Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence: A Campus Guide for Self-Study and Planning

“A great democracy cannot be content to provide a horizon-expanding education for some and work skills, taught in isolation from the larger societal context, for everyone else…. It should not be liberal education for some and narrow or illiberal education for others.”

— THE QUALITY IMPERATIVE (AAC&U BOARD OF DIRECTORS 2010)

For generations, the United States has promised universal access to opportunity. It’s part of our history and the engine of our economic and civic prosperity. But opportunity in America continues to be disproportionately distributed. The effects of this imbalance are evident. We have deep and persistent gaps in education, income, and wealth, and these gaps are widening as our nation becomes more diverse. As a result, the middle class is shrinking, and the fastest-growing segments of our population are the least likely to have the opportunities they need to succeed.

Expanding access to quality education is key to making opportunity real for all. It is key to closing America’s deepening divides, strengthening the middle class, and ensuring our nation’s vitality. Yet, at all levels of US education, there are entrenched practices that reinforce inequities—and that lead to vastly different outcomes for low-income students and for students of color. We are failing the very students who must become our future leaders and citizens.

In fact, US higher education is falling seriously behind in meeting the country’s need for citizens and workers with postsecondary learning and sought-after skills. This needed talent must come from precisely the segments of US society that the American educational system has underserved—in the past and to this day.

By 2027, 49 percent of high school seniors will be students of color. Yet, historically and today, African American, Latino/a, and Native American students are notably less likely than students from other racial and ethnic groups to enter and complete college. In addition, only 9 percent of students in the lowest income quartile complete a bachelor’s degree by age twenty-four. As increasingly large numbers of high-income students complete college, the equity divides in US college attainment have deepened dramatically.

Higher education has a role to play in addressing this issue. It is our responsibility to the students we serve as well as to our democracy and the nation’s economy. It is time for higher education to step up and lead for equity and inclusive excellence.

Using This Campus Guide for Self-Study and Planning

To serve students and society well, higher education will need to make a pervasive commitment to equity and inclusive excellence—both preparing students for and providing them with access to high-quality learning opportunities, and ensuring that students of color and low-income students participate in the most empowering forms of college learning.

This Campus Guide for Self-Study and Planning is part of a series of publications and activities designed to advance equity and inclusive excellence. It provides a framework for needed dialogue, self-assessment, and action. It can be used by campus educators as a tool for bringing leaders and educators together across divisions and departments to engage in an internal assessment process and to conduct necessary dialogues, all aimed at charting a path forward to improve all students’ success and learning. The Guide is designed with particular attention to helping campus leaders and practitioners focus on the success of students who come from groups who traditionally have been underserved in higher education.

This guide is part of a series of documents and resources that have been, or will be, released throughout AAC&U’s Centennial year. All the documents in this series build on the work and resources developed through AAC&U’s signature initiative Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP).

Other AAC&U Resources on Equity and Inclusive Excellence

America’s Unmet Promise:  
The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education

Step Up and Lead for Equity:  
What Higher Education Can Do to Reverse Our Deepening Divides

The LEAP Challenge:  
Education for a World of Unscripted Problems

To order these publications, and to see campus examples and other campus tools, see: www.aacu.org/diversity/publications.