Preface

By Tia Brown McNair, senior director for student success and chair of the General Education Maps and Markers Equity Working Group, Association of American Colleges and Universities

As part of the General Education Maps and Markers (GEMs) project, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) convened a group of scholars, practitioners, and policy makers to form an Equity Working Group. The Equity Working Group was created to examine educational practices that deepen and accelerate learning for students traditionally underrepresented and underserved in higher education. The charge to this group of dedicated and esteemed higher education leaders was to recommend strategies for increasing all students’ access to high-quality learning that fosters equitable levels of demonstrated achievement and degree completion.

America’s Unmet Promise: The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education by Keith Witham, Lindsey E. Malcom-Piqueux, Alicia C. Dowd, and Estela Mara Bensimon highlights the contemporary realities that helped shape the Equity Working Group members’ conversations about the continuing legacy of educational inequities that have occurred throughout our nation’s history. Knowledge of these realities prompted the Equity Working Group members to ask critical questions such as “What does it mean to be an equity-minded practitioner? What does it mean to take an equity-minded approach when developing pedagogy? How can we value and embed students’ cultural capital in curricular and cocurricular design? How can we move the dialogue about student learning and success from deficit-minded approaches to asset-based approaches? How can we build capacity for educators to ask and respond to questions about equity that can lead to campus change? What spoken and unspoken assumptions about low-income students, first-generation students, and students from racial and ethnic minority groups underlie our efforts? How do we motivate faculty and staff to address equity as intrinsic to higher education’s mission?”

As educators, we have a responsibility to ask and answer these types of questions as a means of confronting our biases and our views of otherness. Unconscious bias is a powerful influence on who we educate and on how we educate. Only by deepening our understanding and continually renewing our willingness to change our policies and practices can we truly alleviate the inequities that plague our nation and hold hostage the success of our students and of our future democracy.

The five principles for ensuring equity in higher education reform that are outlined in this publication represent a starting point for faculty and staff as they reflect on how to lead the change necessary to make access to high-quality learning a reality for all students. In a set of complementary resources to be published in 2015, the Equity Working Group will further examine these five principles as well as additional principles focused on developmental education, faculty and staff development, assessment of student learning, and higher education policy. These resources will include specific action items, questions, and exemplars to help educators engage with the scholarship of equity and inclusive excellence.

The Equity Working Group hopes that readers will use this report and those forthcoming resources to prompt essential campus conversations about our individual and collective roles in advancing equity as an educational imperative. In the data and recommendations presented here, we hope you will find the motivation and a path forward toward improving opportunity for all your students.

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1 As detailed in this report, “equity-mindedness” is a concept developed by the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California.
In *The Cancer Journals*, Audre Lorde writes, “I am defined as other in every group I’m part of. The outsider, both strength and weakness. Yet without community there is certainly no liberation, no future, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between me and my oppression” (1997). As educators, we must transform otherness from cultural liability into cultural capital, recognizing the power of diversity to effect positive change within our educational system and in our higher education reform efforts. Whether we identify as other or have never experienced otherness, we are all part of a community bound by shared history. We must use our understanding of that history to liberate ourselves and ensure a bright future for all students and for our nation. That is America’s promise.