

# ADVANCING EQUITY, CENTERING STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

NOVEMBER 2022



ASSOCIATION OF  
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*The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and the participants in the Equity Roundtables and do not necessarily represent those of APLU, Lumina Foundation, or any of their staff.*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities' Powered by Publics (PxP) Equity Roundtable initiative brought students and administrators together to participate in roundtable discussions to capture barriers related to access, success, and career pathways for historically underrepresented students in higher education.

The roundtables were also designed to gather recommendations for advancing equity in these areas. A diverse group of students was required for participation (i.e., alumni, transfer students, students of color, adult learners, veterans, etc.). Roundtables were held both in-person and virtually. The specific objectives included:

- Providing opportunities to include student voices in institutional policies and practices;
- Providing a forum for candid discussions of equitable and inequitable policies and practices;
- Creating a vehicle to develop and disseminate promising strategies that eliminate barriers to the success of marginalized students on their academic journey.

Participating campuses were:

- Florida International University
- Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
- Missouri University of Science and Technology
- New Mexico State University
- North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University
- Rutgers University-Newark
- Texas State University
- University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff
- University at Buffalo (SUNY)
- University of Cincinnati
- University of Colorado Denver
- University of Illinois Chicago
- University of Nebraska–Lincoln
- University of Nevada, Las Vegas
- University of New Mexico
- University of Texas at Arlington
- University of Texas at El Paso
- University of Texas at San Antonio
- University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee
- Wayne State University

The report is expansive and detailed. Some highlights include that students felt that:

- Their respective institutions had resources for them to take advantage of, but that they were responsible for finding these resources and establishing a comprehensive support system without sufficient institutional guidance
- Traditional hours of operation for student support services are incompatible with non-traditional students who may commute, be enrolled part-time, and take evening classes
- Finances were a significant barrier to college access and student success
- Orientation and transition programs did not sufficiently reach every type of student, and more targeted supports are necessary
- Student support services are siloed, and students experience them as such
- Career services center the traditional and STEM student, which disadvantages the non-traditional student and social science and humanities students

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Another key takeaway of note is that students were eager to engage in these discussions and desire to be involved in change processes on their respective campuses. We build upon this key takeaway at the end of the report by highlighting a few new and innovative approaches emerging in higher education that challenge hierarchies and invite students into decision-making processes.

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# INTRODUCTION

The term “equity” is everywhere. In recent decades, we have witnessed the proliferation of “equity” into the higher education lexicon and discourse. It can be found in university mission statements, strategic plans, position titles, and foundation priorities. With more historically underrepresented students (i.e., first-generation, low-income/working-class, students of color, LGBTQIA+, etc.) entering colleges and universities than ever before, the conversation about how we change our institutions and intentionally design them to promote equity becomes increasingly necessary.

Despite stated values around equity, students stated that contemporary higher education institutions have often placed the burden of responsibility for access and success onto students and their respective communities. In other words, students are responsible for their success; they must seek out resources on their own, and their families and networks should carry the weight of helping them navigate the college-going process. The result of this view is that students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, are even more disadvantaged.

In the discussions with participants, equity was defined and operationalized to mean redirecting resources to, intentionally providing support for, and reconfiguring culture towards the success and well-being of historically underrepresented students. The work of equity means placing responsibility and accountability onto institutions, not individuals. Equity means to address the multiple, intersecting power asymmetries in present-day higher education and to empower marginalized groups. Equity is to challenge the status quo that is largely responsible for inequities.

## POWERED BY PUBLICS’ COMMITMENT TO EQUITY

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Grounded in the principle of fairness, equity is a condition wherein no person or community is hindered by systemic barriers in their access to educational opportunities, rights, resources, and support. Understanding equity is necessary for institutions of higher education so they can identify and rectify barriers within policies and procedures that foster unequal access and success. Equity-minded colleges and universities intentionally design curriculum and support services such that students receive what they need to be successful and social determinants (such as race, ethnicity, income, disability, and other factors) are no longer entrenched and reliable predictors of educational outcomes. For more information, visit: <http://www.aplu.org/pxp>

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How do we meaningfully create a more equitable system of higher education? The solution is to avoid reproducing the traditional systems of power and organizational structures that have long animated institutional change efforts. We need a new way of doing things; new voices must be centered and amplified.

This Powered by Publics (PxP) Equity Roundtable initiative sought to engage in something new by bringing together a diverse group of students (i.e., adult learners, transfer students, current students from marginalized populations), alumni, and leaders to engage in candid conversations about systemic barriers that contribute to inequitable outcomes. The initiative also birthed strategies and recommendations for institutions to eradicate barriers and remove such obstacles for all students, especially those from marginalized populations. This report captures the student experience and their recommendations for change.

## FRAMING THE REPORT AND IDENTIFYING THE AUDIENCE

This report is organized around three themes that were inspired by the PxP Student Journey Framework (see Appendix) and include **equitable access, equitable student success, and equitable career pathways**. For each theme, we dive deeper into the problem, which is crystallized by the student experience and perspective.

