

Advancing Postsecondary Value:

Promising Practices & Policy Priorities
From AASCU Member Institutions

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Credit: Nevada State University

About

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 that represents the sector of over 500 regional public colleges, universities, and systems whose members share a learning- and teaching-centered culture, a historic commitment to serving today's students, 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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Funding for this paper was provided in part by Strada Education Foundation, a nonprofit organization committed to bridging the gap between education and employment. Strada focuses on ensuring that postsecondary learning leads to meaningful careers through employer alignment and systemic change. Through research, grantmaking, policy solutions, and strategic investments, Strada supports accessible, affordable education-to-employment pathways, especially for students facing the greatest barriers to opportunity.

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This publication was also made possible by funding from The Joyce Foundation, a private, nonpartisan philanthropy that invests in public policies and strategies to advance racial equity and economic mobility, through policy research, development, and advocacy, while also exploring evidence-informed solutions at the national and federal levels. The Joyce Foundation supports strategies that remove barriers for young people with a focus on students of color and those who disproportionately face structural barriers to social and economic progress.

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About the Postsecondary Value Commission

This paper builds on the [action agenda](#) of the Postsecondary Value Commission (PVC), a group of 30 higher education leaders brought together to answer the question "what is college worth?" The action agenda seeks to help institutional leaders, policymakers, students, and families answer key questions about postsecondary value and introduce a valued-centered lens to approach postsecondary decisions.

[Visit the PVC action agenda](#)

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Introduction

While postsecondary education serves as a fundamental driver of socioeconomic mobility, particularly for Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, first-generation, and low-income students, the value that graduates receive from their degrees continues to be unevenly distributed (Postsecondary Value Commission, 2021a; Lumina Foundation, 2019). Against this backdrop, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) seeks to understand and elevate the work of institutions that place postsecondary value at the center and implement promising practices to ensure all students benefit from their education. This paper investigates the promising practices within regional public universities (RPUs) that contribute to enhanced postsecondary value for all students as well as the role of policy in supporting these practices. RPUs are unique in many ways, including being vital contributors to the K–12 school system and aligning degree offerings with regional economic needs (Orphan & Wetherbee, 2025).

Building on AASCU's longstanding commitment to strengthening postsecondary value across RPUs, this multiphase project was guided by two central questions. Phase I of this project, supported by the Strada Education Foundation, aimed to answer the first guiding question: *What lessons or promising practices from regional public universities can be effectively adapted to enhance postsecondary value for graduates?* Through a comprehensive analysis of 50 promising practices gathered from leadership across a wide array of RPUs nationwide, this initial phase sought to identify adaptable strategies that RPUs could implement to enhance postsecondary value for their students.

Phase II of the project, supported by The Joyce Foundation, engaged AASCU regional public university leaders through surveys and interviews to answer the second guiding question: *How can institutional, state, or federal policymakers help more public colleges and universities scale the promising practices identified in Phase I?* This phase focused on identifying policies at various governance levels that can effectively support the scaling of value-enhancing practices, providing actionable insights for policymakers committed to advancing postsecondary value and student success.



Credit: Colorado State University Pueblo

Background

AASCU is uniquely positioned to answer the two guiding questions because AASCU's constellation of member institutions spans 46 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and Guam. The overwhelming majority (96%) of its member institutions are RPUs, and nearly half (45%) are rural-serving institutions. AASCU member institutions serve a student body that has traditionally been underserved in higher education. Of the more than 3.1 million undergraduate students enrolled at our member institutions, nearly half (47%) identify as people of color, and 40% receive Pell Grants, on average. More than one-third of AASCU member institutions meet the eligibility requirements to apply for federal designation and funding for at least one minority-serving institution type.

Member institutions comprise 90% of public four-year historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), 58% of public four-year Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), and 52% of public four-year Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institutions.

AASCU member institutions share a learning- and teaching-centered culture, a historic commitment to first-generation and low-income students, and a dedication to research and creative work that fuels regional economic growth and cultural vitality. AASCU supports its members in fulfilling their role as stewards of place, anchored in their local communities, advancing the public good, and fostering collaboration across differences to address pressing challenges. In addition, AASCU member institutions are deeply rooted in the places their students live and work, engaging a wide range of populations through campus and community partnerships.

