

Lumina Foundation  
Strategy Labs State Policy Academy  
*Addressing Equity Gaps in State Goals for Postsecondary  
Education Attainment*

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Work Planning Resource Guide  
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# The Equity Imperative for Postsecondary Attainment

**The Equity Imperative.** Lumina Foundation is committed to advancing equity as a core principle in pursuit of Goal 2025. While we know that educational attainment is at the center of civic, social and economic success, the current system prevents an increasing number of students from realizing that success — particularly those who have been historically excluded from and served the least by the existing structure. Education is the great equalizer and the mechanism by which all individuals are able to achieve the “American Dream.” However, there are deep and persistent disparities in who has the ability to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

The system must be redesigned in a way that values the diverse pathways by which students obtain the knowledge, skills and abilities they need to succeed in the workplace and in life. Achieving Goal 2025 requires Lumina to acknowledge systemic disparities and to place equity and excellence at the center of all of its work.<sup>1</sup>

## In this context, equity means:

Recognition of the need to eliminate disparities in educational outcomes of students from historically underserved and underrepresented populations.

- Elimination of widening postsecondary attainment gaps for Native American, African American and Latino students.
- Creation of opportunities, sharing of resources, and empowering students for success.
- Focus on institutional accountability rather than student deficits.

## How can we redesign our postsecondary education system to advance equity?

State policy plays a vital role. State goals, strategic plans, and policies addressing postsecondary attainment can advance equity by being intentional about eliminating disparities and ensuring that existing and new policies are aligned to the goals of closing attainment gaps. Doing so is not always easy, but we believe there are key principles that can inform the development of state postsecondary policy.

## Principles of Equity-Focused State Attainment Goals & Postsecondary Strategic Plans

1. An equity focus informs the design and implementation of all postsecondary policy, not just programs that target specific groups.
2. Equity-focused goals and strategic plans reflect the historical, demographic, political, cultural, and environmental contexts in which policy is enacted. In particular, equity-focused policy acknowledges the social contexts that are often hidden or ignored, including those of racial discrimination and segregation, intergenerational poverty, and regional disparities in public resources such as early childhood services, healthcare, and K-12 education.
3. Equity-focused goals and strategic plans acknowledge differences in the learning needs of an increasingly diverse population by addressing the full range of traditional and non-traditional postsecondary settings and models of delivery. This is critically important to prevent the unintentional creation of new patterns of stratification across educational models and sectors.
4. Equity-focused goals and strategic plans emphasize institutional and state responsibility for the success of underserved students and confront the disadvantaging features of existing policies.
5. Effective strategic plans require clarity in language, goals, and measures as well as data collection and reporting mechanisms to support those goals and measures.

<sup>1</sup> Read about Lumina Foundation’s Equity Imperative at <http://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/equity-imperative.pdf>

## Embedding Equity in State Goals and Plans

What does it mean for a state to embed equity principles in its postsecondary attainment goals and plan? States' experiences in the development and implementation of strategic plans that embed equity have demonstrated that goals and strategic plans are effective if they:

- *Help higher education officials, board leaders, and other policymakers communicate clearly about the state's priorities for higher education.* They provide a reference point for a clear, consistent message about the state's values—particularly its commitment to equity.
- *Inform action that institutions need to take in order to close attainment gaps.* That is, the goals and plan are realistic, point to specific courses of action, and provide a meaningful framework (particularly in the absence of outcomes- or performance-based funding) for aligning institutional efforts around the state and across sectors.
- *Guide the evaluation, reform, or development of policy through an equity lens.* The language of the plan should provide a clear lens through which to assess existing policies, determine how well those policies contribute to and/or align with the goals and priorities in the plan, and realign budgets and investments to those priorities.

- *Build urgency and create a common reference point for equity concerns.* The goals and plan can help establish a vocabulary and metrics that become part of the state conversation.

### How do we get there?

This guide outlines six key strategies that emerged from the experiences, success, and challenges of states that have developed attainment goals and strategic plans that commit to closing attainment gaps among underrepresented and underserved groups.

The point of identifying these key strategies is not to suggest that all states should follow a similar or prescribed path—indeed, the first strategy emphasizes that all states are different and planning must start with a rigorous analysis of local and regional needs and priorities. But our observations across states reveal that there are some common denominators *within the process* of developing effective equity-focused attainment goals and strategic plans.

These six strategies provide resources for developing a work plan to: understand a state's unique attainment gaps; identify the specific equity challenges implicated in those attainment gaps; address those equity challenges rigorously and intentionally in state planning and goal-setting; and build a broad base of support for an equity-focused attainment agenda.

### Key Strategies for Embedding Equity in State Attainment Goals & Postsecondary Plans

1. **Know your state.** Conduct a rigorous analysis of state economic and demographic contexts.
2. **Create goals.** Create attainment goals that are clear, ambitious, and reflect equity priorities.
3. **Build a careful process.** Start the equity conversation by establishing a deliberate, inclusive process of plan development.
4. **Craft a strong message.** Develop a clear “story” about the equity imperative in your state.
5. **Know what works.** Identify policy assets and levers that can reinforce equity-focused attainment goals.
6. **Make the plan a living document.** Monitor and report publicly on progress and update goals regularly.

