then the framework turns to the predominant degree level (e.g., median earnings among bachelor’s degree holders). To calculate this, researchers can use pooled 5-year American Community Survey data.*

² *Publicly available data do not presently support the production of this threshold for students from low-income backgrounds.*

Postsecondary education should strive to move students toward economic security, under which a person has sufficient earnings and wealth to withstand life’s economic shocks, after accounting for their investment. As an ultimate goal, students would also reach a level of wealth parity, under which a person’s race, income, or gender does not predict their ability to accumulate wealth. While postsecondary education alone may not be able to generate wealth parity, it is a key system influencing the racial wealth gap.

However, postsecondary education cannot reach its full potential as an engine of economic mobility without providing access to Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women—especially at those institutions that offer the highest economic returns. To measure this combination of economic returns *and* access, the Postsecondary Value Framework applies two indices to each institution: the Economic Value Index (EVI) and the Economic Value Contribution (EVC). The EVI multiplies an access rate with the percentage of students meeting the minimum economic returns threshold. Secondly, the EVC illustrates the value to society, in dollars, that a selected institution generates by providing a positive return on investment to students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.

In addition to the economic indicators above, the Postsecondary Value Framework also incorporates key non-economic benefits of a postsecondary education, like wellbeing, learning outcomes, skills development, and racial justice orientation and competencies.

Students' postsecondary value is reflected in their post-college outcomes—which are directly impacted by their learning experiences and opportunities within the institution and by federal and state policies. Hence, the **action agenda** described in this paper outlines key policies and practices that institutional leaders, federal policymakers, and state policymakers should implement to address systemic barriers that prevent Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women from reaping equitable returns from postsecondary education and achieving economic and social mobility. The action agenda also provides key questions that students and families should expect institutions to answer related to postsecondary value. These recommendations are organized around five key focus areas:

- **Equalize Access to Increase Postsecondary Value**
- **Remove Affordability as an Impediment to Postsecondary Value**
- **Eliminate Completion Gaps and Strengthen Post-College Outcomes to Ensure Postsecondary Value**
- **Improve Data to Expose and Address Inequitable Postsecondary Value**
- **Promote Social Justice by Providing Equitable Postsecondary Value**

Institutional Leaders	Federal Policymakers	State Policymakers	Students and Families Questions students should receive answers to about value (all measures should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, and gender)
<p>Equalize Access to Increase Postsecondary Value because where students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women enroll and what they study greatly impacts the quality of education they receive; and thus, their post-college outcomes.</p>			
<p>Interrogate and eliminate admissions requirements that could limit access for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, including consideration of legacy status, standardized test scores, and criminal history.</p> <p>Implement best practices in equitable recruitment and develop robust partnerships with local schools, community colleges, and community organizations serving Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds.</p> <p>Equalize access to all programs and fields of study for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p> <p>Reduce barriers to enrollment for transfer students and improve credit recognition for students with transfer credits or college in high school credits.</p>	<p>Increase federal support for evidence-based college access programs to continue to increase postsecondary enrollment for Black, Latinx, Indigenous and underrepresented AAPI students, and students from low-income backgrounds.</p> <p>Offer funding incentives for institutions to increase their enrollment of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds by setting minimum enrollment equity benchmarks that institutions must meet to receive bonus aid or competitive grants.</p>	<p>Build strong, reliable transfer pathways and guarantees between all public two- and four-year institutions, including the state flagship university.</p> <p>Improve statewide dual enrollment policies to prioritize equity, increase program participation for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, and streamline credit recognition and pathways to postsecondary degree completion.</p>	<p>What is the racial, socioeconomic, and gender composition of the student body as well as the faculty and staff, overall and by program of study?</p> <p>How will my previous credits (transfer credits, college in high school credits) apply toward my degree and fulfill requirements for my program?</p>

Institutional Leaders	Federal Policymakers	State Policymakers	Students and Families Questions students should receive answers to about value (all measures should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, and gender)
<p>Remove Affordability as an Impediment to Postsecondary Value because investing in students of color and students from low-income backgrounds promotes equitable student success, improves students' return on investment, pays dividends for society, and can serve as a critical step in compensating for the legacies of systemic racism and classism in our country.</p>			
<p>Allocate institutional aid toward meeting the full cost of attendance and eliminating unmet need, based on students' income and wealth, instead of awarding aid based on non-need factors, like GPA, standardized test scores, or high school ranking.</p> <p>Address basic needs security for students and their families.</p>	<p>Dramatically increase federal need-based aid for students from low-income backgrounds, including by doubling the Pell Grant.</p> <p>Create and implement a comprehensive affordability plan, through a federal-state partnership, to stabilize and secure state and federal investment in public postsecondary institutions to promote college affordability.</p> <p>Increase federal investment in Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) to strengthen financial support for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and the institutions that serve them.</p> <p>Revise the tax code to incentivize private contributions to institutions that disproportionately serve students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, including MSIs.</p>	<p>Increase appropriations to public institutions that serve large shares of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, including MSIs and community colleges, to remedy decades of insufficient and inequitable funding.</p> <p>Allocate all state grant aid toward meeting the full cost of attendance and eliminating unmet need, based on students' income and wealth, to remove financial barriers to student success and prevent student loan debt.</p> <p>Moderate tuition increases to promote affordability and increase the predictability of expenses for students with financial need.</p>	<p>How much are students required to pay out-of-pocket to complete their education, and how much is financed through debt?</p>

Institutional Leaders	Federal Policymakers	State Policymakers	Students and Families Questions students should receive answers to about value (all measures should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, and gender)
<p>Eliminate Completion Gaps and Strengthen Post-College Outcomes to Ensure Postsecondary Value because earning a credential with labor market returns is the surest route to economic mobility for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.</p>			
<p>Reform developmental education to strengthen pathways to completion.</p> <p>Bolster institutional supports, including robust, culturally responsive academic advising programs, to address barriers to equitable completion for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p> <p>Match robust advising models with additional financial assistance, including microgrants, emergency grants, and in-kind benefits to remove financial and non-financial barriers to completion in a comprehensive way.</p> <p>Strengthen students' pathways to degree completion and into careers by setting high standards for rigorous learning and offering opportunities that both expand students' minds and prepare them for success in the workplace.</p>	<p>Incentivize institutions to close equity gaps in college completion and post-college outcomes by assessing their performance on key value metrics.</p> <p>Invest in the development and expansion of evidence-based programs that provide for enhanced academic advising, career counseling, and financial aid and in-kind assistance to eliminate financial and non-financial barriers to completion and post-college success.</p> <p>Reform and target federal funding for employer incentives, supports, tuition reimbursement programs, and other non-tuition accommodations (e.g. childcare, transportation support) toward low-wage workers to narrow race and income gaps in college completion and improve college-to-career pathways.</p> <p>Incentivize employers to expand their workforce pipelines to include more Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, including by recruiting aggressively from the institutions that serve them.</p>	<p>Develop or refocus statewide attainment goals to promote mobility and equitable value for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds.</p> <p>Incentivize institutions to close equity gaps in college completion and post-college success by adopting or enhancing outcomes-based funding policies for public institutions, prioritizing institutions that equitably enroll, graduate, and deliver strong post-college outcomes for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds.</p> <p>Allocate state workforce development resources to create industry partnerships between employers and institutions that serve students of color and students from low-income backgrounds to strengthen career pathways and promote strong post-college outcomes.</p> <p>Develop a statewide strategy for expanding the workforce pipeline that includes and prioritizes institutions and programs that serve Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p>	<p>What are the average completion rate and time-to-credential for students in my program, including for students who transfer in and out?</p> <p>What are the career and employment outcomes for students who attended my program?</p>