Then, we offer student reflections by sharing their direct quotes with readers. We had a depth of quotes from students on these three themes, so quotes are shared judiciously and are unique to the individual who shared them. These quotes are completely anonymized to protect students' identities and institutional affiliations. Finally, we present the solutions and recommendations that students posed in the equity roundtables.

The solutions and recommendations are divided into two categories: immediate-tangible and long-term systemic. They are split in this way so readers understand that not all solutions to these problems can occur overnight. Some, in fact, most, will take time, energy, and concerted/collaborative effort.

We conclude with bringing forward some new and exciting processes that will help improve outcomes toward greater equity and include historically underrepresented voices in the decision-making and change processes. One of the greatest lessons learned in this equity roundtable initiative is that the student perspective is imperative to any equity-related change and that the process should be a shared process, not a linear or hierarchical one.

This report is meant for administrators and staff across institutional types. While the report is not written for student audiences, we highly recommend the report still be circulated to student populations. This allows students to see their experiences reflected as their institutions work toward equitable change.

## EQUITABLE ACCESS

Students reflected upon their experiences choosing their respective campuses and integrating into the campus culture. Many students, especially those from historically underrepresented communities, experienced several barriers they were tasked to overcome. Across all four roundtable sessions, four sub-themes emerged that summarize the problem regarding access to higher education. These themes include making convenient choices, lack of outreach and pipeline, financial barriers, and turbulent transitions.

**Making Convenient Choices.** Many students chose their respective universities out of convenience. Students shared that they chose their college based on the proximity to their homes and families and the cost of attendance. As such, students decided to attend a public, land-grant university in their state instead of a private institution either near

or far. Some shared their aspirations to attend a university out of state but expressed that they could not afford out-of-state tuition and room/board. In this respect, many students did not have a choice. Or, at minimum, their decision-making autonomy dwindled. Instead, decisions were largely made for them based on the unaffordability of attending higher education out of state or attending a private institution.

**Lack of Outreach and Pipeline.** Students flagged inequities in college access before even stepping foot on a college campus; most indicated they began seeing the inequities they would soon face while in high school. Students remarked that their high school experiences shaped their access to the university. For example, some had access to Advanced Placement (AP) and college prep courses that prepared them for the college curriculum

and the application process. Some had guidance counselors with manageable caseloads that allowed for more intimate interactions and deeper care. Others had college counselors with an extensive network of admissions counselor colleagues ready to help. Additionally, some students shared that their universities intentionally placed themselves in local high schools and have high visibility for prospective students. Students were either advantaged or disadvantaged from the resources and relationships available to them through their high schools.

**Financial Barriers.** Finances were cited as a key barrier to equitable access for students. Students shared that their college-going decisions were shaped, in part, by their financial circumstances or their desire (or lack thereof) to accumulate student loan debt. Many students could not, however, escape taking out loans. A fair share of students shared that they took out loans for housing and other related expenses. Students expressed that this accrued debt is anxiety-provoking; some even shared that debt affects their family relationships. They stated how this anxiety seeps into their ability to complete their degrees and see the light at the end of the tunnel, or said better, a return on their investment. Some students even shared that they declared certain majors to receive institutional and state-related scholarships to evade financial barriers.

Students also recalled the pressures and anxieties placed on them by their university's payment plan structure particularly for undocumented and international students. This well-meaning support requires students to aggressively pay the university weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly. Students shared how they struggled to focus on their learning because they were worried about paying the university back, having money left to survive, and in some cases, financially supporting their families.

Certain historically underrepresented groups experienced financial barriers in unique ways. For example, first-generation students who came from under resourced public K-12 schools noted that they had to learn, on their own, how to pay for college. Transfer students were responsible for learning their

new institution's financial processes and procedures and unlearning that of their previous institutions. Transfer students also discussed how their eligibility for scholarships and other financial aid differed from a traditional first-year student who started and stayed at the same university. DACA students who engaged in the roundtable discussions talked in detail about having to pay out of pocket because their DACA status prevents them from receiving federal financial aid.

**Turbulent Transitions.** Some students had turbulent beginnings at their respective universities, partly due to the lack of targeted institutional support in the transition process. This varied greatly according to how students identified themselves—first generation, LGBTQIA+, student of color, adult learner, veteran, etc. Many students remarked that they felt their universities worked harder to instill school pride than provide them with relevant information toward their transition and success. Students believed that orientation and first-year and transition programs were too generalized and key opportunities were missed to point students to their needs according to their unique identities and experiences.



