

# AMERICA'S UNMET PROMISE: The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education



BY Keith Witham, Lindsey E. Malcom-Piqueux,  
Alicia C. Dowd, & Estela Mara Bensimon



**GEMs**

General Education Maps & Markers





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# Foreword

By Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities

*“Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5,000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental.”* – W. E. B. DU BOIS

In releasing *America’s Unmet Promise*, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) calls on higher education to bring new urgency to the goal of providing equitable access to a quality college education for students of color and students from low-income families. These students will soon form the majority of the nation’s college-eligible learners, and their fortunes will shape—for better or worse—America’s economic and global future.

Unhappily, as *America’s Unmet Promise* shows in detail, many of these emerging majority students have been systemically “underserved” at every step along their educational pathways, in their studies prior to college, and, for those who actually enroll in college, within higher education as well. They have been tracked, marginalized, crowded in overstressed schools, and taught by the least experienced teachers. These students may earn good grades in school, but nonetheless are steered to developmental courses in college because what they studied was not taught at the college-preparatory level. If they go to college, many of these underserved students will transfer from one institution to another. But since federal tracking does not include transfer students, these underserved students do not appear in federal reports on college completion and student “success.”

These students are democracy’s hope and America’s future. They need and deserve the advantages of a horizon-expanding higher education. They need and deserve a liberal education.

AAC&U is determined to face, publicize, and work to reverse the disparities that today disfigure both our educational system and democracy’s promise of quality education and meaningful access to opportunity for all members of our society. The first step in this effort is a searching analysis of the evidence. I am grateful to the authors of *America’s Unmet Promise* for providing this research synthesis, with its detailed and illuminating portrait of educational inequality and of the cumulative burdens it imposes on the underserved. AAC&U will use this report as the background text for our Centennial efforts, described below, to build new commitment and new capacity—across higher education—to face and address the “equity imperative.”

*America’s Unmet Promise* was written in the context of AAC&U’s work on General Education Maps and Markers (GEMs), a project funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The report will be supplemented, later in 2015, by publications identifying educational practices that support underserved student success in higher education and that ought to be incorporated into students’ higher education learning pathways, beginning with general education.

*America’s Unmet Promise* casts its gaze well beyond the college curriculum, however. This report is primarily a portrait of American inequality as it is organized and reinforced by educational practices from early childhood through higher education. Hopeful rather than despairing, the authors provide guiding principles on what it would take for higher education to become “equity-minded” in practice as well as in aspiration.

While the disparities made visible in this report cannot, of course, be solved by higher education reform alone, higher education can and should play an important and expanded role in illuminating the disparities and in promoting educational and societal changes that would begin to ameliorate them. Publication of this report is a crucial sounding of the trumpet to make equity a priority for higher education and for society as a whole.

### **Race, Ethnicity, Class, and the Persistence of Unequal Opportunity**

*America's Unmet Promise* cites evidence that, by 2027, virtually half of those graduating from high school will come from communities of color. How ready is higher education for this milestone in America's march from majority white to "majority minority"?

In principle, the higher education community has long since embraced diversity as an ethical and educational priority. AAC&U has worked with educators on the intersections of diversity and democracy since the 1980s. We have been joined in this effort by the entirety of our membership and by dozens of sister associations, both national and regional. And yet, as the evidence shows, the United States remains very far indeed from achieving equity in higher education attainment.

The stubbornly persistent disparities encompass not just *whether* students go to college, but *where* they go to college. Those from higher income families overwhelmingly enroll in the nation's more selective colleges and universities, where they have access to an extraordinary array of educational opportunities and enrichments. By contrast, students of color and low-income students are far more likely to enroll in "broad-access" institutions. While our broad-access institutions have admirable missions and extraordinary staff, the hard truth is that they almost always have markedly fewer resources than they need to provide anything like the robust social, financial, and academic supports that more affluent institutions provide routinely. As Alexander Astin once observed at an AAC&U annual meeting, higher education in the United States functions like a medical system whose finest resources are allocated only to the healthy, while those with the most serious health challenges are sent off to medical trailers that are staffed by part-time medics who strive valiantly to assist, with not nearly enough. The mission and quality learning needs of broad-access higher education institutions need to become a shared policy priority.

### **The Divides and Disparities Endanger America's Economic and Democratic Future**

It is now sixty years since the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* called on the nation to integrate our public schools with "all deliberate speed"—a decision intended, in part, to extend educational opportunity more equitably and inclusively. But the initial progress made in the aftermath of *Brown* has been reversed rather than scaled; many of our schools—and higher education institutions as well—are now more segregated by race, ethnicity, and class than ever. Even as progress stalls, the costs of our failure to expand access to excellence are growing ever higher. Failure to invest in quality learning for underserved students will mean, in the very near future, an absolute loss of American capability.

Given the shift to a knowledge economy, achieving postsecondary education is now essential for almost everyone seeking a middle-class life. But employers and economists agree that just earning a credential is far from enough. Today's economy is fueled by innovation and rapid change, and this development has raised the bar for the level and scope of learning graduates need from college. To succeed in their own lives, the nation's emerging majority students will need a higher level of learning than they currently are attaining.

Given developments in the global community, where the United States faces “the rise of the rest” as its new and game-changing reality, the provision of a quality college education to those from groups historically excluded from it also will prove crucial to our nation’s economic future. Specifically, as highly educated baby boomers retire, the nation will rely on young Americans to sustain our global role in both the economy and world affairs. But as we have seen, the rising majority of these workers must come from communities that have *never* been well served by our educational system at any level.

Finally, given our union in a democracy committed to liberty, opportunity, and justice for all, the equity divides that deface our educational system raise questions both at home and abroad about the meaning and integrity of America’s democratic promise. The societal pressures that accompany deep disparities already are erupting and prompting yet another round of “dialogues about race.” But dialogue will be insufficient to repair this nation’s divided house. The deep educational divides that reflect and perpetuate inequality will take concerted, systemic, transforming action to overcome.

### **Inclusive Excellence and the Equity Imperative: AAC&U’s Centennial Commitments**

The year 2015 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of AAC&U. Throughout this Centennial Year and beyond, AAC&U will explore the meaning and implications of the association’s recently expanded mission. In 2012, looking ahead to the Centennial, AAC&U expanded its mission to address explicitly rather than implicitly the question of who needs to benefit from an empowering liberal education. Our new mission statement affirms that our purpose is “to make liberal education and inclusive excellence the foundation for institutional purpose and educational practice in higher education.” Our approach to inclusive excellence encompasses not only *what* is taught—the knowledge and skills needed to contribute to a diverse and globally engaged society—but also *who* is taught. Our mission is to provide the most empowering forms of learning to all who enroll in college, not just to the most fortunate among our students.

Through our long-term initiative Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP), and in partnership with our 1,350 institutional members, AAC&U has already anchored our commitment to inclusive excellence by providing a comprehensive and contemporary framework for high-quality education. (To learn more about AAC&U’s framework for quality learning and inclusive excellence, see the appendix.) I am proud of the work AAC&U has done to provide an educationally meaningful framework for quality. And yet, as we planned to mark the association’s Centennial, taking stock of our priorities and our progress, it became starkly apparent that our commitment to making excellence inclusive was gaining ground only at the margins.

Even as educators have embraced the language and the goal of “making excellence inclusive,” many influential policy leaders appear determined to focus college learning—especially in broad-access institutions where underserved learners are clustered—on job training primarily. As a result, even as more underserved students head to college, we are witnessing an unprecedented shrinking of the stated purposes of education. Where once it was assumed that the purpose of higher education was to prepare a graduate for work, life, and citizenship, national policy leaders now speak almost exclusively about college as workforce development.

Notably, employers themselves overwhelmingly endorse the capacities fostered through liberal education as the best preparation for success in today’s economy. In contrast, the public dialogue

effectively drowns out any mention of those vital aspects of college learning that build global acumen, democratic knowledge, or even ethical or intercultural learning. Stuningly, the National Governors Association opined in a widely circulated report that higher education might need to pull back from its commitment to the liberal arts, and many leaders have openly attacked both studies and investments in the humanities and social sciences. The historic ties between the liberal arts and democratic self-governance notwithstanding, public policy is promoting a strikingly instrumental, technocratic, and value-free approach to higher education.

Preparing students for a demanding economic environment is indeed an important purpose of higher education. Yet in fact, broad learning is part of the strongest career preparation. Moreover, it is equally important that we also commit to students' intellectual, ethical, and personal development. And, crucially, we must reclaim rather than retire our role in preparing all graduates for informed, knowledgeable, and participatory citizenship. AAC&U's vision for inclusive excellence encompasses all these goals. Further, we affirm that there is absolutely no way graduates can be well prepared for the current world of global interconnections—both economic and civic—without a strong liberal education, from school through college, that includes big-picture learning encompassing history, cultures, and values as well as science and technology.

### **Bringing Quality and Equity Together**

Higher education, AAC&U believes, has come to a historic crossroads, and new creativity is needed to bring quality and equity together. Research findings—including recent work on high-impact practices (Kuh 2008; Finley and McNair 2013) and earlier work on diversity (Smith 1997)—show persuasively that emerging majority students are most likely to persist and learn in college when they experience this nation's most powerful forms of learning: deep engagement with meaningful questions; active practice and use of higher-order skills and judgment; and hands-on involvement with faculty, peers, advisors, and collaborative partners in real-world settings, including students' own places of employment. But it is clear that we have a long way to go in developing the will and the wit required to provide this kind of learning—best described as a liberal education—to emerging majority college students, rather than just to the most fortunate students.

As we celebrate our Centennial and look to our second century of educational leadership, AAC&U intends to work at the interface of quality and equity. The long-term goal is captured in our mission statement. We seek to make excellence genuinely inclusive—and by excellence we mean the big-picture, inquiry-centered, opportunity-expanding learning that only a liberal education can provide. We will work to build much wider understanding not just of the importance of earning a college degree, but of the fact that, ultimately, it is the quality of learning that accounts for the value of a college education.

Concurrently, we will work tirelessly to persuade Americans that this nation's systemic failure to provide quality learning to our emerging majority students is not just deplorable but, in the context of the changing demographics, recklessly dangerous. Ours is no longer an economy that can skim talent off the top of society. When innovation is key to survival, economic success requires the development of new talent from all parts of society. This nation is not currently poised to produce that talent.

Will history show that our leaders invested successfully in the development of new talent from all parts of our society, with sustained attention to those historically left behind? Will we be able to look back twenty years hence and say that higher education built new capacity for our economic future and for our diverse democracy? These are the questions we face as citizens of a democracy and as a community of educators.

I hope you will read *America's Unmet Promise* with care. Even more, I hope you will join with us to create solutions to the stark problem of educational inequality that this report lays bare.



# 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<sup>1</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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The authors are grateful for the many insightful comments, questions, and recommendations provided by those individuals who reviewed drafts of this report. In particular, the authors would like to acknowledge the members of the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U's) General Education Maps and Markers (GEMs) Equity Working Group (listed below), not only for their contributions to this report, but also for their commitment to advancing equity in higher education policy and practice, both as participants in the GEMs initiative and in their own work. We also thank the members of the GEMs Editorial Review Group for their feedback.

The authors would also like to thank the staff of AAC&U—including Tia Brown McNair, David Paris, Carol Geary Schneider, Debra Humphreys, Heather McCambly, and Kevin Hovland—for their many thoughtful comments and suggestions and for taking a national leadership role in making equity a core concern in higher education reform. The authors are especially grateful to Kathryn Peltier Campbell at AAC&U for her exceptional talent and patience as an editor; this report is significantly clearer and more effective because of her efforts. Thanks are also due to Michele Stinson and Shelley Johnson Carey for shepherding the publication through the design and production process. Of course, any errors, omissions, or other offenses are the responsibility of the authors.

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# Introduction to *America's Unmet Promise*

Over the past few years, higher education policy makers and practitioners, along with system and institutional leaders, have redoubled their efforts to improve the retention and graduation rates of the nation's college students. Federal and state governments and major national foundations have invested millions of dollars in initiatives aimed at increasing student success. Many of these efforts are now showing promise for moving the needle, however slowly, on college completion rates.

Within this “completion agenda,” there has been a particular focus on improving outcomes for students from lower- and middle-class families and students of color, for whom many forms and aspects of higher education have been and remain inaccessible. But enduring gaps in opportunity and success remain, from prekindergarten through higher education and into the workforce. Students' success in college is a function of educational experiences that span their entire lives and that are inextricably bound in complex social and economic dynamics. Thus despite years of increasing diversity in overall postsecondary enrollment, educational opportunity in the United States—and the economic and social benefits it affords—remains markedly stratified along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines.

Despite enduring inequities and the stubbornly slow pace of improvement, there is reason to be optimistic. The completion agenda has ushered in a wave of new resources and initiatives dedicated to ensuring that US higher education fulfills its promise for the twenty-first century by tackling inequities head on. For example, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has advocated for equity as essential to contemporary higher education through initiatives like Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) and the new LEAP Challenge, and through projects like General Education Maps and Markers (GEMs). Precisely because they hold great potential for transforming higher education, reform efforts like these must make equity a central concern.

To truly address the needs of America's future, we cannot address equity in higher education separately from core educational redesign. Rather, we must make equity a key framework for any reform—one that is explicitly and deliberately wedded to goals for educational excellence and student achievement.

This goal is especially important when our reforms focus on the most fundamental experiences of postsecondary education, such as the general education curriculum. As we design or implement new ways of structuring and delivering these core educational experiences, we must constantly ask ourselves: In what ways does the general education curriculum advance or neglect equity as both a societal goal and a learning goal for students? In what ways does the current delivery of general education contribute to or perpetuate inequities in higher education experiences, and in what ways do our proposed reforms correct those inequities? (Bensimon 2012).

Furthermore, we must consider the ways in which the content of our general education curriculum empowers students who have experienced marginalization and instills in all students the knowledge, values, and ideals that are crucial to counteract the economic and racial polarization that threatens our nation. The United States may aspire to have the most college-educated population in the world, but this goal will be meaningless without the resolve to become the most equitable society.

In this publication, we provide both an empirical and a conceptual overview of equity as a framework for higher education reform. The terms equity and equality are often confounded or used interchangeably;

*Educational opportunity in the United States—and the economic and social benefits it affords—remains markedly stratified along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines.*

however, they reflect different historical and political understandings of the roots of stratification. While *equality* is typically defined as treating everyone the same or giving everyone the same opportunities regardless of their individual attributes, we define *equity* as proportional representation—here, of racial and ethnic groups and those of different socioeconomic status—in terms of access, retention, completion, and participation in programs (e.g., honors programs), experiences (e.g., study abroad), and activities (e.g., undergraduate research) that build students’ academic and cultural capital. While we recognize that many groups have experienced and continue to experience marginalization in higher education—including women, particularly in certain science and engineering fields (Touchton, Musil, and Campbell 2008); lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students; and those from religious minority groups—we focus in this report on inequities linked to socioeconomic status and race and ethnicity due to our country’s specific and entrenched history of affirming and enforcing these inequities even in the face of their direct contradiction with democratic ideals.

As we define it here, being *equity-minded* involves taking stock of the contradictions between the ideals of democratic education and the social, institutional, and individual practices that contribute to persistent inequities in college outcomes among different racial and ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes. Equity-minded individuals are aware of the sociohistorical context of exclusionary practices and racism in higher education and the effect of power asymmetries on opportunities and outcomes for students of color and students of low socioeconomic status. Being equity-minded thus involves being conscious of the ways that higher education—through its practices, policies, expectations, and unspoken rules—places responsibility for student success on the very groups that have experienced marginalization, rather than on the individuals and institutions whose responsibility it is to remedy that marginalization.

