A Vision for Equity

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In 2015, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), in partnership with the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California, launched a multiyear institutional change effort, Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence: Campus-Based Strategies for Student Success, funded by Strada Education Network and Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation & Affiliates. At that time, many higher education institutions were, and continue to be, engaged in conversations and institutional efforts to advance student success. As indicated by evidence from AAC&U’s member survey report, Bringing Equity and Quality Learning Together: Institutional Priorities for Tracking and Advancing Underserved Students’ Success (Hart Research Associates 2015), many AAC&U member institutions are tracking and disaggregating data on the retention and graduation rates of students from traditionally underserved groups, but far fewer are disaggregating data on students’ participation in high-impact educational practices or on their achievement of institutional learning outcomes. In addition, strategies for closing equity gaps are works in progress, and many institutions do not have explicit equity goals for student success outcomes. In other words, campus efforts to ask and answer questions about equity in student outcomes were not a core component of student success initiatives. With the most diverse student population in the history of US higher education, we do a disservice to our students by not engaging in equity-driven data analysis leading to institutional change that supports underserved student success. A failure to engage in such analysis is a failure of our educational system.

A Vision for Equity includes chapters from the thirteen campuses that sought to build internal capacity to address inequities in student outcomes and narrow equity gaps through the following objectives:

- increased access to and participation in high-impact practices (HIPs)
- increased completion, retention, and graduation rates for low-income students, first-generation students, adult learners, and minoritized students
- increased achievement of learning outcomes for underserved students using direct assessment measures, including AAC&U’s Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics
- increased student awareness and understanding of the value of guided learning pathways that incorporate HIPs for workforce preparation and engaged citizenship

The participating campuses have implemented targeted student interventions, improved curricular designs and student pathways, enhanced academic support programs, strengthened high-impact practices, leveraged resources, created institutional tracking models, and designed professional development training for faculty and staff. The campuses have designed mechanisms for sharing data (e.g., equity dashboards, reports, regular campus-wide meetings, newsletters, and websites) and have embedded equity goals as strategic priorities. Several of the campuses have opened offices focused on equity and inclusion, and others have hired additional staff to advance equity goals.

The significant strides made by the campus teams—from expanding their initial understanding of why equity matters to creating internal systems and structures to ask and answer difficult questions about student success—speak to the dedication and commitment of all involved. Why equity matters should be a question that every educator should be able to answer, and ensuring student success should be the shared goal that we all have in common.