## STUDENT REFLECTIONS

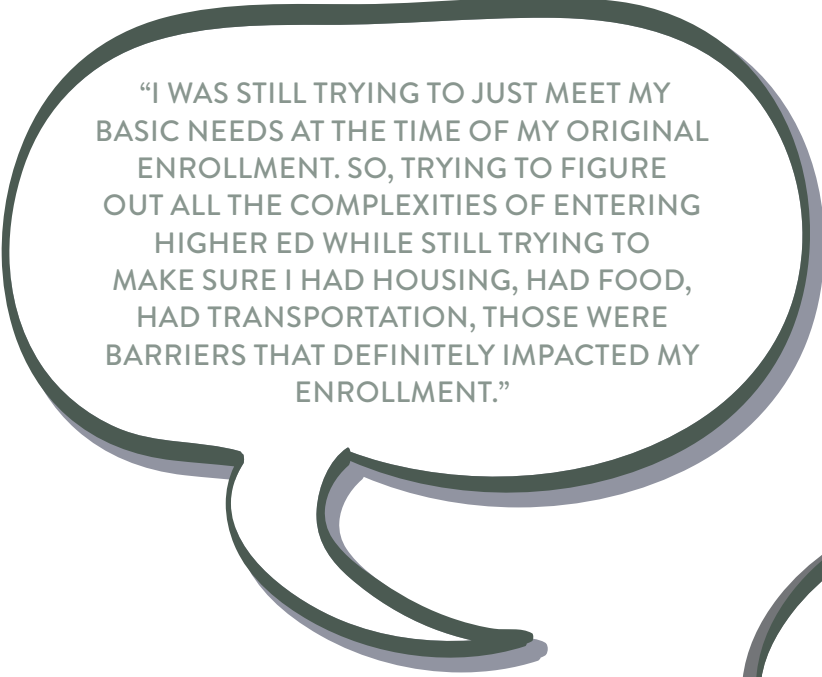
"I DON'T THINK THAT I SETTLED...I AM ALSO NEURODIVERGENT AND WORK BETTER IN SMALLER SETTINGS. HAD I BEEN AT A LARGER UNIVERSITY, I WOULD NOT HAVE HAD THE SAME SUPPORT AND ACCESS TO SERVICES. [THE UNIVERSITY] TOLD ME, 'WE WORK FOR YOU, SO MAKE US WORK.'"

"[THE UNIVERSITY] WAS GOOD AT PUTTING PEOPLE IN FRONT OF US INSTEAD OF PUSHING A PAMPHLET OR A LINK TO A WEBSITE."

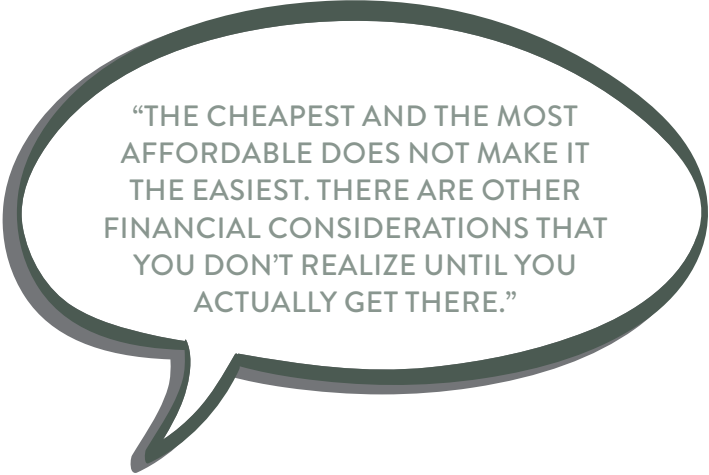
"FINANCES SHAPED MY ENTIRE EDUCATION. I HAD ALL OF MY TUITION PAID FOR BY GOING INTO AGRICULTURE. BUT THAT'S NOT MY CAREER PATH. IT'S LAW. [THE UNIVERSITY] PAYS FOR ALL OF IT AND I DO NOT HAVE A SINGLE STUDENT LOAN."

"WE HAVE A BILL THAT SAYS COST OF TRANSPORTATION, LIVING, ETC. I JUST LOOKED AT THE TUITION AND FEES. WHEN I CHANGED TO THE BUSINESS MAJOR, I REALIZED THAT THE COST OF THE PROGRAM IS MORE EXPENSIVE, AND MY REFUNDS WERE LESS. HAD I KNOWN, I MAY HAVE STAYED IN COMMUNICATIONS."

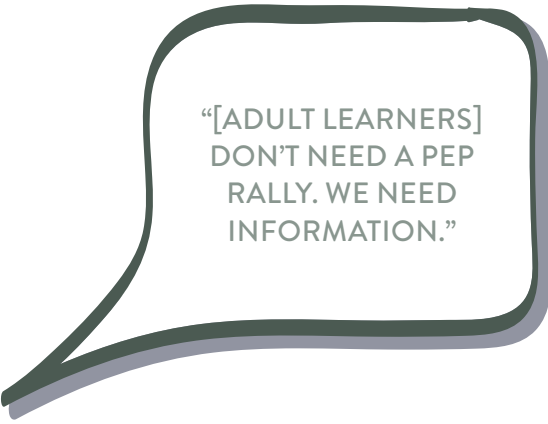
"HAVING DEBT PUTS A TOLL ON MY MENTAL HEALTH. I HAVE THIS PASSION BUT WHAT IF I GO INTO A JOB WHERE I'M NOT MAKING ENOUGH MONEY TO PAY OFF THIS DEBT?"




“I WAS STILL TRYING TO JUST MEET MY BASIC NEEDS AT THE TIME OF MY ORIGINAL ENROLLMENT. SO, TRYING TO FIGURE OUT ALL THE COMPLEXITIES OF ENTERING HIGHER ED WHILE STILL TRYING TO MAKE SURE I HAD HOUSING, HAD FOOD, HAD TRANSPORTATION, THOSE WERE BARRIERS THAT DEFINITELY IMPACTED MY ENROLLMENT.”