Equity-mindedness guards against the ingrained habit of blaming inequities in access, opportunity, and outcomes on students’ social, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Equity-minded practices are created through

1. willingness to look at student outcomes disaggregated by race and ethnicity as well as socioeconomic status;
2. recognition that individual students are not responsible for the unequal outcomes of groups that have historically experienced discrimination and marginalization in the United States;
3. respect for the aspirations and struggles of students who are not well served by the current educational system;
4. belief in the fairness of allocating additional college resources to students who have greater needs due to the systemic shortcomings of our educational system in providing for them;
5. recognition that the elimination of structural racism in institutions of higher education requires intentional critical deconstruction of structures, policies, practices, norms, and values assumed to be race neutral (Lawrence et al. 2004).

In this paper, we argue that systematic inequalities in participation and outcomes that consistently leave socioeconomically disadvantaged students and those from marginalized racial and ethnic groups in educational systems of lesser value while placing dominant groups in systems of higher value (in terms of labor market outcomes and social status attainment) are signs of inequity. These systemic and racialized inequalities bear investigation, intervention, and remedy (Dowd and Bensimon, forthcoming). Thus the first section of this paper is a call to action, making the case for equity as

integral to any higher education reform effort because of the vital role higher education plays in the lives of individuals and the health of society.

In the second section, we synthesize what we know about the complex dynamics of inequity in the policies and practices of educational institutions, illustrating the many ways in which such inequities manifest in disparities across the educational experiences of socioeconomically disadvantaged students and students of color. The goal of this review, beyond providing a basic overview of race- and class-based disparities in educational outcomes, is to demonstrate that those disparities are the cumulative result of racial and socioeconomic stratification across a complex set of educational experiences, including access to the kinds of broad and applied learning needed for success in a twenty-first-century workforce (Finley 2012; Humphreys and Kelly 2014).

In the third section, we provide an overview of the concept of equity as a framework for higher education reform, offering five guiding principles for equity “by design.” These principles provide a common vocabulary and conceptual footing for reform, and they suggest benchmarks and safeguards for ensuring equitable design in future efforts. In this section, we propose the need to understand equity as *an actionable concept* and *a quality of policy and practice*. We suggest that only by embedding responsibility for equity pervasively in the design of new policy and practice can educational reforms achieve their much-needed aims.

The five principles will be essential if higher education is to address the cumulative impact of the complex, multifarious, and inextricably linked inequities that students from marginalized communities experience across the lifespan. By the time young people from low-income families and many communities of color arrive at postsecondary institutions—if they do—they and their families have likely persevered through inadequate preschool education, underresourced K–12 schools, and interactions with an array of bureaucratic systems of public assistance that serve to stigmatize and demoralize. Enrolling in higher education at all is an immense victory for many of these students. But too often, they arrive without adequate academic preparation at institutions that do not have the resources, tools, or knowledge to correct for a lifetime of marginalization wrought by institutionalized racism and classism.

No single reform initiative can address all of these challenges. But neither do we have to accept how poorly the current systems serve marginalized students. While we must be candid about the realities of inequities across social and economic structures, we must also be willing to disrupt the current systems of higher education and take responsibility for those aspects of inequality that are under our control.



## PART 1.

# Aspiring to Equity in Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century

Effective higher education reform efforts must be infused with an awareness of the ways in which many groups within US society have been historically excluded from educational opportunities, or marginalized within the structures and institutions that house those opportunities. We have characterized this awareness as *equity-mindedness*—a way of approaching educational reform that foregrounds the policies and practices contributing to disparities in educational achievement and abstains from blaming students for those accumulated disparities (Bensimon 2007; Dowd and Bensimon, forthcoming). Achieving equity in higher education design and delivery is critical to achieving the democratic ideals of social and economic equality, as higher education plays a key role in advancing individual, community, and national well-being.

### **Access to and attainment of high-quality postsecondary education is vital to the social and economic success of individuals and families.**

Advocates of higher education know well that college participation and success is increasingly critical to social and economic opportunity. While the benefits of a college degree have long been evident in the higher earning potential and greater economic security that college graduates enjoy (Baum, Kurose, and Ma 2013), the extent of economic and social security afforded by a postsecondary credential has become even clearer in the wake of the Great Recession brought on by the economic crisis in 2007–08. Not only were recent college graduates less than half as likely in 2011 and 2012 to be unemployed as those with just a high school diploma, but unemployment rates also have declined rapidly since the recession for college graduates while largely stagnating for those without a college credential (Carnevale, Jayasundera, and Cheah 2012).<sup>2</sup>

Whereas in past generations the American middle class was maintained through access to manufacturing and other jobs that did not require a college degree, the same is simply no longer true today. Indeed, the American middle class—once the most affluent in the world—has both shrunk and become poorer relative to the middle classes of other developed nations. As well-paying low-skill jobs have evaporated, income inequality in the United States has grown, and the middle and lower classes make less money than families at similar points in the income distribution of countries like Canada, Sweden, and Finland (Leonhardt and Quealy 2014). The slow growth of educational attainment in the United States relative to that of other developed nations is a central factor in our growing income inequality.

These patterns make clear that despite recession, dragging economic growth, and legitimate concerns about growing levels of student loan debt, a college degree is still a wise long-term investment. But, as is also increasingly clear, the economic and other benefits afforded by a college degree are tied not just to the credential but also to the quality of learning that takes place during a student's undergraduate

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<sup>2</sup> Unemployment rates for recent college graduates peaked at 11.1 percent in 2011 but had declined to 6.8 percent one year later; meanwhile, unemployment rates for recent high school graduates peaked at 30 percent in 2010 and remained above 20 percent two years later. And while the US economy shed more than five million jobs requiring only a high school degree during the recession, the labor market actually grew by 187,000 jobs requiring a bachelor's degree during the same time period. Since the end of the recession, more than half of all new jobs have gone to bachelor's degree holders although they represent only one-third of the total workforce (Carnevale, Jayasundera, and Cheah 2012).

experience. As the economy becomes increasingly globalized, knowledge- and information-based, and technology-driven, the labor market value of problem-solving and analytic skills has come to exceed that of the concrete, field-specific knowledge valued in past eras.

In AAC&U's most recent employer survey (Hart Research Associates 2013), respondents made clear that the types of problem-solving and analytical thinking skills students gain through undergraduate education are more important than the specific major or program in which they earn a degree (see, e.g., Humphreys and Kelly 2014).<sup>3</sup> The vast majority of employers report looking to hire college graduates who

- have had “educational experiences that teach them how to solve problems with people whose views are different from their own”;
- have learned “about ethical issues and public debates important in their field”;
- have had “direct learning experiences working with others to solve problems important in their communities”;
- have learned “about societies and cultures outside the US and [about] global issues and developments” (Hart Research Associates 2013, 9).

In the quickly changing contexts of the twenty-first-century global workforce and society, simply earning a credential is not enough to ensure these positive outcomes associated with postsecondary education. All students need access to the kinds of hands-on, engaging learning experiences that will equip them with the broad knowledge and analytical skills the labor market rewards.<sup>4</sup>

The economic impact of college education—for individuals and for the nation—is compelling and quantifiable. But the benefits of postsecondary educational attainment extend beyond economic outcomes. Individuals with a college education are more likely than those with just a high school diploma to have consistent health insurance coverage and healthy lifestyles that reduce reliance on social and healthcare services (Baum, Ma, and Payea 2013). And postsecondary educational attainment is positively linked to measures of civic participation: college graduates are almost twice as likely to vote as those with just a high school diploma, are much more likely to consider themselves informed about current political issues, are more likely to participate in volunteer activities, and are more likely to express trust in others—all indicators of a robust democratic culture (Baum, Kurose, and Ma 2013; Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development 2013).

### **Equality in educational attainment is vital to the future we envision for our communities, regions, and nation.**

The far-reaching individual benefits of postsecondary educational attainment have clear implications for the civic and economic health of cities, regions, states, and the nation. In the aggregate, individual gains in civic participation and workforce readiness represent the potential for individual states and the country as a whole to grow and prosper in the twenty-first century. And while the individual benefits higher education affords provide clear justification for making equity in access and success a moral imperative of a democratic society, the larger social benefits that derive from having a highly educated workforce make the equity imperative not only a moral one but an economic and political one as well.

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<sup>3</sup> AAC&U has published several reports on employers' opinions of college learning (see Hart Research Associates 2006, 2008, 2010, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> AAC&U has contributed extensively to the field's understanding of the dimensions of these liberal education outcomes and the practices that best engage students in achieving them. See, e.g., AAC&U (2005); National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise (2007); Finley (2012); and Finley and McNair (2013).

Quite simply, in the face of persistent inequality in educational attainment, it is impossible for this nation to achieve the global economic and sociopolitical leadership to which it aspires.<sup>5</sup> Disparities in structural investments in public education—from preschool through higher education—are manifested in income inequality, economic inefficiency, and a weakened democratic system (Stiglitz 2013).

To truly appreciate the long-ranging perils of continued disparities in educational opportunity and success, we must face the fact that the population of young people on whom the nation's future depends will increasingly be comprised of children from groups who have been historically excluded from, tracked out of, and served most poorly by existing higher education structures. Although students of color have long been part of our educational systems and we should thus be cautious about overstating the rationale of demographic change as justification for attending to equity in educational reform, the need for equity is only going to grow as the demography of the United States shifts, particularly in southern and western states. The changes will be significant: according to projections by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), the US high school graduate population was 72 percent white in 1997 and will be only 51 percent white in 2027 (see figure 1). By 2027, Latino students will comprise a full quarter of all high school graduates nationally; Latinos already constitute more than half of high school graduates in California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. And by 2020, the majority of graduating seniors in Florida, Mississippi, and Georgia will be students of color (Prescott and Bransberger 2012).

*The population of young people on whom the nation's future depends will increasingly be comprised of children from groups who have been historically excluded from, tracked out of, and served most poorly by existing higher education structures.*

By 2027, half of the students in US high schools will come from what have long been described as minority groups. Our future as a diverse democracy has arrived. America's future prosperity, economic and democratic, depends on how well we educate our students of color.

These future college-going students will not experience college in the same ways that past generations have. Even today, many students are participating in higher education in ways current systems were not designed to support:

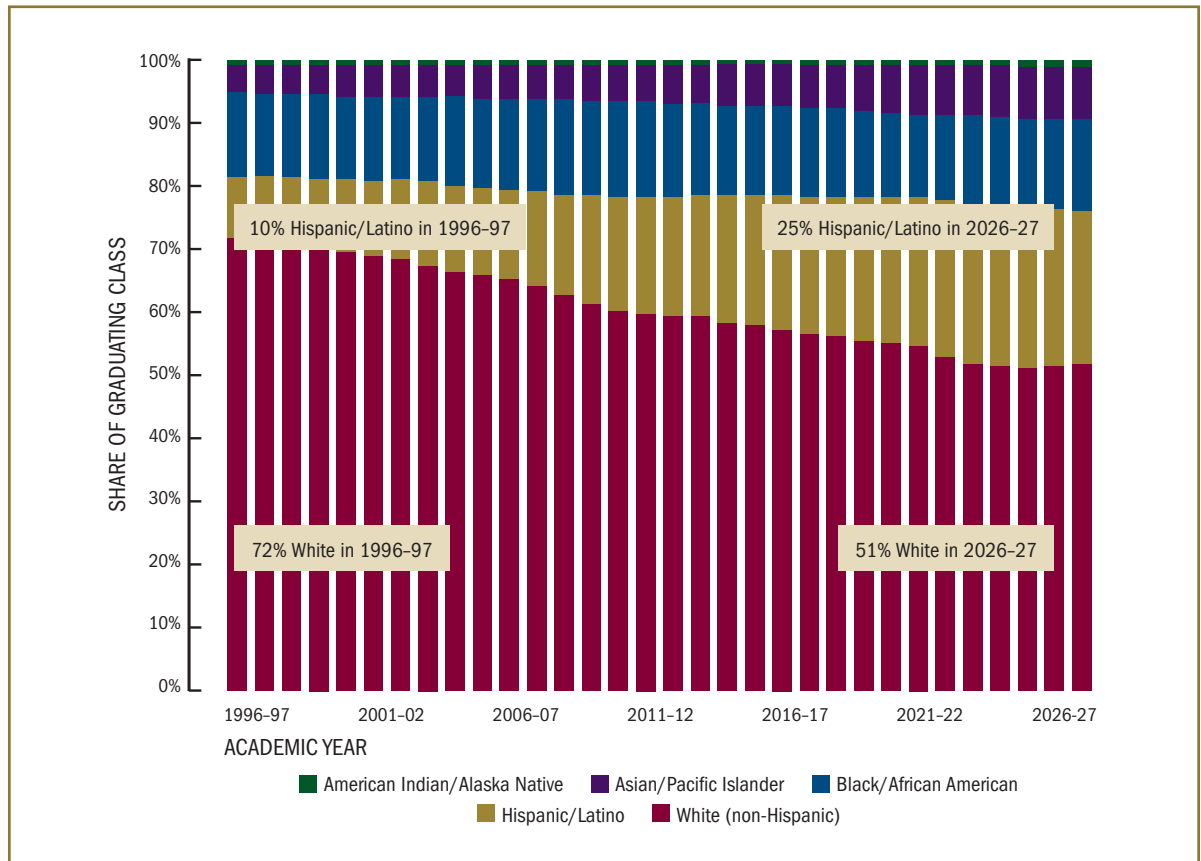
- Only a quarter of all college students attend a residential four-year college.
- Almost a quarter of all college students have dependent children.
- Most college students work at least part time, and more than half of those who never completed their college educations say they dropped out because they needed to work to support themselves and their families (Public Agenda 2009).

For many of these students, the traditional experience of residential higher education is simply not feasible. And yet these are the same students for whom access to and success in high-quality engaged learning is most vital—for the well-being of themselves, their families, and the nation.

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5 In the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) 2013 survey of critical workforce skills, for example, US adults fell significantly below the OECD average in literacy, numeracy, and information- and computer technology-related problem-solving skills. But perhaps more troubling, the United States is in the dubious company of nations that have both large social disparities and below-average workforce skills—nations where class mobility is low and where family socioeconomic status is highly correlated with educational attainment (OECD 2013). Signaling the deeply entrenched patterns of inequity that manifest in individuals' lifetime educational and economic opportunities, the OECD notes, "The fact that the countries with the greatest social inequities in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) are also those with low rates of social mobility as observed in the Survey of Adult Skills suggests that the relationship between social disadvantage and lower skills proficiency may be established early in individuals' lives" (OECD 2013, 10).

FIGURE 1. High school graduates by race/ethnicity, 1996–97 to 2010–11; projection through 2026–27



Source: Prescott and Bransberger 2012.

In sum, equity in higher education for the twenty-first century is no longer just about access or about achieving socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity in postsecondary enrollment as an end in itself. Rather, equity in postsecondary educational attainment has far-reaching effects on our regional and national economies and our social cohesion and democratic vitality. This reality demands that we work toward a broader vision of equity in higher education, which in the twenty-first century must be characterized by

- *equity in access across stratified tiers of higher education;*
- *equal successes of all students across the many types of programs and credentials within those tiers; and*
- *equity in access to the myriad forms of deep and engaged learning that prepare students for today's workforce and society.*

## PART 2.

# The Cumulative Impact of Inequities in Educational Opportunity

Educational opportunity in the United States is deeply stratified, as is evident in disparities in degree completion and in the types of institutions to which students have access. Less obvious but just as problematic are forms of stratification in the kinds of opportunities students have *within* college: their access to science- and technology-oriented majors, to opportunities for applied learning, to quality advising about courses and financial aid, and to positive relationships with faculty and other mentors. Achieving equity in higher education design and delivery requires attending to disparities across tiers and sectors as well as within institutions, since the experiences students have (or do not have) at every level of education will determine what opportunities are available to them later.

