



Navigating from Crisis to Transformation

The Opportunity

Our nation is in turmoil. The COVID-19 pandemic, economic downturn, and fresh incidents of police brutality against Black Americans have laid bare systemic inequities that have persisted for centuries. Universities have been profoundly impacted by these health, economic, and social forces and the future is still uncertain. One thing is clear, however: returning to the status quo after this crisis is over is unacceptable. APLU believes that we have an opportunity to reaffirm our values and commit to greater change, and we must seize the moment.

Reaffirming the Powered by Publics Vision, Core Values, and Goals

The *vision* of Powered by Publics, shared by APLU and participating members, is to work collaboratively to help more students of color, low-income and first-generation students attend college, complete their degrees, and prepare for the workforce—ultimately contributing to a transformed higher education sector and a more equitable and prosperous society. Our long-term aim is to eliminate race and income as predictors of student success.

This work is guided by the commitment of APLU and public universities to the four *core values*:

- equity,
- collaborative learning,
- transparency (including sharing key data), and
- sharing knowledge and best practices to drive institutional change across campuses.

Our national *goals* remain unchanged – they are:

1. Produce hundreds of thousands more graduates by 2025 with an emphasis on underrepresented minority, low-income, and first-generation students.
2. Cut in half the achievement gap by 2025 for underrepresented minority, low-income, and first-generation students while increasing access.
3. Share key data, learning, and effective practices to drive innovation and transformation across the higher education sector.

Current Status of Powered by Publics

Over the past year and a half, Powered by Publics has built a collaborative network for shared learning, dissemination of promising practices, and testing ideas for change. Each cluster has explored pressing barriers to student success or institutional change, agreed upon common focus areas, and set targets for increasing degrees conferred and reducing achievement gaps. Initial focus areas and projects were developed through a design-thinking process with campuses. After the first year of work, and with feedback from participating institutions, APLU identified five **common themes** that were clarified and reinforced at our 2019 Powered by Publics Design Challenge in San Diego. These themes are below with examples from the cluster work.

Our theory of change is that campus-level strategy development and continuous improvement efforts within all five areas will lead to increased degree completion for the student populations that we wish to serve.

1. **Equity:** A common desire across all clusters to advance equity for students of color, low-income, and first-generation students.
2. **Data-Informed Decision Making:** A common desire across all clusters to share data and measure what we'd like to change, with leadership provided by the Data Integration cluster.
3. **Affordability:** Making college more affordable for students through changes to financial aid programs, student employment opportunities, affordable learning materials, financial literacy programs, and strategic business models.
4. **Holistic Student Supports:** Caring for the whole student through a constellation of supportive practices, including holistic advising, transfer services, and removal of administrative barriers to persistence.
5. **Teaching and Learning:** Ensuring students thrive in the classroom by streamlining pathways to a credential, addressing high DFW rates, faculty development, first-year learning communities, and general education reform.

In March 2020, faced with the urgent demands of campuses to respond to the crisis, we initiated a 2-month pause to Powered by Publics with the option for clusters to hold drop-in conversations around their immediate needs. During this downtime, we were able to reflect on our work and areas for improvement and growth. As we begin to re-engage, we will focus on how we can improve these areas going forward:

- Addressing systemic inequities in higher education through project activities, above and beyond setting goals.
- Achieving alignment and consistency across clusters, with more opportunities for cross-cluster learning and sharing.

- Differences in campus capacity to engage as a result of COVID-19 and providing options for low- and high-touch participation.

Where do we go from here?

We are enduring a crisis with rapidly changing conditions that have challenged our assumptions and plans. Although we cannot return to where we were last November, we want to continue our work and leverage this crisis as an opportunity for change. We can advance institutional transformation, improve student success, and increase equity - thereby adding value to public higher education. Rather than develop a detailed plan, APLU proposes a set of **strategic priorities** that will guide our work nationally, and a few common activities that institutions may choose to engage in.