Institutional Leaders	Federal Policymakers	State Policymakers	Students and Families Questions students should receive answers to about value (all measures should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, and gender)
Improve Data to Expose and Address Inequitable Postsecondary Value because current information gaps ignore critical outcomes disparities for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.			
<p>Leverage data assets, develop a culture of data-use, and create systems dedicated to using data to identify and remedy gaps in enrollment, completion, and value for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p> <p>Use data to reorient institutional strategic plans and institutional self-evaluations required by accreditors toward the goal of providing equitable value.</p>	<p>Create and implement a federal student-level data network (SLDN) that provides disaggregated information about all students' pathways and post-college outcomes, including employment, earnings, and loan repayment outcomes.</p> <p>Enhance the College Scorecard and other federal information websites to provide transparency into which colleges are providing value to students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p> <p>Revive accreditor data dashboards to include measures of equitable completion and value.</p> <p>Require greater disaggregation of AAPI student groups in postsecondary data collections to capture the diversity of AAPI students' experiences and outcomes and to uncover inequities in college access, completion, and success.</p> <p>Increase transparency in the awarding of need- and non-need-based financial aid by states and institutions.</p>	<p>Strengthen connections across education, labor, and public benefits data systems to calculate value metrics for all students, programs, and institutions.</p> <p>Provide institutions with secure access to workforce outcomes data to monitor value for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p> <p>Report disaggregated value-related student outcomes data publicly.</p>	<p>What do graduates from my program earn at 1, 5, and 10 years out?</p> <p>What is the debt-to-earnings ratio for graduates of my program?</p> <p>How long does it take graduates at this institution to see a return on investment or experience value?</p>

Institutional Leaders	Federal Policymakers	State Policymakers	Students and Families Questions students should receive answers to about value (all measures should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, and gender)
Promote Social Justice by Providing Equitable Postsecondary Value because postsecondary education has an important role to play in dismantling racism, classism, and sexism in our economy and society.			
<p>Proactively conduct and report on an equity audit—a comprehensive evaluation of policies and practices relating to admissions, enrollment, student supports and engagement, completion, post-college outcomes, and leadership, faculty, staff, and contractor diversity—to identify racial, socioeconomic, and gender-based inequities in access, participation, and success.</p> <p>Foster a safe, welcoming, and unbiased learning environment that facilitates excellence and attainment for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p> <p>Promote a more just society by preparing students to combat racial, socioeconomic, and gender-based injustice in their workplaces and communities.</p> <p>Institute equitable hiring, career advancement, and pay practices for all faculty and staff members.</p> <p>Actively engage with local community stakeholders to promote equity and justice, and actively work to remedy any harms caused to the local community in the past.</p>	<p>Require all Title IV institutions to conduct and report on an equity audit that assesses the impact of their policies and practices on Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women, and offer financial incentives to institutions that show evidence of improvement.</p>	<p>Conduct a statewide equity audit that assesses the impact of all state postsecondary policies on Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.</p> <p>Require racial and gender diversity, including diverse student representation, in appointments to gubernatorially appointed boards, state higher education agency leadership, and institutional leadership roles in public postsecondary education.</p>	<p>Has this institution examined its own role in perpetuating and combating inequality?</p> <p>Are students welcomed into conversations about how the institution should design equitable curricula, policies, and practices?</p>

FOCUS AREAS

The action agenda outlines key challenges to ensuring equitable postsecondary value, along with examples of opportunities for institutional leaders, federal policymakers, and state policymakers to enhance postsecondary value for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women through practice and policy change.

These recommendations are not an exhaustive list of needed reforms, and we encourage all postsecondary stakeholders to pursue these and other bold solutions to promote social and economic mobility and justice through postsecondary experiences.

Equalize Access to Increase Postsecondary Value

Because where students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women enroll and what they study greatly impacts the quality of education they receive; and thus, their post-college outcomes.

PROBLEM: While college-going has risen across the board for all students, college access remains unequal for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds. In 2016, 83 percent of recent high school graduates from high-income backgrounds enrolled in either two- or four-year colleges, compared to just 67 percent of recent high school graduates from low-income backgrounds.³ Similarly, White recent high school graduates (70 percent) enrolled in college at higher rates than Black (58 percent) and Latinx (68 percent) high school graduates.⁴ The COVID-19 public health crisis is exacerbating these disparities in enrollment. While undergraduate enrollment has decreased across the board from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020, Indigenous students and Black students have been hardest hit, seeing enrollment declines of 10 percent and 8 percent, respectively.⁵

Variations in Access, Completion, and Outcomes for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Students

Our current postsecondary data system fails to appropriately disaggregate among 25 distinct, self-identified AAPI subgroups, masking variations in postsecondary access, completion, and post-college outcomes for AAPI students and limiting our ability to address inequitable postsecondary value. Although similar issues of variation may exist within other subgroup populations, the issue is especially acute within the AAPI community.

While recent high school graduates in the aggregate AAPI race/ethnicity category enrolled in college at a high rate of 86 percent, this measure fails to account for different experiences between East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, Central Asian, and Pacific Islander communities and the communities that those geographic groups contain.⁶

For example, data from the American Community Survey (ACS) shows that Southeast Asian Americans, including those from Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, and Cambodian backgrounds face enormous disparities in college enrollment and educational attainment, with around one-quarter of this population having not graduated from high school, compared to only 12 percent of all AAPI adults.⁷ Of those who have graduated high school, Cambodian (74%), Hmong (76%), Lao (69%), and Vietnamese (80%) Americans are less likely to have attended college compared to the aggregate AAPI group (88%).⁸ While over 50 percent of aggregate AAPIs have earned a bachelor's degree or higher, attainment rates are far lower for Vietnamese (33%), Lao (18%), Hmong (22%), and Cambodian (20%) adults.⁹

Because of these data limitations, underrepresented AAPI communities are not adequately represented in many of the datasets that we use throughout this paper. However, they remain a key population in the work of the Postsecondary Value Commission and our action agenda includes a recommendation to better capture the diversity of the AAPI community.