## 1. KNOW YOUR STATE: Conduct a rigorous analysis of state economic and demographic contexts.

Effective state attainment goals are based on an understanding of *for whom and by how much* higher education access and success must improve. The development of a state plan informed through data analysis takes into account:

- *Which populations have the lowest rates of postsecondary attainment historically?*
- *Which populations are the fastest-growing in the state?*
- *Projecting forward current rates of educational attainment across groups, can the state meet its goals for 2020 or 2025?*
- *How far would closing gaps in attainment (e.g., for Latinos, African Americans, low-income adults without a college education) advance the state towards overall attainment goals?*
- *What career fields and occupations in the state have strong labor market demand currently? In 5, 10, 15 years? What are the levels of educational attainment required for those jobs? What are the projected shortfalls of adults with those credentials?*
- *At current rates of educational attainment, will some populations in the state be disproportionately excluded from opportunities in high-wage, high-demand jobs?*
- *What is the potential return-on-investment—in terms of economic growth, increased tax revenue, and other measures—of increasing postsecondary access and success for underserved populations?*

States that have developed strategic plans with a clear focus on equity have conducted these types of rigorous data analyses, often with the assistance of state demographers or external organizations. Postsecondary attainment is part of a dynamic and constantly changing social and economic environment. A state's success in educating its population both affects and is

affected by economic conditions. Without knowing specifically what—and who—your attainment strategies need to focus on, strategic plans will reflect general goals rather than frameworks for action.

Equitable state policy goals acknowledge which populations are most likely to be left out of opportunities for jobs that pay family-sustaining wages due to a lack of higher education. Goals crafted around the needs to better serve those populations create a strong message that all postsecondary policy must work as a tool for equity—not as a peripheral concern but as a fundamental ingredient of the state's overall higher education policy agenda.

The experiences of states with equity-focused attainment goals and strategic plans have demonstrated that conducting rigorous data analyses and investing time in communicating, vetting, and revising interpretations of those analyses will pay off immensely as time goes on. Indeed, many states have found that setting aside structured time for those developing the state plan to analyze, interpret, debate, and collectively make sense of data—often with the support of an outside facilitator or expert—was vital to the development of robust and defensible state goals.

However accomplished, rigorous assessment of demographic and workforce projections as well as historical and projected education attainment trends is vital to setting clear and measurable goals (Strategy 2), developing and communicating a plan for achieving those goals (Strategies 3 and 4), aligning current and future policy strategies to the plan (Strategy 5), and monitoring the state's progress (Strategy 6).

## Strategy 1: State Examples

**COLORADO:** “Colorado has the second largest degree attainment gap in the country—that is, the gap between the educational attainment of white students and the attainment of the next largest ethnic group, which in Colorado is Hispanic/Latino. In other words, Colorado’s system performs far better for white students than it does for Hispanics or those from low-income families.” - *Colorado Competes: A Completion Agenda for Higher Education* (2012)

**IDAHO:** “Poverty is a significant barrier to education. Completion rates by income show a stark reality: young people from high-income families complete college at a 60% rate; those from low income families complete at a 7% rate. This disparity does not exist because young people from higher income families are smarter or more talented – they are simply afforded more opportunities. This should be a significant concern for Idaho because the primary source of new students is from traditionally underrepresented and underserved populations such as Latinos, Native Americans, and first-generation families with low income. The 2010

U.S. Census identified that 11% of the state’s population was Latino with a median age of 23, compared to [a median age of] 35 for White non-Hispanics.” – *Complete College Idaho: A Plan for Growing Talent to Fuel Innovation and Economic Growth in the Gem State* (2012)

**MASSACHUSETTS:** “Further, by 2020, the number of White high school graduates (whose overall college participation and completion rates are significantly higher than those for students of color) will decline by 15 percent. While the ranks of Asian/Pacific-Islander and Latino/a students continue to grow, their numbers aren’t increasing fast enough to offset this decline.

Getting more students into college and through to graduation—particularly African-American and Latino/a students—isn’t just a matter of social justice. It’s also an economic imperative for the state. Consider this: If African-American and Latino/a adults possessed college degrees at the same rate as White adults (60%), the state would easily meet its need for more college graduates by 2025.” – *Degrees of Urgency: Why Massachusetts Needs More College Degrees Now* (2014)

### RESOURCES FOR STATE, REGIONAL, AND LOCAL-LEVEL EQUITY CONTEXT ANALYSIS:

- **WICHE: *Knocking at the College Door*.** Projections of high school graduates by race/ethnicity through 2028. <http://www.wiche.edu/knocking-8th>
- **Lumina Foundation: *Stronger Nation through Higher Education*.** Provides current and trend data on postsecondary attainment at the national, state, and county levels, as well as for the 100 most populous metropolitan regions. [http://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger\\_nation](http://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger_nation)
- **PolicyLink National Equity Atlas.** Provides data and downloadable graphic illustrations for a comprehensive set of equity indicators at the state, regional, and national level, including demographic change, income inequality and unemployment, educational attainment and job requirements, poverty, and GDP gains related to racial equity. <http://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators>
- **Georgetown University Center on Education & the Workforce:** Provides state and national projections of educational attainment required to meet future workforce needs. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/>

## 2. CREATE GOALS. Create attainment goals that are clear, ambitious, and reflect equity priorities.

Advancing a coherent policy agenda to improve postsecondary attainment starts with a clear, measurable goal or set of goals. Attainment goals serve as the guideposts for assessing, aligning, and developing policy measures focused on postsecondary access and success. They are symbolic of the state’s commitment to prioritize educational attainment and to advance equity as a core principle for higher education policy.

