

Transforming at Scale



**How AASCU's Student Success
Equity Intensive Promotes
Equitable Postsecondary Value**

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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 350 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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About the Institute for Higher Education Policy

This paper was developed with financial support from the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization committed to building a more equitable and just society through higher education. Through research, advocacy, policy development, and field engagement, IHEP drives systemic change in higher education to advance equitable outcomes and generational impact for communities historically marginalized on the basis of race, ethnicity, or income.

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About the Postsecondary Value Commission

This paper builds on the work of the Postsecondary Value Commission (PVC), a group of 30 diverse leaders brought together to answer the question "what is college worth?" by doing three things: propose a **definition** of postsecondary value, develop a way to **measure** that value, and urge **action** to improve value and make it more equitable.

Visit the PVC website →

Suggested Citation

Basavaraj, P., & Taylor, M. (2024). *Transforming at scale: How AASCU's Student Success Equity Intensive promotes equitable postsecondary value*. Washington, DC: American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

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Introduction

Postsecondary education holds great potential in uplifting students, families, and communities through upward socioeconomic mobility, as greater educational attainment often leads to higher median annual earnings (Espinosa et al., 2019; Ma & Pender, 2023). As students enrolling in higher education are increasingly diverse, it is crucial that postsecondary institutions take responsibility in the upward mobility for all students, especially those who have been historically underserved, namely Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students.

For institutions to facilitate upward socioeconomic mobility, they need to transform through intentional realignment of institutional structures, culture, and business models to create a student experience that results in equitable student outcomes and postsecondary value. For transformation to occur, institutional capacity and commitment to equity are critical (Basavaraj et al., 2021). What's more, true institutional transformation that centers equity takes time to come to fruition and requires shared leadership with buy-in and commitment from across campus (Kezar et al., 2021). When it comes to transformation, there is no one-size-fits-all approach—institutions transform differently. For example, the transformation at a Hispanic-Serving Institution may look very different when compared with a Historically Black College and University, an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution, or a predominantly white institution with regard to their mission, goals, and institutional capacity.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) represents nearly 350 public universities, colleges, and systems united by a shared commitment to expand access, success, and opportunity for students of all backgrounds. In 2021, nearly half (48%) of the more than 3.2 million students enrolled at AASCU member institutions identified as people of color. On average, 40 percent of all students enrolled at AASCU member institutions received Pell Grants. As such, AASCU member institutions play a critical role in serving and uplifting historically underserved students enrolled in postsecondary education.

In 2020, AASCU received recognition from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as an Intermediary for Scale.¹ Through this support, AASCU began its Student Success Equity Intensive (SSEI), a multiyear program that aims to guide and support institutions through a transformational journey that helps close equity gaps for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students.² Participating AASCU member institutions engage in a cohort-based experience with their peers in a structured five-step process for which AASCU provides facilitation, tools, and connections to field experts. The overarching goal of SSEI is to catalyze institutional transformation to serve students equitably.

¹The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Intermediaries for Scale include organizations that demonstrated commitment and experience in supporting student-centered institutional transformation. For more information on Intermediaries for Scale, please visit <https://usprogram.gatesfoundation.org/-/media/usp/usp-resources/k12-resources/intermediaries-for-scale-fact-sheet--january-2020.pdf>.

This work builds upon the work of the Postsecondary Value Commission (PVC), a group founded in 2019 by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Consisting of 30 leaders in higher education, including AASCU's former president Mildred Garcia who served as co-chair, the PVC came together to answer the question "what is college worth?" by crafting a definition of postsecondary value, developing a way to measure postsecondary value, and developing a set of policy and practice recommendations designed to improve postsecondary value.³ Their charge resulted in the creation of the Postsecondary Value Framework (PVF), which includes a set of metrics or "thresholds" that measure the economic return of a student having attended college. In addition, the PVF includes noneconomic returns for both students and broader society. With the work of the PVC as a foundation, the Institute for Higher Education Policy created an interactive data tool called the Equitable Value Explorer (EVE) to help the field of higher education measure postsecondary value.

To this end, this paper seeks to explore how the Student Success Equity Intensive contributes to delivery of equitable postsecondary value through institutional transformation. To do so, the paper will answer the following questions:

- 1: *What institutional capacities were perceived as crucial (or of highest need) at institutions participating in SSEI to close equity gaps for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students?*
- 2: *How do student economic outcomes and EVE thresholds at SSEI-participating institutions compare? What variance do we see among minority-serving institutions (MSIs) that are SSEI participants?*
- 3: *What are the implications based on institutional capacities, student outcomes, and economic returns to improving equitable student success at regional comprehensive universities? In what ways can participation in SSEI increase an institution's capacity for equitable delivery of postsecondary value?*

² Transformation is defined as the realignment of an institution's structures, culture, and business model to create a student experience that results in dramatic and equitable increases in outcomes and educational value and eliminates race, ethnicity, and income as predictors of student success. For more information, please visit the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation website at <https://usprogram.gatesfoundation.org/what-we-do/postsecondary-success/transformation>.

³ For more information on the Postsecondary Value Commission, please visit <https://www.postsecondaryvalue.org>.