PROBLEM: Our postsecondary system remains highly stratified, with too many institutions still providing limited access to the students for whom a credential of value could make the most difference. Students from low-income backgrounds and students of color who enroll in college are less likely to pursue bachelor's degrees or attend selective colleges, which often have greater resources to devote to student success and provide higher chances of completion—which both confer additional economic returns. While 41 percent of White undergraduate students and 57 percent of the highest-income students enrolled at selective four-year institutions, only 28 percent of Black students, 23 percent of Latinx students, and 14 percent of the lowest-income students enrolled at these colleges and universities.¹⁰ Although two-year and less-selective institutions can offer valuable postsecondary experiences, the racial and income-based disparities in where students attend college are indicative of a failure to equitably distribute access to resources and opportunities.

PROBLEM: Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to have access to programs that provide strong economic returns—returns often necessary to repay student loans and build wealth. Stratification by field of study also hampers economic outcomes for minoritized students and women, particularly at the baccalaureate level, where they are underrepresented relative to White men in some high-pay programs of study, including engineering and computer science.¹¹ For example, White men are six and eleven times more likely to earn bachelor's degrees in engineering compared to Latinx and Black women, respectively.¹²

PROBLEM: Navigating transfer pathways remains a barrier to postsecondary value for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Two-year institutions provide college access to a diverse array of today's students: 32 percent of Pell Grant recipients, 43 percent of Indigenous, 42 percent of Latinx, and 37 percent of Black undergraduates attend a community college.¹³ The vast majority of these students (80 percent) intend to go on and earn a bachelor's degree, but only 25 percent have access to pathways that allow them to successfully do so,¹⁴ with rates of upward transfer being lowest among Black and Latinx students and students from low-income backgrounds.¹⁵

PROBLEM: Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are underrepresented in college in high school programs, including dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, and early college high school. Dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, and early college high school programs can improve students' college access and admissions outcomes, provide students with an opportunity to earn college credits at a reduced cost, and help students acclimate to the rigor and expectations of college courses. While these opportunities can serve as an effective on-ramp to college success, program participation remains unequal. While 13 percent of White students earn college credits through dual enrollment, Black (7 percent) and Latinx (9 percent) students participate at lower rates.¹⁶ Similarly, 16 percent of students in the highest-income quintile earn credits through dual enrollment, but only 6 percent of students in the lowest-income quintile participate.¹⁷ Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are also less likely to earn college credits through International Baccalaureate (IB) programs and Advanced Placement (AP) classes.¹⁸

ACTIONS: Postsecondary education must ensure that Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women are afforded equitable opportunities to enroll in institutions and programs that provide value and lead to social and economic mobility.

To equalize access to promote postsecondary value...

Institutions should:

Interrogate and eliminate admissions requirements that could limit access for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, including consideration of legacy status, standardized test scores, and criminal history. Legacy admissions policies are designed to give preference to applicants based on their familial relationship to alumni, benefitting White and wealthy students whose families have had the privilege to attend college.¹⁹ In doing so, these policies, by definition, perpetuate the racism of decades past when our higher education system was closed to Black, Latinx, AAPI, and Indigenous communities. In fact, at some highly selective colleges, legacy status equates to scoring 160 points higher on the SAT.²⁰ Ending these inequitable policies would provide first-generation students, students from low-income backgrounds, and Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students a fairer shot at admittance to selective institutions, since research shows that Black and Latinx students are significantly underrepresented among legacy applicants, compared to the broader applicant pool.²¹

Standardized testing policies perpetuate privilege and advantage students who already have the most resources and support. Perpetual racial bias is embedded in the structure of tests, which are adapted from earlier undeniably racist standardized intelligence, or IQ, tests.²² Research suggests that up to 12 percent of test questions in the SAT are biased against Black students and up to 10 percent are biased against Latinx students.²³ Privileged students are better positioned to receive high test scores, are more likely to take tests multiple times to improve their score, and are better able to afford the most effective methods of test preparation, like working with a private tutor.²⁴ These students will continue to benefit from the use of standardized test scores in admissions decisions, even when tests are optional. Therefore, institutions should remove test score requirements altogether (go test blind) as part of a comprehensive overhaul of their admissions policies and adopt more holistic admissions approaches.

Collecting criminal justice information (CJI) and information on prior drug convictions or drug use in admissions perpetuates racial inequities, deepens socioeconomic disparities, and is a loss for individuals, communities, and society at large. Racial disparities in incarceration and involvement in the justice system begin as early as elementary school, with the school-to-prison pipeline primarily affecting Black students. In fact, Black youth are five times more likely to be detained in juvenile facilities than White youth, meaning that Black students are more likely to develop criminal records well before the time they apply to college.²⁵ CJI policies lead to attrition of applicants with criminal records and the denial of admission of qualified students of color, particularly Black students.

Implement best practices in equitable recruitment and develop robust partnerships with local schools, community colleges, and community organizations serving Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds. All institutions should be actively engaging with and recruiting Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds,, and prioritizing outreach to the neighborhoods, schools, and community organizations that serve large majorities of these students. Research suggests that many institutions—particularly those best positioned to support underserved students’ success—prioritize recruiting White and affluent high schoolers to the detriment of students of color, first-generation students, rural students, and students from low-income backgrounds. A recent study examined 15 public research universities’ recruitment patterns and found that most prioritize visiting wealthy high schools where the median neighborhood income was approximately \$68,000 to \$110,000.²⁶ Institutions were less likely to send admissions officers to visit high schools with higher proportions of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, where White students are in the minority.²⁷ Research also indicates that institutions are less likely to visit rural high schools, prioritizing urban and suburban schools instead.²⁸

Colleges and universities should also develop early college awareness programs with local schools, including elementary, middle, and high schools, build robust partnerships with local community colleges, and conduct routine outreach to local community organizations to encourage the enrollment of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, including adult and returning adult students. For example, Brandeis University has developed partnerships with local high schools to conduct routine visits, host college fairs, build relationships with guidance and college counselors, engage parents, and host essay writing workshops.²⁹ Rice University has built robust partnerships with local area elementary and secondary schools, developing more than 50 programs to bring middle and high school students from low-income backgrounds to campus for learning experiences.³⁰

Equalize access to all programs and fields of study for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.

Institutions should prioritize racial, socioeconomic, and gender equity in program access, including for new students accepted into a department or major, enrolled students who declare or switch majors or transfer to a different department, and transfer students.

Institutions must interrogate policies and practices that work to disproportionately exclude students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women from enrolling and persisting in certain program majors or fields of study. These barriers can include implicit bias in advising, designing introductory courses to “weed out” students, and charging students higher prices to take classes in certain majors, like engineering.³¹

Reduce barriers to enrollment for transfer students, given that Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students and students from low-income backgrounds are overrepresented at two-year institutions³², and improve credit recognition for students with transfer credits or college in high school credits.

