Ensuring Access:
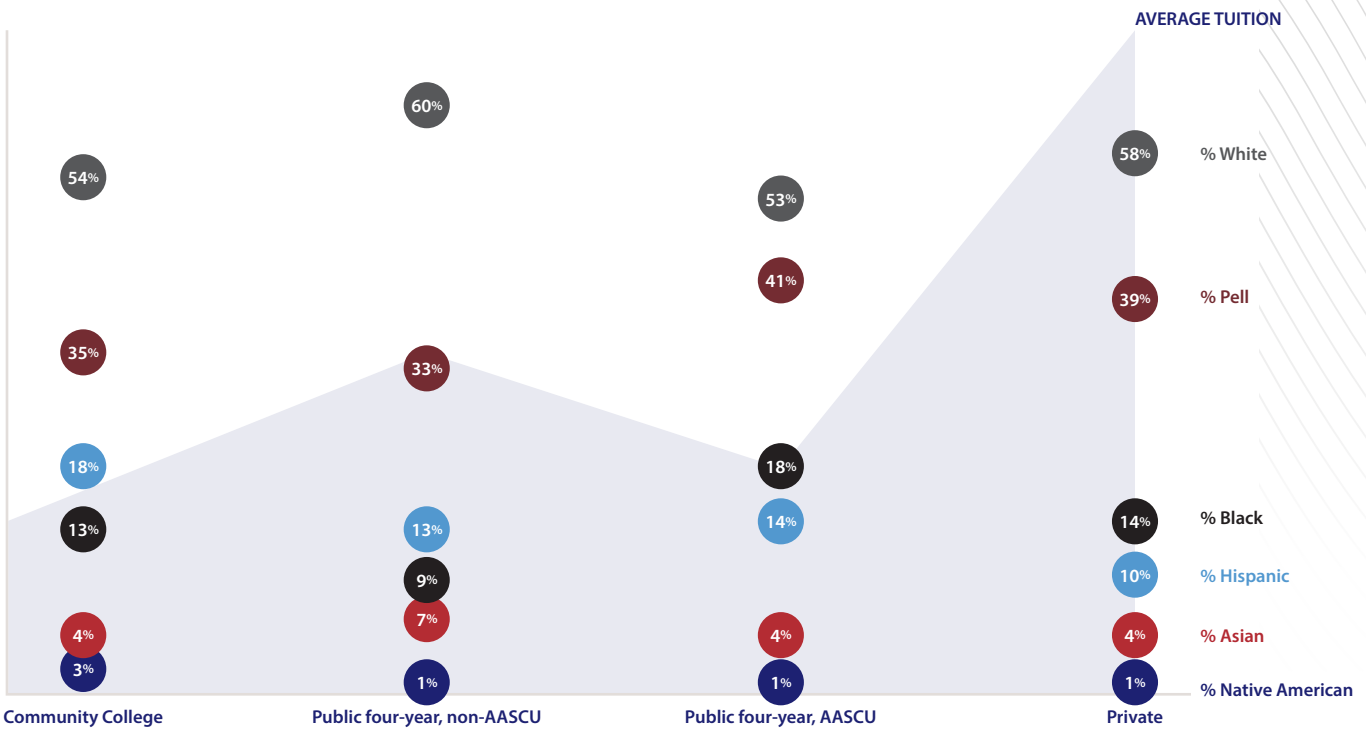## AASCU Institutions' Practices & Policies

January 2023

AASCU's Role in Access

A college degree enables upward financial mobility—a college graduate's lifetime earnings are over 80% greater than those without a degree.[1] Yet, systemic societal and educational constructs can create hurdles for students—particularly those who are historically underserved (e.g., Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students)—to gain access to education. The aim of this brief is to describe practices and policies that AASCU member institutions use to foster accessibility for historically underserved students.

Students from lower income families often come from under-resourced school districts and lack access to college preparatory coursework, tutoring, test preparation services, and quality college counseling.[2,3,4] Further, first-generation students, students of color, and other historically underserved students often face testing biases, and may be unfamiliar with the college application and enrollment process.