In the following discussion, we summarize data illustrating the cumulative and complex nature of educational disparities in the United States, from K–12 through college. These data illustrate disparities in educational opportunity among racial and ethnic groups as well as by socioeconomic status (SES), defined according to available information (sometimes by income quartile or by composite SES variables, or, where those variables were not available, by factors associated with SES such as parents' levels of educational attainment).<sup>6</sup>

In considering these data, it is important to note that *race and class disparities are overlapping but distinct, and both matter separately* (Carnevale and Strohl 2013). Readers will correctly note that race and class disparities are strongly linked in the United States and that disparities may overlap across these categories. Indeed, African Americans, American Indians, and Latinos are disproportionately likely to experience poverty and sustained unemployment, and to fall in the lowest income quartile (Pew Research Center 2013). In fact, Latino children in the United States are now not only proportionately more likely to live in poverty than white children, but actually outnumber white children living in poverty (Lopez and Velasco 2011).

While inequities that stratify educational opportunity in the United States by race and by class are often connected, these inequities are not the same. Racial inequality is the cumulative effect of 250 years of slavery, 90 years of Jim Crow, and 60 years of “separate but equal” (Coates 2014). Equity gaps related to race stem from the shared history of “involuntary immigrants” (Ogbu 1990): groups who became Americans through enslavement (e.g., African Americans), colonization (e.g., American Indians, Puerto Ricans, and Native Hawaiians), or forceful annexation of territory (e.g., Mexican Americans). When we take stock of history, we recognize that such actions marginalized and “minoritized” these groups (Gillborn 2005), who have yet to gain full access to the benefits of higher education in the United States.

The mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization of poor and low-income students differ from the mechanisms of racial discrimination in education. Public schools are free to all, but for too many years, the doctrine of “separate but equal” created *de jure* discrimination in schools and legalized the practice of providing inferior education to Asian, Native Hawaiian, black, Latino, and Native American students. From their earliest days, colleges and universities provided scholarships for poor students, but legally discriminated against students of color (Dowd and Bensimon 2013).

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<sup>6</sup> Socioeconomic status (SES) is a composite indicator of relative social and economic well-being; specific factors included in SES vary but typically include measures of wealth, household income, occupation, and parents' educational attainment. Such measures could also include household and neighborhood factors (see Cowan et al. 2012).

Although policy may have limited impact in attenuating the many complex ways in which growing up poor constrains educational opportunity (see, e.g., Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997; Levine and Nidiffer 1996), federal policy has focused for decades and continues to focus on making higher education affordable. While the resources available may be inadequate to address the tremendous financial need demonstrated by today's students, the United States currently has an extensive system of state subsidies and federal financial aid programs designed to reduce cost-based barriers to attending college.

Policies designed to address race-based discrimination have not received the same high levels of public support as those intended to address financial need. Affirmative action, the major effort to counter racial discrimination, has been and continues to be under attack nationally and is currently nonexistent in several populous states. Further, affirmative action policy has always focused in a limited way on remedying access to selective institutions rather than on affirming postsecondary education as a civil right. Diversity initiatives and multicultural education notwithstanding, no major effort exists in federal or state policy to counter the legacies and contemporary forms of racial and ethnic discrimination in schooling—where the mechanisms of discrimination today are not legal but cultural, deeply embedded in assumptions about who merits a quality education, how merit should be demonstrated, and what counts as knowledge. Students of color are subject to stereotyped assumptions about their abilities, interests, motivation, and work ethic that are the direct descendants of legal discrimination. Our efforts as educators to counter those assumptions have been insufficient (Dowd and Bensimon 2013).

Even after adjusting for income, disparities still exist between racial and ethnic groups across many indicators of high school achievement and college access and success (Carnevale and Strohl 2013). Similarly, belonging to an “underrepresented minority” group is not a proxy for being low-income, particularly among high-achieving high school students (Hoxby and Avery 2012). As Carnevale and Strohl argue, “Unequal educational and career outcomes for economically disadvantaged whites can be explained with variables like family income, parental education, and peer expectations. These same variables do not fully explain African American and Hispanic educational and economic outcomes” (2013, 36). Thus, while “the interaction between race and class creates the most powerful brew for limiting upward mobility,” racial disparities and those based on class differences are simply not the same (37).

The distinct patterns and causes of these disparities underscore the importance of creating clear goals and strategies for higher education reform that address inequities based on socioeconomic status and on race and ethnicity as different but interconnected phenomena. The data below are intended to clarify for educators how such inequities manifest for different groups of students.

### **Disparities in the K-12 system form the roots of higher education inequity.**

This report makes the case for higher education reform that places responsibility for disparities in access and outcomes between socioeconomic and racial and ethnic groups within higher education itself. A core principle of this call to action is the idea that higher education policy makers and practitioners must not lay the blame for disparities elsewhere—with high schools, communities, families, or students themselves—but rather must focus on the institutions and structures of higher education that do not serve all students equitably. Most of the data we present here thus pertain to disparities within higher education, as a means of pinpointing those inequitable structures.

That said, we also argue throughout this report that disparities in educational outcomes are the cumulative result of disadvantages and barriers that low-income students and students of color face throughout their lives. Though as higher education reformers we must stay resolutely focused on those institutions and practices within our control, we cannot make higher education more effective without also understanding the complexity and history of the disparities we hope to attenuate.

K–12 schools are increasingly racially and socioeconomically homogenous due to high levels of economic inequality and residential segregation, such that around 40 percent of both African American and Latino students now attend high-poverty public elementary schools (i.e., those in which three-quarters of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch), compared to just 5 percent of whites (Aud et al. 2010, Figure CL-4). These high-poverty schools are more likely than those in suburban, predominantly white areas to be staffed by less experienced teachers who are more likely to possess emergency teaching credentials (Snyder and Dillow 2013). Far too often, these racially and socioeconomically isolated schooling environments are underresourced and underperforming, as evidenced by the lower levels of per-pupil expenditures, lower student achievement on standardized educational assessments, and higher student-to-counselor ratios compared to wealthier, suburban schools (Haskins, Holzer, and Lerman 2009; Lewis and Manno 2011; Snyder and Dillow 2013).

Educational inequities thus start early and have far-reaching implications. In addition to less access to early childhood education generally, for example, low-income children are likely to have less qualified instructors than their wealthier peers in publicly funded pre-K programs (APA Presidential Task Force on Educational Disparities 2012; Clifford et al. 2005). Inequities experienced in early childhood manifest quickly in disparities in academic proficiency throughout elementary school. For example, being behind one's peers in reading proficiency is disturbingly predictive of failure to graduate from high school (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2013; Hernandez 2012). Disparities in academic proficiency persist throughout primary and secondary education:

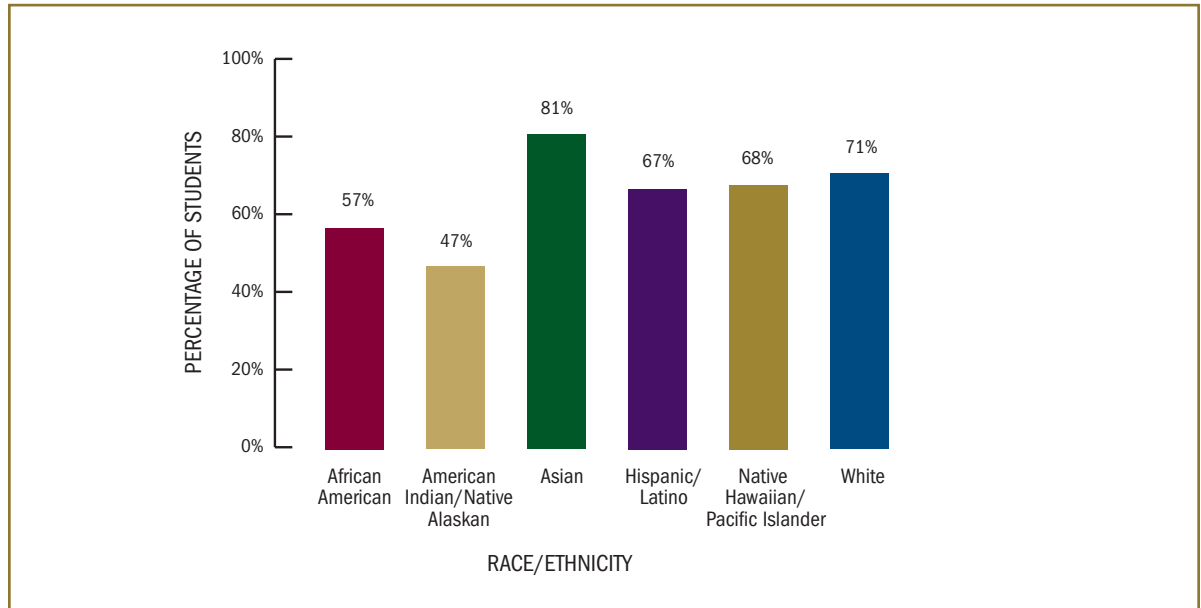
- By fourth grade, 82 percent of low-income students are not proficient in reading compared to 52 percent of their higher income peers.
- By eighth grade, 81 percent of low-income students are below grade-level proficiency in math, compared to 53 percent of higher income students.
- Among racial and ethnic groups, 57 percent of white eighth graders are below grade-level proficiency in math, compared to 80 percent of Latinos, 83 percent of American Indians, and 87 percent of African Americans (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2013).

These early disparities are compounded by additional inequities in high school, where low-income, African American, Latino, and American Indian students have less access not only to Advanced Placement courses, but also to the basic “core” math and science courses necessary as a part of a college-preparatory curriculum. Recent data from the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights show that while 81 percent of Asian students and 71 percent of white students attend high schools that provide the array of math and sciences courses necessary for college preparation (i.e., Algebra I and II, calculus, biology, chemistry, and physics), only 57 percent of black students, 67 percent of Latino students, and 47 percent of American Indian students have access to these courses (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights 2014; see figure 2).

Low-income students and students of color are also underrepresented among high-achieving students (that is, those who test at high levels of academic proficiency); but even among high achievers, low-income students and students of color are systematically given less opportunity to enroll in advanced and Advanced Placement courses (see figure 3). These inequitable patterns of course-taking are a function of both the fact that low-income and minority students are concentrated in schools that do not offer such courses and the fact that these students are less likely to have access to those courses within schools that do offer them (Bromberg and Theokas 2014).

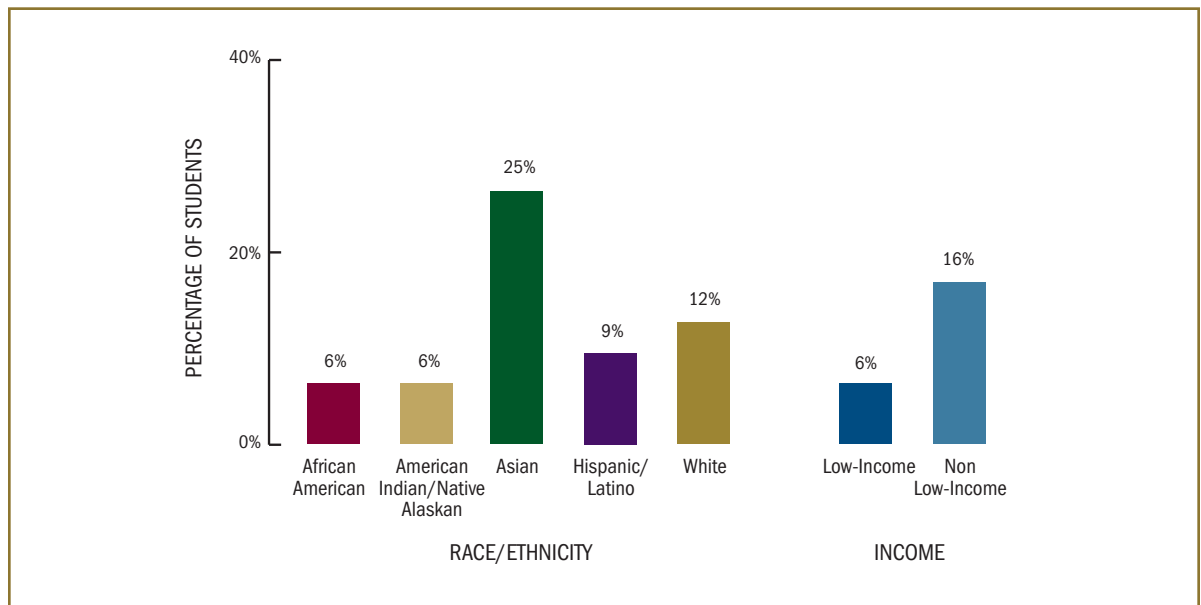
**FIGURE 2. Percentage of students with access to advanced math and science courses**

Percentage of students attending high schools that offer the full range of math and science (Algebra I, Algebra II, geometry, calculus, biology, chemistry, physics)



Source: US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights 2014.

**FIGURE 3. Percentage of students participating in Advanced Placement courses, by race/ethnicity and income**



Source: Theokas and Saaris 2013.

Given the inequities students from low-income families and communities of color encounter from their very earliest interaction with public education all the way through high school, the increased rates of participation in higher education among all these groups over the past decades is a victory. But by the time these students graduate from high school (if they do) and apply for college (if they do), they have already been long tracked toward less-selective colleges and universities, where they are

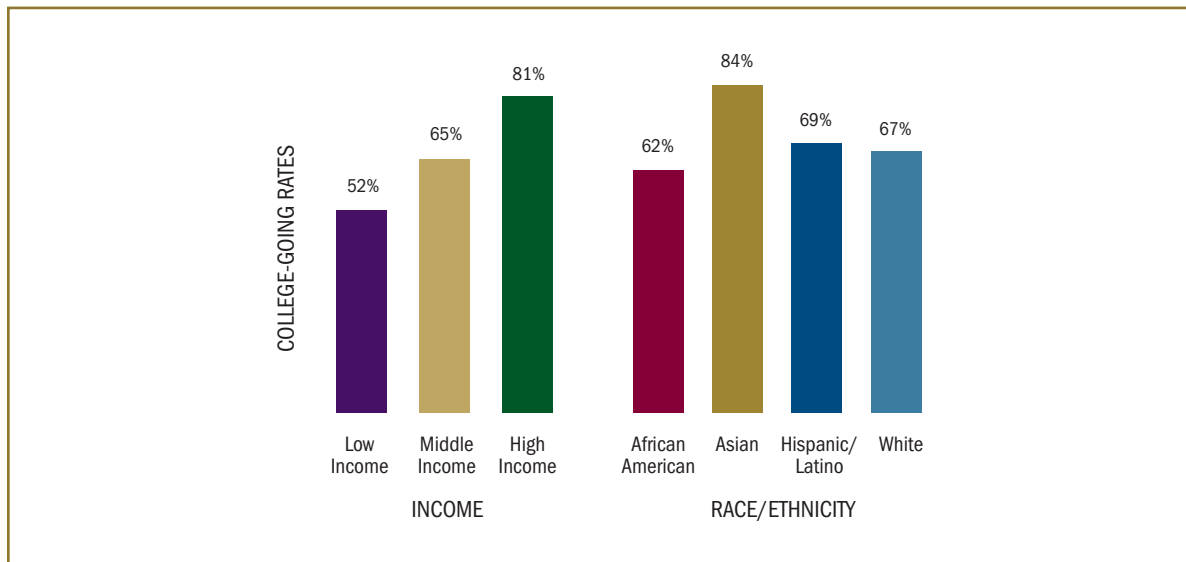
more likely to need remedial instruction, are more likely to enroll in vocational programs rather than academic ones, and are less likely to be offered rigorous and engaging learning experiences that will help them fulfill their aspirations. The data below quantify these inequities in educational opportunity for low-income students and students of color and show how inequitable systems of higher education not only fail to attenuate disparities in K–12 learning, but also further exacerbate these disparities.