Background

AASCU's Student Success Equity Intensive

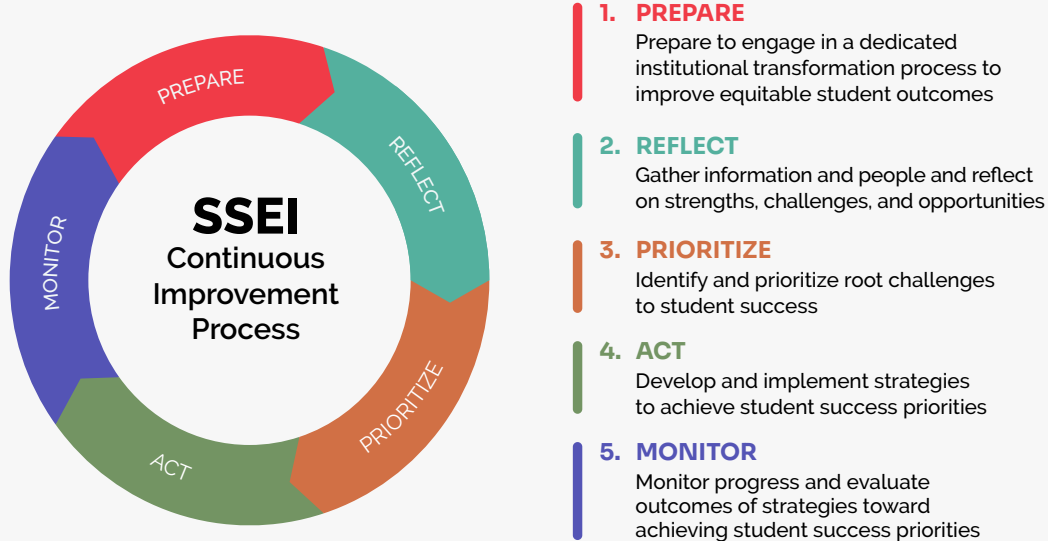
SSEI is a multiyear experience for public four-year institutions striving to accelerate equitable student success, and therefore advance equitable postsecondary value. The cohort experience accelerates transformation by providing specific and customized support that allows institutions to make data-informed decisions to close equity gaps on their campus. Participating institutions develop their own student success goals for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students, ensuring each institution's transformation journey helps the campus achieve individualized goals through tailored support.

The SSEI model consists of six key learning experiences, all of which align with the PVF's pipeline to equitable value: (1) cross-departmental collaboration; (2) equity-minded data discussions; (3) connection with other institutions to discuss real-time challenges; (4) learning and sharing best practices; (5) crafting meaningful stories to support case making for action; and (6) connecting with subject matter experts who provide technical assistance to institutions as they work toward their equity goals.

AASCU guides institutional teams participating in SSEI through a five-stage continuous improvement process (see Figure 1). The continuous improvement model provides institutions with the ability to utilize data and reflection to inform their process and make changes throughout the transformational journey that allow them to meet their overall goals. The five stages are as follows:

1. *Prepare*: AASCU prepares institutions by helping create and onboard transformation teams, providing necessary training and equipping teams to participate in a dedicated institutional transformation process to improve equitable student outcomes.
2. *Reflect*: Institutions gather information and key staff involved in student success work and reflect on strengths, challenges, and opportunities through AASCU-hosted sensemaking sessions.
3. *Prioritize*: Institutions identify and prioritize root challenges to student success on their campus.
4. *Act*: Institutions develop and implement strategies to achieve student success priorities.
5. *Monitor*: Institutions monitor progress and evaluate outcomes of strategies toward achieving student success priorities.

Figure 1: SSEI Continuous Improvement Process



Source: American Association of State Colleges and Universities

Institutional Transformation Assessment Capacities

All institutions participating in AASCU's SSEI are required to complete the Institutional Transformation Assessment (ITA), a process through which institutions reflect on their current student success efforts and the institutional structures in place to support these efforts. Completing the ITA helps institutions learn about their strengths and where improvements can be made, critical information needed to prioritize and make an actionable path toward equitable student success (Postsecondary ITA, n.d.).

The ITA was created utilizing evidence that demonstrates that an integrated approach to continuous improvement shows promise in supporting institutional transformation that leads to equitable student success. The ITA focuses on the following operating capacities as outlined by the Postsecondary ITA (n.d.), all of which put equity front and center (see Figure 2).

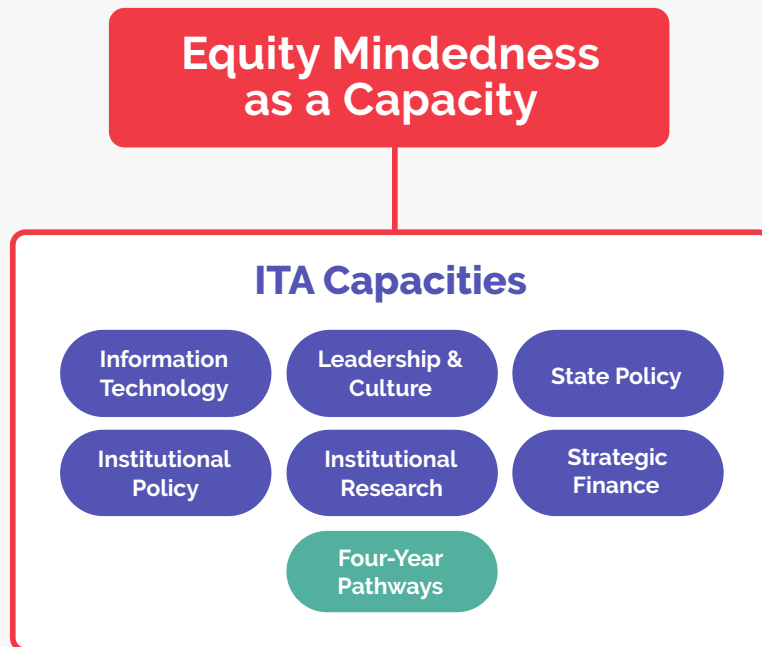
- **Information Technology (IT):** The institution's ability to provide institutional leadership, faculty, and advisers with tools and information they need to contribute to student success; support students, faculty, and staff with IT solutions; and develop and monitor meaningful student success initiatives.
- **Institutional Policy:** The institution's ability to change institutional policies, processes, and procedures to support, sustain, and institutionalize efforts to improve student success and close equity gaps.
- **Institutional Research:** The institution's ability to use inquiry, action research, data, and analytics to intentionally inform operational, tactical, and strategic accomplishment of its student success mission. This function—occurring both inside and outside of an institutional research office—provides timely, accurate, and actionable decision support to administrators, faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders.

