

Transforming at Scale



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

Executive Summary

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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 →

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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. To do so, institutions must transform through realignment of institutional structures, culture, and business models. Institutional capacity and a campus-wide commitment to equity are critical if institutions are to achieve equitable student success and postsecondary value.

In 2020, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) received recognition and funding through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as an Intermediary for Scale.¹ Through this, AASCU launched its Student Success Equity Intensive (SSEI), a multiyear, cohort-based program that guides participating institutions through a transformational journey to help close equity gaps for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students. 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 and achieve equitable student success.

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, the PVC came together to craft a definition of postsecondary value, develop a way to measure postsecondary value, and develop a set of policy and practice recommendations designed to improve postsecondary value.² Their charge resulted in the creation of the Postsecondary Value Framework, which includes a set of metrics or “thresholds” that measure the economic return of a student having attended college. These thresholds and additional data have been made publicly available through the Equitable Value Explorer (EVE), an interactive data tool created by the Institute for Higher Education Policy.

This paper utilizes publicly available data through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and the EVE, coupled with SSEI’s Institutional Transformation Assessment (ITA) data, to examine how AASCU’s SSEI program contributes to the delivery of equitable postsecondary value through institutional transformation. Weaving these data together, we offer three key findings.

Institutional leadership and culture was reported as one of the most critical capacity areas needed to close equity gaps for historically underserved students. Nearly all SSEI teams reported in their ITA data sensemaking sessions that institutional leadership and culture was crucial in supporting institutional transformation. Improvements to all other

¹ 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>.

² For more information on the Postsecondary Value Commission, please visit <https://www.postsecondaryvalue.org>.

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. Two other capacity areas emerged as critical to this effort: institutional research and institutional policy. Institutional research helps institutions identify where equity gaps emerge and for whom. Utilizing data to inform decision-making processes and institutional policy can ensure that structures are in place to support historically underserved students through to success.

Overall, students graduating from SSEI institutions were better off financially having gone to college than not having gone at all. What's more, more than half of SSEI institutions propelled their students up the socioeconomic ladder. All SSEI institutions surpassed the minimum economic return threshold ("T₀"), meaning that the median earnings of these graduates exceeded those of the average high school graduate in their state. Over half (59%) of SSEI institutions surpassed the earnings mobility threshold ("T₃"), meaning that their graduates earned enough after graduation to move up to the upper-middle income quintile. This reveals the promise of SSEI institutions in uplifting students, their families, and communities.

While all SSEI institutions surpassed the threshold for minimum economic return, equity gaps remain. The amount that students' median earnings exceeded this threshold was lower among institutions where a larger proportion of students identified as people of color or were Pell Grant recipients. Institutions where less than 20% of the student body identified as people of color exceeded the minimum economic return threshold by roughly \$16,000. In contrast, institutions where 81% or more of their students identified as people of color surpassed the threshold by nearly \$10,000. The difference in median earnings was starker when we look at Pell Grant recipient status. Institutions where 20% or less of their student body received Pell Grants exceeded the minimum economic return threshold by roughly \$18,000—more than double the amount that institutions where at least 81% of their student body received Pell Grants exceeded the threshold (\$7,608).

It is important to note that the EVE data utilized in this paper represent median earnings of graduates 10 years after enrolling in postsecondary education, well before any of the SSEI institutions joined the program. That said, we are hopeful that the continuous improvement model of the SSEI program will help participating institutions discover where equity gaps emerge and utilize the supports through the SSEI program to work toward closing them. The data presented in this paper also reveal an important message: while higher education holds promise in uplifting students and families, it alone cannot erase the pervasive racial and economic differences that occur in this country.

Looking Ahead

The value of a postsecondary degree has been evident in accomplishing upward economic mobility. But still, there is more work to be done. All institutions have room to improve and grow, and 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. 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.

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 program, 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.

References

Espinosa, L.L., Turk, J. M., Taylor, M., & Chessman, H. M. (2019). *Race and ethnicity in higher education: A status report*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

Ma, J., & Pender, M. (2023). *Education pays 2023*. Washington, DC: College Board.