**After graduating from high school, students experience inequitable access to higher education.**

The following data demonstrate differences in enrollment patterns in higher education. Disparities by class and race exist not only in whether students attend college at all—which has obvious implications for lifetime earnings, health, and social mobility, as discussed above—but also in *where* students enroll across a stratified higher education system.

**College-going rates.** College-going rates (that is, the percentage of students who attend college within one year of high school completion) of low-income students fall far below those of their counterparts from middle- and high-income families. In 2012, 52 percent of low-income students enrolled in a two- or four-year postsecondary institution within one year of completing high school, compared to 65 percent of middle-income students and 81 percent of high-income students (see figure 4) (Kena et al. 2014, Table 30.3).<sup>7</sup>

**FIGURE 4. Percentage of recent high school completers immediately enrolling in college by socioeconomic status and race, 2012**



Source: Kena et al. 2014, 149–50 (Tables 30.3 and 30.4).

Race-based disparities in immediate college-going rates are smaller than those between income groups. In fact, Latino students now have slightly higher immediate college-going rates than white students, though disparities still exist for African Americans. In 2012, 67 percent of white high

<sup>7</sup> The rate at which high school graduates enroll in college directly after high school is important to educational equity because a delay in college entry is associated with a dramatic decrease in the likelihood of completing a bachelor’s degree (Adelman 2006). Controlling for other factors, including race, income, and academic preparation, students who postpone college enrollment are 64 percent less likely to complete even a bachelor’s degree than those who enroll directly following high school graduation (Bozick and DeLuca 2005; Goldrick-Rab and Han 2011).

school graduates enrolled in a postsecondary institution (two-year or four-year) within one year of completing high school, compared to 62 percent of African American, 69 percent of Hispanic/Latino, and 84 percent of Asian high school completers (Kena et al. 2014, Table 30.4).

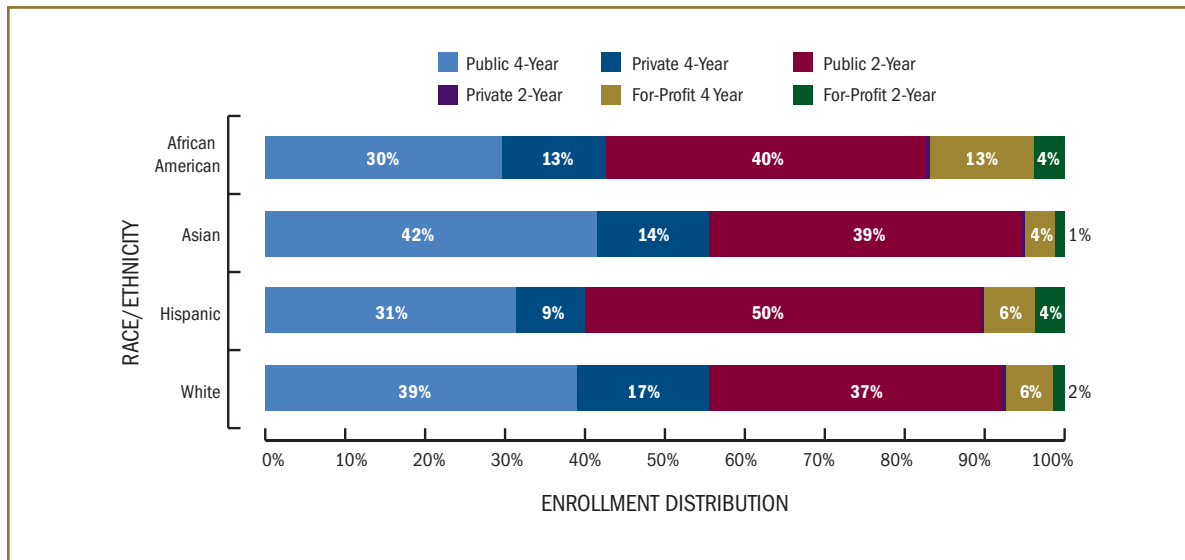
***Enrollment distribution across a stratified system.*** Though disparities in overall college-going rates between African Americans, Latinos, and whites and between socioeconomic groups have lessened significantly over the previous two decades (Kena et al. 2014), the aggregate data mask the highly unequal distribution of students across sectors of US higher education. Indeed, students from low-income families and from many racial minority groups are concentrated in community colleges, in less-selective four-year institutions, and in the for-profit sector.

These stratified enrollment patterns are not without consequences for low-income and minority students. Community colleges and less-selective four-year institutions are often underresourced compared to more selective colleges and universities, with higher student-to-faculty ratios and greater reliance on contingent faculty; they also have lower average completion rates (discussed below) (Jenkins and Rodriguez 2013).

Further, African Americans, Latinos, and low-income students are disproportionately (and increasingly) likely to enroll in for-profit institutions, which have higher average net tuition rates and fees than not-for-profit institutions (College Board 2013a). Students who graduate from for-profit institutions are more likely to borrow and also accumulate higher average debts than students in other postsecondary sectors (College Board 2013b). Policy makers and researchers have expressed significant concerns about the degree completion rates, quality assurance, and labor market outcomes at many for-profit institutions (Deming, Goldin, and Katz 2012). Thus disparities in whether and where students attend college have far-reaching effects on subsequent educational success and post-college outcomes (Mettler 2014).

Figure 5 illustrates the inequitable distribution of undergraduate enrollment by race and ethnicity. Around 40 percent of white and Asian undergraduates attend four-year public institutions, compared to approximately 30 percent of black and Hispanic undergraduates (Snyder and Dillow 2013, Table 268). Further, among those students enrolled in public four-year institutions, whites and Asians are much more likely to attend research universities, which tend to be more selective (Snyder and Dillow 2013). Indeed, in their analysis of the selectivity of institutions where different racial and ethnic groups enroll, Carnevale and Strohl (2013) found striking disparities: since 1995, 82 percent of white first-time college students have enrolled at the 468 most selective colleges and universities, compared to only 13 percent of Latino students and 9 percent of African American students. In contrast, 72 percent of Latino first-time students and 68 percent of African American first-time students enrolled at open or broad-access community colleges and comprehensive universities.

FIGURE 5. Distribution of undergraduate enrollment across postsecondary sectors by race and ethnicity, 2012

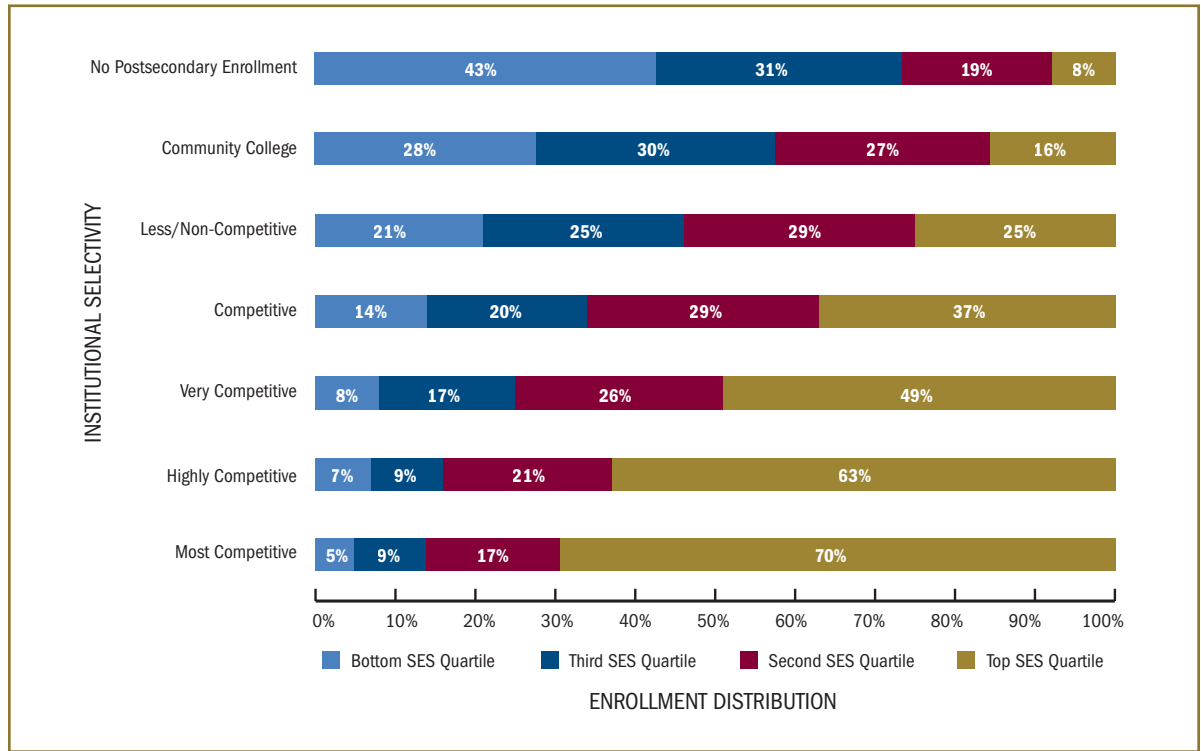


Source: Authors' calculations of data from Snyder and Dillow 2013, Table 268.

For low-income students of all races, the patterns are similarly stark. Students from the lowest income quartile comprise nearly 30 percent of community college enrollment but only 5 to 8 percent of enrollment at the most selective four-year colleges and universities. Students from the top income quartile, by contrast, comprise only 16 percent of community college enrollment but more than half of enrollment at highly competitive institutions and 70 percent of enrollment at the most competitive colleges and universities (Carnevale and Strohl 2010; see figure 6).

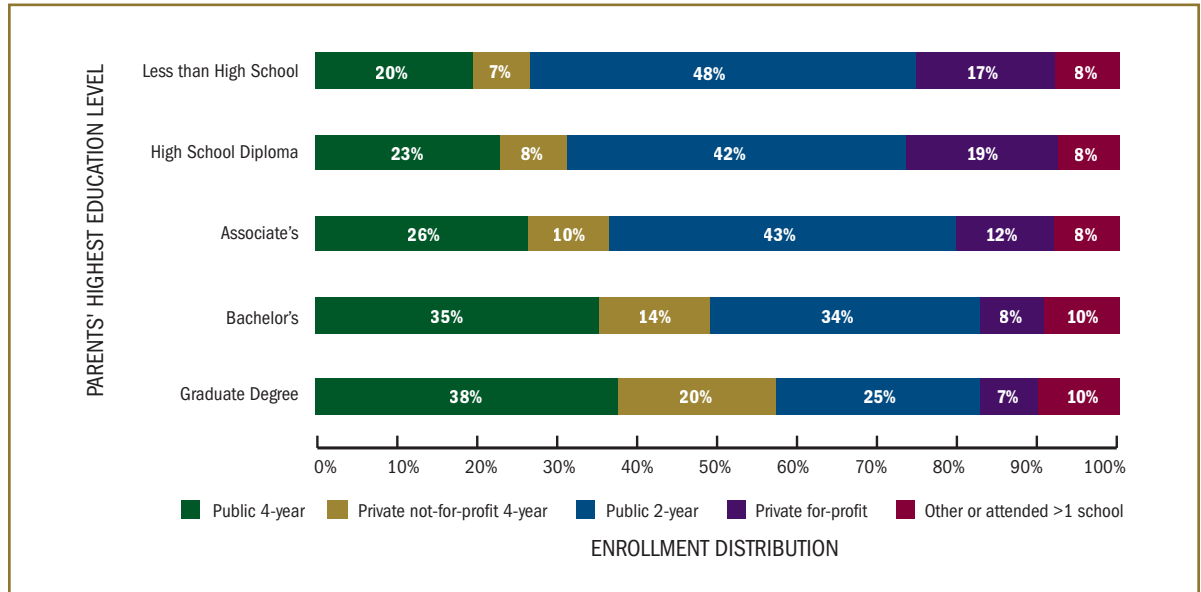
One of the primary factors involved in measuring socioeconomic status is the level of higher education students' parents have attained. Indeed, college enrollment distribution patterns by parents' highest level of educational attainment are similar to those related to students' family income (see figure 7). Almost half (47.7 percent) of college students whose parents did not complete high school attend community colleges, compared to 34 percent of students whose parents completed a bachelor's degree and 25 percent of students whose parents held a graduate degree (NCES 2012). Similarly high proportions of college students whose parents' highest education level was a high school diploma or associate's degree are enrolled in community colleges (42 percent and 43 percent, respectively) (NCES 2012). Low-SES students are also much less likely to be enrolled in not-for-profit four-year institutions (public or private) than middle- and high-SES students, and are significantly more likely to be enrolled in for-profit institutions (NCES 2012).

FIGURE 6. Socioeconomic distribution of undergraduate enrollment by institutional selectivity, 2006



Source: Chart created using data collected by Bastedo and Jaquette (2009), as analyzed by Carnevale and Strohl (2010).