“THE CHEAPEST AND THE MOST AFFORDABLE DOES NOT MAKE IT THE EASIEST. THERE ARE OTHER FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS THAT YOU DON'T REALIZE UNTIL YOU ACTUALLY GET THERE.”



“[ADULT LEARNERS] DON'T NEED A PEP RALLY. WE NEED INFORMATION.”



“FEELING GENUINELY WELCOMED AND CELEBRATED FOR WHO I WAS AND ALL THE IDENTITIES I WAS SHOWING UP WITH? I WOULDN'T NECESSARILY SAY THAT WAS THE CASE.”

## **STUDENT-POSED SOLUTIONS**

### **Immediate-Tangible**

- » More person-to-person interactions to facilitate enrollment, financial aid processes, and to teach students how to use the financial aid tools
- » Leverage student knowledge and input in the creation of orientation and welcome week programming
- » Leverage alumni experience for recruitment efforts in the community
- » Expand community access to campus events
- » Host financial aid information sessions frequently and broaden participation to include families (i.e., for first-generation and ESL families)
- » Hire students as social media managers to capture the daily experiences of college students more accurately, in addition to highlighting departments and services
- » More in-depth and targeted orientation sessions for historically underrepresented groups
- » Create cost estimate tools for students, allowing them to more precisely estimate costs whether they are living on campus or off and capturing transportation costs and other costs they face

### **Long-term-Systemic**

- » Create an online resource hub for 24/7 access and real-time updates regarding scholarship and grant opportunities
- » Establish a greater physical presence in local K-12 schools by strengthening the partnerships between universities and local middle schools and high schools with more frequent visits
- » Create a student-representative presence at local/feeder schools (including high schools and community colleges)
- » Create and implement immersive virtual campus tours to reach students like international students who cannot always easily travel to the institution
- » Create and institutionalize scholarship funds for DACA students and other underrepresented students who may not have access to financial aid
- » Invest in peer mentor support initiatives and programs—students listen to other students

## EQUITABLE STUDENT SUCCESS

Students reflected upon their experiences with, and barriers related to, persistence and graduation. The problem is largely cultural. Students shared that success is narrowly defined and connected to grades, graduation, and streamlining into a career. They believe a holistic view of student success is lacking, especially a focus on well-being and mental health. Moreover, many students felt like they had to piece together their own comprehensive support systems to compensate for their institutions' inadequate support and direction. Sub-themes such as siloed and slow supports, passive/non-relational advising culture, culturally (ir)relevant spaces and curriculum, the hidden curriculum, financial stress, and traditional operations summarize the problem.

**Siloed and Slow Supports.** Students noted the loosely structured organization of higher education offices and departments. Many mentioned facing “run-arounds.” Students viewed this as a barrier to their success and that of their peers. They mentioned that going from office to office to get help was a tedious task, so much so that they began seeking out individuals (instead of offices/departments) that would help them in an expansive and meaningful way. Students made the observation that offices and departments do not talk to one another and often have conflicting and competing goals and agendas. While the supports are present, students remarked that these supports are far from harmonious.

Students also shared that these services are not marketed well, nor do they operate in an efficient and timely manner. For some students, they are not introduced to the service until it is necessary or even mandatory. Students also shared that many of these services are mediated by appointments (i.e., tutoring) and referrals (i.e., mental health counseling), which also create barriers to students accessing the supports necessary for their success. One student tried to use therapy services, and there was no timely response. Despite having an immediate need, he was given a 2–3-week timeline, which led him to stop utilizing student support services.

**Passive/Non-Relational Advising Culture.** Students identified advising as a crucial element of their success. Despite being important to their success, students across roundtables had shared negative experiences with advising. Many students shared that advisors only reach out to them during registration time and do not spend adequate time getting to know them, their needs, or their interests. This results in poor advising for the student. Accordingly, students remarked that the culture of advising is passive, stop-and-go, and more about box-checking. There is no real room to develop relationships. With high caseloads, sustaining meaningful relationships with students becomes increasingly difficult. Students recognize the high caseloads partly responsible for creating a passive advising culture.

**Culturally (Ir)relevant Curriculum and Spaces.** Racially and ethnically minoritized students in roundtable discussions noted the overwhelming lack of diversity in their class readings. In addition, racially and ethnically minoritized students reported that lack of diversity affected how they engaged with their peers in class discussions; their perspectives were often dismissed, and their learning stalled to accommodate their white peers who may have been a little more hesitant to critically engage in conversations around social justice.

One student participant shared her experiences as one of the only students of color in her elementary education major. She shared that she does not always feel welcome and that some of her peers scowl when she speaks about students' lived realities in the school system. As part of her experiences with food insecurity, for example, she cannot unsee or ignore the students facing food insecurity that she teaches as part of her field experience. But some of her peers who have never experienced food insecurity can willfully choose to ignore it. Students from minoritized backgrounds felt that their learning was stifled, and their white peers learning was prioritized.