- **Leadership and Culture:** The institution's ability to develop and lead the execution of a strategic agenda focused on student success.
- **State Policy:** The institution's ability to leverage existing state policies or develop and/or advocate for new evidence-based state policies (which could include, depending on local context, legislative policies, board policies, rules, and/or guidance documents) to support efforts to achieve equitable student success at scale.
- **Strategic Finance:** The institution's ability to strategically and effectively allocate and manage resources in support of the institution's vision, mission, goals, and priority initiatives.

In addition to these operating capacities, four-year pathways play a vital role in equitable student success.

- **Four-Year Pathways:** The institution's ability to systematically define student pathways (a student's journey through the institution, from access and enrollment to completion of their credential), help students choose a pathway, map pathways to students' end goals, keep students on a pathway, and ensure that students are learning.

Figure 2: Equity-Centered Capacities



Source: American Association of State Colleges and Universities

Methodology

This paper draws upon three primary data sources to examine the ways in which AASCU's SSEI helps institutions transform to deliver equitable postsecondary value: ITA institutional assessments, Equitable Value Explorer (EVE), and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Additional institutional characteristics were also integrated using AASCU's membership database.

Understanding ITA Institution-Specific Capacities

AASCU deployed the ITA to 33 institutions participating in SSEI as a means to support their equitable transformation journey. Completion of the ITA is a requirement for SSEI-participating institutions during the Reflect stage of the SSEI continuous improvement process, which spans 10 to 12 months, depending on institutional timelines. Institutions have three months in which to complete the ITA, allowing for greater opportunity to achieve higher response rates. Upon completion, each institution participates in sensemaking sessions with AASCU to discuss reflections and provide opinions about their institutional capacities related to student success. Through these sessions, institutional teams also come to a consensus on institutional challenges and prioritize the areas of need or improvement to support equitable transformation on their campus. The data utilized in this paper include ITA survey results and open-ended responses collected through sensemaking sessions.

Analyses of Student Outcomes and EVE Metrics

This paper utilizes institution-level data available through the Equitable Value Explorer for 33 institutions participating in SSEI to examine median earnings of former students within 10 years of starting college. The EVE data place equity at the fore and allow for analysis for the economic return of students broken out by income and gender. It also allows us to examine postsecondary value at institutions that serve higher shares of students of color. While EVE data reflect the outcomes of students prior to when institutions joined the SSEI program, they set a baseline and serve as a means to help measure progress in closing equity gaps in addition to widely used indicators, such as retention rates.

This paper focuses on the minimum economic return threshold ("T₀"), which measures whether students were better off financially having attended college than had they not attended (see Table 1). Given AASCU member institutions' commitment to serving students from historically underserved communities, this paper also examines the earnings mobility threshold ("T₃"), which utilizes research from Opportunity Insights⁴ to look at the upward economic mobility of college students. Analysis of EVE data is disaggregated by the SSEI institution's MSI status, rural-serving institution (RSI) status, and region, in addition to student body characteristics, including race and ethnicity demographics and Pell Grant recipient prevalence.

⁴For more information on Opportunity Insights, please visit <https://opportunityinsights.org/>.

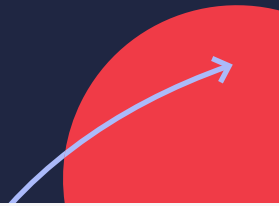


Table 1: Equitable Value Explorer Thresholds

| EVE Threshold | Description |
|------------------------------|--|
| T0 “Minimum Economic Return” | Students meet this threshold if they earn at least as much as a high school graduate plus enough to recoup their total net price within 10 years. |
| T1 “Earnings Premium” | Students meet this threshold if they reach at least the median earnings in their field of study, which accounts for expected variations in pay across fields. |
| T2 “Earnings Parity” | This threshold measures whether students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women meet the median earnings of their more advantaged peers (white students, high-income students, or men). |
| T3 “Earnings Mobility” | This threshold measures whether students earn enough to enter the fourth (upper-middle) income quintile regardless of field of study. |

Source: Threshold definitions are from the Postsecondary Value Commission’s 2021 report, *Equitable Value: Promoting Economic Mobility and Social Justice Through Postsecondary Education*.

Results

Institutional Characteristics

The institutions in this analysis represent 33 institutions in two cohorts participating in AASCU’s SSEI. The institutions are located throughout the nation, with 7 located in the Northeast region, 12 in the Southwest, 8 in the West, 5 in the Southeast, and 1 in a U.S. territory.⁵ Of the SSEI institutions, 15 are classified as RSIs and 30 are classified as regional comprehensive universities. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of the SSEI institutions meet the eligibility requirements to apply for federal designation and funding for minority-serving institutions (MSIs) (21 institutions). Among SSEI institutions, there were 15 Hispanic-Serving Institutions (45%), five Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (15%), three Historically Black Colleges and Universities (9%), one Native American-Serving Nontribal Institution (33%), and one Alaska Native or Native Hawaiian-Serving Institution (33%).

Collectively, the SSEI institutions enrolled more than 403,000 undergraduate students, of whom 51% identified as people of color and 41%, on average, received Pell Grants.