States that have set effective attainment goals demonstrating a commitment to equity have found that *clarity* and *specificity* are critical to the effectiveness of those goals as drivers of policy. State leaders have considered: (1) the language used in expressing goals related to equity, (2) the design of those goals, and (3) their expression within highly publicized documents such as strategic plans versus in lower-visibility technical documents or reports.

### Specificity vs. Simplicity

One challenge in crafting goals that express a commitment to equity is balancing specificity—that is, naming for whom and by how much attainment needs to improve—with simplicity. Greater specificity is better for measurability and for inspiring action; simplicity is important for messaging and building broad buy-in.

***Generally, state leaders have found that goals are more effective if they pinpoint for whom and by how much attainment needs to increase.*** This specificity is more likely to provide a meaningful framework for effective policy and institutional action. But the language of goals should strike a balance between specificity and simplicity by focusing on what is known about the state’s specific needs. Some states have found that closing attainment gaps for particular populations (e.g., Latinos and African Americans) is essential to achieving their overall attainment

goal and have thus crafted specific goals for those groups. Other states have recognized the importance of closing attainment gaps among a wide array of groups and thus expressed an equity goal in more general terms, such as “eliminating equity gaps for underserved populations.” These states have found it important, however, to define who is meant by “underserved” through targets or sub-goals for specific groups.

***Example: “Close attainment gaps for Latino, African American, low-income, and rural populations” is more effective than “Close attainment gaps for underrepresented groups” because it embeds a definition of equity based on the unique demographic contexts of the state, draws attention to specific needs, and avoids ambiguity.***

### Equity Goal Focus & Language

State leaders have also been intentional about how to formulate and articulate equity goals. There is no “one-size fits all” way of expressing equity-focused goals, and states have used language that reflects analysis of state contexts. The most common formulations of equity-focused goals across states currently are:

1. To “close gaps” in attainment between groups—for example, between “underrepresented minority” (typically, Hispanic/Latino, African American, and Native American) populations and White/Asian populations. This formulation has the benefit of focusing attention on the “gap” and can easily be related to disparities in economic opportunity and workforce development needs. But, it also suggests that one population is the standard for everyone rather than emphasizing that attainment for all populations need to improve.

2. *To increase rates/numbers of attainment for particular groups.* Some states formulate goals in terms of targets for actual increases in attainment for particular groups rather than (or in addition to) closing gaps. This approach has the benefit of emphasizing that the state needs to increase attainment for all groups and that some need to see greater increases than others. However, goals expressed in terms of overall increases for separate groups are more complex than goals based on “closing gaps” and may be less easy to translate into branding and messaging.

3. *To close gaps in specific “dimensions” of equity.* Many states have specific goals related to increasing equity within different aspects of postsecondary attainment, for example equity in resources (e.g., financial aid), participation, or completion. These specific goals may be helpful for linking equity and attainment goals to a broader postsecondary policy agenda.

### Embed Equity Focus at a High Level

Within its 20-point state policy agenda, Lumina Foundation has documented how several states have addressed the closing of equity gaps and articulated their attainment goals in statute and/or the state’s strategic plan for postsecondary education. The more official the equity-related goals, the greater the likelihood for goals will serve as meaningful drivers of policy *and* out-last a single commissioner, governor, or legislative champion.

## Strategy 2: State Examples

**TEXAS:** *Example of a goal to close gaps and increase overall rates and numbers.*

- “GOAL 1: By 2015, close the gaps in participation rates across Texas to add 500,000 more students.  
Interim Targets:

- o Increase the overall Texas higher education participation rate from 5 percent to 5.2 percent (150,000 students) by 2005, to 5.5 percent (175,000 students) by 2010, and to 5.7 percent (180,000 students) by 2015.
- o Increase the higher education participation rate for the Black population of Texas from 4.6 percent to 5.1 percent (22,200 students) by 2005, to 5.4 percent (15,000 students) by 2010, and to 5.7 percent (19,300 students) by 2015.
- o Increase the higher education participation rate for the Hispanic population of Texas from 3.7 percent to 4.4 percent (101,600 students) by 2005, to 5.1 percent (120,000 students) by 2010, and to 5.7 percent (120,000 students) by 2015.”  
–Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, *Closing the Gaps* (2000/2006)

**INDIANA:** *Example of a goal focusing on completion as one aspect of attainment.*

- “A call to close the achievement gap.