Four-year institutions should examine institutional credit hour residency requirements^c, ensure that degree program requirements are accessible and transparent for students to understand how transfer credits and college in high school credits (dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, and Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate) will apply toward a degree, develop tuition price guarantees and scholarships for transfer students, provide transfer students with equal treatment in the awarding of institutional aid, and ensure that transfer students have opportunities to enroll in all programs and areas of study.

Federal policymakers should:

Increase federal support for evidence-based college access programs to continue to increase postsecondary enrollment for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds.

For example, consider federal TRIO programs, GEAR UP, and AmeriCorps programs, including the College Advising Corps, College Forward, and College Possible.

Offer funding incentives for institutions to increase their enrollment of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds by setting minimum enrollment equity benchmarks that institutions must meet to receive bonus aid or competitive grants.³³

The federal funding structure for K-12 education provides additional dollars to schools that serve students from low-income backgrounds, established in Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Extending this model to our higher education system, and expanding it to include institutions that serve large proportions of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, will distribute dollars more equitably among institutions, recognize the importance of serving postsecondary students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, and provide these critical institutions with necessary resources to deliver strong outcomes and promote student success.

c Credit hour residency requirements dictate the number of credit hours that a student must earn at an institution to receive a degree from that institution. These policies can limit the number of credit hours that students can successfully transfer from previous institutions.

State policymakers should:

Build strong, reliable transfer pathways and guarantees between all public two- and four-year institutions, including the state flagship university. For example:

- Implement and improve the use of common course numbering systems for all public institutions.
- Implement the use of guaranteed credit mobility, including guaranteed transfer of an associate degree or a core block of classes.
- Create statewide reverse credit transfer policies.
- Set tuition price guarantees for students who transfer.
- Design state aid to be portable when students transfer.^{34,35}

Improve statewide dual enrollment policies to prioritize equity, increase program participation for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, and streamline credit recognition and pathways to postsecondary degree completion. For example:

- Embed equity goals into state guidance for dual enrollment programs and produce and distribute regular, disaggregated reports on dual enrollment participation to all stakeholder groups.
- Ensure that dual enrollment and college in high school credits are included in statewide transfer articulation agreements and transfer guarantees.
- Include a diverse set of providers and delivery methods to help reach all students—including those in higher education deserts—in state enrollment plans.
- Require schools to conduct early student and parent education about dual enrollment opportunities, require that schools clearly communicate eligibility criteria in a transparent way, and require multiple measures to assess readiness and eligibility.
- Allocate resources to expand college in high school programs to include college access counseling, financial aid advising, and support for transferring credits.³⁶

Students and families should receive information on:

What is the racial, socioeconomic, and gender composition of the college's student body as well as the faculty and staff, overall and by program of study?

How will my previous credits (transfer credits, college in high school credits) apply toward my degree and fulfill requirements for my program?

Remove Affordability as an Impediment to Postsecondary Value

Because investing in students of color and students from low-income backgrounds promotes equitable student success, improves students' return on investment, pays dividends for society, and can serve as a critical step in compensating for the legacies of systemic racism and classism in our country.

PROBLEM: Postsecondary opportunities are unaffordable for many students from low-income backgrounds. Students from the lowest-income households must devote an amount equivalent to more than 150 percent of their annual income to cover the cost of attending one year at a four-year college—compared with just 14 percent from high-income households.³⁷

PROBLEM: Students from low-income backgrounds and students of color are often forced to rely on loans to finance their education, leading to inequitable student loan debt, and, for many families, repayment burdens that prevent them from building wealth and worsen the racial wealth gap. The vast majority (79 percent) of Black graduates borrowed to finance their education in 2015-16, compared with just 64 percent of White graduates and 55 percent of Latinx graduates.³⁸ Worse yet, half of Black students defaulted on their student loans within 12 years of entering college, and even among Black students who complete a bachelor's degree, 23 percent defaulted—four times the rate for White students.³⁹ Pell Grant recipients were also more likely to default on their educational loans within 12 years of entering college relative to their higher-income peers (28 percent vs 5 percent).⁴⁰

PROBLEM: The institutions that disproportionately serve Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds—community colleges and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Asian American and Native American/Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs)—are critically and chronically underfunded. For example, community colleges—institutions that serve large shares of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds—receive nearly \$2,900 less per student in state resources compared to institutions offering doctoral degrees.⁴¹ These disparities in funding by institution type create massive spending gaps for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Due to inadequate and inequitable funding, the institutions that serve Black and Latinx students—including community colleges and MSIs—spent 16 to 20 percent less per student than institutions that primarily serve White students⁴² and one study estimates that public colleges across the country spend approximately \$5 billion more each year to educate White students as compared to their Black and Latinx peers.⁴³

ACTIONS: To harness postsecondary education to disrupt longstanding inequities in income and wealth, postsecondary education must address the affordability challenges facing students of color and students from low-income backgrounds by making historic investments in need-based grant aid and adequately funding the institutions that serve these students.

To remove affordability as an impediment to postsecondary value....

Institutions should:

Allocate institutional aid toward meeting the full cost of attendance and eliminating unmet need, based on students' income and wealth, instead of awarding aid based on non-need factors, like GPA, standardized test scores, or high school ranking. While White families with high net wealth have lower levels of student debt, this is not the case for Black families. In fact, Black families with \$150,000 in net wealth take on the same levels of student debt as Black families with \$0 net wealth.⁴⁴ In addition, students with incomes in the bottom quartile receive \$700 on average per year less in institutional grant aid as compared to those in the top quartile.⁴⁵ Reallocating institutional resources could go a long way in addressing the affordability barriers facing students from low-income backgrounds.

Address basic needs security for students and their families. A 2019 survey from the Hope Center found that 45 percent of student respondents had experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days and 17 percent of student respondents had experienced homelessness.⁴⁶ To promote basic needs security for students, institutions should create and enhance on-campus resources for students, including campus food pantries; partner with state and local actors to offer targeted resources, including emergency grants, meal vouchers, transportation vouchers, and vouchers for low-cost housing; and ensure that advisors and student support professionals are educated about public benefit programs, including the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), and are able to help eligible students enroll.^{47, d}

Federal policymakers should:

Dramatically increase federal need-based aid for students from low-income backgrounds, including by doubling the Pell Grant. Over seven million undergraduate students rely on the Pell Grant to attend college each year,⁴⁸ but inadequate investment in the program means that the award has failed to keep pace with rising costs. At its peak, the maximum Pell Grant award covered more than three-fourths of the average cost of attendance at a four-year public university. Today, it covers less than one-third.⁴⁹ Policymakers should make historic investments in the Pell Grant program by doubling the maximum award amount. They also should protect and strengthen the long-term impact of the program by indexing the maximum award amount to inflation, targeting awards to students most in need of support, expanding eligibility to those who have been excluded, including undocumented students, and ensuring continued, annual support for the program by funding it through mandatory spending.