AASCU member institutions are typically "one of the largest—and often the most accessible—paths to a bachelor's degree, including for first-generation, minority, and working adult students."[5] In fact, AASCU institutions enroll larger shares of historically underserved students at lower tuition and fees than other public four-year institutions and private institutions (Figure 1). AASCU member rates of enrollment for historically underserved students are even slightly higher for some groups than at community colleges, which are, by definition, open-access institutions.

Figure 1. AASCU Institutions enroll double the share of Black students and 8 percentage points more Pell Grant recipients than other public four-year, at a lower price point

AVERAGE TUITION

	Community College	Public four-year, non-AASCU	Public four-year, AASCU	Private	
% White	54%	60%	53%	58%	
% Pell	35%	33%	41%	39%	
% Black	13%	9%	18%	14%	
% Hispanic	18%	13%	14%	10%	
% Asian	4%	7%	4%	4%	
% Native American	3%	1%	1%	1%	

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2017–18 Student Financial Aid and 2018 Enrollment data.

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Facilitating Accessibility: Institutional Policies and Practices

Several measures of accessibility were assessed to select 13 AASCU member institutions for this study (see the Appendix for the selection criteria methodology). Noting that AASCU member institutions provide broad access relative to other four-year institutions, the selected institutions represent the accessibility range within this group. Scans were then conducted of the 13 institutions using publicly available documentation to identify relevant policies and practices. Table 1 summarizes the various ways accessibility is evident at the six most accessible AASCU member institutions, from inclusion in the mission to supports and programming.

Table 1. How accessibility shows up at AASCU member institutions

	Small Southwestern	Midsized Western	Small Mid-Atlantic	Small Southeastern	Small Midwestern #1	Small Midwestern #2
Mission						
Access on homepage	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Access in mission/ vision statement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Racial equity/ social justice	✓			✓		
Admission policies						
Open admission				✓	✓	
Applications: first generation considered			✓			
Applications: no fee				✓		
Support/programming						
Summer bridge/ early enrollment	✓	✓			✓	✓
Access scholarship/ program	✓	✓	✓			

Access Mission

For nearly all of the most accessible institutions (five of the six), access is visibly communicated and prominently featured as a value and focus of the institution on the website homepage. This conveys to prospective students and families from historically underserved populations that they would be welcomed on campus. The presence of access on the homepage signals a broader institutional focus on access, which likely stems from a tone that is set by leadership.

While the following items were most often found on institution websites, these are important access-related themes that institutions should consider in the implementation of student-centered policies and practices.

» **FOCUS.** Accessible institutions appear to take pride in their accessibility and diversity.

   – Accessible institutions publish statements about access-related missions and history on their homepages, using language such as "opportunity" and stating that many current students are the first in their families to attend college. Accessible institutions often feature their success in measures of accessibility and diversity rather than emphasize selectivity or prestige.

   – Accessible institutions also emphasize access and related concepts such as socioeconomic mobility in public-facing documents (e.g., mission statements, value statements, and strategic plans).

» **AFFORDABILITY.** Accessibility is closely tied to affordability, as low-income and other historically underserved students can more easily access an affordable institution. Providing easily accessible information for students about financial aid is critical for increased access. The small Southwestern institution cites a national ranking for low debt on its homepage and links to financial aid more prominently than other institutions.

» **RESOURCES.** In addition to financial aid, providing tailored information about resources for special populations, such as immigrant, adult, or commuter students, broadens access to historically underserved populations.

» **DIVERSITY.** Accessible institutions provide data about the diversity of students and faculty. These institutions also highlight the success of historically underrepresented students and alumni through videos or blogs as aspirational and motivational examples for prospective students of similar backgrounds.

» **COMMUNITY.** Institutions can also demonstrate their connection to the community to remind stakeholders, including prospective students, of their regional mission. The Southwestern institution, for example, collaborates with local and national companies to provide fresh produce to underserved communities. This sends a signal not only about the institution's community mission but also about its investment in uplifting populations in need.

Facilitating Accessibility

ACCESS MADE VISIBLE
We initially approached our scan as prospective students searching for information about the institution on its website. One noticeable feature that immediately stood out was the visibility of access as central to the institution's mission, beginning with information provided on the homepage. Access was typically included in the mission and vision statements as well, as the primary mission before a mention of research and academic rankings.