FIGURE 7. Distribution of undergraduate enrollment across postsecondary sectors by highest parental education level, 2012

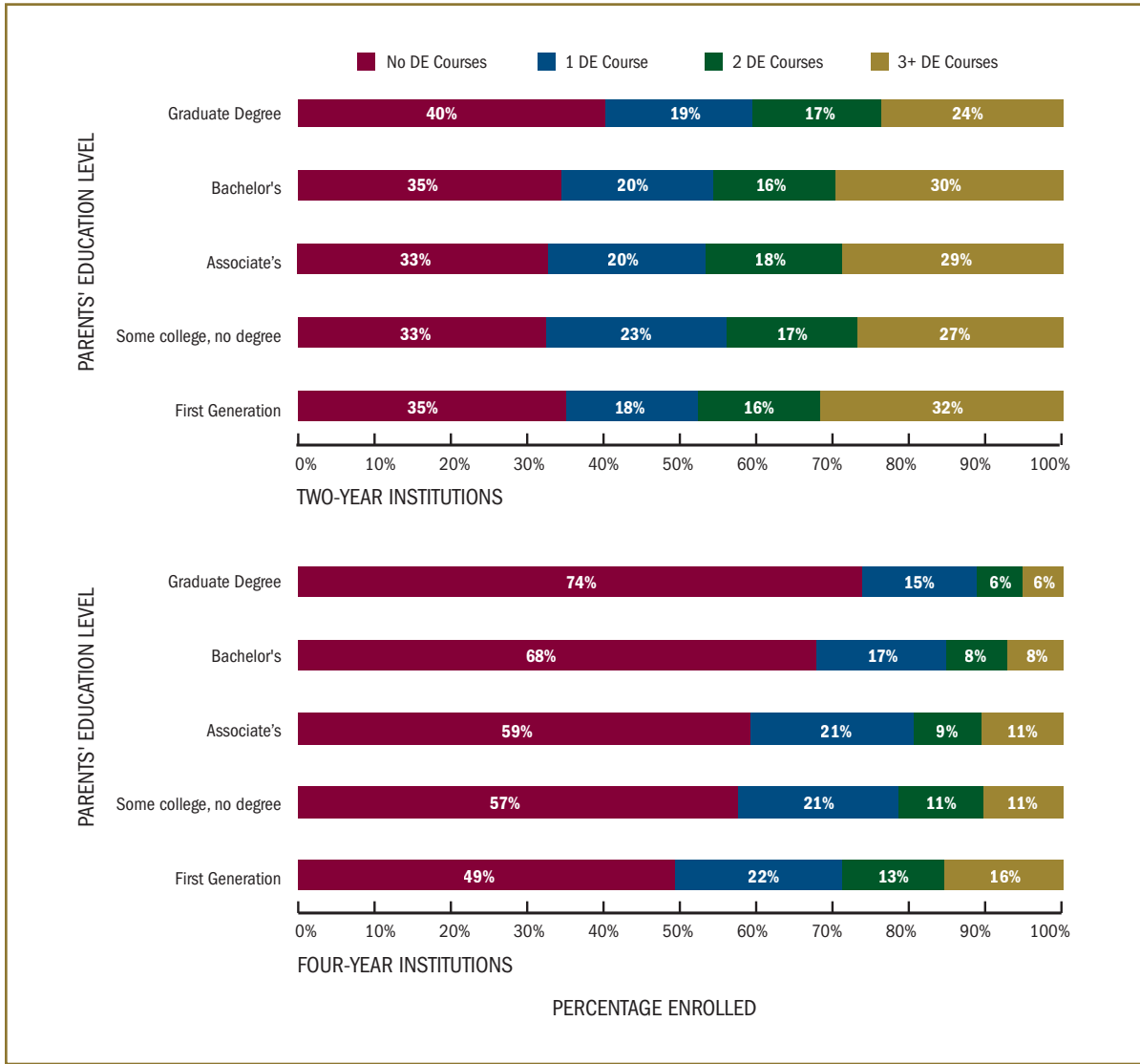


Source: Authors' calculations using data from NCES 2012.

**Disparities in the need for developmental education.** Given the inequities in K–12 educational opportunities faced by many low-income students and students of color, it is not surprising that these students are more likely to complete high school less academically prepared for college than their

white and Asian middle- and high-income counterparts (Aud, Fox, and KewalRamani 2010; Lewis and Manno 2011; Snyder and Dillow 2013). Thus earlier inequities result in inequitable access to college-level courses, with adverse effects for students who must start their college careers in developmental education courses that students have to pay for even though they are not eligible for college credit. Though developmental education is designed to be an access strategy—serving as an on-ramp to higher education for students without the requisite academic preparation—the effectiveness of these courses is often compromised by ineffective structural supports and insufficient resources (Complete College America 2012). The disproportionate placement of first-generation students and students of color in developmental education courses (see figures 8 and 9) thus contributes to further disparities for these students—in retention and completion rates, graduate school participation rates, and access to opportunities for deep and engaged learning throughout their postsecondary careers.<sup>8</sup>

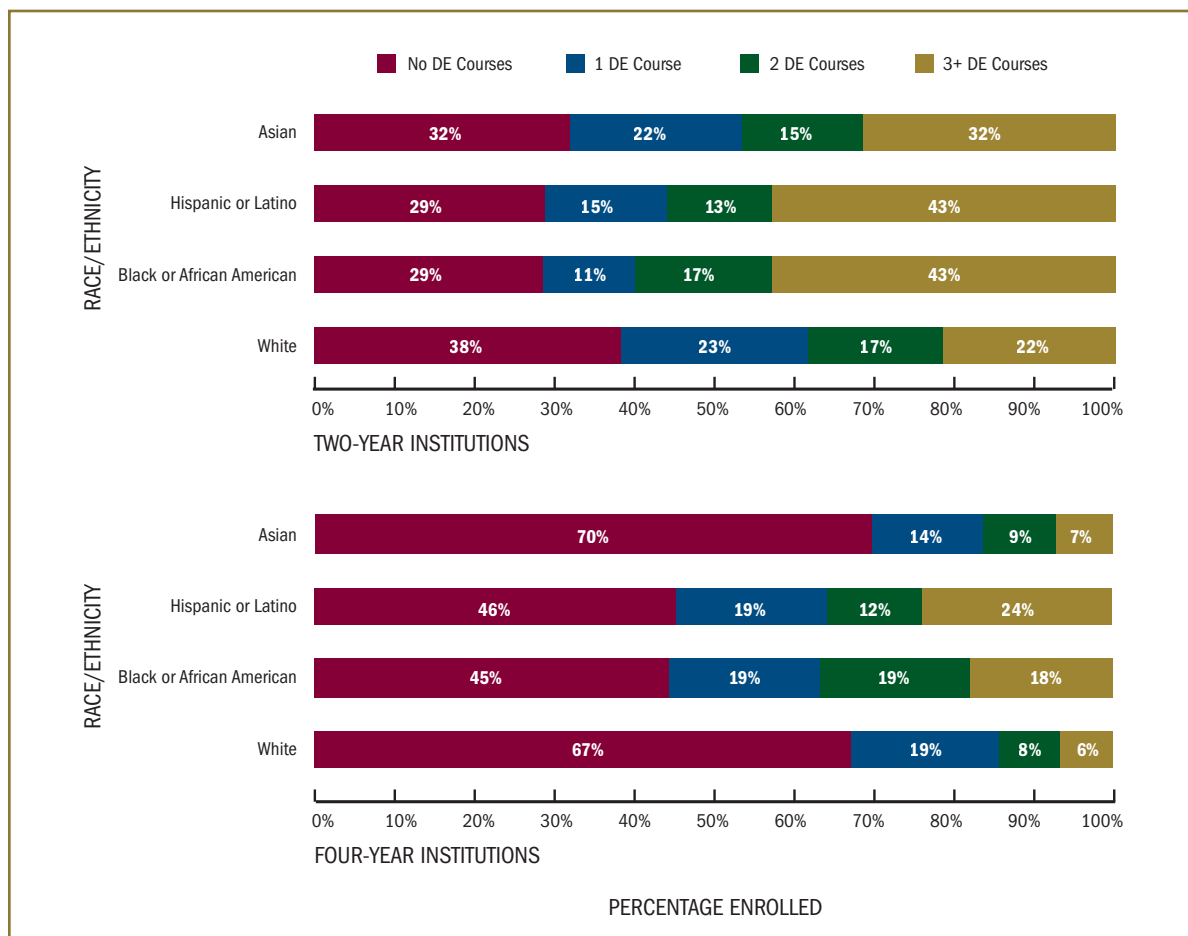
**FIGURE 8. Developmental education (DE) course taking of undergraduates at two- and four-year institutions, by parents' educational level/first-generation status, 2009**



Source: Authors' calculations using data from NCES 2009.

<sup>8</sup> First-generation students are defined as those whose parents never attended college (Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin 1998).

FIGURE 9. Developmental education (DE) course taking of undergraduates at two- and four-year institutions, by race and ethnicity, 2009



Source: Authors' calculations using data from NCES 2009.

**Within college, students do not have equitable access to liberal education and high-impact experiences.**

Once students have enrolled in college, they continue to experience inequitable access to certain educational experiences. These include academic and transfer (as opposed to vocational) programs at community colleges; high-demand majors (e.g., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, or STEM) at two-year and four-year postsecondary institutions; and high-impact educational practices (e.g., undergraduate research, study abroad) across the higher education system (Kuh 2008).

**Participation in vocational and academic programs.** First-generation and low-income students attending community colleges are more likely than their upper-class peers to enroll in career and technical education programs (NCES 2012). Similarly, data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NCES 2012) reveal that among community college students in 2012, African Americans were more likely than whites, Asians, and Latinos to be enrolled in career-oriented or technical programs that, in contrast to many academic programs, may not be designed to prepare students for transfer to four-year institutions. In 2012, 70.2 percent of African American community college students were enrolled in a career/technical education program, compared to 67.9 percent of white community college students, 60.7 percent of Asian community college students, and 64.1 percent

of Latino community college students. Though many career and technical education programs may offer strong labor market outcomes and improve career options for graduates, the disproportionate enrollment of historically disadvantaged populations in these programs has the potential to limit opportunities for transfer to four-year institutions, thereby contributing to existing disparities in bachelor's degree attainment for these groups.

***Inequitable representation in STEM fields.*** Though the number of low-income and minority students earning bachelor's degrees has increased over the previous several decades, gains in educational attainment have been uneven across the academic disciplines. In particular, African Americans, Latinos, and first-generation students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds continue to be underrepresented in degree programs in science, engineering, technology, and mathematics (STEM) and related fields (NCES 2012; NSF 2013). This underrepresentation persists despite these groups' similar levels of stated interest in pursuing STEM degrees as compared to their white and more affluent counterparts (NSF 2013).

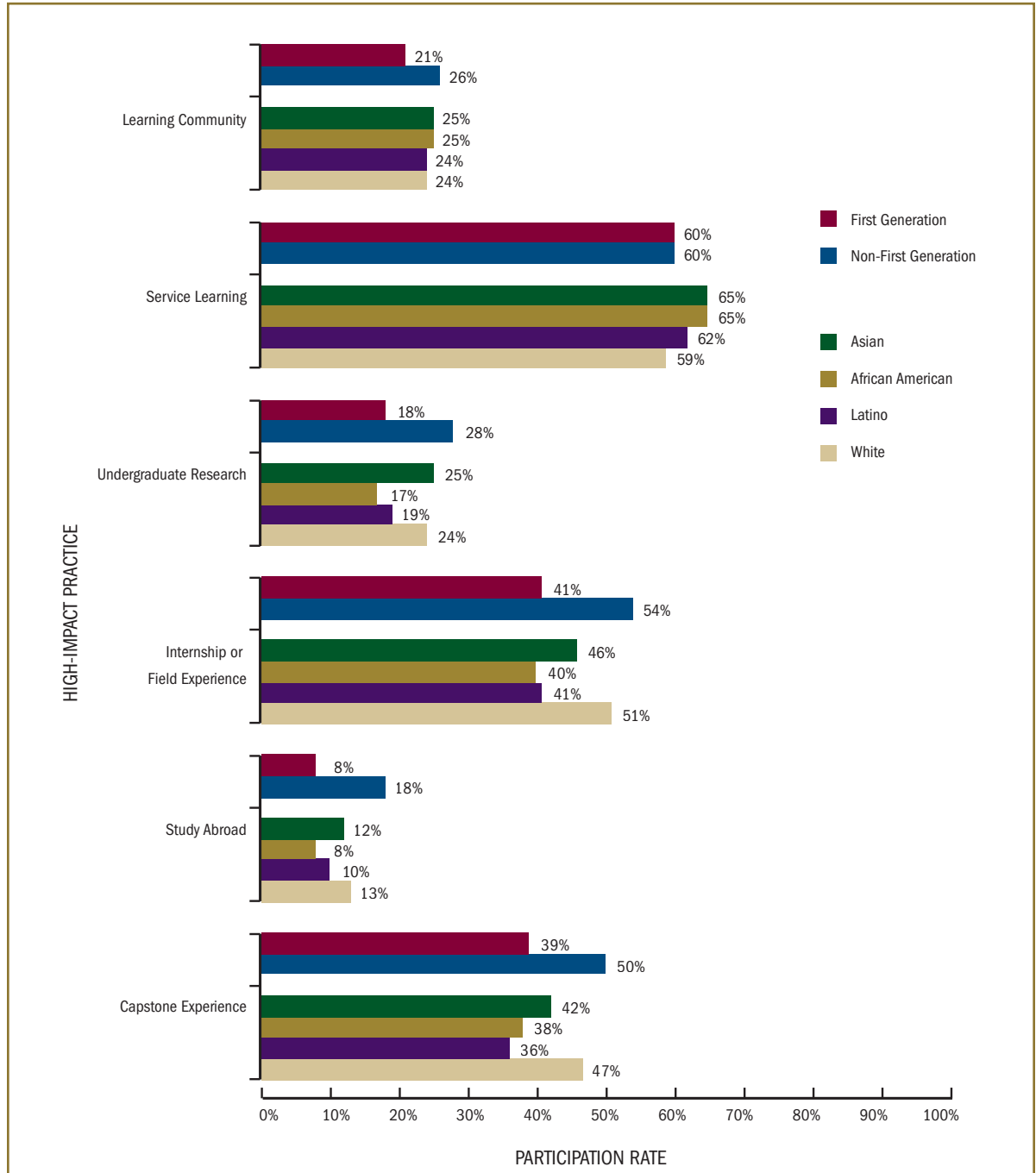
First-generation college students attending four-year institutions, for example, are less likely to major in a STEM field than their counterparts whose parents attended or completed college (NCES 2012). In 2012, around 16 percent of first-generation undergraduates were majoring in natural science, math, and engineering-focused STEM fields, compared to almost 20 percent of students whose parents hold a bachelor's degree and 22 percent of students whose parents hold a graduate degree (NCES 2012). Similarly, African Americans and Latinos major in STEM fields less commonly than their white and Asian peers. In 2012, just over 14 percent of African American undergraduates and 16.6 percent of Latino undergraduates at four-year institutions were majoring in STEM fields, compared to nearly 18 percent of whites and 32 percent of Asians (NCES 2012). These racial and socioeconomic disparities in access to STEM degree programs have the potential to contribute to future disparities in employment and earnings, as STEM occupations constitute an increasing share of the nation's jobs and pay higher wages than jobs in many other sectors (Carnevale, Smith, and Melton 2011).

***Participation in High-Impact Practices.*** A number of "high-impact practices" (or HIPs) have emerged in recent years as ways that colleges and universities can effectively engage students in applied and broad forms of learning. These practices include learning communities, service learning, research with faculty, internships or field experiences, study abroad programs, and capstone experiences (Kuh 2008; Finley 2012; Finley and McNair 2013; NSSE 2013). Given the significance of these experiences for enhancing students' learning, AAC&U in particular has investigated participation in HIPs among students from specific underserved groups. This research reveals that historically underserved students—including racial and ethnic minorities and first-generation college students—often do not participate in as many HIPs as their more advantaged counterparts (Finley and McNair 2013).

Figure 10 illustrates rates of participation in six high-impact practices by first-generation and non-first-generation college students as well as participation rates by race and ethnicity, as recorded by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). First-generation college seniors are less likely than non-first-generation college seniors to have engaged during their undergraduate careers in five of the six HIPs included in NSSE data (NSSE 2013). Equal proportions (60 percent) of first-generation and non-first-generation students participated in service-learning programs as undergraduates. However, first-generation student participation rates in learning communities, undergraduate research, internships or field experiences, study abroad, and capstone experiences fell far below those of non-first-generation students (see figure 10; NSSE 2013).

Encouragingly, similar proportions of African American, Latino, Asian, and white college seniors had participated in a learning community during their undergraduate careers (around 25 percent for all groups) (see figure 10; NSSE 2013). Students of color were actually more likely to have participated in service-learning programs than whites: 65 percent of African Americans, 62 percent of Latinos, and 65 percent of Asians engaged in service learning, compared to 59 percent of whites (NSSE 2013). However, African Americans and Latinos were less likely than whites and Asians to participate in undergraduate research, complete an internship or field experience, study abroad, or engage in a senior capstone experience (see also Swaner and Brownell 2008).