Those who noted seeing themselves and their identities represented on campus broadly mentioned meaningfully creating that space on their own and/or participating in student groups in which they felt welcomed and celebrated. Students did, however, identify a few instances in which universities did put an effort into and emphasis on celebrating various cultures (i.e., supporting identity-based student groups, offering space to host cultural events, displaying flags from different countries). While some of these student- and university-led initiatives and gestures are meant to benefit all students, some still feel marginalized and left out. For example, commuter students noted that they cannot always participate in cultural events because they happen late and feel that these events are catered to a specific group of students (i.e., residential students).

**The Hidden Curriculum.** A unique theme that emerged from these conversations was the hidden curriculum—a certain way to act and behave that the university deemed necessary for success. Students acknowledged that they had to learn how to navigate university bureaucracy, learn how to communicate with certain offices/departments in unique ways, etc. They learned from their peers who had successfully navigated these processes. The hidden curriculum was even present at minority-serving institutions. Several Black students at HBCUs mentioned that they felt pressure to dress a certain way. Those students shared that there was an unwritten rule that students should dress professionally/business-casual to receive help from campus leaders and faculty. These expectations were framed as helping students understand the importance of self-presentation. Yet, still, some students cannot afford professional/business-casual attire. This is an equity issue related to student success and a cultural issue that requires attention.

**Financial Stress.** Financial stress trickled down from access to student success for many students. Students entered detailed conversations about the financial stress that forms because of required course materials. They attributed this stress to a potential barrier to their success. After paying their bills and clearing their accounts to fully access the university,

some students are asked to pay hundreds of dollars for course packs and access codes necessary for certain required courses. Many students expressed that they only open the online course pack to do their homework. When faced with this financial stress, students have shared that they mentally check out because they feel that the course packs and access codes just give them access to more busy work.

**Traditional Operations.** Students shared that faculty office hours, along with business hours at key offices and departments (i.e., financial aid, and career services), are incompatible with the day-to-day life of students. Some students (i.e., commuters, adult learners, and part-time/evening students) are not on campus during normal hours and thus miss opportunities to chat with faculty or visit offices in person and receive help.

## STUDENT REFLECTIONS

“WHY WOULD I BE PROACTIVE TO SERVICES I HAVE NEVER BEEN INTRODUCED TO? THERE’S A LOT OF RELIANCE ON STUDENTS TO KNOW WHO TO REACH OUT TO.”

“WE HAVE AN ISSUE WITH ADVISORS LEAVING AND STUDENTS NOT KNOWING WHO THEIR ADVISOR WILL BE/IS. AND THEN BEING UNABLE TO GET AN APPOINTMENT DUE TO ADVISORS BEING BOOKED. EMAILING ADVISORS TO MAKE AN APPOINTMENT IS NOT EFFICIENT. THIS CAUSES ME TO MISS DEADLINES.”

“I HAVE CONCERNS BECAUSE I HAVE SEEN A LOT OF MY FRIENDS MISGUIDED BY TAKING CLASSES THAT WON’T HELP THEM WITH THEIR GRADUATION. ADVISORS ARE BUSY AND IT’S DIFFICULT TO SCHEDULE AN APPOINTMENT IN A TIMELY MANNER.”

“ADVISING CAN BE HIT OR MISS. I ADVISE FRESHMEN TO CONNECT WITH DEPARTMENTS DIRECTLY INSTEAD OF PROFESSIONAL ADVISORS. SOMETIMES PROFESSIONAL ADVISORS MAKE ASSUMPTIONS AND DON’T TAKE STUDENT DOUBTS INTO ACCOUNT.”

“I DON’T FEEL LIKE I CAN BE MY AUTHENTIC SELF ON CAMPUS. THE PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT ISN’T DIVERSE AND I FEEL LIKE I’M WALKING ON EGGHELLS IN CLASS.”

“THERE IS NOTHING TO REALLY HELP STUDENTS WHEN THEY ARE DEALING WITH GRIEF. IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT COURSE EXTENSIONS. IT IS ABOUT DOCUMENTATION AND COMPLIANCE RATHER THAN HOLISTIC AND HUMANISTIC SUPPORT.”

“THERE ARE A BILLION RESOURCES ON CAMPUS, BUT THEY DON’T MEET STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE. I FEEL LIKE THEY JUST WAIT FOR US TO SEEK THEM OUT.”

“[THE UNIVERSITY] WANTS TO INCREASE DIVERSITY, BUT THEY DON’T FUND DIVERSE STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS. THEY DON’T TRUST US.”

“I DON’T STAY BECAUSE OF THE INSTITUTION. I STAY BECAUSE OF THE PEOPLE AND THE COMMUNITY I’VE BUILT. THE LEAST-FUNDED PROGRAMS ARE WHERE I FIND THE MOST COMMUNITY.”