This emphasis in focus was further evident in the *frequency* of access-related terms. The most accessible institutions posted access content and related concepts such as accessibility, diversity, and community an average of five times per homepage. Institutions falling lower on the accessibility scale more frequently posted content related to prestige, rankings, and research, compared to the most accessible institutions, which mentioned these terms an average of one time each.

Consider:

» What signals does your website homepage send to prospective students about access?

» Is an emphasis on equity, community, and accessibility visible and central?

» Do public-facing documents emphasize institutional pride in accessibility, and a mission to serve historically underserved populations?

» Do public-facing documents such as websites point to resources to ease the accessibility and affordability of enrolling at the institution?

» Are the principles reflected on public-facing documents enacted in student-centered policies and programs on campus? How else can you demonstrate a commitment to access?

Response to Racial Equity

Accessible institutions also feature statements on their website homepages about recent national events related to police brutality, racial justice, and equity, and the role of the institution in facilitating equity for student and institutional success.

Examples:

» **EQUITY MISSION.** A small Southwestern institution's president issued a statement about closing the university for Juneteenth to commemorate the emancipation of slavery in the U.S. and stressed the importance of equity and equal treatment for the institution and its students. This institution also recently featured a story on its website about its enrollment growth, crediting its emphasis on diversity and accessibility as the impetus for that growth.

» **EQUITY ACTIONS.** A small Southeastern institution recently announced participation in a system-wide task force on racial equity in response to recent events. The chancellor appointed a committee of staff, faculty, and a student representative to participate in focus groups to examine ongoing initiatives and identify any existing barriers to inclusiveness on its campus.

» **EQUITY DISCUSSIONS.** The small Southwestern institution held a speaker series about equity and racial justice in response to recent events. In his statement about the speaker series, the Southwestern institution's president stressed the need for dialogue to empower this generation of students to make impactful change in the community and society.

Consider:

» In addition to considerations about emphasizing access on the institution's homepage, does your website respond to recent events surrounding racial justice and equity in meaningful, visible ways? Does this messaging come from the institution's leadership?

» How is your institution taking action to make equity central to its mission?

» Do your institution's strategic goals take equity into account? Do you have an equity plan or measure progress toward equity-related benchmarks? Do you have a senior administrator responsible for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)?

> A Southwestern institution's president stressed the need for dialogue to empower this generation of students to make impactful change in the community and society.

Access/Success Support

Accessible institutions not only talk about access, but "walk the talk" by offering resources and programming that promote a sense of belonging for prospective students from historically underserved backgrounds. While some of these practices may be considered success programs for students already enrolled, the availability of such programs helps the institution feel more accessible for prospective students who are seeking such supports. Often these students will learn about supportive programming through friends or family members who have attended the institution, or through college access programs that provide information about the college application process.

Examples:

» **ACCESS SCHOLARSHIPS.** Comprehensive scholarship programs promote access by providing not only the financial resources, but also support to ensure that students enroll and persist.

   – **PROMISE PROGRAM.** Students who transfer to a small Southwestern institution from the local community college are eligible for a full scholarship if federal and state aid do not cover tuition. This Promise program supplements the financial support with personal mentoring.

   – **TRANSFER SCHOLARSHIP.** A small mid-Atlantic institution's community college transfer scholarship includes child care in addition to full tuition and fees, books, and limited transportation.

   – **SCHOLARSHIP PLEDGE.** At a small Midwestern institution, low-income, in-state students are eligible for a four-year statewide scholarship. Scholarship recipients must make a pledge to participate in pre-college activities while in high school. Once in college, scholarship recipients are required to maintain a minimum number of credits and satisfactory academic progress.

» **TRIO.** Three of the highly accessible institutions offer Upward Bound (UB), federally funded pre-college TRIO programing offering a college pathway (college access counseling, support, and scholarships) for low-income, first-generation high school students. While TRIO grants are competitive, institutions that successfully apply for and implement TRIO programs often provide models for reaching a larger cohort of students across campus.

A small mid-Atlantic institution's community college transfer scholarship includes child care in addition to full tuition and fees, books, and limited transportation.

» **EARLY COLLEGE.** A Southwestern institution offers the opportunity for local high school students to complete up to two years of college coursework on the campus before graduating from high school. The program offers specialized pathways in business and technology fields.