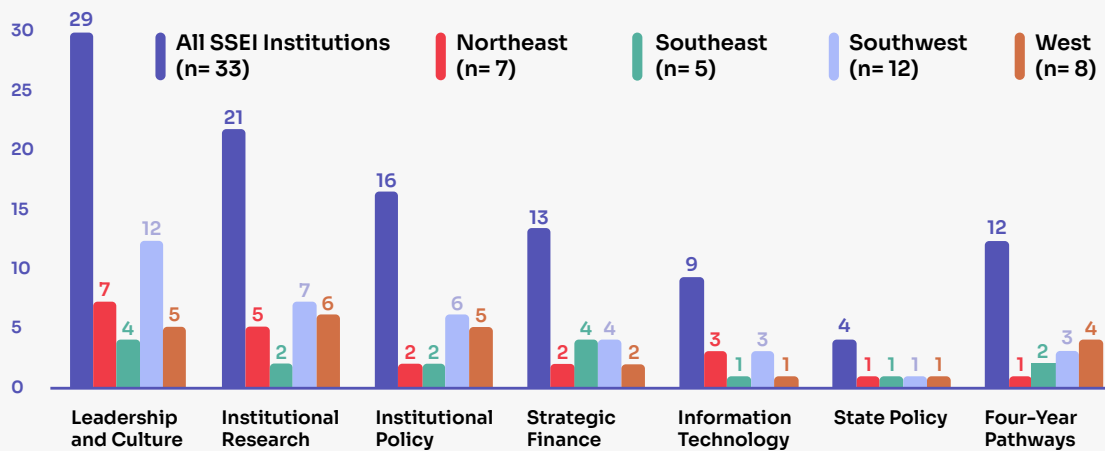
⁵ The SSEI institution located in one of the seven U.S. territories is included in the overview of the institutional characteristics and student demographics in this section, as well as the ITA assessments analysis. However, EVE data were only available for the 50 states and the District of Columbia. As such, this SSEI institution is not included in EVE data analysis.

Total undergraduate headcount at the SSEI institutions ranged from about 2,100 students to 58,130 students. If we consider cost, there is great range in net price or the price that students pay after grant aid is subtracted from the total cost of attendance, ranging from \$2,615 to \$20,976 per year, with an average of \$13,620.

ITA Institutional Capacities

Analysis of the ITA survey results revealed common themes across most SSEI institutions with regard to institutional capacities that they reported as critical in improving student success and closing equity gaps for historically underserved students. Nearly all (29) SSEI institutional teams reported that institutional leadership and culture was one of the most crucial institutional capacities needed to close equity gaps, followed by institutional research (21 institutions) and institutional policy (15 institutions) (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Number of SSEI Teams Who Reported ITA Institutional Capacity as Crucial to Close Equity Gaps

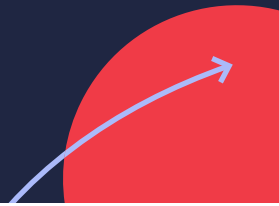


Source: Authors' analysis AASCU's SSEI institutions' ITA assessments.

Note: The "All SSEI Institutions" bar includes the SSEI institution located in the U.S. territory, which is not separately shown.

Leadership and Culture: All institutions located in the Southwest and Northeast indicated institutional leadership and culture as critical, compared with four out of five (80%) institutions in the Southeast and five of out eight (63%) institutions in the West regions. Key themes that emerged from the ITA sensemaking sessions related to leadership and culture to support equitable transformation include:

- a) *Need for shared understanding of student success and clarity around roles:* A consistent definition of student success needs to be shared across the entire campus, not only within the executive leadership team. Campus personnel need to familiarize themselves with the barriers that exist on campus for students and how their work impacts student success.



b) *Need for cross-campus collaboration, including faculty involvement in student success efforts:* Operating in siloed structures leads to less effective collaboration across different units and stakeholders, thus hindering the overall effectiveness of participating in student success initiatives. As such, cross-campus collaboration that includes individuals from all levels of the institution strengthens committed efforts related to equitable student success.

c) *Need for inclusive and equitable institutional culture, including incorporating student voice in decision-making processes:* Stability and consistency in leadership positions can help create an inclusive and equitable culture. Institutions should consider bringing in students to understand their perspectives and incorporate their feedback into decision-making processes.

d) *Need to allocate resources effectively:* Transparency in how an institution's resources are allocated across different divisions can help avoid misunderstanding among units and encourage collaboration.

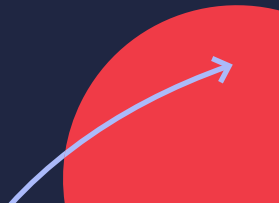
Institutional Research: Six out of eight (75%) of institutions located in the West, five out of seven (71%) institutions in the Northeast, and seven out of 12 (58%) Southwest institutions indicated that institutional research is crucial. The following themes emerged from sensemaking sessions related to data and institutional research:

a) *Data literacy and culture:* Lack of data literacy and interpretation skills, as well as mistrust in data, hinder cross-campus teams' ability to have data-related conversations. It is critical that communication, definitions, and use of data are consistent across the entire campus. A cross-campus data-informed culture provides institutional leaders with the critical insights needed to identify equity gaps and make insightful decisions to help close these gaps. Creating such a data-informed culture requires clear expectations for all faculty and staff around how to utilize data to inform policies, programs, services, and coursework.

b) *Data governance structure:* A robust data governance structure sets clear policies and procedures regarding data collection, access, and use. It also allows for greater trust in data and strengthens data integrity across the campus. Clear data governance structures also provide campus teams policies regarding data access, maintenance, and use, which are critical to utilizing data to identify areas where changes need to be made to close equity gaps.