## **STUDENT-POSED SOLUTIONS**

### **Immediate-Tangible**

- » Meet students where they live and gather and improve the advertisement of student services and supports through tabling
- » Better define student success and whose responsibility it is
- » Build a relational culture between faculty/administrators/staff and students
- » Create more culturally relevant and responsible curriculum that centers diverse perspectives
- » Offer culturally relevant/social justice pedagogy workshops for faculty to learn how to facilitate and engage students in difficult conversations
- » Create more open-education resources and course-packs that are at no cost to the student
- » Invest in identity-based advisors and counselors who are trained and equipped to deal with the lived experiences of students from historically underrepresented groups (i.e., people of color, LGBTQIA+, first-generation, veteran, and adult learners)
- » Institutionalize midterm semester evaluations instead of just end of course student evaluations
- » Ask students about their wants, needs, desires, and struggles instead of operating from assumptions
- » Consider labeling “Office Hours” as “Student Hours” to avoid cultural misunderstandings and to communicate to students that these hours are for them
- » Pay student organization leaders for their labor in creating and maintaining campus culture and community through their activities and events

### **Long-term-Systemic**

- » Invest in and expand the number of advisors, develop deeper relationships with students to direct them to more tailored services
- » Stagger office hours to best reach commuter, adult learner, and part-time students who may take classes and be on campus in the evenings
- » Create more one-stop-shops for holistic student success so that more students can receive help and support in an efficient manner
- » Create a liaison office run by students to facilitate faculty/administration and student interactions and relationships
- » Establishing supports for students who are mothers—increasing childcare access on campus
- » Offer students more project-based and hands-on assignments and learning opportunities that give students more agency and autonomy to get creative with assignments (i.e., creating a TikTok, podcast, or YouTube series for a class assignment as opposed to a formal paper); mentor and coach faculty members to apply these methods through centers for teaching and learning



## EQUITABLE CAREER PATHWAYS

Students reflected on the extent to which their universities prepare them for their post-undergraduate plans. They also shared how often they utilize career services and whether or not career services are beneficial to them and their post-undergraduate plans. Students overwhelmingly agreed that their campus' career services should be transformed in ways that center marginalized and underrepresented students' needs. Further, students discussed the disadvantages that (unpaid) internship/co-op requirements present to marginalized and underrepresented students. While those unpaid opportunities opened doors for some students, they also needed to sacrifice their livelihoods to pursue their career ambitions. In what follows, we dive deeper into the sub-themes that summarize the problem: career center spaces and services, overreliance on technology, filling the gaps with high-impact practices, and unpaid opportunities.

**Career Center Spaces and Services.** Many students shared that their career centers were both/either uninviting or inaccessible. For example, some students noted that their career center services (i.e., job fairs) were too STEM-focused, which disadvantaged humanities and social science students with expansive career options and desires. Students who shared these sentiments felt they received insufficient support (i.e., fewer non-STEM recruiters at career fairs).

Students also remarked that their career centers offer broad supports such as resume coaching and interview preparation. While students said these services are helpful, they also expressed services were too general and not specific enough to help them get into the weeds of their career aspirations. In other words, the career centers take a centralized approach to help all students, but in that pursuit, some students feel like the career center can quickly become less relevant and able to support their needs. Students also shared that the career center can be an intimidating space to visit. Some students felt this way because their career centers are job-focused rather than skill-focused.

**Overreliance on Technology.** Students shared that their institutions used digital platforms like Handshake to provide career planning services to students. Still, students felt that their institutions over/relied on technology to fill in the gaps. Students remarked that Handshake was difficult to navigate and created disconnect and isolation regarding career planning. Students shared that this over/reliance on technology leads them to believe that their universities do not have the culture of wanting to help students in person or even in a humanizing, supportive way. Instead, they let platforms like Handshake do the job.

**Filling the Gaps with High-Impact Practices.** Students shared that high-impact practices, especially internships, helped solidify future career plans. Students shared overwhelmingly positive experiences with internships. One student noted that internships broke up the repetition of information he heard in his classes and allowed him to get hands-on experience. Students also attributed internships to skill acquisition, something they felt they could not necessarily gain in the classroom. Students learned about internships both from their departments and the career center. Some students could not, however, participate in certain internships because they were unpaid, presenting equity issues.

**Unpaid Opportunities.** While students appreciated internship and co-op opportunities, many noted they were unpaid. Several students shared that their major departments required internships/co-ops that were mainly unpaid but necessary for certification (i.e., student teaching) and degree completion. Even more troubling was that some departments would exclusively partner students up with companies that had unpaid internships. Career centers even actively advertised unpaid internships. As a result, students were tasked to figure out how to manage their finances and make ends meet while completing unpaid (or severely underpaid) labor.

## STUDENT REFLECTIONS

"IT'S NOT THAT [THE CAREER CENTER] HIDES INFORMATION, BUT YOU HAVE TO GO SEEK IT OUT, YOU HAVE TO GO CHASE PEOPLE DOWN AND ASK ALL THOSE QUESTIONS. AND IF YOU ARE LUCKY, YOU GET THE RIGHT PERSON WHO DID SOMETHING SIMILAR TO YOU, AND THEY CAN JUST LEAD YOU DOWN THE PATH YOU NEED."

"STUDENTS ARE DOING SO MUCH TO SURVIVE; LIFE KEEPS MOVING; CAREER READINESS IS NOT TOP OF MIND FOR STUDENTS OR FOR UNIVERSITIES."

"I FEEL THAT LIFE IS MORE THAN JUST GETTING A JOB. WHAT ABOUT THE TRANSITION? WHAT ABOUT BENEFITS? 401K?"