Recognizing that Indiana must significantly increase college completion rates for both recent high school graduates and returning adult students, the Commission:

- 1) Resolved to cut the college completion gap between underrepresented student populations and Indiana’s overall student population in half by the year 2018 and eliminate it altogether by 2025.
- 2) Called upon Indiana’s colleges and universities to publicly set targets for closing completion rate gaps for underrepresented populations on their campuses.

Pledged to annually publish the college completion rates for student demographic groups and highlight successful strategies for closing the achievement gap as part of the new Indiana College Completion Report.”

–Indiana Commission for Higher Education, “Commission sets sights on closing college achievement gap” (2013).

### 3. BUILD A CAREFUL PROCESS. Start the equity conversation by establishing a deliberate, inclusive process of plan development.

State plans and goals are important as symbolic tools—some state leaders have called their plans the “north star” for postsecondary policy. In addition, those who have developed these goals and plans have noted that the *process* of developing them itself has had tremendous value—in terms of creating buy-in and getting broad ownership over those values and priorities. These state leaders noted the benefits of an organized and structured process that was deliberate and in which there was an adequate investment of time and resources. Such structured approaches include:

- **Carefully selecting a committee or task force to develop and take ownership of the plan and goals.** This includes seeking out stakeholders across sectors, community leaders or elected officials with knowledge of higher education, state demographers, the business community, and other community representatives—including those who may be “champions” for advancing equity.
  - **Dividing the work into “subgroups” or “workgroups” to allow for an in-depth analysis and writing around particular topics identified as priorities.** Smaller workgroups meet more often than the core committee in order to provide depth and care to the crafting of highly contextualized language, analysis, or goals. These more in-depth small-group working structures help to surface particular equity challenges and engage different perspectives.
  - **Creating structured time for group “learning” around state needs, particularly around analysis and interpretation of disaggregated data.** The process for learning from data is most effective as a continuous conversation rather than a one-time event. Anchoring attainment plans and goals in unique state contexts in a meaningful way requires structured processes for learning from data.
- For example, the committee tasked with plan development within one state’s commission set aside time in a weekly meeting to “grapple with data” and clarify and refine assumptions and priorities. In some states, similar meetings occurred monthly and in others they took the form of one or two day-long retreats every two-to-three months focused on different aspects of their state’s equity challenges.
- **Hiring trained facilitators to manage the conversation and keep meetings on-task.** In some cases, hiring an external facilitator has the added benefit of bringing an objective or neutral perspective to help balance competing priorities and minimize potential tensions around particularly difficult or politicized topics, such as equity among particular groups. Though hiring a facilitator poses an additional cost for the process, states have found the investment worthwhile in terms of greater effectiveness and efficiency in the development of a plan.
  - **Seeking outside experts to provide guidance on state equity challenges.** Bringing in expertise adds to the ongoing learning process necessary to make informed decisions. Particularly around issues of equity, some states have found it valuable to bring in outside experts to help provide national context, big-picture frameworks or ideas, or insights from other states or sectors. Some states have brought in speakers via Skype or other online venues to reduce costs.
  - **Meeting with campus leaders to understand institutions’ unique equity challenges—and strengths.** Institutions will ultimately be responsible for taking the actions or making the changes necessary to yield increases in state attainment and reducing equity gaps. Helping institutions understand campus-level equity challenges and incorporating their unique needs or goals into the planning

process can ensure that the goals and plans are meaningful at the institutional level. In some states, this took the form of informal meetings between those developing the plan and campus leaders. Other states used existing institutional councils or other inter-institutional structures as forums for discussions about state goals and plans.

- **Distributing drafts of the plan broadly for feedback to increase buy-in around the equity imperative.** One state’s commission formally circulated their plan three times to receive feedback from a wide range of key stakeholders. Another state’s coordinating board routinely sends committee members to different parts of the state to regional “College Town Hall” meetings to receive feedback from stakeholders including the postsecondary community, representatives from business and industry, colleagues in the legislature, and other higher education organizations.

### Strategy 3: State Examples

**COLORADO:** “The process of creating a new statewide master plan supported by performance contracts for Colorado’s public higher education system is inherently time consuming given the need for full participation and agreement among and across different institutions. Without meaningful ‘buy-in’ from the institutions, the master plan would be little more than an aspirational document. For this reason, the CCHE made it a priority to solicit

input from officers of various units on campuses throughout the state at every stage of the planning process, in spite of the fact that this required additional time and effort. Taking the time for a collaborative process also helped ensure that the performance measures eventually agreed upon would be meaningful, understandable, and achievable.” – *Colorado Competes, FY 2013-2014 Executive Summary (2013)*

**MARYLAND:** The Maryland Higher Education Commission established six writing groups consisting of faculty, administrators, and state officials from across sectors of higher education. These six groups—including one focused explicitly on equity issues—developed key ideas and content that fed into the Maryland Ready state plan, providing a broad base of ownership and input. — *Maryland Ready (2013)*; see p. 66 for a list of working groups.