Institutional Policy: Five out of eight (63%) institutions in the West, six out of 12 (50%) institutions in the Southwest, two out of five (40%) Northeast institutions, and two out of seven (29%) Southeast institutions selected institutional policy as a crucial institutional capacity in equitable student success. The following themes emerged from the sensemaking sessions:

a) *Need for policy review and communication:* Institutional policies should be reviewed and realigned to reflect the institution's vision and goals. Communication methods to facilitate policy review should be clear and to the point.



b) *Differing interpretation of policies:* Differences in the interpretation of institutional policies can vary by position, resulting in inequities for students of color. It is critical that policies are clear and that all faculty and staff understand how those policies translate into practice to ensure equitable implementation.

c) *Create student-centered, inclusive, and equitable approach to policy development:* Institutional policies should be student-centric, inclusive, and equitable. Language used should also be clear and easily understood by students, faculty, and staff to ensure that the intent of the policy is clear, addresses disparities, and promotes equitable outcomes for all students.

While leadership and culture, institutional research, and institutional policy were the most commonly cited operational capacities as crucial to close equity gaps and increase student success, several other common themes emerged across the other operational capacities. Those major themes are outlined below.

Strategic Finance:

a) *Utilize data to guide financial decisions:* Institutions should utilize data to guide financial decisions and resource allocations that are based upon student success priorities. Institutions can also identify indicators to track progress and return on investment for student success initiatives and make data-informed changes as needed to increase equitable student success.

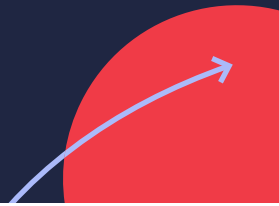
b) *Impact of institutional culture on resource allocation:* Senior institutional leadership plays a vital role in communicating its commitment to student success goals and how the institution is allocating its resources based on student needs. Clear communication from senior leaders can help faculty and staff understand why certain resource allocations are made and how these decisions align with the institution's equity and student success goals.

c) *Involve students and faculty in decision-making:* Incorporating student voices while making decisions related to resource allocation can lead to a more equity-centered allocation process. Involving faculty in the resource allocation process allows them to promote student needs, as they spend the most time with students, and helps amplify student needs in the decision-making process.

Information Technology:

a) *Increase clarity around campus technology and tools:* The use of technology tools can be inconsistent and limited across departments—especially among faculty if there is not enough buy-in for tools intended to support students. It is critical that institutions coordinate communication about existing technology available, identify barriers in technology use, and provide training to support faculty and staff on how to utilize the tools efficiently.

b) *Improve student access to technology:* At many institutions across the country, students lack access to broadband internet and other technology needed to



complete their coursework. This is especially true in rural areas. Engaging with students via surveys and interviews can influence institutional policies around access to technology should students indicate that they cannot access the internet and other necessary tools for their courses. Training on technology platforms utilized in classes, such as Blackboard and the Microsoft suite of applications, can assist peer mentors in their efforts to support fellow students.

State Policy:

a) *Strong presence and advocacy for student populations at the state level:* Institutional advocacy for students at the state level is crucial, especially for supporting historically underserved student populations and advancing equitable initiatives on campus.

b) *Need to improve focus on equal opportunities for all:* Advancing equal opportunities for all at the institutional level also requires state support. Working with local communities, local and state government officials, and local school districts can assist institutions seeking to advance these efforts.

c) *State-level funding models:* State-level funding models for postsecondary education vary from state to state. While some states may have performance-based funding models in which institutions get recognition based on student outcomes, other states do not require an institution reaching specified outcomes requirements for funding. State funding models directly impact how institutions can support their students through to success and should center equity to ensure that students from all backgrounds can succeed.

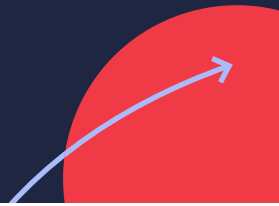
Four-Year Pathways: While not an institutional capacity from the ITA, four-year pathways play a crucial role in this process.

a) *Need to improve the student experience:* Students experience postsecondary education in different ways due to institutional and societal structures in place. As such, recognizing the diversity of student populations on a campus is critically important in creating inclusive and welcoming environments that can help ensure all students have a positive and supportive postsecondary experience.

b) *Recruitment of faculty and staff:* Research shows student persistence and outcomes improve when the faculty and staff on campus reflects the diversity of the student body (Bitar, Montague, & Ilano, 2022; Llamas, Nguyen, & Tran, 2021). Student success requires that students feel supported by faculty and staff and that they can see themselves reflected in all areas across campus.

Student Outcomes and EVE Metrics

Overall, every SSEI institution surpassed the Postsecondary Value Framework's Threshold 0 (T0), meaning that the median earnings of these students exceed those of the average high school graduate in their state, and that they earned back the cost that they paid for their college education. In other words, students from SSEI institutions are



better off financially having gone to college than not having gone to college. Looking at Threshold 3 (T3), median earnings of students at more than half of the SSEI institutions (19 institutions or 59%) surpassed T3. Said differently, students who attended these institutions earned enough to move into the upper-middle income quintile. This reveals the promise of SSEI institutions in uplifting students, their families, and communities.

Thresholds by Institutional Characteristics

Region

Threshold 0: All institutions' median earnings surpassed their state's T0, meaning they earned more than the average high school student in their state (see Table 2). The median earnings of students in the Southwest, on average, surpassed T0 by more than \$14,000, the most of any region.

Threshold 3: Three of the four regions represented by SSEI institutions surpassed T3 on average, meaning institutions in these regions had median student earnings high enough to put them in the top-two income quintiles. SSEI institutions in the Southwest had the largest gain, surpassing T3 by more than \$5,300, on average. SSEI institutions in the Northeast fell slightly below T3, where students' earnings were roughly \$1,600 below T3, on average.