d The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020 reforms the federal student aid process to proactively inform low-income students of federal means-tested benefits for which they may be eligible. See <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hr133/BILLS-116hr133enr.pdf>

Federal campus-based aid programs, like the Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (FSEOG) and Federal Work Study, are critical forms of need-based aid and help students from low-income backgrounds cover tuition and non-tuition expenses. However, the current allocation formula for federal campus-based aid, including FSEOG and FWS, uses a base guarantee that prioritizes institutions that have previously received awards. As a result, many newer or growing institutions receive inequitable funding from the programs, even if they enroll large shares of students from low-income backgrounds and students of color.⁵⁰ Policymakers should increase funding for FSEOG and FWS and revise the formula to prioritize institutions that serve students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

Create and implement a comprehensive affordability plan, through a federal-state partnership, to stabilize and secure state and federal investment in public postsecondary institutions to promote college affordability. Per-student state investment in postsecondary education fell nationally by 13 percent between 2008 and 2018, resulting in dramatic increases in the proportion of education expenses shouldered by students and families.⁵¹ To incent states to make a greater investment in higher education and need-based aid with the goal of decreasing costs for students and increasing completion and educational quality, federal policymakers should create a federal match program that provides needed federal funds alongside affordability guarantees for students. Examples of current federal-state partnership proposals include the Debt-Free College Act, introduced by Sen. Brian Schatz (D-HI) and Rep. Mark Pocan (D-WI), and the federal-state matching grant program proposed by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO).^{52, 53}

If the federal-state partnership is proposed as a free college or a debt-free college program, the program should aim to, first and foremost, cover tuition and non-tuition costs for students from low-income backgrounds and students with unmet financial need. Importantly, this program should also include all public institutions in the state (including the state flagship) and provide for additional resources necessary to ensure that institutions serving large proportions of students of color and Pell Grant recipients are able to participate and manage enrollment changes, while still maintaining student supports and delivering strong outcomes.

Increase federal investment in MSIs to strengthen financial support for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and the institutions that serve them. Systemic racism continues to impact financial realities for MSIs. Historical underfunding from federal and state sources and inequitable investment from private donations have left many MSIs with smaller endowments than predominantly White institutions—leaving these institutions with fewer resources to support their efforts to deliver value. Further, the long-term effects of the racial wealth gap likely prevent many MSI alumni from giving to their alma mater.⁵⁴

Because these institutions are also often constrained from raising tuition based on their designations and missions, this makes many MSIs hugely dependent on federal and state support. When this funding is inadequate, as it historically has been, it can force institutions to make difficult trade-offs to support their students and stay viable, like reducing the generosity of scholarships or scaling back student support programs. To allow these institutions to serve key populations at an affordable price, policymakers should dramatically increase and make permanent funding for MSIs in Titles III and V and provide additional funding for capital investments to help equalize endowment amounts for MSIs.

Revise the tax code to incentivize private contributions to institutions that disproportionately serve students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, including MSIs. The federal government should provide greater subsidies for donations to under-funded institutions than to wealthy colleges with large endowments.

State policymakers should:

Increase appropriations to public institutions that serve large shares of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, including MSIs and community colleges, to remedy decades of insufficient and inequitable funding. For example, half of underrepresented students of color enroll at community colleges, which receive less than \$9,000 in state and tuition revenue per student, compared with public doctoral institutions, which receive over \$22,000 in state and tuition revenue.⁵⁵

Allocate all state grant aid toward meeting the full cost of attendance and eliminating unmet need, based on students' income and wealth, to remove financial barriers to student success and prevent student loan debt. Only 46 of the 100 largest state financial aid programs distribute awards based only on a student's financial need, with others utilizing merit-based criteria or other eligibility criteria, like intended profession.⁵⁶ To promote college affordability for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, states should award all state financial aid dollars based on need.

Moderate tuition increases to promote affordability and increase the predictability of expenses for students with financial need. Tuition and aid policy should have the explicit goal of improving affordability for students from low-income backgrounds, while maintaining funding for institutional need-based aid programs, student support services, and high-quality instruction.⁵⁷

Students and families should receive information on:

How much are students required to pay out-of-pocket to complete their education, and how much is financed through debt?

Eliminate Completion Gaps and Strengthen Post-College Outcomes to Ensure Postsecondary Value

Because successfully earning a credential with labor market returns is the surest route to economic mobility for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

PROBLEM: Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds who enroll in postsecondary education are less likely to graduate than White and higher-income students. At four-year institutions, for example, students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to graduate than their higher-income peers (48 percent vs. 66 percent),⁵⁸ and similar trends hold by race/ethnicity (40 percent of Black, 54 percent of Latinx, and 39 percent of Indigenous students graduate in six years vs. 64 percent of White students).⁵⁹

PROBLEM: Students who leave postsecondary education without a degree or credential earn less, and in some cases, may lose their investment of time and money. Completion is critical to realizing the economic returns to a credential—especially for students of color. For example, in one large public university system, it took non-completers nearly three times as long to reach median earnings of \$50,000, compared with those who did complete a bachelor’s degree.⁶⁰ Five years after leaving college, Black and Latinx non-completers still did not earn as much as Black and Latinx completers earned in their first year after graduation.⁶¹ Even worse, non-completers are twice as likely to default on their student loans compared to students who completed a credential within six years,⁶² leaving these students without the earnings premium associated with postsecondary attainment and leaving them with debt. Closing gaps in college completion is an essential component to promoting equitable economic returns for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.

PROBLEM: Students who receive a low-quality postsecondary education may leave with a credential and debt, but without the necessary skills and competencies to secure workforce opportunities that lead to social mobility. At some institutions, students are not provided the rigorous content and instruction to achieve the types of learning outcomes and competencies that employers seek.⁶³ And many institutions have not yet built robust partnerships with employers to streamline students’ pathways to careers.⁶⁴

To make the promise of college completion real for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women, program instruction must be high-quality, rigorous, and lead to strong employment, earnings, and post-college outcomes. For students to reap value from their postsecondary education, they must at least earn enough to recoup their financial investment on top of what they would have earned without pursuing education after high school. In fact, the Postsecondary Value Commission defines this return on investment as Threshold 0 (T0): Minimum Economic Return (see Figure 3), yet hundreds of institutions do not meet this level of minimum returns, indicating that they should reexamine their programming, practices, and policies to enhance quality and boost students’ post-college success.⁶⁵

ACTIONS: Postsecondary education must deliver strong and equitable completion and workforce outcomes for students to create economic value and ensure an adequate return on investment.

To promote completion and strengthen post-college outcomes to ensure postsecondary value....