» **UNDOCUMENTED SUPPORT.** The midsized Western institution offers a center that provides support for undocumented students. While this may not be an access program per se, as it serves students once they are already on campus, the knowledge that such supports exist would likely attract and motivate prospective undocumented students to apply to this institution.

» **SUMMER BRIDGE.** Three institutions offer free summer bridge programs to help ease the transition to postsecondary education. The summer bridge programs vary in length and intensity of support. A six-week summer bridge program at a midsized Western institution is recommended for students who require developmental coursework, and provides an opportunity to earn general education credits. This program along with two others at small Midwestern institutions help students develop study skills and connect with peers, faculty, and resources.

» **UNDERSERVED MINORITY CO-CURRICULAR PROGRAMMING.** Accessible institutions not only have a higher representation of groups such as Black or Latinx students, but more active student groups and programming specific to these populations. The midsized Western institution, for example, hosts an annual Latina mentoring event featuring speakers and networking.

Consider:

» Does your institution offer scholarships to historically underserved populations that help ease accessibility? Do access scholarships have personal support components?

» Has your institution surveyed students to assess their greatest needs?

» Does programming exist to help ease the transition to college-level coursework, particularly for those who may be academically underprepared? Is this programming free? Is it required?

» Do population-specific centers or student groups provide a sense of belonging and resources for historically underserved populations? How do prospective students learn about these supports?

Admission Policies

While campus visits and fee waivers are common application practices across colleges and universities, accessible institutions offer additional application policies and practices that further promote accessibility.

Examples:

» **OPEN ADMISSIONS**. Two highly accessible institutions are open admission—all students with a high school diploma or GED are admitted, although some programs have selective admission. At one of the institutions, standardized tests are recommended but not required. Only 7% of AASCU institutions are open admissions.

» **SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS.** The small mid-Atlantic institution noted considering first-generation student status in its admission decisions.

» **FEE-FREE.** A small Southeastern institution does not require an application fee.

» **ADMISSION CHATS.** One institution offers virtual, informal, group-based "Coffee With an Admission Counselor" discussions, making these staff and important information more accessible.

Consider:

» Could anything in the application process be preventing historically underserved students from applying to the institution?

» Can local populations afford the application fee?

» Are underserved populations at a disadvantage because of potential bias in standardized exams?

» Are admission counselors accessible?

» How can you use holistic admissions that include race as a factor?

Moving Forward

Public-facing documents at the less accessible institutions place more emphasis on themes of prestige, research, and the traditional campus experience. Rather than appearing to facilitate broad accessibility, these institutions impose more rigorous application requirements, in some cases considering legacies in admissions decisions.

However, these institutions are making moves to improve accessibility. Four of the seven less accessible institutions recently announced permanent test optional policies (unrelated to COVID-19). This is an important step for accessibility given that standardized admission tests are known to be advantageous to white and higher-income students.[6] One institution, announcing this policy shift in 2020, emphasized accessibility, inclusion, diversity, and equity in its values. Another institution announced that as of fall 2021 it automatically admitted students with a high school GPA of 3.25 or higher. It should be noted that the data used to determine relative accessibility were based on the most recent U.S. Department of Education data available at the time of analysis, and these policy changes may be reflected in future analyses.

Conclusion

Highly accessible institutions stand out for their emphasis on access as a tenet central to their mission, and as a factor in their success. Institutions can replicate the following practices to ensure and improve their accessibility:

» **PRIORITIZE ACCESS.** Emphasize a sense of belonging for students of all backgrounds on public-facing documents. Cite accomplishments in accessibility and affordability for historically underserved students first and foremost. Accessible institutions need not compromise on academic excellence; however, accessibility messaging must be prominently featured.

» **CONSIDER THE COMMUNITY.** Emphasize social justice and serving the community in homepages, mission statements, and strategic planning documents, in addition to themes of accessibility, affordability, equity, and diversity.

» **SUPPLEMENT WITH SUPPORT.** Consider offering pre-college support programs and supplementing access scholarships with academic and personal support, college application assistance, and mentoring to help prepare students for campus life.

» **EXPAND APPLICATION ACCESSIBILITY.** Consider implementing test-optional policies to help populations who have been disadvantaged by bias in standardized tests, or who lack access to test preparation services. These policies may encourage more historically underserved students to apply. Additional accessible application practices include consideration of first-generation status and eliminating an application fee.