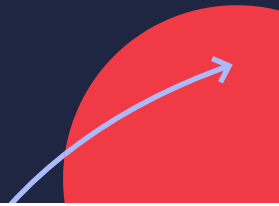
Table 2: Median Earnings for Thresholds 0 (T0) and 3 (T3), by Region

| Region | Average T0 Value | Average Median Earnings Relative to T0 | Percent of Institutions Whose Median Earnings Exceed T0 |
|------------------|------------------|--|---|
| Northeast (n=7) | \$44,189 | +\$12,013 | 100% |
| Southwest (n=10) | \$40,178 | +\$14,173 | 100% |
| West (n=8) | \$45,820 | +\$12,437 | 100% |
| Southeast (n=5) | \$38,823 | +\$9,987 | 100% |

| Region | Average T3 Value | Average Median Earnings Relative to T3 | Percent of Institutions Whose Median Earnings Exceed T3 |
|------------------|------------------|--|---|
| Northeast (n=7) | \$57,765 | -\$1,563 | 29% |
| Southwest (n=10) | \$48,943 | +\$5,327 | 80% |
| West (n=8) | \$53,374 | +\$4,883 | 63% |
| Southeast (n=5) | \$45,197 | +\$3,612 | 80% |

Source: AASCU analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and Equitable Value Explorer data.

Notes: The Equitable Value Explorer does not include the U.S. territories. As a result, one SSEI institution was not included in this analysis. | In some instances, institutions had missing data and were excluded from this table as a result. | The average values reflect the average T0 and T3 for the state in which the institution is located, aggregated into regions.



Minority-Serving Institution Status

Threshold 0: Students who attended SSEI institutions that were classified as MSIs exceeded T₀ by \$11,223, on average (see Table 3). Similarly, the median earnings of students from non-MSI SSEI institutions exceeded T₀ by \$14,729, on average. While the average amount that the median earnings of students at non-MSIs surpassed T₀ was higher than that of MSIs, the overall T₀ was higher at MSIs. As such, when accounting for the T₀ and the median earnings relative to T₀, students at MSIs and non-MSIs had similar median earnings 10 years after starting college.

Threshold 3: SSEI institutions that were MSIs exceeded T₃, on average, by nearly \$2,400. Similarly, non-MSIs, on average, exceeded T₃ by about \$2,117. While any upward economic mobility should be celebrated, the EVE data analysis reinforces previous research that shows MSIs do a better job than non-MSIs at propelling students up the socioeconomic ladder (Espinoso, Kelchen, & Taylor, 2018).

Table 3: Median Earnings for Thresholds 0 (T₀) and 3 (T₃), by Minority-Serving Institution Status

| MSI Status | Average T ₀ Value | Average Median Earnings Relative to T ₀ | Percent of Institutions Whose Median Earnings Exceed T ₀ |
|----------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| MSI (n=19) | \$42,978 | +\$11,223 | 100% |
| Not MSI (n=11) | \$40,872 | +\$14,729 | 100% |

| MSI Status | Average T ₃ Value | Average Median Earnings Relative to T ₃ | Percent of Institutions Whose Median Earnings Exceed T ₃ |
|----------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| MSI (n=19) | \$52,013 | +\$2,385 | 53% |
| Not MSI (n=11) | \$50,216 | +\$2,117 | 82% |

Source: AASCU analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and Equitable Value Explorer data.

Notes: The Equitable Value Explorer does not include the U.S. territories. As a result, one SSEI institution was not included in this analysis. | Institutions can meet the eligibility requirements for more than one MSI type. As such, institutions are not broken out by MSI type so as to not double count institutions in the analysis. | In some instances, institutions had missing data and were excluded from this table as a result.

Rural-Serving Institution Status

Threshold 0: Students who attended SSEI institutions classified as RSIs, on average, exceeded T₀ by roughly \$11,500 within 10 years of starting college (see Table 4). Students who attended SSEI institutions that were not RSIs exceeded the T₀ threshold, on average, by \$13,518.

Threshold 3: The median earnings of students at both RSIs and non-RSIs surpassed T₃. RSIs, on average, exceeded T₃ by \$2,161 and non-RSIs exceeded T₃ by \$4,469.

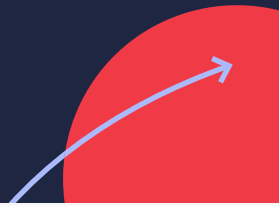


Table 4: Median Earnings for Thresholds T₀ (T₀) and 3 (T₃), by Rural-Serving Institution Status

| RSI Status | Average T ₀ Value | Average Median Earnings Relative to T ₀ | Percent of Institutions Whose Median Earnings Exceed T ₀ |
|----------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| RSI (n=15) | \$40,997 | +\$11,499 | 100% |
| Not RSI (n=15) | \$43,364 | +\$13,518 | 100% |

| RSI Status | Average T ₃ Value | Average Median Earnings Relative to T ₃ | Percent of Institutions Whose Median Earnings Exceed T ₃ |
|----------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| RSI (n=15) | \$50,335 | +\$2,161 | 60% |
| Not RSI (n=15) | \$52,331 | +\$4,469 | 67% |

Source: AASCU analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and Equitable Value Explorer data.

Notes: The Equitable Value Explorer does not include the U.S. territories. As a result, one SSEI institution was not included in this analysis. | In some instances, institutions had missing data and were excluded from this table as a result.

Thresholds by Student Characteristics

Race and Ethnicity

To understand the economic return of postsecondary education for students of color, we analyzed how SSEI institutions performed against T₀ and T₃ by the proportion of the student body who identified as people of color.⁶

Threshold 0: While all SSEI institutions surpassed T₀, the amount that students' median earnings exceeded the threshold was lower among institutions where a larger proportion of students identified as people of color (see Table 5). SSEI institutions where 20% or less of the student body identified as people of color far surpassed T₀. On average, these institutions exceeded T₀ by more than \$16,100. Among SSEI institutions where 81% to 100% of the students identified as people of color, median earnings exceeded T₀ by \$9,955, on average.