**TEXAS:** An extensive period of data analysis, internal research, and vetting with external stakeholders was vital to the development and renewal of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board “Closing the Gaps” plan. Leaders in Texas attribute their success embedding equity into the state postsecondary agenda to this extensive and well thought out process. See <http://www.theccb.state.tx.us/>: “Developing the next long-term higher education plan for Texas” for a detailed description of THECB’s planning process. — *Closing the Gaps (2000; 2006)*

#### RESOURCES FOR EXPERTISE IN ISSUES OF EQUITY & POSTSECONDARY POLICY:

- **Excelencia in Education:** Focused advancing educational success for Latinos. <http://www.edexcelencia.org>
- **Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP):** Experts on equity in postsecondary policy. <http://www.ihep.org/>
- **PolicyLink:** Expertise & tools to support equity-focused social policy. <http://www.policylink.org/equity-tools>
- **Southern Education Foundation:** Experts in policies and practices that advance equity and success for students of color and low-income students. <http://www.southerneducation.org/>
- **Center for Urban Education at USC.** Expertise in aligning policy & institutional change to advance equity. <http://cue.usc.edu>
- **Young Invincibles:** Experts in engaging young adults in substantive policy issues. <http://younginvincibles.org/>

#### 4. CRAFT A STRONG MESSAGE: Develop a clear “story” about the equity imperative in your state.

A strong goal and plan for increasing postsecondary attainment motivates action and leads to a wide array of supporting changes in policy and practice.

Important to the success of creating an equity-focused state attainment goal and plan is crafting a message that creates a sense of “urgency” and creates buy-in across the state among the wide range of actors necessary to the achievement of the goal.

Most states have recognized that building a public agenda that incorporates equity as a vital component of postsecondary attainment goals requires crafting rationales that frame equity in terms of its importance to addressing the state’s overarching values and priorities. The narratives used to convey the importance of equity are essential for navigating political terrain and ensuring broad acceptance. Across states, the most common rationales used to communicate the role of equity in attainment are:

- **Economic growth, workforce demand, & state return on investment**

The most common and compelling rationale for incorporating an equity focus into postsecondary attainment goals is the need to ensure the adequacy of the state’s skilled workforce and to grow per capita income and state revenues over the long term. States have effectively used such economic and return on investment (ROI) rationales to garner support from the business community and legislators for policy to advance postsecondary attainment. Within this rationale, advancing equity in postsecondary access and success is a pragmatic and obvious strategy for growing overall human capital in the state.

- **Demographic change**

Demographic shifts in nearly every state are such that traditional college-going populations are increasingly likely to be non-white. Related to the economic growth rationale but distinct in terms of emphasizing the need to respond to shifting demographics, many states have found it effective to frame a focus on equity within a clear presentation of data showing demographic change. This rationale emphasizes that the state must help a more diverse population enter and succeed in postsecondary education—not just to ensure economic growth but because the very composition of the state is changing.

- **Equal opportunity & moral imperative**

Some state plans note the obligation of state government to give all individuals the opportunity to succeed—a rationale that draws on the narrative of the American Dream and principles of equal opportunity. Others reference an implicit moral imperative for addressing equity. Such rationales may point to the relationships between, for example, postsecondary attainment and poverty, access to healthcare, housing, and so on.

- **“Branding and Selling” the Plan**

A number of states have found it valuable to “brand” their state attainment plan with a highly recognizable title or logo. Titles or slogans like “Maryland Ready” and “#Memo2MA” capture the emotional component to a package of policy goals or strategies. Oregon’s “40-40-20” goal provides a catchy and easy-to-remember slogan. Such brands provide memorable reference points that the public can connect to and that governors, legislators, and other elected officials can easily reference as they lay out their own policy agendas.

## Strategy 4: State Examples

**OREGON: Example of an equity rationale based on economic growth and state ROI.** “Oregon faces two growing opportunity gaps that threaten our economic competitiveness and our capacity to innovate. The first is the persistent achievement gap between our growing populations of communities of color, immigrants, migrants, and low income rural students with our more affluent white students. While students of color make up over 30% of our state- and are growing at an inspiring rate- our achievement gap has continued to persist. As our diversity grows and our ability to meet the needs of these students remains stagnant or declines- we limit the opportunity of everyone in Oregon. The persistent educational disparities have cost Oregon billions of dollars in lost economic output and these losses are compounded every year we choose not to properly address these inequalities.” **–Oregon Education Investment Board, *Equity Lens* (2014)**

**MARYLAND: Example of an equity rationale based on demographic change.** “The State’s changing demography influences most of the goals included in Maryland Ready. These changes will force the State and all Maryland postsecondary institutions to examine their outreach and recruitment strategies, teaching and instruction methods, financial aid systems, academic support services, and use of technology. In many ways the State’s future social and economic outlook is dependent upon how well postsecondary institutions adapt to the changing demography and educate and support these populations. It is critical that Maryland colleges and universities adjust current philosophies, practices, and policies to accommodate students who are less white, less affluent, and of nontraditional age.” **–Maryland Ready (2013)**