AASCU's postsecondary value efforts began with the Postsecondary Value Commission (PVC), co-chaired by Dr. Sue Desmond-Hellmann, former CEO of the Gates Foundation, and Dr. Mildred Garcia, former AASCU president, who helped shape its vision and direction. When the PVC launched, it asked a simple but important question: *What is college worth?* The answer, as the commission revealed, depends on who a student is, where they attend, and what support they receive along the way. According to the commission's findings, not all students realize the same level of return on their postsecondary



Credit: Nevada State University

investment—women, students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students often face systemic barriers that limit their outcomes (Postsecondary Value Commission, 2021a). In 2021, the PVC released its [final report](#), which offered a new way to [measure value](#), a postsecondary value framework, and an [action agenda](#) outlining policies and practices that institutional leaders, federal policymakers, and state policymakers should implement to ensure all students benefit from postsecondary education and achieve economic and social mobility.

The PVC action agenda was based on the following key areas and strategic goals (Postsecondary Value Commission, 2021b)

1. Expanding access to increase postsecondary value
2. Removing affordability as an impediment to postsecondary value
3. Eliminating completion gaps and strengthening postcollege outcomes to ensure postsecondary value
4. Improving data to expose and address postsecondary value
5. Providing postsecondary value

When the PVC concluded its work, AASCU continued its commitment to developing a targeted strategy to engage AASCU member presidents and chancellors in a coordinated effort to further postsecondary value efforts by amplifying the PVC's action agenda. As a result, AASCU created the postsecondary value coordinating team and launched the Presidential Postsecondary Value Task Force, a group of presidents and chancellors from AASCU member institutions nationwide, to advance the commission's findings and recommendations by spotlighting campuses already implementing promising practices enhancing postsecondary value. Phase I of this project was born out of these intentions and afforded a deeper look at the practices in place. Phase II then examined the role of policy in advancing these efforts.

Credit: Nevada State University



Methodology

This project employed a multiphase approach, integrating two survey phases with in-depth interviews with university leaders and their campus teams, aiming to identify effective institutional practices for increasing postsecondary value and bridge these with policy implications to identify optimal approaches for scaling value-enhancing strategies.

Phase I

Sample Demographics and Institutional Characteristics

The Phase I promising practices survey and interviews engaged 77 RPU leaders, including 12 presidents and chancellors; 34 vice presidents; and 31 associate vice presidents, deans, faculty, and staff representing 40 member institutions. Men comprised 45% of participants, while women represented 55% of participating leaders.

The institutions that contributed promising practices reflect the diversity of AASCU's membership and regional public universities across the United States. More than half (52%) are designated as minority-serving institutions, and almost half (46%) serve rural communities. Participating campuses represented every region of the country, with 18% located in the West, 18% in the Southwest, 16% in the Northeast, 22% in the Midwest, 12% in the East, and 14% in the South. This broad representation underscores both the varied contexts in which RPUs operate and the shared commitment across regions to advancing student success and postsecondary value.

Data Collection and Analyses

Data collection of promising practices enhancing postsecondary value at RPUs began with an open call to presidents and chancellors of AASCU member institutions for submissions through an online survey, inviting campus leaders to share practices that enhanced value for their graduates. To reduce respondent burden and deepen context, semi-structured interviews were subsequently added, allowing executive leaders and their campus teams to engage through focused conversations rather than completing an extensive survey. This approach balanced efficient information capture with richer, practice-level insight. A thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data gathered from the interviews and open-ended items from the survey and using illustrative quotes from institutional leaders.

Promising Practices Online Survey: The online survey asked for concise details about each promising practice, including practice title and description, target student populations, intended outcomes and evidence to date, key campus or community or industry partners, and alignment with the PVC action agenda. The survey also included an opportunity for leaders to submit photos, video, or quotes related to the promising practice.



Credit: Elizabeth City State University

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with executive leaders, faculty, middle managers, and staff, and these interviews mirrored the structure of the online promising-practices survey. Each conversation gathered the same core information, including promising practice description, target populations, and implementation strategies, while allowing follow-up probes to clarify context, mechanisms, and results. Interviews also included tailored questions on how leaders define "postsecondary value" in their institutional context. This format preserved comparability with the survey while yielding richer detail on decision-making, institutional environments, and lessons learned.

Coding: All responses were coded by a single researcher using the NVivo qualitative analysis platform utilizing thematic analysis across interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses. The lead researcher focused on identifying and coding attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, strategies, tactics, and paradigms. In addition, the analysis examined the extent to which each phenomenon occurred and the frequency with which it recurred across different data sources, providing insight into both prevalence and consistency. Two independent analysts provided input to ensure the quality and consistency of coding.