Threshold 3: Similar to what was observed with T₀, SSEI institutions where a smaller proportion of their student body identified as people of color exceeded T₃ by larger amounts. Institutions where 20% or less of their student body identified as people of color surpassed T₃ by roughly \$8,900, on average. Comparatively, SSEI institutions where 81% to 100% of their student body identified as people of color did not meet T₃ and fell, on average, \$586 below the threshold.

⁶ The term "people of color" includes those that identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and multiracial.

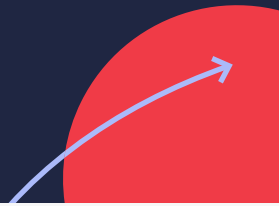


Table 5: Median Earnings for Thresholds 0 (T0) and 3 (T3), by Students' Race and Ethnicity

| Percent of Student Body Identifying as People of Color | Average T0 Value | Average Median Earnings Relative to T0 | Percent of Institutions Whose Median Earnings Exceed T0 |
|--|------------------|--|---|
| 20% or less (n=2) | \$42,026 | +\$16,109 | 100% |
| 21% to 40% (n=7) | \$41,037 | +\$13,188 | 100% |
| 41% to 60% (n=9) | \$43,313 | +\$14,283 | 100% |
| 61% to 80% (n=7) | \$44,172 | +\$10,342 | 100% |
| 81% to 100% (n=4) | \$40,005 | +\$9,955 | 100% |

| Percent of Student Body Identifying as People of Color | Average T3 Value | Average Median Earnings Relative to T3 | Percent of Institutions Whose Median Earnings Exceed T3 |
|--|------------------|--|---|
| 20% or less (n=2) | \$49,213 | +\$8,922 | 100% |
| 21% to 40% (n=7) | \$50,443 | +\$4,268 | 86% |
| 41% to 60% (n=9) | \$53,168 | +\$4,998 | 56% |
| 61% to 80% (n=7) | \$53,143 | +\$1,383 | 57% |
| 81% to 100% (n=4) | \$50,064 | -\$586 | 50% |

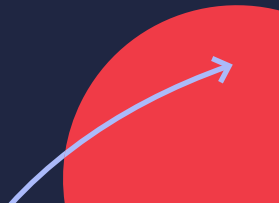
Source: AASCU analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and Equitable Value Explorer data.

Notes: The Equitable Value Explorer does not include the U.S. territories. As a result, one SSEI institution was not included in this analysis. | The term "people of color" includes those students who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and multiracial. | In some instances, institutions had missing data and were excluded from this table as a result.

Pell Grant

To understand the economic return of postsecondary education for Pell Grant recipients, we analyzed how SSEI institutions performed against T0 and T3 by the proportion of the student body who received Pell Grants.

Threshold 0: While all SSEI institutions surpassed T0, the amount that students' median earnings exceeded the threshold was lower among institutions where a larger proportion of students received Pell Grants (see Table 6). SSEI institutions where 20% or less of the student body received Pell Grants far surpassed T0—by more than \$18,100, on average. Among SSEI institutions where 61% to 80% of the students received Pell Grants, median earnings exceeded T0 by \$7,608, on average.



Threshold 3: Institutions where 20% or less of their student body received Pell Grants surpassed T₃ by roughly \$12,300, on average. Comparatively, SSEI institutions where larger shares of the student body received Pell Grants did not meet the threshold. Among SSEI institutions where 41% to 60% of students received Pell Grants, they fell, on average, \$83 below T₃. Among institutions where 61% to 80% of their students received Pell Grants, median earnings fell, on average, \$2,109 below T₃.

Table 6: Median Earnings for Thresholds 0 (T₀) and 3 (T₃), by Students' Pell Grant Recipient Status

| Percent of Student Body Who Received Pell Grants | Average T ₀ Value | Average Median Earnings Relative to T ₀ | Percent of Institutions Whose Median Earnings Exceed T ₀ |
|--|------------------------------|--|---|
| 20% or less (n=1) | \$40,498 | +\$18,135 | 100% |
| 21% to 40% (n=16) | \$42,641 | +\$14,014 | 100% |
| 41% to 60% (n=10) | \$42,727 | +\$11,006 | 100% |
| 61% to 80% (n=3) | \$38,361 | +\$7,608 | 100% |

| Percent of Student Body Who Received Pell Grants | Average T ₃ Value | Average Median Earnings Relative to T ₃ | Percent of Institutions Whose Median Earnings Exceed T ₃ |
|--|------------------------------|--|---|
| 20% or less (n=1) | \$46,348 | +\$12,284 | 100% |
| 21% to 40% (n=16) | \$50,986 | +5,896 | 81% |
| 41% to 60% (n=10) | \$53,360 | -\$83 | 40% |
| 61% to 80% (n=3) | \$48,078 | -\$2,109 | 33% |

Source: AASCU analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and Equitable Value Explorer data.

Notes: The Equitable Value Explorer does not include the U.S. territories. As a result, one SSEI institution was not included in this analysis. | In some instances, institutions had missing data and were excluded from this table as a result.

Discussion

As research shows, institutional capacities are the core elements that make up an institution's operational competency (Basavaraj et al., 2021). Strong capacity in each area and integration among them are necessary conditions for equitable, sustainable transformation. Participating SSEI institutions selected institutional leadership and culture, institutional research, and institutional policy as crucial to institutional transformation for equitable student success. To some extent, this implies that institutions rely heavily on these capacities as means to improve equitable student success. Without these capacities in place, among others, implementing student success initiatives is at risk. Capacities get institutions ready, willing, and able to undertake sustainable transformation.

Across the board, students attending SSEI institutions are better off financially having attended college than not attending at all. However, we must address differences that emerged in our analysis of postsecondary value across SSEI institutions, particularly as it relates to economic returns for students where larger proportions of students identified as people of color or were Pell Grant recipients.