FIGURE 10. College senior participation rates in high-impact practices by first-generation status and race/ethnicity, 2013



Source: NSSE 2013.

While all of these experiences make different contributions to students' engagement in college learning, some—such as undergraduate research and internships—may constitute critical gateways into graduate education or high-demand and high-wage jobs. Educators must thus identify and interrogate inequities in the rates at which students participate in these HIPs with attention to related disparities in opportunity that students of color and those of low socioeconomic status experience later in life.

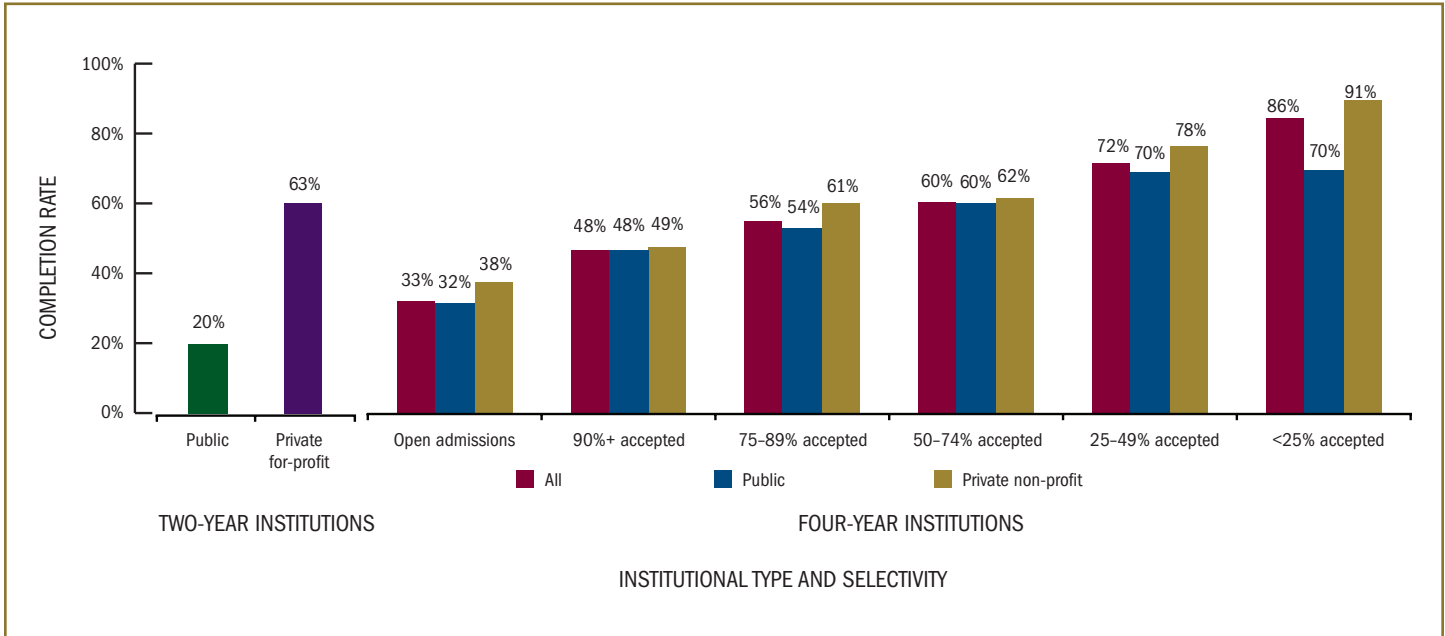
In sum, achieving equity and excellence in higher education requires not just ensuring that students from all socioeconomic and racial or ethnic groups have equal access to the full range of postsecondary institutions and that they graduate from those institutions at equal rates, but also that they have equal access *within* their undergraduate careers to valuable opportunities for engaging in the kinds of deep, broad, and applied learning necessary for success in a twenty-first-century economy and society. When examining equity in access and outcomes, we too often neglect to recognize how educational experiences within our institutions of higher education are stratified. But as the data on completion and graduate education (outlined below) suggest, these within-institution disparities may constitute yet another form of cumulative inequity that contributes to long-term inequality of opportunity for some students.

### **Cumulative inequities across students' educational experiences result in deep disparities in undergraduate completion and attainment.**

The data presented thus far have explored how inequities in K–12 preparation accumulate over time to create disparities in college-going rates for low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color, as well as inequalities in these students' college experiences. Students from these groups who do enroll in higher education find themselves sorted across a stratified array of institutional types where they are disproportionately more likely to be enrolled in developmental education and less likely to have access to valuable high-impact practices. Not surprisingly, such disparities cumulatively impact these students' likelihood of ultimate success, including their likelihood of completing college.

As figure 11 illustrates, stark differences in completion rates exist across the stratified US postsecondary system. As outlined above, low-income, first-generation, and racial or ethnic minority students are most likely to be concentrated in public community colleges and open- or broad-access four-year institutions, where students as a whole have lower chances of postsecondary success.

FIGURE 11. Average completion rates within 150 percent of expected time

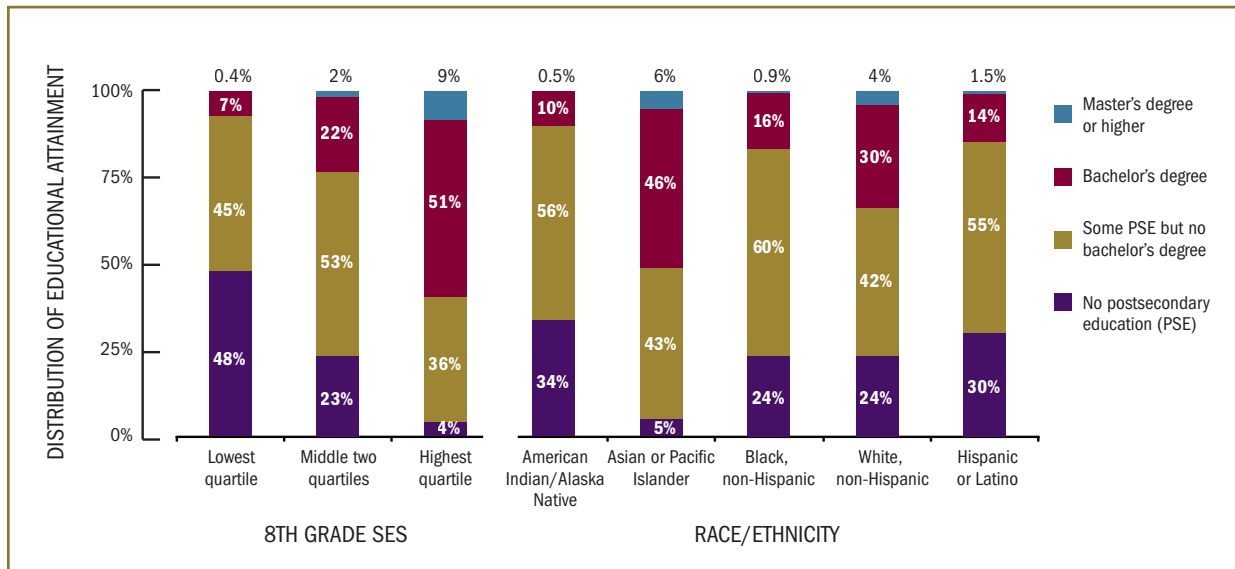


Source: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2014.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, disparities in postsecondary educational attainment exist among both different socioeconomic and different racial or ethnic groups. Figure 12 shows data on the self-reported educational attainment of eighth graders who participated in the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NCES 2000), as of the final follow-up survey in 2000. The data show, for example, that while more than half of students who were in the highest SES quartile in 1988 had earned a bachelor's degree or higher by 2000, less than 10 percent of students in the lowest SES quartile had done so, and almost half of that group had never enrolled in postsecondary education. Similarly, white and Asian students earned bachelor's degrees (or higher) at more than twice the rate of black and Latino students.

9 When considering data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, or IPEDS, it is important to note that the high completion rates of for-profit two-year colleges may be misleading; many observers, including the US Department of Education and members of Congress, question whether these programs offer strong labor market outcomes for students. It is also important to note that because they only account for first-time, full-time, and continuously enrolled students, IPEDS graduation rates are often criticized as a measure of student success, particularly for low-income students and students of color who are more likely to take nontraditional paths through higher education, as well as for the community colleges that disproportionately serve those students.

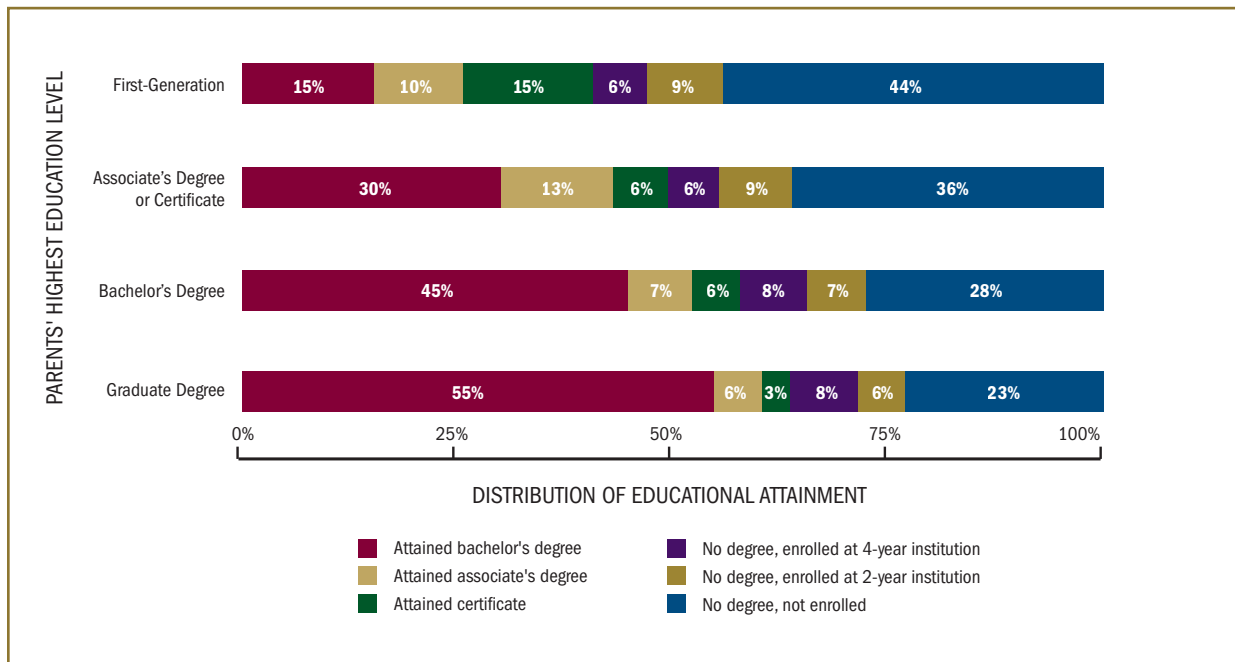
FIGURE 12. Postsecondary educational attainment by socioeconomic status (SES) and race/ethnicity



Source: Authors' calculations using data from NCES 2000.

Disparities in postsecondary attainment are equally stark between students who are the first in their families to attend college and those whose parents have postsecondary credentials. As figure 13 illustrates, each higher level of postsecondary credential students' parents have earned is associated with an approximately ten to fifteen percentage point increase in the likelihood that students themselves will earn at least a bachelor's degree.

FIGURE 13. Postsecondary educational attainment among first-generation students and by parents' highest level of educational attainment



Source: NCES 2009.

## **Inequities in available data complicate the project of advancing equity.**

Throughout this report, we have assembled the most reliable national data available on the myriad educational experiences of students from different socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups in the United States. Too often, however, methodological challenges prevent these national datasets and longitudinal studies from accurately representing the full range of experiences of the many distinct racial and ethnic groups that are enrolled in our educational systems. In many ways, the lack of available data for these students is itself a form of educational inequity, as we cannot make the necessary policy or practice interventions on behalf of students whose educational experiences are hidden within aggregate categories or excluded from the data altogether.

***Disparities in educational opportunity for American Indian and Alaska Native students.*** The data limitations are particularly problematic for the diverse groups of American Indian students, for whom populations are often too small to yield statistically significant conclusions, resulting in a frustrating lack of information about patterns of educational achievement at the national level. Where data do exist, however, the disparities in college access and success are stark. For example:

- Only 26 percent of American Indian students aged 18–24 were enrolled in college in 2006, compared to 41 percent of white students (Brayboy et al. 2012).
- American Indian students have six-year college graduation rates equal to those of African American students—at 40 percent, the lowest among all racial or ethnic groups (compared to 62 percent among white students) (NCES 2014, Table 326.10).
- American Indian students comprised *only 0.3 percent* of master’s and doctoral students as of 2007–08 (Brayboy et al. 2012).

Creating equity in postsecondary opportunity for American Indian and Alaska Native students requires an understanding not just of these statistical patterns of educational attainment, but also of these students’ cultural contexts and educational aspirations. In their comprehensive review of postsecondary educational experiences among American Indian and Alaska Native students, Bryan Brayboy and colleagues (2012) suggest that to better serve these students, higher education must be designed to support self-determination and “nation building” among tribal communities. That is, higher education should serve to enhance the cultural advancement and preserve the indigenous knowledge systems of American Indian tribes—a different objective than that suggested by the economic logic that informs much of mainstream educational policy (Brayboy et al. 2012).

***Disparities in educational opportunity for Pacific Islander and other Asian students.*** Similarly, though Asian American students are typically associated with high levels of educational attainment and Asians are often excluded from the population of “underrepresented minority” students on whom much of the discourse about access and equity focuses, there is in fact tremendous and growing diversity within the Asian American population (Teranishi 2010). For many of the groups hidden within that aggregate category, disparities in high school and postsecondary educational opportunity are just as great as those experienced by American Indian, black, and Latino students.

Fortunately, the National Center for Educational Statistics has recently revised the codes for race and ethnicity it uses to distinguish between Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders within its IPEDS data system. This single disaggregation reveals stark differences that the data previously had masked. For example, data from the most recent IPEDS cohort indicates that Pacific Islander students at four-year institutions had six-year graduation rates of 49 percent, compared to 70 percent among other Asian American students—a *twenty-one-percentage-point gap* that an aggregated Asian/Pacific Islander category previously hid.

Significant disparities are still hidden within the aggregated Asian American category, however. Robert Teranishi and colleagues (Teranishi, Lok, and Nguyen 2013) from the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education have demonstrated the importance of further disaggregating educational outcomes for distinct Asian American populations. To illustrate this point, Teranishi and colleagues consider educational attainment data from the American Community Survey. These data illustrate great disparities among Asian American populations. For example, while some Asian American populations experience high levels of postsecondary enrollment and success, others experience very low levels of bachelor's degree attainment. Among Taiwanese Americans, 74 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher, as do 71 percent of Asian Indians, 53 percent of Koreans, and 52 percent of Chinese Americans. In contrast, among Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian Americans, *less than 15 percent* possess a bachelor's degree or higher.

Higher-quality data that are more meaningfully disaggregated are thus critical to the goal of creating equity in higher education.