Institutions should:

Reform developmental education to strengthen pathways to completion. Developmental education courses are often intended as opportunities to help close equity gaps in degree attainment. They aim to prepare students to be successful in college, build students’ confidence, and serve as an on-ramp to college for students who may otherwise not have access. But too often, the remediation process serves as another barrier to success, increasing students’ time-to-credential and decreasing students’ completion outcomes. This is especially true for Black and Latinx students and students from low-income backgrounds, who are overrepresented among those enrolled in developmental education.⁶⁶ Nearly 60 percent of community college students take at least one

developmental education course, and among those students, only 28 percent graduate within eight years.⁶⁷ To improve completion outcomes for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, institutions should ensure that placement in developmental education courses is based on multiple measures, instead of a standardized test; reform gateway course models for math and writing to provide students with support alongside credit-bearing opportunities; and have students take credit-bearing courses each semester, so they advance on a pathway to completion.⁶⁸

Bolster institutional supports, including robust, culturally responsive academic advising programs, to address barriers to equitable completion for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.

Institutions should create robust academic advising models that require all students to attend introductory advising sessions, encourage students to meet with an assigned faculty advisor, leverage technology to proactively contact students when they encounter academic challenges and to manage advising caseloads, and encourage students to contact dedicated, full-time academic advising staff when they have questions or need help navigating registration, figuring out degree requirements, or have questions about graduation and transfer policies.⁶⁹

Institutions should also use clear and accessible degree planning materials, like degree maps, to guide advising and help students better understand course requirements and course sequencing.

Match robust advising models with additional financial assistance, including microgrants, emergency grants, and in-kind benefits (e.g. transportation vouchers, free textbooks, nutritional assistance, childcare benefits), to remove financial and non-financial barriers to completion in a comprehensive way. One such program, the City University of New York (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), has been shown to deliver strong outcomes for students, leading to a 53 percent completion rate, up from just 25 percent, by coupling financial assistance, hands-on support services, and required guided pathways.⁷⁰

Strengthen students' pathways to degree completion and into careers by setting high standards for rigorous learning and offering opportunities that both expand students' minds and prepare them for success in the workplace. Institutions should design degree programs and courses to help students master key learning outcomes and employer-demanded skills, such as critical thinking, teamwork, and written and oral communication.⁷¹ Depending on the field of study, programs should be designed in a way that prepares students for professional licensure requirements or continued postsecondary education.

Institutions should work with employers to align learning outcomes to labor market needs, offer meaningful in-school employment opportunities, and develop paid internship opportunities and apprenticeship programs that build students' skills, social capital, and networks.⁷²

Institutions should connect students with on-campus and off-campus job opportunities for students that build career capital and promote stronger academic outcomes than other forms of employment that are not related to labor market needs, students' program of study, or students' career goals. These types of jobs maximize the value provided to students from working since they allow students to accumulate career skills, build professional networks, and increase confidence, while minimizing stress.⁷³ Moreover, creating content- and experience-based job opportunities is incredibly important for students of color, who face enormous disparities in obtaining paid internship opportunities.⁷⁴

Institutions should prioritize students receiving Federal Work Study in filling these opportunities and should ensure that Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and women have equal access to all apprenticeship and work opportunities, especially in fields in which they have historically been underrepresented.^{75,76}

Federal policymakers should:

Incentivize institutions to close equity gaps in college completion and post-college outcomes by assessing their performance on key value metrics to set a standard for high-quality postsecondary education and promote equitable opportunities for student success.

Policy makers should address value through a system that balances institutions' performance on key value metrics—both overall and when disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, and gender (e.g., using a combination of metrics such as completion rate, attainment of Threshold 0, and Equitable Value Index). This system should use policy levers such as incentive funding for improvement or strong performance, short-term financial support for institutions to create and execute improvement plans, additional flexibilities and federal investments to correct for funding inequities and inadequacies (e.g., funding for chronically underfunded institutions, like Minority Serving Institutions and community colleges), and additional requirements, penalties, or loss of funding for low-performing institutions.

Invest in the development and expansion of evidence-based programs that provide for enhanced academic advising, career counseling, financial aid, and in-kind assistance to eliminate financial and non-financial barriers to completion and post-college success. Legislative proposals like the Community College Student Success Act would provide funding to public two-year colleges to develop and implement completion programs modeled on the CUNY ASAP program and adapt to fit the needs and circumstances of the institutions' students.⁷⁷

Reform and target federal funding for employer incentives, supports, tuition reimbursement programs, and other non-tuition accommodations (e.g., childcare, transportation support) toward low-wage workers to narrow race and income gaps in college completion and improve college-to-career pathways. Although over 60 percent of employers offer education assistance programs, few employees take advantage of the opportunity.⁷⁸ The government should incentivize both the expansion of and participation in of these programs, ensure opportunities for both large and small employers and their employees, and target resources toward increasing attainment for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, including partnerships between employers and community colleges and MSIs.

Incentivize employers to expand their workforce pipelines to include more Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, including by recruiting aggressively from the institutions that serve them. Employers who actively recruit from only elite institutions perpetuate inequities in the labor market, as these institutions serve fewer students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. For example, Latinx journalists appealed to the *Los Angeles Times* to increase representation in the newsroom by recruiting through large public systems like the California State University system.⁷⁹

State policymakers should:

Develop or refocus statewide attainment goals to promote mobility and equitable value for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds.

As of December 2020, 45 states have put in place ambitious attainment goals, aimed at increasing the share of the state's adults who hold a postsecondary degree or credential,⁸⁰ but a 2019 report found that only 34 state attainment plans mentioned race and only 25 outlined strategies and action steps to improve postsecondary completion and outcomes for students of color.⁸¹ All states should develop and focus state attainment goals to, first and foremost, address longstanding inequities in college completion for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI communities and low-income communities.

Incentivize institutions to close equity gaps in college completion and post-college success by adopting or enhancing outcomes-based funding policies for public institutions, prioritizing institutions that equitably enroll, graduate, and deliver strong post-college outcomes for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds.

These funding systems also should remedy past funding inequities and insufficiencies. States should also consider using key value metrics that measure student outcomes as part of their state authorization standards.⁸²

Allocate state workforce development resources to create industry partnerships between employers and institutions that serve students of color and students from low-income backgrounds to strengthen career pathways and promote strong post-college outcomes.

State policymakers should work closely with state labor and workforce agencies to ensure that these partnerships work to address inequities in employment and lead to economic mobility and security.

Develop a statewide strategy for expanding the workforce pipeline that includes and prioritizes institutions and programs that serve Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.

States should facilitate greater recruitment and cooperation between local and regional employers and community colleges and MSIs, ensure that community colleges and MSIs are included in industry-level partnerships, and should make these connections part of all state economic and workforce development plans.