**MASSACHUSETTS: Example of an equity rationale based on demographic change.** “Further, by 2020, the number of White high school graduates (whose overall college

participation and completion rates are significantly higher than those for students of color) will decline by 15 percent. While the ranks of Asian/Pacific-Islander and Latino/a students continue to grow, their numbers aren’t increasing fast enough to offset this decline. Getting more students into college and through to graduation—particularly African-American and Latino/a students—isn’t just a matter of social justice. It’s also an economic imperative for the state. Consider this: If African-American and Latino/a adults possessed college degrees at the same rate as White adults (60%), the state would easily meet its need for more college graduates by 2025. **–*Degrees of Urgency: Why Massachusetts Needs More College Graduates Now* (2014)**

**COLORADO: Example of an equity rationale based on promise of equal opportunity.** “Nevertheless, important challenges lie ahead, and failure to meet them may result in disintegration of a system built upon the bold, uniquely American foundational belief that all citizens, from military veterans to low-income inner-city youth, deserve the opportunity to improve their station in life through education.” **–*Colorado Competes* (2012)**

**OREGON: Example of an effective goal “brand” or slogan. “40-40-20 Goal”.** “The Legislative Assembly declares that the mission of all education beyond high school in Oregon includes achievement of the following by 2025:

- 1) Ensure that at least **40 percent** of adult Oregonians have earned a bachelor's degree or higher.
- 2) Ensure that at least **40 percent** of adult Oregonians have earned an associate's degree or post-secondary credential as their highest level of educational attainment.
- 3) Ensure that the remaining **20 percent** or less of all adult Oregonians have earned a high school diploma, an extended or modified high school diploma or the equivalent of a high school diploma as their highest level of educational attainment.” **–Or. Rev. Stat., 351.009 §3 (2011) / Oregon University System (2011)**

## 5. KNOW WHAT WORKS. Identify policy assets and levers that can reinforce equity-focused attainment goals.

Many state plans that make an explicit commitment to equity outline the specific policy or programmatic strategies in the state that can be used to advance equity in postsecondary attainment. Reinforcing the value of these policies (such as funding models or financial aid) or strategies (such as remedial redesign or structured pathways) to serve *as tools for equity* helps make clear that closing attainment gaps is important and possible. Understanding what is in place and what works is an essential starting point for making state attainment goals and plans *actionable* at the state and institutional levels.

States have used two sets of strategies to advance policy in alignment with equity-focused goals and plans:

- **Identifying those existing policy levers that the postsecondary planning entity has available to influence institutional behavior (e.g., funding mechanisms, accountability reporting, etc.)**

Most often, states with equity-focused attainment goals have reframed resource allocation processes from an equity perspective. A resource allocation structure guided by an equity lens can help institutions be deliberate about focusing on issues of equity and creating programs, policies, and procedures that support students who have not been well-served by higher education.

- **Identifying policy & programmatic “equity assets”**

A second key strategy evident in several state plans is to identify within the plan itself the state’s “equity assets”: existing policies or programs that are currently serving or could be improved to serve as tools to advance equity. All states have a wide range of existing policies or programs that currently work to advance

equity or could be enhanced if evaluated from an equity perspective. State plans that identify these existing equity assets make clear how existing resources in the state can be deployed to more effectively support equity—and thereby make progress towards ambitious attainment goals. Contextualizing ambitious equity goals within the array of existing strategies and policies can inspire action and help to align existing efforts with the priorities and goals outlined in the plan.

### Strategy 5: State Examples

#### **OREGON: Example of using existing policy levers to embed an equity focus.**

“Objective: By utilizing an equity lens, the OEIB [Oregon Education Investment Board] aims to provide a common vocabulary and protocol for resource allocation and evaluating strategic investments. The following questions will be considered for resource allocation and evaluating strategic investments:

1. Who are the racial/ethnic and underserved groups affected? What is the potential impact of the resource allocation and strategic investment to these groups?
2. Does the decision being made ignore or worsen existing disparities or produce other unintended consequences? What is the impact on eliminating the opportunity gap?
3. How does the investment or resource allocation advance the 40/40/20 goal?
4. What are the barriers to more equitable outcomes? (e.g. mandated, political, emotional, financial, programmatic or managerial)
5. How have you intentionally involved stakeholders who are also members of the communities affected by the strategic investment or resource allocation? How do you validate your assessment in (1), (2) and (3)?

6. How will you modify or enhance your strategies to ensure each learner and communities' individual and cultural needs are met?
7. How are you collecting data on race, ethnicity, and native language?
8. What is your commitment to P-20 professional learning for equity? What resources are you allocating for training in cultural responsive instruction?

Creating a culture of equity requires monitoring, encouragement, resources, data, and opportunity. OEIB will apply the equity lens to strategic investment proposals reviews, as well as its practices as a board." –Oregon Education Investment Board, *Equity Lens* (2014)

**MARYLAND: Example of using existing policy levers to embed an equity focus.**

"As part of the commission's mandatory eight-year regulatory review, MHEC [Maryland Higher Education Commission] will revisit its statutory and regulatory definitions and references to diversity to ensure that the concept is defined broadly, and inclusively, and encompasses those whose opportunity and access to postsecondary education is limited. These groups include underrepresented minorities, older adults, students with disabilities, and independent students.

**IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES/STRATEGIES:**

- By FY 2015, the State will review, modify, and amend references to diversity in COMAR [Code of Maryland] to ensure language is more inclusive of Maryland's diverse population.
- By FY 2016, the State will review and use the Attorney General's Strengthening Diversity in Maryland Colleges and Universities: A Legal Roadmap as a tool for expanding the conception, application, and implementation of diversity initiatives beyond race, ethnicity, and gender, without abandoning these areas where their use is in compliance with current law and in the best interest of advancing postsecondary education for all Marylanders.

The commission will work with the public postsecondary segments to ensure that members of the university community develop cultural competence and an appreciation for a diverse range of values, beliefs, and attitudes.

**IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES/STRATEGIES:**

- By FY 2018, the State will use information and data gathered from institutional submissions required for the Cultural Diversity Report for Maryland Postsecondary Education to identify postsecondary institutions needing improvement in the cultivation of a culturally competent postsecondary community."

–*Maryland Ready* (2013)

**INDIANA: Example of identifying existing policies that can support equity goals.**

The Indiana Commission of Higher Education provided research-based ideas that promote equity-focused policies and programs throughout its plan, *Reaching Higher, Achieving More*. For example, three broad focal areas were identified within the plan that can contribute to meeting the state's equity goals: preparation, remedial redesign, and smarter pathways. Under each area the Commission made suggestions on how to increase student success, recognizing that improvements in these areas would disproportionately impact success rates for students historically underrepresented in higher education. For example, under the strategy of "Smarter Pathways," the Commission recommends that institutions "implement highly structured, cohort-based programs for high-demand degrees that serve high proportions of low-income and working students" and "promote on-time degree maps that articulate clear pathways for students to earn a certificate within one-year, an associate degree within two-years and a bachelor's degree within four-years." Indiana's plan recognizes that such strategies, which are already being implemented by many states, may serve as tools for equity.

–*Reaching Higher, Achieving More* (2012)

## 6. Monitor & report on progress, and update goals to reflect changes over time.

States with long-standing strategic plans that have been effective in guiding policy and building a public agenda have made their plans and goals “living documents.” States’ economic, political, and demographic landscapes are constantly shifting. Regular updates ensure that postsecondary plans and attainment goals remain relevant and meaningful. Progress reports to key stakeholders and leaders reinforce the importance of the goals to keep everyone engaged. This is true generally, but *especially* with respect to equity-related goals—demographic and political changes make it critical to continually update and communicate the state’s commitment to closing attainment gaps.

States have used several strategies to sustain their goals as living documents and maintain a focus on equity:

- **Reporting through postsecondary attainment dashboards**

Some states have developed public reporting mechanisms designed to keep the public informed about the state’s progress towards its attainment goals by providing annual updates on key metrics.

Strong examples of public dashboards related to postsecondary attainment goals:

- *Focus on trends and progress towards goals.*
- *Show disaggregated data and reinforce the importance of equity in reaching overall attainment goals.*
- *Provide data by institution to reinforce institutional commitment.*

- **Training for new university presidents & trustees**

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) provides training to all new university trustees, including orientation to their institution’s status on the key metrics associated with the Closing the Gaps plan. Other states also incorporate orientation and status updates of progress on state attainment goals in their regular meetings with trustees, presidents, faculty associations, business groups, and others. Ensuring that disaggregated data and progress toward equity goals are featured in these updates helps reinforce the state’s commitment to equity within the broader attainment agenda.

- **Ongoing, structured internal learning**

States that have worked to make their plans and goals “living documents” have also emphasized the importance of creating structured processes for ongoing learning within the coordinating board or commission staff. These structured learning processes mirror those described in Strategy 1 above—the process of analyzing the state population and tailoring the plan to those unique contexts should be ongoing. State leaders have noted the need to be “relentless” about their equity challenges and needs and work to ensure that goals and plans accurately reflect the needs of the state and its diverse population.

- **Engaging institutions in goal-setting & reporting**

Finding meaningful ways to engage institutions in the state’s postsecondary attainment plans and goals (beyond accountability mechanisms) is critical to ensuring that those plans and goals become living, actionable documents. States that have focused on making their plans “living documents” have noted the importance of

communicating consistently with institutions. The goals and plan serve as a framework for institutions to develop their own strategies and approaches to closing the specific attainment gaps on their campuses. Aligning state and institutional goals is vital to sustained increases in attainment.

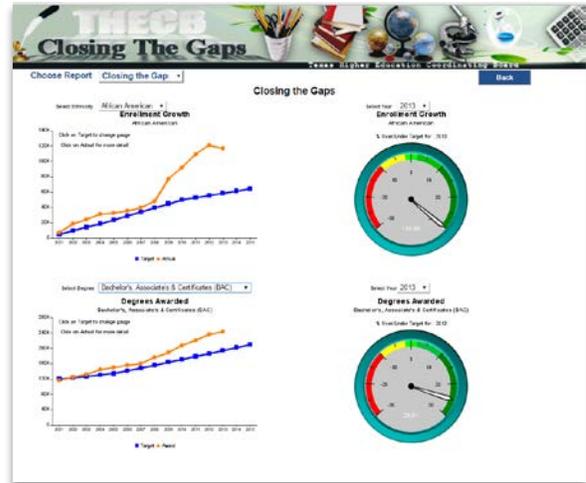
▪ **Embedding equity in institutional accountability mechanisms**

As described in Strategy 5, a number of states have embedded an equity priority within accountability and/or performance-based funding models for institutions. Doing so not only reinforces the state’s commitment to equity but also helps make the attainment goals and plan a “living” framework for action.