"WE HAVE A LOT OF EVENTS WHERE ORGANIZATIONS AND RESOURCES TABLE AROUND CAMPUS, AND I HAVEN'T SEEN THE CAREER SERVICES OFFICE AT ANY OF THEM!"

"I CAN'T TAKE AN INTERNSHIP BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE TIME TO TAKE TWO DAYS OFF TO TAKE PART IN AN UNPAID INTERNSHIP. I ALREADY WORK TWO JOBS... [UNPAID INTERNSHIPS] ARE NOT FEASIBLE."

"I ACKNOWLEDGED EARLY ON THAT MY UNIVERSITY DID NOT DO A GOOD JOB [PREPARING ME FOR LIFE AFTER COLLEGE], SO I SOUGHT OUT MENTORS TO DO DIFFERENT THINGS CAMPUS IN AND OF ITSELF WILL NOT [SUFFICIENTLY SUPPORT]."

## **STUDENT-POSED SOLUTIONS**

### **Immediate-Tangible**

- » Establish partnerships between career services and academic departments to meaningfully embed skill-building activities and exercises that best prepare students for flexible career pathways
- » Practice the act of encouraging vs. discouraging—encouraging students to pursue their passions and dreams while also encouraging them to have multiple career plans and to embrace detours on the path
- » Discuss careers and transferable skills with students early and often, not just near graduation
- » Improve career center outreach (i.e., visiting classrooms, tabling events in areas where students gather and live)
- » Consider an Alumni Career Fair where only alumni come to recruit and talk about their journeys
- » Offer alumni access to career services
- » Facilitate the identity formation and consciousness of students before they leave college, i.e., through incorporating diagnostic interviewing
- » Offer headshot services (e.g., Headshot Booths)

### **Long-term-Systemic**

- » More carefully and meaningfully consider non-traditional and non-STEM students in career service programs, services, and initiatives (i.e., inviting non-profit organizations to recruit at career fairs, hire part-time career counselors who work evenings and are trained to cater to adult learners/those that may be re-careering)
- » Pay students for internships/co-ops on campus and partner with local business and community organizations to offer paid internships; discourage departments from requiring unpaid internships for graduation

## CONCLUSION: CHARTING A NEW PATH AND HOW WE GET THERE

In each roundtable, students felt institutions should do more to improve college access, advance student success, and strengthen career pathways, especially for historically underrepresented students. The participating students felt the onus is too often placed on themselves and their peers to make important college-going decisions, connect to campus resources, and chart a path toward success. They want the university to be more proactive in reaching them directly. Students stressed their feeling that new mindsets, perspectives, and processes are necessary to chart an equitable path for historically underrepresented students – and that engaging students in the change process is key to realizing such change.

As shown in the report, historically underrepresented students still do not feel as if their needs are being fully met. Nor do they confidently feel that their institutions are structured or operated around their holistic success. Students made clear they believe living up to institutional commitments to equity will require shifts in mindsets of faculty, staff, and leaders as well as in programs, policies, and practices.

The equity roundtable initiative serves as a model of how institutions can constructively incorporate student perspectives into efforts aimed at improving overall student success — listen to students, center their perspectives, and allow them to offer recommendations for change. In the appendix, we offer resources to support institutional transformation in ways that invite students into the process and allow equity to manifest in colleges and universities nationwide.

## APPENDIX: RESOURCES

### THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE PROJECT: FIRST DAY TOOLKIT

The [Student Experience Project \(SEP\)](#) is a collaborative of university leaders, faculty, researchers and national education organizations committed to innovative, research-based practices to increase degree attainment by building equitable learning environments and fostering a sense of belonging on campus. The First Day Toolkit is a suite of resources designed to guide faculty through the process of improving the messages that students receive through syllabi and the first day of class that support social belonging, growth mindset, and an equitable learning experience. The toolkit contains an online training module on key considerations for writing syllabi that support student success, example syllabus language, and additional practices for instructors to utilize on the first day of class to create an equitable learning environment. Over 200 instructors have utilized the First Day toolkit's evidence-based resources in both virtual and in-person settings.

More information can be found at: <https://studentexperienceproject.org/firstdaytoolkit/>

### INTRO TO EQUITY DESIGN

This is an online course from [equityXdesign](#), who are leaders in the racial equity, design, and innovation spaces. This course provides a practice that merges the consciousness of racial equity work with the methodology of design thinking, guided by three central beliefs: innovation's need for inclusion and intentional design, the indistinguishable relationship between the past and the present, and a moral imperative to live in the future we desire to create. equityXdesign believes that designing for the most affected and marginalized, letting their voices and experiences lead, and acknowledging the barriers to engagement are critical. This course is for teams of educators, designers, and advocates committed to building internal capacity, cultivating new ideas, reforming biased policies and inventing equitable institutions.