### **Educational disparities are disparities in opportunity for twenty-first-century success.**

In sum, the data presented above illustrate how inequities in the distribution of educational opportunity in higher education accumulate, overlap, and interact to produce unequal outcomes for students of color and for those from socioeconomically disadvantaged families. The data show that black, Latino/Hispanic, and American Indian students, as well as those from low-income families, are systematically tracked into different educational experiences than their more advantaged peers. These differences result in disparities not only in students' educational attainment, but in their access to the broad and applied learning that is vital to success in the twenty-first century. Specifically, these data show that

- low-income students and students of color are overrepresented in programs that provide less opportunity for broad learning in general education courses, and are overrepresented in developmental education courses that delay entry into those courses;
- low-income students and students of color are underrepresented in undergraduate majors that provide the greatest opportunities for stable employment and above-average earnings, including STEM fields;
- low-income students and students of color are underrepresented in many of the high-impact experiences embedded within colleges and universities that provide opportunities to hone intellectual, problem-solving, and ethical decision-making skills, including undergraduate research and capstone experiences, study abroad, and internships.

These data thus tell a story not just of disparities in college attainment, but of disparities in the opportunities for deep learning and engagement underlying that attainment. All of the disparities illustrated above emerge from interconnected inequities in the way our current system delivers higher education: inequities in students' access to different types of institutions, but also in their access to different types of learning experiences within those institutions. Higher education leaders and practitioners must understand and address these inequitable structures and practices in order to design new models that equitably achieve excellence in learning.



## PART 3.

# Principles for Creating Equity by Design

The evidence presented above clearly illustrates how inequities in educational opportunity accumulate over students' lives, continue to manifest in patterns of opportunity and attainment in higher education, and ultimately contribute to stark differences in lifetime employment opportunity and earnings. Though students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and students of different racial and ethnic minority groups may experience similar disparities, the forms of inequity that contribute to these outcomes are different (but often overlapping).

- As stated in Part 2, for African Americans, racial inequality is the cumulative effect of 250 years of slavery, 90 years of Jim Crow, and 60 years of separate but equal (Coates 2014). For other racial and ethnic groups, the history of segregation and marginalization in underresourced public schools as well as active exclusion from higher education institutions has created an enduring pattern of underattainment. The role institutionalized racism plays in disparities in educational outcomes for students of color should be recognized and named.
- For low-income and middle-class students, especially those who are of the first generation in their families to attend college, a lifetime of limited access to high-quality developmental and educational enrichment opportunities may determine not only if, but also where they are able to attend college (Levine and Nidiffer 1996). For students who do apply to college, lack of financial resources and of the knowledge needed to navigate the college admissions process can limit opportunities. The disparities in access and success experienced by students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged are perpetuated by deeply entrenched beliefs about the primacy of merit as a logic guiding admissions and financial aid practices.
- *For many students, these multiple forms of inequity overlap and intersect to create barriers to equal opportunity and success.*

In this report, we argue that reducing inequities in educational attainment and all of its attendant outcomes will require deliberate and explicit effort. In the following discussion, we outline five overarching principles for ensuring equity in the design of higher education reform:

- 1. Clarity in language, goals, and measures is vital to effective equitable practices.**
- 2. “Equity-mindedness” should be the guiding paradigm for language and action.**
- 3. Equitable practices and policies are designed to accommodate differences in the contexts of students’ learning—not to treat all students the same.**
- 4. Enacting equity requires a continual process of learning, disaggregating data, and questioning assumptions about relevance and effectiveness.**
- 5. Equity must be enacted as a pervasive institution- and system-wide principle.**

## **1. Clarity in language, goals, and measures is vital to effective equitable practices.**

Too often, higher education practitioners use the term “equity” ambiguously in our discourse, recognizing its importance to our educational goals but without explicitly naming what we mean. Without defining

the term clearly, *we cannot assume that everyone involved in our reform efforts shares an understanding of what we mean by equity as a goal or of the populations for whom we strive to achieve it.* Though the meanings of terms like equity and equality are by no means absolute or universal across disciplines or the broad discourses of social justice, we offer here some basic definitional ideas to help create a shared vocabulary and solidify the foundation of equitable reform efforts.

*Equity.* Equity is perhaps most commonly understood as a quality of certain practice or policy interventions (such as an *equitable* distribution of resources) based on a goal of achieving equality in some social or economic outcome. Importantly, equitable practices or policies may introduce unequal distributions of resources—for example, when a need-based financial aid policy reserves funds specifically for low-income students. Though ostensibly *unequal*, these practices are considered *equitable* because they are necessary *to produce equality in some outcome* like access to or success in higher education. To test whether a practice is equitable (and to make the case publicly for why it is so), we thus must be clear about the outcomes in which we seek equality.

Our educational reform efforts should be built upon explicit goals for student outcomes—in learning, character development, labor market success, or other forms of achievement. Just as the goals we set for our efforts in terms of student outcomes must be made explicit, *so too* must we be explicit about the goals we have for *equity* in student outcomes. How we define the equality we want—that is, in terms of access, success, or excellence in higher education, and *for whom*—will inform how we craft the equitable policies and practices needed to achieve our goals. If we seek to create equitable access to high-impact practices, for example, we will need to interrogate the ways in which those practices are currently inhospitable or unavailable to some groups of students and make extra efforts to make those practices more inclusive.

We urge reformers to think of equity *as the quality of practice and policy* needed to achieve equality in outcomes. This definition emphasizes—as we have done throughout this report—that equity is an *actionable* concept, one that we can embed as a design principle in our reform efforts. Equity in access to college, for example, is not achieved simply through the presence of a diverse group of students on our campuses or within our online programs. Instead, it requires intentional and ongoing attention to ensuring that our campuses and programs support the success of all students.

To ensure clarity in language, goals, and measures, reformers should ask themselves the following essential questions:

- ✓ Can we provide a succinct, shared definition of what we mean by the term “equity”—one that makes clear to outside audiences both what we hope to achieve and the means necessary to achieve it?
- ✓ In our theory of change, do we clearly articulate
  - in which specific experiences and student outcomes we hope to achieve equality?
  - for whom we expect our reforms to achieve equality?
  - the equitable practices and policies necessary to achieve those goals?
- ✓ Have we outlined clear measures and benchmarks that will enable us to know if we are making progress toward our equity goals? How will we know if we are off track?

The examples included in this section are hypothetical, and any resemblance to actual programs or institutions is purely coincidental.

### Example of unclear language and goals

A public university adopts a strategic plan entitled “Equity and Excellence” in which the third of three goals outlined for the university over the next five years is to “achieve a diverse student body and faculty reflecting the increasing globalization of the environment in which we operate.” The strategies outlined for achieving that goal include the following:

- “Increase the diversity of our student body.”
- “Support the success of all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.”
- “Adopt more global and diverse perspectives in academic curricula and extracurricular offerings.”

### Example of clear equity goals and measures

A public university adopts a strategic plan entitled “Equity and Excellence” in which the third of three goals outlined for the university over the next five years is to “eliminate disparities in access, retention, and completion for students of color.” The strategies outlined for achieving that goal include the following:

- “All academic departments and student support programs will report to the provost each semester on the participation and/or success rates of students, disaggregated by race/ethnicity.”
- “Internal grants or funding requests will prioritize the elimination of disparities in the success rates of students of color.”
- “Professional development focused on culturally inclusive pedagogy and practice will be available to all faculty and staff.”

## 2. “Equity-mindedness” should be the guiding paradigm for language and action.

Perhaps the most important principle for ensuring equitable higher education reform is to target educational institutions and systems, *not the students they have been failing*.

The principle of relocating the cause of disparities in educational outcomes from the imagined deficits of students to the institutional structures and policies we create is central to the work of the University of Southern California’s Center for Urban Education, which describes this principle as “equity-mindedness.” Equity-mindedness is more than simply being aware of inequities or being “equity-aware.” Equity-mindedness requires being deliberately conscious, in action and in policy, of the sociohistorical contexts for educational attainment, and reframing inequities in terms of the institutional practices that perpetuate patterns of stratification rather than assuming that those patterns are the result of deficits in the abilities or aspirations of racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups (Bensimon 2007; Bensimon and Harris 2012).

As a guiding principle for new educational models or reforms, equity-mindedness has three major implications:

- **First, equity-mindedness is expressed through the language and artifacts that structure our educational environments.** All of the materials we produce as part of our daily work in higher education (syllabi, websites, admissions materials, course catalogs, advising materials, etc.) communicate subtle assumptions about students, including who belongs on our campuses, in our courses, or in special opportunities—and who does not. In any educational reform initiative, we must therefore be careful to ensure that the language we use does not perpetuate assumptions about students’ deficits despite our best intentions.

To ensure equity-mindedness in language, reformers should ask themselves the following essential questions:

- ✓ Does our language generalize about traits shared by groups of students?
- ✓ Does our language reflect assumptions about students’ views of their own identities? (For example, who self-identifies as “at risk” or “disadvantaged”?)

- ✓ Does our language make clear which institutional practices and policies are implicated in our reforms?
  - Does our language foreground institutional responsibilities rather than expectations of students?
  - What assumptions about students' behavior are embedded in our language?

**Example of deficit-minded language**

The Pathways to Academic Success Program is designed to help at-risk students make good choices about courses in order to make timely progress toward earning a credential or transferring.

**Example of equity-minded language**

The Pathways to Academic Success Program is designed to make academic requirements and sequences more clear and accessible, and to remove barriers that delay students' progress, particularly for underrepresented students, toward earning a credential or transferring.

- **Second, equity-mindedness highlights the importance of faculty and administrators as agents of change.** Even the most well-resourced and thoughtful initiatives will fail if those individuals with the most direct impact on students' experiences maintain deficit-minded assumptions about students' approaches to learning. New reform efforts must include professional development for faculty and administrators (but especially faculty) and include ways to engage these individuals in understanding how their practices may communicate assumptions that students perceive as discouraging, alienating, or even hostile.

To ensure equity-mindedness in faculty and administrator engagement, reformers should ask themselves the following essential questions:

- ✓ Do our reforms depend on faculty adopting new practices, and if so, do we build in authentic opportunities and incentives for faculty to learn and engage in changing their practices?
- ✓ Do our reforms disproportionately burden adjunct or contingent faculty (e.g., due to their prominent role in many colleges—especially community colleges)? If so, do we adequately account for their marginal positions and offer appropriate incentives?
- ✓ Do our reforms treat faculty and staff as engaged co-constructors of a new institutional paradigm, or as implementers of a mandated change?

- **Third, equity-mindedness emphasizes that our reforms must aim to change practices and structures to yield more equal outcomes, not just to teach students to navigate existing practices and structures.** The goal of equitable reform is not to help students become more like the people traditional models of education were *designed to serve* (middle class, traditionally aged, living on campus), but to help our educational delivery models become more like the people higher education *actually serves* (culturally diverse, flexible, geographically mobile, and technologically engaged). This may seem obvious, but it cannot be overstated, particularly given higher education's longstanding (mostly well-intentioned) practice of helping students succeed by teaching them how to navigate existing structures.

To ensure equity-mindedness in the way they express their goals, reformers should ask themselves the following essential questions:

- ✓ Do we express goals in terms of institutional practices that are responsive to students' needs? Does the initiative or reform entail structures and benchmarks that aim toward a *discipline of equity*—meaning that equity becomes embedded in the routines, practices, and incentives of the everyday work of everyone involved?
- ✓ When we envision “success,” can we imagine *the practices and student experiences* that result in that outcome? In other words, do we define success in terms of both our practices and students' experiences?

#### **Example of ad hoc equity strategies**

A state system of higher education implementing a competency-based model for assigning degree credits collects data on the rates at which students from different demographic groups receive those credits, but only reports the data when requested. There are no incentives for faculty or administrators to ask for the data or to monitor whether the new model of assigning credits is affecting students inequitably.

#### **Example of a discipline of equity**

A state system of higher education implementing a competency-based model for assigning degree credits makes each institution accountable for closing equity gaps in the rates at which different demographic groups accumulate credits toward a degree. The institutions collect disaggregated data and circulate monthly reports to all faculty and staff with graphs showing gaps between groups within their programs or departments. System and institutional leaders routinely address equity in strategic planning, budgeting, and educational practices.

### **3. Equitable practices and policies are designed to accommodate differences in students' learning contexts—not to treat all students the same.**

This point flows from the prior one but bears repeating as a separate and critical principle for the equitable design of educational reforms. Simply put, achieving equality in outcomes does not mean—in fact cannot mean—treating all students as though they are the same. Rather, equitable policies and practices in higher education recognize and accommodate differences in students' aspirations, life circumstances, ways of engaging in learning and participating in college, and identities as learners and students. An equitably designed educational reform or innovation can be adapted to different types of educational experiences (for example, vocational or technical education, adult education, and liberal education). Replacing existing structures with rigid new ones increases the likelihood that reforms will create new patterns of stratification.

The need for equitable, flexible new structures for educational delivery has important technical implications. Technical designs for equitable educational reforms must not rely on assumptions about students' access to technology, their consistent enrollment in one institution, their ability to attend labs or other experiences on campus at set times, and so on. We do not mean to suggest that educational reforms should not make the best possible use of technology to advance equity, or that commuter or other highly mobile students cannot be expected to attend needed courses or programs (indeed, many do despite the challenges of work and other responsibilities). Rather, equity in design means *it is our responsibility to inquire into, understand, and account for the different ways students may access educational opportunities*. Even in planning the technical details for our new models of educational delivery, we must incorporate a process for assessing and appreciating differences in the contexts of students' learning.

To ensure equitable design and implementation of educational models, reformers should ask themselves the following essential questions:

- ✓ Does the technical design of our reform have the potential to create new (or exacerbate existing) patterns of stratification, even among the student groups we hope to target? *For example, does the design create stratification between commuters and residential students, or between those who have regular access to the internet and those who do not?*
- ✓ Are the curricula and pedagogical practices embedded in our initiatives designed to be flexible and to incorporate different approaches to and needs for learning?
- ✓ Have we created feedback loops and points of input for students to help shape their own experiences and to evaluate and improve the initiative?
- ✓ Can our reforms and new initiatives be adapted to best fit local contexts and populations, or do they have to be adopted “off the rack”?

#### **Example of inequitable design**

As a retention strategy, a large public university develops a new first-year experience program in which student success courses and academic advising are embedded in student housing. A large portion of the university’s students, however—including a disproportionate percentage of those likely not to be retained—are commuter students.

#### **Example of equity-minded design**

As a retention strategy, a large public university develops, as part of its general education curriculum, a first-year experience program organized around cohorts of students, including cohorts of residential, commuter, and transfer students. Academic and social supports are built into students’ schedules depending on the times when they are most likely to be on campus, including adjacent to evening course times.

## **4. Enacting equity requires a continual process of learning, disaggregating data, and questioning assumptions about relevance and effectiveness.**

In looking to evidence to guide our reforms and initiatives, we must continue to interrogate what we think we know, and we must be honest and vigilant about what we do *not* know. Enacting equity as a principle for the design of new educational models requires that we build into the process of implementation the capacity to continue to *learn, question assumptions, and evaluate outcomes*.

In higher education, for example, we observe disparities and stratification in the programs and educational experiences we create and implement for students. Factors outside our control (students’ responsibilities outside of school, lack of preparation in K–12, and so on) may contribute to the experiences students have on our campuses, but they are not the root cause of the disparities we observe in the experiences and opportunities that *we create*. We must therefore identify what factors under our control lie at the root of those disparities and target our equitable designs at those factors.<sup>10</sup>

10 Common in healthcare management and manufacturing, engineering, and other applied sciences, root cause analysis (RCA) systematically maps the causes of an observed event by continually asking “why” until a specific underlying cause is identified. Proponents of RCA as a tool for quality improvement emphasize that the root cause has to be something under the control of management. See, e.g., Rooney and Vanden Heuvel (2004), who offer the example of “severe weather” as an inappropriate answer to the question of why products were not delivered to a customer on time. In this example, a root cause analysis should identify deeper underlying causes that can be controlled by management—for example, a lack of systems to predict and route shipments around severe weather.