Students and families should receive information on:

What are the average completion rate and time-to-credential for students in my program, including students who transfer in and out?

What are the career and employment outcomes for students who attended my program?

Improve Data to Expose and Address Inequitable Postsecondary Value

Because current information gaps ignore critical outcomes disparities for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.

PROBLEM: Current gaps in our postsecondary data system obscure critical inequities in outcomes for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students with varied paths to and through postsecondary education, including part-time and transfer students. In our existing postsecondary data system, only 48 percent of entering postsecondary students are reflected in federal graduation rate data, and about 1 in 3 students are not included in federally-reported post-college outcomes data.^{e,83} Equally troubling, we are unable to fully understand post-college outcomes for students of color because we currently cannot disaggregate earnings data by race/ethnicity or by completion status. A new question on the FAFSA will finally allow for disaggregated data on student borrowing and loan repayment by race/ethnicity,⁸⁴ but policymakers must publicly report this information to reveal inequities in outcomes for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students.

Current data gaps limit students' ability to find a college or program of value and institutional leaders' and policymakers' ability to assess inequities, target interventions, and promote strong outcomes for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds.

ACTIONS: Postsecondary education must promote equitable value by increasing data transparency and improving our federal postsecondary data infrastructure to empower students, families, and leaders to make informed postsecondary decisions.

To improve data to expose and address inequitable postsecondary value....

Institutions should:

Leverage data assets, develop a culture of data use, and create systems dedicated to using data to identify and remedy gaps in enrollment, completion, and value for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women.⁸⁵

Use data to reorient institutional strategic plans and institutional self-evaluations required by accreditors toward the goal of providing equitable value. Institutions should incorporate what they learn from internal data analysis to develop strategic plans and institutional improvement efforts and use these analyses to self-assess.⁸⁶ For example, Lehman College of the City University of New York aligns and embeds strategic goals and objectives with data.⁸⁷

e Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) analysis of 2018 Integrated Postsecondary Education System data. Department of Education. The IPEDS Graduation Rate survey only includes outcomes for first-time, full-time students, limiting its utility for understanding success for the majority of students at institutions of higher education. IPEDS also separately collects information through the Outcome Measures (OM) survey, which includes part-time and non-first-time students up to 8 years after enrollment. OM is not disaggregated by race/ethnicity, age, or gender, necessary to understand equitable outcomes. It is also not as widely cited of a measure as the less-inclusive Graduation Rate Survey. For more information, see: <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data/survey-components/9/graduation-rates>; <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data/survey-components/11/outcome-measures>

Federal policymakers should:

Create and implement a federal student-level data network (SLDN) that provides disaggregated information about all students' pathways and post-college outcomes, including employment, earnings, and loan repayment outcomes. Congress should pass legislation like the College Transparency Act that would leverage existing data at the institutional and federal levels to streamline data systems and fill in gaps so stakeholders can better understand student outcomes.

Enhance the College Scorecard and other federal information websites to provide transparency into which colleges are providing value to students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women. The U.S. Department of Education should reinstate on the College Scorecard previously removed metrics such as the percentage of students earning more than a high school graduate and national median earnings⁸⁸ and continue to explore ways to expand and disaggregate available data for consumer information (e.g., disaggregate earnings data by completion status and race/ethnicity; incorporate measurement of institutional performance on the Value Commission thresholds). They also should restart reporting institution-level outcomes data, in addition to the more recently added program-level data.

The Office of Federal Student Aid should continue to improve and enhance data on the student aid portfolio, including by disaggregating student borrowing and repayment data by race/ethnicity.

Revive accreditor data dashboards⁸⁹ to include measures of equitable completion and value (e.g., meeting the Value Commission's thresholds, especially Threshold 0) to support both the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) and accreditors themselves in taking an evidence-driven approach to measuring student outcomes by embedding data-use and emphasizing equitable outcomes in routine practices and reviews.⁹⁰

Require greater disaggregation of AAPI student groups in postsecondary data collections to capture the diversity of AAPI students' experiences and outcomes and to uncover inequities in college access, completion, and success. Our current postsecondary data system aggregates 25 distinct, self-identified AAPI communities in a way that masks inequities in outcomes. At a minimum, colleges and universities should be required to disaggregate race/ethnicity data for AAPI ethnic groups based on the nine categories used in the decennial Census and the American Community Survey (ACS), and the Department of Education should implement policies requiring greater disaggregation of AAPI data.⁹¹

Increase transparency in the awarding of need- and non-need-based financial aid by states and institutions, by requiring the IPEDS Student Financial Aid survey to disaggregate by race/ethnicity and Pell receipt for all aid sources, including state financial aid programs, institutional aid programs, and private grants and scholarships.⁹²

State policymakers should:

Strengthen connections across education, labor, and public benefits data systems to calculate value metrics for all students, programs, and institutions. Given the wealth of data states hold and use to inform policymaking, they should work to build relationships across offices and agencies and facilitate secure data sharing practices.⁹³ For example, Kentucky has leveraged these connections to create the Postsecondary Feedback Report—an interactive tool using disaggregated data to show the connection between institution and program completion, employment, and earnings within the state.⁹⁴

Provide institutions with secure access to workforce outcomes data to monitor value for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, underrepresented AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women. State higher education agencies should work with labor market information offices to connect postsecondary and workforce data. To fill gaps left by state data systems, states should also seek out other data sources, like the Census Bureau’s Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamic (LEHD) program, as the University of Texas System has done to supplement state-based data or the growing cross-state workforce data exchange through the Administrative Data Research Facility.⁹⁵

Report disaggregated value-related student outcomes data publicly. States like Minnesota have proven the value of publicly available, disaggregated student outcomes data, including information on employment type, employment industry, wages, and wage growth. Minnesota also maintains a publicly available data dashboard for policymaking and to gauge program effectiveness and a secure Postsecondary Data Mart that provides student-level data to postsecondary institutions in the state.⁹⁶

Students and families should receive information on:

What do graduates from my program earn at 1, 5, and 10 years out?

What is the debt-to-earnings ratio for graduates of my program?

How long does it take for graduates to see a positive return on their investment or experience value?

Promote Social Justice by Providing Equitable Postsecondary Value

Because our postsecondary education system has an important role to play in dismantling racism, classism, and sexism in our economy and society.

PROBLEM: Racial, socioeconomic, and gender-based discrimination and bias in hiring, employment, and career advancement impact post-college outcomes and postsecondary value in ways that extend beyond issues of college access, affordability, and success. Black individuals with some college or an earned associate’s degree still face higher unemployment rates than White individuals who did not complete college and, at every education level, Black individuals are almost twice as likely to be unemployed compared to White individuals.^{97,98} In fact, Black job applicants must have two additional levels of higher education relative to White candidates to have

the same employment probability.⁹⁹ Even within our postsecondary system, nearly three-fifths of all tenured faculty members are men, with the largest share being White men, and more than two-thirds of all full-time faculty are White men and women.^{100,101} When graduates face discrimination and disparities in post-college outcomes, like job placement, career advancement, and earnings, it impacts the value of their degree or credential to secure social mobility for themselves and their families.