**Strategy 6: State Examples**

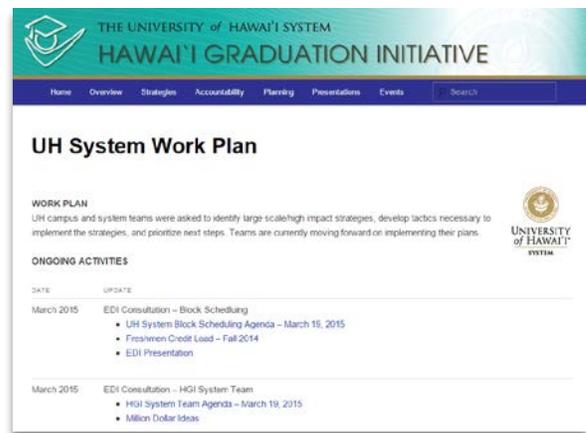
**INDIANA: Example of using accountability to reinforce equity goals.** The Indiana Commission for Higher Education (ICHE) made a resolution calling on all public institutions to set goals for closing completion rate gaps for underrepresented populations on their campuses, and annually reports disaggregated data showing progress in closing gaps for all public institutions in the state. Indiana also provides institutions extra funding for completions of at-risk students (defined as Pell-eligible) within the state’s outcomes-based funding model.

**TEXAS: Example of reporting through a public dashboard to reinforce equity goals.** The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) maintains a public dashboard with a few select indicators showing progress towards the key interim targets and goals from the state’s “Closing the Gaps” plan.



**HAWAII: Example of institutional reporting and planning to reinforce equity goals.** The University of Hawai'i System (UHS) provides annual “Campus Scorecards” with key indicators of student success, including time and credits to degree and key indicators related to on-time completion. UHS also produces Campus Scorecards for each campus in the system showing improvements in success rates for Native Hawaiian students.

UHS also requires each of its 10 campuses and the system itself to complete and continually update a Hawaii Graduation Initiative (HGI) Work Plan in which they “identify large scale/high impact strategies, develop tactics necessary to implement the strategies, and prioritize next steps.”



## COMMON CHALLENGES & OBSTACLES TO EMBEDDING EQUITY IN STATE PLANS & GOALS

States have had very different experiences and taken a variety of approaches to creating goals and state plans for postsecondary attainment that reflect an explicit commitment to equity. But the most common finding from our conversations with state leaders is that it is not easy. This work requires a considerable amount of time. State teams tasked with developing these goals and plans should anticipate challenges, but know that thoughtful planning and strategies can help to overcome them.

Some of the common challenges encountered across states include:

- **Resource limitations:** The time and money necessary to accomplish many of the strategies outlined above, such as detailed demographic analyses, may be hard to come by. But there are many resources that states can draw on to help develop and communicate equity-focused goals and plans (Strategies 1-3). Making use of existing analyses and drawing on the expertise of national organizations can enable states to focus their limited resources on the time and efforts necessary to achieve broad buy-in.
- **Legislative obstacles:** Some state boards or commissions have encountered legislative obstacles to equity-focused plans and goals based on the perception that they sanction “preferential treatment”. In these contexts, strategies for building a compelling rationale for focusing on equity (Strategy 4), building a broad base of support for equity goals (Strategy 3), and identifying key existing policy levers that already support equity goals (Strategy 5) may help to preempt or overcome potential political obstacles.
- **Leadership change:** The turnover of institutional and elected leadership and changes in priorities can undo years of hard work crafting and monitoring postsecondary plans and goals. States can ensure that the commitment to equity outlives a single administration by building a broad base of support around an equity commitment (Strategy 3) and making plans and goals “living documents” through consistent updates and continually “selling” the plan to new institutional and elected leaders (Strategy 6).
- **Limited data capacity:** A number of states have noted that the existence of a robust state education data system was critical to developing strong, equity-focused attainment goals and a plan for achieving them. But many states do not have data systems that cross sectors or support advanced longitudinal analysis of student progress and outcomes. Certainly these data limitations can frustrate the planning process. But even states without advanced data systems have used the best available data to craft compelling rationales for focusing on equity and to develop goals that are anchored in the best possible understanding of state demographic and economic contexts (Strategy 4).
- **Getting bogged down in data:** Similarly, some states—even those with robust data systems—noted that in their early efforts to develop plans they got “bogged down” in arguments about the validity and accuracy of the data they had available. Teams should develop strategies early on to avoid this common pitfall: such strategies might include involving external data experts or facilitators and deciding in advance on a few critical questions that they hope to answer with the data. States should also focus on building core internal teams that can develop expertise in state data (this was described across several states as a critical resource in the planning process). Once that core internal group has identified and refined an agreed-upon set of key data, teams can move toward engaging stakeholders in crafting goals, rationales, and strategies to address equity gaps.