Information on this course and more offerings can be found at: <https://courses.equitymeetsdesign.com/>

### FOOD INSECURITY AT URBAN UNIVERSITIES: PERSPECTIVES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The [Coalition of Urban Serving Universities \(USU\)](#) and the [Association of Land-grant Universities \(APLU\)](#) developed and co-produced a report to highlight the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food insecurity, as experienced by students at a small set of urban universities from March through December 2020. This project was designed to provide a snapshot of what food insecurity is, as well as what it looks like on urban campuses and among their stakeholders, using qualitative methods. As a result of this exploratory project, 2 Food Insecurity at Urban Universities conceptual frameworks are presented for understanding: a) the interconnected nature of basic needs, academic performance, and the student experience; and b) aspects of institutional culture that promote food insecurity as an institutional priority.

The report can be accessed and downloaded at: <https://www.aplu.org/library/food-insecurity-at-urban-universities-perspectives-during-the-pandemic/file>

## STUDENT JOURNEY FRAMEWORK

The [Student Journey Framework](#) is based on the “Supporting Student Success: Preventing Loss-Momentum Framework” created by Completion by Design, in collaboration with the Community College Research Center and The RP Group, for 2-year institutions and which can be adapted for the 4-year university context. The framework is intended to help university leaders understand the student experience and where students are most likely to run into roadblocks, stop out, or drop out. The framework allows leaders to tailor solutions and supports for each phase in the student’s journey and suggests core capacities for implementation as well as measures for success.

To download the guide, visit: <https://www.completionbydesign.org/s/article/Understanding-the-Student-Experience-through-the-loss-momentum-framework-Clearing-the-Path-to-Completion>

## SHIFT POWER. SHARE POWER. AN ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE WITH AND FOR TODAY’S NEW MAJORITY LEARNERS

Working at the intersection of innovation and behavior change, [Kinetic Seeds](#) is a design consultancy tackling complex educational challenges. Woven into our DNA is the belief that students’ voices can be instruments of meaningful, lasting change. Our process constructs new spaces within which we (students, learners, educators, advocates, leaders, policymakers and others) can make meaning together. Designed with sponsoring organization Tides, design partner Designing for Equity, members of Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Intermediaries for Scale, and 63 students from across the country, the “Shift Power. Share Power. Framework” helps higher education professionals respond to the realities of learners’ lived experiences in a holistic and equity-centered manner.

To download the framework, visit: <https://kineticseeds.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Shift-Power-Share-Power-Engagement-Framework-FINAL-October-2022.pdf>

## FRAMING EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A TOOLKIT

This toolkit was developed by the [FrameWorks Institute](#), a communications nonprofit that supports progressive changemakers in leading more productive public conversations about social and scientific issues. It builds on original social science research conducted by FrameWorks on topics such as education, racial disparities, evidence-based policymaking, and related topics. This toolkit was developed with support from Tides for Intermediaries for Scale, a project of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The toolkit can be accessed at: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YOUyJ9sEa2qa33Me94ofsWgHbPAxFEKLDvwXJLsi9M/edit>

## THE ECOLOGICAL VALIDATION MODEL OF STUDENT SUCCESS

The Promoting At-Promise Student Success (PASS) project from the USC Pullias Center for Higher Education created the Ecological Validation Model of Student Success to argue how programs or services get created is more important than what gets created. The model illustrates how validating experiences can become embedded within higher education policies, practices, and structures. This approach validates historically marginalized and underserved students' multiple identities, assets, strengths, and capabilities for success through carefully coordinated supports instead of siloed supports. This model is particularly helpful in addressing the problem around equitable student success, as students in the roundtables noted that supports for them existed in pockets and sometimes in tension with each other.

Visit <https://pass.pullias.usc.edu/> to learn more about the model and how it can be implemented.

## SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP

Shared equity leadership is a new phenomenon that situates equity as the work of many, instead of just a few, like the chief diversity officer or the vice president for equity and inclusion. The above graphic illustrates the foundational practices, values, and personal journeys individuals must go on to properly and meaningfully advance equity. When working to implement some of the student-posed recommendations, especially the long-term-systemic ones, it would behoove institutions to assemble a diverse team with various perspectives, insights, and access to people and resources to make change happen.

Shared equity leadership affirms that leadership is a process, not a position. This leadership process can help improve access, student success, and career pathway inequities. And educate leadership teams about equity issues in the process. Campuses within APLU's Powered by Publics (PxP) and Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU) networks, like Rutgers University - Newark, are already enacting shared equity leadership and can serve as models for this work.

More information on shared equity leadership can be found at: <https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Diversity-Inclusion/Shared-Equity-Leadership.aspx>

## DESIGN FOR EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION (DEHE) MODEL

The DEHE model also challenges traditional top-down decision making by spinning design thinking into something worthwhile for higher education. Top-down processes can perpetuate inequities by obscuring the perspectives of those who institutions are designing new policies, practices, and programs for. The model identifies how members of committees, task forces, and leadership teams can engage their colleagues and key stakeholders to design new programs, policies, and practices that advance equity. One of the most important elements of the DEHE model is empathizing with those who design teams are designing for. Additionally, bringing them into the process is encouraged in the DEHE model. When designing for those long-term-systemic recommendations, it is important to include students. It will be important to learn from them in the empathize phase, include them in the organizing phase, and receive their feedback when refining.

Check out the DEHE guide for tangible ways to utilize this model: <https://pullias.usc.edu/download/using-design-for-equity-in-higher-education-for-liberatory-change-a-guide-for-practice/>



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