The comprehensive analysis of these 50 practices established the basis for identifying strategies, tactics, and lessons that can be adapted across regional public universities. However, the Phase I findings also raised critical questions about scalability: What enables some institutions to successfully implement and sustain these practices while others face barriers? What role does policy play in either facilitating or hindering the adoption of promising practices across different institutional contexts? These questions formed the foundation for Phase II, which shifted focus from identifying effective practices to understanding the policy conditions necessary for scaling them.

Phase II

The second phase of this project used surveys and interviews to examine how policy—at the institutional, regional, state, and federal levels—can support or hinder efforts to scale promising practices that improve postsecondary value and student outcomes. Additionally, statistical analysis was conducted to assess policy survey data from close-ended questionnaire items.

Sample Demographics and Institutional Characteristics

The research team drew on insights from 13 presidents/chancellors and executive leaders who completed the survey and 10 in-depth interviews with senior leaders—nine presidents and one vice president. Two individuals participated in both components. Altogether, the study captured perspectives from leaders at 20 AASCU member institutions. The participant group reflected a range of identities, with near gender parity (11 men and 10 women) and the following racial and ethnic composition: 13 white, six African American, and two Latino/a leaders.

The sample includes leaders from institutions from across the South, Midwest, Southwest, West, East, and Northeast regions of the United States. It represents a range of institution types, including HBCUs, HSIs, predominantly Black institutions, and rural-serving institutions, offering a broad cross-section of leadership perspectives and varied institutional settings and regional contexts.

Data Collection and Research Design

Data collection of policy priorities at RPUs began with AASCU's research team developing and sharing a survey, via an email invitation, to presidents and chancellors from AASCU member institutions who participated in Phase I of this project through the sharing of promising practices. With a 35% response rate, the survey provided insight into which policies are most effective in helping institutions scale value-driven practices, as well as where additional support is needed. These findings informed follow-up interviews with selected presidents and chancellors to explore specific policy actions that could drive long-term, systemic change. All responses were kept confidential. A thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data gathered from the interviews and open-ended items from the survey.

Survey: To follow up on Phase I findings, the research team launched a survey targeting leaders from member institutions that submitted promising practices in Phase I. The survey consisted of 11 questions designed to connect practice to policy by identifying where supports and barriers occur across policy levels (institutional/board, university system, local, state, federal, other) and what actions would most enable scaling. Items included multiple-choice, multi-select, and open-ended prompts, with light branching and text-piping to reference each respondent's specific practice.

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with presidents, chancellors, and one vice president who, via the survey, indicated willingness to participate in a follow-up discussion. To broaden participation, a general invitation was also shared with AASCU presidents and chancellors interested in contributing input. The lead researcher scheduled and facilitated all sessions, which additionally included a representative from AASCU's government relations and policy analysis department to provide policy context and surface actionable implications. Interviews focused on linking institutional practices to policy environments across governance levels and clarifying supports, barriers, implementation details, and evidence of impact. A common protocol with standardized prompts and optional probes was used. Responses were documented and integrated with survey data for analysis.

Coding: Building on the approach used in Phase I, a single researcher conducted thematic coding using NVivo, analyzing both interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses. Attention remained on identifying patterns in attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, strategies, tactics, and paradigms. The analysis also considered how frequently these elements appeared and how consistently they surfaced across different data sources. The same two independent reviewers from Phase I provided feedback to ensure quality and consistency in the coding process.

The policy priorities shared by RPU leaders through the survey and interviews provided critical insights into the conditions necessary for scaling promising practices. Additionally, the qualitative data shed light on how leaders' perspectives on policy are shaped by broader environmental factors, such as legislative changes and budget constraints, as well as their views on the extent to which policy can influence or impact student success at the university level.

Credit: California State University Stanislaus



Results—Phase I

Phase I interviews and surveys provided valuable insights into the strategic goals and guiding principles employed by RPU leaders as they implemented promising practices enhancing postsecondary value. Participants shared clear and reflective accounts of both successful efforts and ongoing challenges. The sections that follow present these findings by first outlining broad strategies that shaped their overall direction, followed by specific tactics and practical approaches used in day-to-day implementation. This phase yielded several primary findings, along with key takeaways and lessons drawn from the experiences of RPU leaders.