To help embed ongoing learning and root cause analysis as equity design principles, reformers should ask themselves the following essential questions:

- ✓ Are we supporting our new models by relying on evidence that is limited to specific contexts and student populations? What do we know and not know?
- ✓ Have we articulated clearly and distinctly both the symptoms (e.g., disparities in outcomes) and the underlying causes that are under our control (e.g., ineffective or exclusionary structures and practices)?
- ✓ Does our new model intervene at the level of the cause or that of the symptom?
- ✓ Have we built in checkpoints to assess whether our new model is affecting the root cause of the disparities we hope to address?

#### ***Example of reform without opportunities for continual learning***

A public Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) implements a summer bridge program intended to improve the retention rates of students historically “at risk” of dropping out during the first year. The institution builds the program based on a model from an elite private institution, which provides students with cultural experiences and tutoring in writing and math. After the first year, retention rates have not improved and the program is deemed a failure.

#### ***Example of ongoing learning and root cause analysis***

A public Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) realizes that its Latino students are retained at lower rates than other students. Administrators survey first-year students and find that many Latino students express a lack of awareness about academic and social supports available to them. Administrators also survey faculty and professional staff and find that many on campus believe that the university “does enough” to support Latino students, but that the students themselves do not make time to seek out support. The institution redesigns the summer orientation program so that students and their families have an opportunity to meet with representatives from various student support services. The institution also implements ongoing professional development for faculty and student affairs staff on cultural inclusivity.

## **5. Equity must be enacted as a pervasive institution- and system-wide principle.**

The final principle of equitable design is simple but critical: equity has to be a pervasive quality of institutional practice and policy. Higher education institutions are remarkably innovative; across every sector and in every state, new practices and programs are improving the educational experiences of students who have the good luck to be touched by them. But too often, these approaches take the form of boutique programs or isolated initiatives—pockets of innovation that do not spread across the entire institution or change how it serves students on a fundamental level.

It is tempting to describe this principle as targeting institutional “culture,” and indeed many higher education reformers would agree that we should strive for a “culture of equity” in higher education much as we strive for a culture of evidence or a culture of assessment. But “culture” is hard to define and harder to affect. Educational reformers must therefore be clear and pragmatic in applying this principle: equity must inform not just the design of individual components of a new model of educational delivery, but the entire operational structure of the organizations that implement it.

There are concrete ways in which we can be intentional about embedding equity into institutional structures:

- First, though institutions of higher education often espouse equity as a concern, equity is often absent from discussions of “core” management operations, such as budgeting, hiring and promotion policies, assessment, and internal accountability structures and indicators. When designing new models of educational delivery, we have the opportunity to introduce equity principles into these aspects of institutional management.
- Second, reforms or new initiatives can help *build urgency* campus- and system-wide and contribute to the spread of equity principles through effective advocacy and communication. Research on the diffusion of innovations shows that individuals are most likely to adopt new practices or technologies when those innovations (1) correspond to a clear, visible need, and (2) are communicated simply, effectively, and consistently (see, e.g., Gawande 2013). When we design reforms or new models of education, we thus have to ensure that we are clear, compelling, and consistent in our messaging about the urgency of reducing disparities through equitable policies and practices.

To create new models that incorporate equity as a pervasive principle, reformers should ask themselves the following essential questions:

- ✓ Have we anticipated and addressed the management implications for implementing new models equitably *and* the equity implications of any management challenges associated with the new models? *For example, does our design—though equitable in intent—pose revenue or management challenges for community colleges, historically black colleges and universities, or other minority-serving institutions more than for liberal arts colleges, flagship universities, or primarily white institutions?*
- ✓ Have we made equity an explicit dimension of the framing and communication of our new model (e.g., alongside economic or other rationales), or does equity appear as an “add-on” goal buried within our messaging about the initiative?
- ✓ Have we identified the audiences most likely to need convincing about equity as a primary goal, and have we developed succinct messages to convey the urgency of equity to these stakeholders?

#### **Example of equity as an isolated effort**

As the result of concerns that emerged during an institutional self-study for accreditation, the provost appoints a committee to make recommendations for improving the institution’s retention rates for African American students. The committee provides a report to the provost recommending that the multicultural student affairs office develop a new pilot program to provide mentoring to students of color, but budget cuts prevent the implementation of the program.

#### **Example of equity embedded as an institution-wide principle**

As the result of concerns that emerged during an institutional self-study for accreditation, an institution’s leaders engage in a new strategic planning process focused on improving outcomes for students of color while also improving student success rates overall. The president and provost appoint top administrators from financial aid, admissions, and student affairs, as well as the current faculty chair of the budgeting and resource committee, to develop a new plan that will determine how the institution’s resources could be reallocated to advance excellence and equity. Subsequently, all department and division administrators are required to demonstrate how they have aligned their budgets with the goals of the plan, including institution-wide goals for closing equity gaps.

## Conclusion

Achieving equality in educational attainment and success cannot be, and *does not need to be*, left to chance. In the twenty-first century, equity in higher education can no longer be conceived of as a peripheral concern. The disparities we observe today across all of higher education's sectors, systems, and experiences are too complex and too pervasive to be addressed by ad hoc or after-the-fact strategies. Rather, equity must be a defining quality of policies and practices that locate responsibility for equal outcomes within the structures we create. If necessary, we must change those structures to serve students rather than trying to change students to fit existing systems. We must engineer equitable practices into the core goals, theories of change, and benchmarks of implementation and evaluation for our new models of educational delivery and credentialing.

*In the twenty-first century, equity in higher education can no longer be conceived of as a peripheral concern.*

In sum, creating equity by design requires a paradigm shift, but the work does not stop with a new state of mind. Higher education reformers can enact policy and practice equitably through concrete, specific strategies. We encourage reformers to

- push for clarity in definitions of equity and equality, naming explicitly for whom and in what we aspire to achieve equality;
- be vigilant about framing goals and mechanisms in terms of structures and institutional responsibilities, not students' deficits;
- interrogate assumptions about disparities and ensure that designs target causes and not symptoms;
- ensure that equity is pervasive within the core practices of educational delivery, both institution and system wide.

Inequality is created through the individual and collective practices of those who are college-educated. Therefore, the exercise of equity—morally and pragmatically—is a leadership responsibility that higher education cannot deny. It is the duty of higher education to instill the knowledge, values, and ideals of caring that are crucial to counteract the economic and racial polarization that grows larger with each day. As we stated above, the United States may aspire to have the most college-educated population in the world, but this goal will be meaningless without the resolve to become the most equitable society.

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## APPENDIX

# Liberal Education and America's Promise: AAC&U's Framework for Quality Learning and Inclusive Excellence

AAC&U's initiative Liberal Education and America's Promise: Excellence for Everyone as a Nation Goes to College (LEAP) was launched in 2005 and asks core questions about the learning students most need from college; listens and responds as employers make the case that today's workers need to be better prepared for a global economy; and focuses on education for knowledgeable and responsible citizenship, as well as careers.

The **LEAP Vision** includes a commitment to

- **Essential Learning Outcomes.** These are the learning outcomes essential for success in life and work in the twenty-first century (see page 43).
- **High-Impact Educational Practices (HIPs).** These are evidence-based practices that engage and challenge students. They include such things as first-year seminars, intensive writing, collaborative projects, internships, learning communities, undergraduate research, capstone courses, and diversity/global learning courses and programs.
- **VALUE Assessments.** Using students' own work and faculty-validated VALUE rubrics, colleges should probe whether each student has developed Essential Learning Outcomes, and can apply his or her learning to complex problems and real-world challenges.
- **Inclusive Excellence.** All students at every kind of institution should benefit from a deep, hands-on, and practical liberal education that prepares them for success in work, life, and citizenship.

## LEAP Strategies for Change

Hundreds of institutions and a growing roster of state systems now are using the LEAP framework of Essential Learning Outcomes, high-impact educational practices, VALUE assessments, and inclusive excellence.

The next phase of work in the LEAP initiative—the LEAP Challenge—is intended to help institutions take their foundational work on liberal education and inclusive excellence to the next level. The long-term goal is to ensure that every one of our students reaps the full benefit of an empowering liberal education, no matter what his or her background, intended major, or career and life aspirations. There are many pathways to students' achievement and demonstration of Essential Learning Outcomes through Signature Work. Each of our students deserves our help in finding the right pathway.

## The LEAP Principles of Excellence

The Principles of Excellence offer both challenging standards and flexible guidance so they can support high-quality learning and inclusive excellence at any college, university, or community college. These principles can be used to guide change and to influence practice across the disciplines as well as in general education programs.



### ★ Principle One

#### *Aim High—and Make Excellence Inclusive*

Make the Essential Learning Outcomes a Framework for the Entire Educational Experience, Connecting School, College, Work, and Life

### ★ Principle Two

#### *Give Students a Compass*

Focus Each Student's Plan of Study on Achieving the Essential Learning Outcomes—and Assess Progress

### ★ Principle Three

#### *Teach the Arts of Inquiry and Innovation*

Immerse All Students in Analysis, Discovery, Problem Solving, and Communication, Beginning in School and Advancing in College

### ★ Principle Four

#### *Engage the Big Questions*

Teach through the Curriculum to Far-Reaching Issues—Contemporary and Enduring—in Science and Society, Cultures and Values, Global Interdependence, the Changing Economy, and Human Dignity and Freedom

### ★ Principle Five

#### *Connect Knowledge with Choices and Action*

Prepare Students for Citizenship and Work through Engaged and Guided Learning on “Real-World” Problems

### ★ Principle Six

#### *Foster Civic, Intercultural, and Ethical Learning*

Emphasize Personal and Social Responsibility, in Every Field of Study

### ★ Principle Seven

#### *Assess Students' Ability to Apply Learning to Complex Problems*

Use Assessment to Deepen Learning and to Establish a Culture of Shared Purpose and Continuous Improvement

Note: Adapted from *College Learning for the New Global Century* (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise 2007).

## The LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes

Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students can prepare for both responsible citizenship and a global economy by achieving the Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs).



### ★ Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

***Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring***

### ★ Intellectual and Practical Skills, including

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

***Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance***

### ★ Personal and Social Responsibility, including

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

***Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges***

### ★ Integrative and Applied Learning, including

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

***Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems***

Note: This listing was developed through a multiyear dialogue with employers and with hundreds of colleges and universities about needed goals for student learning; analysis of a long series of recommendations and reports from the business community; and analysis of the accreditation requirements for engineering, business, nursing, and teacher education. The findings are documented in previous publications of the Association of American Colleges and Universities: *College Learning for the New Global Century* (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise 2007) and *The LEAP Vision for Learning* (AAC&U 2011). For more information, see [www.aacu.org/leap](http://www.aacu.org/leap).

## About the Authors

**Keith Witham** is an assistant professor of higher education at Temple University in Philadelphia. His research and teaching focus on investigating ways that policy and organizational practice can be aligned and/or changed to better serve students historically excluded from or marginalized within existing postsecondary structures. During his doctoral studies, Witham worked with Estela Bensimon and Alicia Dowd at the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education (CUE) on institutional and statewide implementation of CUE's Equity Scorecard and other projects aimed at advancing equity through practice and policy. Prior to pursuing his PhD, Witham was a research analyst and part of the founding staff at Complete College America, a nonprofit organization that works with state policy makers nationally to promote college success for all students. He was also previously a program associate at the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

**Lindsey E. Malcom-Piqueux** is an assistant professor of higher education administration in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at the George Washington University. Her primary interest centers on postsecondary access and success for minoritized women and men in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Following this interest, she has conducted research in several areas including the relationship between financial aid and STEM outcomes, the role of four-year minority-serving institutions and community colleges in facilitating STEM degree attainment, and gender equity in STEM among blacks, Latinas/os, and Native Americans. Malcom-Piqueux received her PhD in urban education with an emphasis on higher education from the University of Southern California, and her MS and SB in planetary science from the California Institute of Technology and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, respectively.

**Alicia C. Dowd** is an associate professor of higher education at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education and codirector of the Center for Urban Education (CUE). Her research focuses on political-economic issues of racial/ethnic equity in postsecondary outcomes, organizational learning and effectiveness, accountability, and the factors affecting student attainment in higher education. Since joining CUE in 2006, she has been instrumental in developing the Equity Scorecard, CUE's signature action research process. Dowd utilizes cultural historical activity theory and critical race theory to design and evaluate the impact of action research processes and tools. She is the coauthor, with Estela Bensimon, of *Engaging the "Race Question": Accountability and Equity in US Higher Education* (forthcoming in 2015 from Teachers College Press). Dowd was awarded her doctorate by Cornell University, where she studied the social foundations of education, labor economics, and curriculum and instruction.

**Estela Mara Bensimon** is a professor of higher education at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education and codirector of the Center for Urban Education, which she founded in 1999. With a singular focus on increasing equity in higher education outcomes for students of color, she developed the Equity Scorecard—a process for using inquiry to drive changes in institutional practice and culture. She is the principal investigator of Equity in Excellence in Colorado, a place-based project funded by the Ford Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. She is also the principal investigator for the Equity Scorecard Initiative in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. Bensimon has published extensively about equity, organizational learning, practitioner inquiry, and change, and her most recent publications include the coedited book *Confronting Equity Issues on Campus: Implementing the Equity Scorecard in Theory and Practice* (2012). Bensimon earned her doctorate in higher education from Teachers College, Columbia University.



The mission of the **Center for Urban Education (CUE)** is to lead socially conscious research and develop tools for institutions of higher education to produce equity in student outcomes. Housed at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education, CUE is committed to closing the racial-ethnic equity gap and improving student outcomes in higher education. Using data, process and benchmarking tools, and structured inquiry activities embodied in what is called the Equity Scorecard™, CUE helps two- and four-year colleges and state higher education systems identify problems, develop interventions, and implement equity goals to increase retention, transfer, and graduation rates for historically underrepresented racial-ethnic groups. Since CUE's founding in 1999, more than eighty two-year and four-year colleges and universities in eight states have partnered with CUE to use the Equity Scorecard™ and learn about the concept of "equity-mindedness" that is the foundation for institutional responsibility.



**General Education Maps and Markers (GEMs)** is a new and far-reaching LEAP initiative designed to significantly improve the quality of undergraduate education, increase student success rates, and chart a new course for general education curriculum design that is aligned with twenty-first-century goals for learning. GEMs—supported with an initial grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—draws upon AAC&U’s long-standing work in the area of curricular reform in order to develop an adaptive and proficiency-based framework for general education. The initiative foregrounds problem-centered inquiry as the touchstone for quality in twenty-first-century undergraduate learning. Through the GEMs initiative, AAC&U seeks to ensure that all students, and particularly those from groups that have been traditionally underserved by higher education, are engaged in deep, inquiry-based learning and have multiple opportunities to apply their knowledge, skills, and ethical responsibilities to complex problems and questions.



## About AAC&U

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises more than 1,300 member institutions—including accredited public and private colleges, community colleges, research universities, and comprehensive universities of every type and size. AAC&U functions as a catalyst and facilitator, forging links among presidents, administrators, and faculty members who are engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Its mission is to reinforce the collective commitment to liberal education and inclusive excellence at both the national and local levels, and to help individual institutions keep the quality of student learning at the core of their work as they evolve to meet new economic and social challenges.

Information about AAC&U membership, programs, and publications can be found at [www.aacu.org](http://www.aacu.org).



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