It should be noted that this scan relied on public sources for information about accessible policies and practices, and future research should evaluate the effects of accessibility levers on enrollment and completion rates for historically underserved students, as well as the qualitative factors of how these practices can best be implemented to reach students most effectively.

The tragic consequences of COVID-19 and related campus closures have only served to exacerbate college access barriers for the neediest students. Students from lowest-income families were the most likely to have cancelled plans to attend college in fall 2020.[7] Black and rural white students in particular realized sharp enrollment drops because of difficulty paying for college and accessing courses online. Together with policies and practices identified in the Ensuring Affordability issue brief[8], the strategies identified here help facilitate a more equitable playing field for students who are otherwise disadvantaged throughout the college pipeline. It is more important than ever for higher education to act as a lever to enable greater success and prosperity for future generations, thus alleviating the pervasive inequities facing our society. Education not only benefits individuals, society also realizes returns through increased productivity and economic contributions.

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Look for strategies that help facilitate mobility for historically underserved students, in the upcoming third and final issue brief in this series.

COVID-19 & Accessibility

In addition to the challenges that COVID-19 introduced for historically underserved students to afford and access online coursework, students also expressed that paying full tuition for online courses without the in-person experience and support did not seem worthwhile. Many colleges have experienced enrollment declines because students opt to earn money in the workforce rather than pay tuition. Emergency COVID funding enabled institutions to offset some expenses by providing computers, wireless internet hotspots, and emergency financial assistance. However, many institutions' budgets are falling short even with this additional federal funding.[9] Colleges are also looking for ways to increase access, for example by shifting to test-optional policies after the closure of testing centers in the spring of 2020. Some college admission professionals see this as an opportunity to reevaluate the necessity of standardized testing in admissions decisions.[10]

Appendix: Methodology

Using the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2017–18 Student Financial Aid data and 2018 Fall Enrollment data, a combination of three measures was used to select institutions for this study:

1. The Black share of fall 2018 students enrolled[11] compared with the state's percentage of Black population ages 18 to 40. Census data was used for the 2018 race/ethnicity population estimates in each state to compare with the share of enrollments.[12]

2. The Hispanic share of fall 2018 students enrolled compared with the state's percentage of Hispanic population ages 18 to 40.

3. The percentage of first-time, full-time students with family incomes less than $30,000 was used to assess accessibility for students estimated to be from low-income families; quartiles on the percentage of first-time, full-time students with family incomes less than $30,000 in 2017–18 were defined across AASCU member institutions.[13]

Site Selection

A set of six institutions that fall within the following criteria was selected:

1. AASCU member institutions.

2. Institutions with large shares of students enrolled on the three measures mentioned above.

3. One institution per state to maximize geographic diversity.

4. Restrict the number of special designation institutions (e.g., historically Black colleges and universities and Hispanic-serving institutions). By design, special designation institutions are highly accessible on the composite value. However, several were included to investigate policies they may have in place that can be implemented elsewhere to expand accessibility.

Using the same metrics, seven institutions were selected fulfilling the following criteria.

1. AASCU member institution.

2. Institutions with fewer students enrolled on the three measures mentioned above.

3. One institution per state.

Scans were then conducted of the 13 institutions using institutional and state websites, relevant publications, and policy reports to identify institutional policies and practices that affect institutions' accessibility. The scans relied on publicly available information. While this may be seen as a potential limitation, it is important that institutions make information about programs and policies transparent and easy to access.

Endnotes

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About the American Association of State Colleges and Universities

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) is a Washington, D.C.-based higher education association of nearly 400 public colleges, universities, and systems whose members share a learning- and teaching-centered culture, a historic commitment to underserved student populations, and a dedication to research and creativity that advances their regions' economic progress and cultural development. These are institutions Delivering America's Promise.

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This AASCU Issue Brief was prepared by Abby Miller and Sue Clery, founding partners of ASA Research, in collaboration with AASCU. ASA is driven by the belief that research—particularly in the fields of higher education and workforce—is essential for expanding opportunity, improving economic mobility, and contributing to personal and social well-being. ASA is pleased to partner with AASCU in support of student success and to provide strategic data consulting and assistance to AASCU.

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