ACTIONS: To truly deliver on our promise to Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women, postsecondary education must do its part to begin to tackle larger social inequities, including employment and pay discrimination and wealth gaps on our campuses and beyond.

To promote social justice by providing equitable postsecondary value....

Institutions should:

Proactively conduct and report on an equity audit—a comprehensive evaluation of policies and practices relating to admissions, enrollment, student supports and engagement, completion, post-college outcomes, and leadership, faculty, staff, and contractor diversity—to identify racial, socioeconomic, and gender-based inequities in access, participation, and success.^{102,103} After conducting an equity audit, institutions should create and implement a comprehensive plan to eliminate existing inequities and share progress in a transparent, accessible way.

Foster a safe, welcoming, and unbiased learning environment that facilitates excellence and attainment for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women. Delivering on promises of equity comes down to the hard work of individual people. It requires self-reflection, difficult conversations, cultural shifts, and the recognition and elimination of implicit biases. Creating a safe environment requires an honest reckoning with institutional histories, concerted action to eliminate symbols of past and present racism, and funding restorative commitments to descendants of enslaved laborers and Indigenous communities.¹⁰⁴

Promote a more just society by preparing students to combat racial, socioeconomic, and gender-based injustice in their workplaces and communities. Institutions play a key role in educating leaders in sectors like criminal justice, healthcare, and government. For example, the California Community College system educates 80 percent of California's police officers, making postsecondary education a key leverage point for combating racism within the state's police force.¹⁰⁵

Some institutions are making strides to better prepare students. For instance, the Truth, Racial Healing, & Transformation Campus Center at Rutgers University-Newark created Undoing Racism training for high school and college students and anti-bias training for first-year students and faculty to educate, challenge, and empower participants to dismantle racist structures.^{f,106}

f In 2016, the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) joined the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Truth, Racial Healing, & Transformation (TRHT) effort. AAC&U is partnering with higher education institutions to develop TRHT Campus Centers, with the goal of developing at least 150 self-sustaining, community-integrated TRHT Campus Centers. For additional information, see: <https://www.aacu.org/trht-campus-centers>

Institute equitable hiring, career advancement, and pay practices for all faculty and staff members. Just as in the broader labor market, Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI workers and women face employment and wage inequities on campuses. Institutions should examine human resources practices to close hiring, promotion, and pay gaps.¹⁰⁷

Actively engage with local community stakeholders to promote equity and justice, and actively work to remedy any harms caused to the local community in the past. Institutions should leverage their capacity, resources, and talents to enrich their local communities and solve community challenges.

For example, the Truth, Racial Healing, & Transformation Campus Center at Rutgers University-Newark sponsors interactive community projects to discuss local issues, such as the water crisis in Newark that is affecting communities of color.¹⁰⁸

In another instance of equity-driven community impact, informational technology experts from Tribal Colleges worked with the University of Wisconsin-Extension's (UWEX) Center for Community Technology Solutions through the Building Community Capacity through Broadband initiative to expand broadband for local Indigenous residents.¹⁰⁹

Federal policymakers should:

Require all Title IV institutions to conduct and report on an equity audit that assesses the impact of their policies and practices on Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women, and offer financial incentives to institutions that show evidence of improvement. Equity audits have been introduced in federal legislation, including the College Equity Act, which authorizes the Department of Education (ED) to award grants to institutions to conduct equity audits and to execute plans to address identified inequities.¹¹⁰ Federal policymakers should go a step further and make these audits mandatory, ensuring that all institutions receiving federal dollars are engaged in the work of promoting equitable postsecondary value and disrupting longstanding inequities on campus.

State policymakers should:

Conduct a statewide equity audit that assesses the impact of all state postsecondary policies on Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women. States should also publicly report on the findings of the equity audit and create and implement a plan to enact policy changes based on the audit's findings.

Require racial and gender diversity, including diverse student representation, in appointments to governors' boards, state higher education agency leadership, and institutional leadership roles in public postsecondary education. In 2016, just one-third of public college presidents were women, and fewer than one in four public college presidents were Black, Latinx, Indigenous, or AAPI.¹¹¹ States should make a public commitment to increasing the racial and gender diversity of higher education decision-makers who serve as college presidents, in state agency leadership, and on gubernatorially appointed boards.

Students and families should receive information on:

Has this institution examined its own role in combating inequality?

Are students welcomed into conversations about how the institution should design equitable curricula, policies, and practices?

Do students feel that the institution fosters a safe, welcoming, unbiased learning environment?

CONCLUSION

Improving our postsecondary system to deliver equitable value for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women will require the focused efforts of key postsecondary stakeholders—including institutional leaders, federal policymakers, and state policymakers. As we turn from crisis to recovery, strengthening postsecondary education's value proposition—making real the promise of economic and social mobility for students—is critical to ensuring that we rebuild a more equitable future together. As we stare down the devastating impact of the COVID-19 public health and economic crises, now is not the time to tinker at the edges. Now is the time for bold, comprehensive systems change to deliver equitable value.

It is abundantly clear that federal, state, and institutional policies influence both the economic and non-economic outcomes that students can expect from attaining a postsecondary credential and the full impact that increased postsecondary attainment can have on our communities and our nation.

These policies—from equitable admissions policies to robust need-based financial aid to building a better postsecondary data system—can help students achieve economic mobility by ensuring that students have equitable access to degrees and credentials of value and programs of study that align with their goals, their interests, and workforce demands. These policies can help prepare students to thrive in the workforce after graduation and find fulfillment in meaningful work opportunities where they can pursue their passions and give back to their communities. These policies can create a stronger, more dynamic workforce, with employees who are equipped with key skills, like critical thinking, quantitative literacy, and intercultural knowledge. These policies can translate into greater economic returns for communities, states, and our nation by increasing GDP, increasing the tax base, and decreasing the need to spend resources on health care, corrections, and public assistance.¹¹² And these policies can create a healthier, happier, and more civically engaged populace.

Importantly, these federal, state, and institutional policies and practices also influence which students and communities are strengthened through our postsecondary system and which communities will be ignored, excluded, or even harmed; if we will harness our postsecondary system to disrupt the legacies of systemic racism, sexism, and classism, or if we will sustain them.

Combined with the value definition and framework, we hope this action agenda will inspire key postsecondary actors at the federal, state, and institutional levels to rethink existing policies and practices, rebuild a postsecondary system centered on ensuring equitable value for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and AAPI students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women, and reimagine our postsecondary system as an instrument to create a stronger and more just society together.

ENDNOTES

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