Strategic Priorities for 2020 and Beyond

APLU and its members believe that advancing collective action in the following priority areas will lead directly to increased degree completion for students of color, low-income, and first-generation students, and reduce equity gaps for these students.

Priority 1: Take explicit action to pursue educational equity for low-income, first-generation, and students of color (Hispanic/Latinx, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Asian, and two or more races), and other populations for which the university aims to improve equity.

- In summer 2020, work to develop a clear, operational definition of equity for each cluster and a high-level strategy for achieving equity goals. This work begins by holding initial conversations with clusters using a common discussion guide and expert facilitation.
- In summer/fall 2020, collect data that is disaggregated by race/ethnicity and income to measure progress toward equity (see below Priority 2). Provide technical assistance to support equity plan development (see below Priority 4).
- Across all activities going forward, explicitly focus on target populations of students who are at risk of not completing.

Priority 2: Commit to transparency by sharing data and monitoring progress toward equity goals.

- In summer/fall 2020, complete the planned data collection for eight core measures, disaggregated by target populations to assess progress toward equity. These measures were finalized by a Data Advisory Task force of campuses participating in Powered by Publics in 2019, but the data collection was delayed due to COVID-19.

- In 2021, APLU, the Association for Institutional Research (AIR), and Ascendium will build a Data Literacy Institute with curriculum for advancing data literacy among faculty and staff on campus - to be piloted by Cluster 14.
- Going forward, leadership and peer-to-peer advice around the use of data within each cluster will be provided by the Data Integration cluster (Cluster 13).
- Going forward, share data within each cluster, across the clusters, and with APLU to demonstrate national progress and increase knowledge across the public university sector.

Priority 3: Develop common opportunities for cross-cluster learning, sharing, and collective action in the remaining thematic areas of Affordability, Holistic Student Supports, and Teaching & Learning

- In summer 2020, in conversation with institutions, determine if each cluster would like to continue their planned projects (pre-COVID-19) or re-assess and re-scope their work.
- Except for the Data Integration cluster, all Powered by Publics clusters have been working on one or more of these core areas: Affordability, Holistic Student Supports, and Teaching and Learning. APLU staff working with these clusters will form internal learning hubs to connect the work and develop cross-cluster learning opportunities (e.g., topic-based webinars, technical assistance through partners) and supporting materials (e.g., reports, learning briefs, case studies).

Priority 4: APLU and its partners invest in institutional capacity through grants and technical assistance

- In summer/fall 2020, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation will provide (through their [Intermediaries for Scale](#) program) funding and services to support campuses in the areas of advising and digital learning, as well as other core areas based on a campus self-assessment. Priority will be given to institutions that serve large numbers of target populations (low-income and students of color). More information forthcoming after July 1.
- In fall 2020, with support from the Foundation and its partners, APLU plans to retain expert consultation to develop equity action plans (see Priority 1).
- APLU has already committed to providing block grants to every cluster for in-person meetings and travel. Most of these meetings have been postponed until Summer 2021 but funded will be sustained for this program.

Next Steps & Timeline for Phased Reboot

July – August

- APLU calls with clusters to review prior work and agree on strategic direction (continue vs. re-design). If the cluster chooses to continue current projects, APLU will support aligning that work with the equity and data-informed decision making priorities above.
- Continue drop-in calls on fall re-opening and other crisis topics over the summer, if desired by the cluster. Other calls with presidents as needed and with individual institutions as needed.
- National data collection (Core Data Metrics) period opens.

August – September:

- National data collection and technical assistance to IR staff provided by APLU data team.
- Facilitated conversations around equity.
- Opportunity opens for grants and services through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Intermediaries for Scale program.

September – December:

- Advance learning agendas for Affordability, Holistic Student Supports, and Teaching & Learning. At least one cross-cluster learning opportunity (e.g., webinar) in each area.
- Virtual convening around APLU Annual Meeting. Planning for funded in-person meetings in 2021.