When we look at economic outcomes through an equity lens, we must consider the profile of the student body enrolled in postsecondary education. While 43% of our nation's undergraduate students are from low-income backgrounds, when we look at the intersectionality of income and race, large differences emerge. More than half of all Black (60%), Indigenous (54%), and Latinx (53%) undergraduate students come from low-income families, compared with 34% of white students (Taylor & Turk, 2019). It is also important to note that research shows people of color earn less than their white peers even when they have the same levels of educational attainment (Espinosa et al., 2019). While higher education does hold promise in uplifting students and their families, it alone cannot erase the racial income gap that exists.

Reflecting on the Meaning of Institutional Success for Equitable Transformation

All institutions have room to improve and grow. As shown through the qualitative analysis in this paper, all institutional capacities either directly or indirectly impact equitable student success. We argue that identifying room for growth as it relates to institutional capacities helps institutions transform positively to support students equitably. For example, if a policy is hindering student success, identifying it in the first place can initiate the discussion that could lead to transformed policies.

Many factors affect student success and, hence, institutional success. One key factor affecting institutional success is institutional leadership and culture, which play a vital role in equitable transformation efforts (Barton & Larson, 2012). Improvements to all other capacity areas require leadership support through its allocation of resources and creating organizational structures to support equitable transformation. Institutional culture impacts every facet of an institution and correlates with leadership behavior (Cote, 2023). The

ITA assessment analysis in this paper reveals the three institutional capacity areas that SSEI participants determined were the most crucial in their institutional transformation toward equitable student success: leadership and culture, institutional research, and institutional policy. We urge institutional leaders to assess their institutional capacities and consider improving these areas by supporting the respective units with marshaling resources (financial, human, technical, time, and so forth) to cultivate a culture conducive to equitable transformation.

Looking Forward

Recommendations to improve postsecondary value at SSEI institutions

The value of a postsecondary degree has been evident in accomplishing upward economic mobility. But still, there is more work to be done to ensure students have the financial support to persist in college and achieve financial stability post-graduation. To address the challenge of financial instability for students and graduates, policymakers and institutional leaders must address college affordability and strategic resource allocation. Doing so requires expanded need-based aid, along with additional grants and emergency financial aid to cover student expenses.

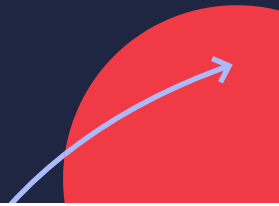
At federal and state levels: AASCU advocates for more need-based aid as one way to improve college access and completion to drive equitable postsecondary value for all students. Doubling the federal Pell Grant reduces net price, which would allow more institutions to offer greater economic return and equitable postsecondary value, particularly for students of color and poverty-affected students (Dancy, Garcia-Kendrick, & Cheng, 2023).

At the institutional level: Institutions must provide funds for student needs, supplies, and supplemental grants to cover housing and remaining expenses and develop innovative tuition policies to support affordability. Innovative policies, such as accelerated bachelor's degrees, often reduce the tuition that students pay, as their time to degree is shortened. Reducing costs to students increases the chances they will go on to meet a minimum economic return (Threshold 0) after finishing school. Also, programs like completion funds such as micro and emergency grants support students with additional funds to finish their degrees (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2022).

SSEI's Impact on Institutional Capacities

Recommendations to advance capacity areas for equitable transformation

Institutional capacities referenced in this paper relate to an institution's expected pace of transformation efforts. The senior leadership must collectively assess the capacities at various departmental units and marshal resources accordingly to improve the student experience. We provide the following recommendations to advance key capacity areas for equitable transformation.



First, institutional leadership must ensure that the institutional research or effectiveness office has the capacity to collect, merge, and disaggregate quantitative student-level data by race, ethnicity, and income. This will help ensure that institutions can identify equity gaps and work toward closing those gaps. Second, institutional leaders must identify change agents among faculty, staff, students, alums, administration, and community members to advance efforts to improve student success. Third, institutional leaders must be aware of operational change theories focusing on change processes and leadership skills, including shared leadership, to support the campus community. Fourth, institutional leaders must invest in current resources and commit to seeking new resources to support transformation efforts. Finally, the institution should leverage existing relationships with community stakeholders to better understand the institutional needs and provide necessary support to advance transformation efforts.

It is evident that the institutions participating in AASCU's Student Success Equity Intensive bring equitable postsecondary value to the students they serve. As they continue through the continuous improvement cyclic process, these institutions will strengthen the institutional capacity areas participants deemed as most crucial in advancing student success. It is our greatest hope and belief that with continued commitment to student success that centers equity, these institutions and future SSEI cohort institutions will provide even more equitable postsecondary value and further uplift their communities.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the many individuals who contributed to *Transforming at Scale: How AASCU's Student Success Equity Intensive Promotes Equitable Postsecondary Value* through consultation and review.

Jacquelyn Jones played an invaluable role in shaping the final paper through her guidance and review. Terry Brown, José Cabrales, and Charles Welch also provided thoughtful review.

The authors are grateful for the efforts of the rest of AASCU's student success team—Lynn Brabender, Randy Bumpers, Melissa Rivas, Andrés Quintanilla, and Nyala Watkins.

A special thank you to Sheden Alsaaty, Travis Abercrombie, Terry Bachmann, Jean Cibuzar, Kellee Edmonds, Liz Martin, and Nikki Lyon for their work on the grant proposal and management, and communications.

Finally, an enormous thank you to the incredible teams at the SSEI-participating institutions who work around the clock to bring equitable postsecondary value to their students, families, and communities.

AASCU extends our special thanks to the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) for its generous support of this paper.

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