Key Findings

1. The promising practices generated in Phase I are directly aligned with the five focus areas outlined in the 2021 Postsecondary Value Commission Action Agenda.
2. Successful implementation of promising practices that enhance value, prioritize students, workforce development, and community needs.
3. Several additional implementation tactics emerged as important across promising practices. These included strengthening college-going pipelines through K-12 partnerships, setting data-informed goals to enhance institutional accountability, reducing financial barriers for students, and prioritizing community needs through partnership and service efforts.

FINDING #1

Phase I Promising Practices Are Directly Aligned With the Five Focus Areas Outlined in the 2021 Postsecondary Value Commission Action Agenda

A key motivation for AASCU to continue the work of the PVC was the recognition that member institutions were already advancing the commission's recommendations. AASCU believed that the mission-driven nature of RPUs, the students they serve, and the urgency of delivering postsecondary value led many institutions to adopt strategies naturally aligned with the PVC's recommendations, before the publishing of the report. Analysis confirmed this alignment, revealing consistent patterns in how RPUs are implementing student-centered, value-enhancing practices.

Through the promising practices survey and subsequent interviews, the team identified 50 promising practices employed by RPUs to ensure postsecondary value for all students. The comprehensive analysis of these 50 practices established the basis for identifying strategies, tactics, and lessons that can be adapted across RPUs.

Each of the 50 promising practices was initially categorized by institutional leaders, who identified the PVC strategic focus area they believed best aligned with their initiative during the data collection process. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of promising practices across the five PVC strategic focus areas as identified by institutional leaders.

Table 1: Distribution of promising practices across the five PVC focus areas as identified by institutional leaders

PVC Five Focus Areas	Percentage of Promising Practices
Eliminating completion gaps and strengthening postcollege outcomes to ensure postsecondary value	38%
Expanding access to increase postsecondary value	21%
Providing postsecondary value	17%
Removing affordability as an impediment to postsecondary value	12%
Improving data to expose and address postsecondary value	12%

In addition, a secondary thematic analysis was conducted to validate those classifications. By reexamining each promising practice based on its implementation details and strategies used by institutional leaders rather than predefined categories, the research team confirmed strong alignment with the PVC recommendations.

Analyses identified six main program strategies for implementing promising practices based on their primary focus and objectives. Table 2 illustrates the alignment between the six program strategies and the five PVC focus areas. Some promising practices were categorized into more than one strategy.

Table 2: The alignment between the six program strategies and the five PVC focus areas

AASCU Member Institution Program Strategies	Postsecondary Value Commission Action Agenda Focus Areas
1. Expanding Access	1. Expanding access to increase postsecondary value
2. Removing Financial Barriers	2. Removing affordability as an impediment to postsecondary value
3. Recruitment & Enrollment	3. Expanding access to increase postsecondary value
4. Retention & Completion	4. Eliminating completion gaps and strengthening postcollege outcomes to ensure postsecondary value
5. Advancing Data Culture	5. Improving data to expose and address postsecondary value
6. Job Placement/Workforce Development	6. Providing postsecondary value

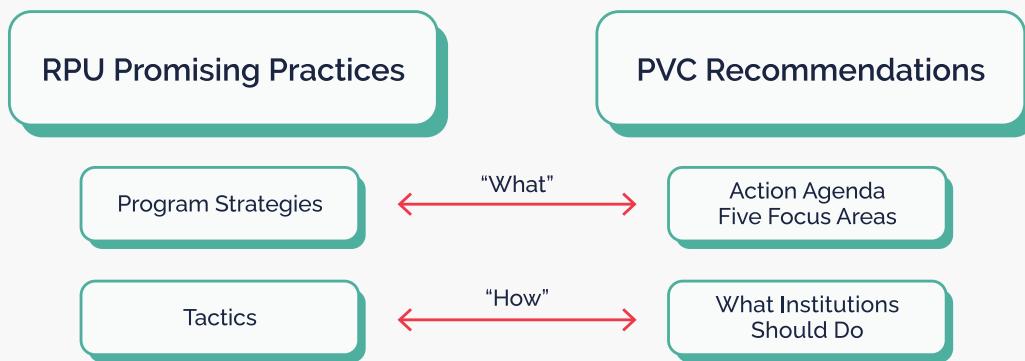
In addition to alignment at the strategic level, the analysis also revealed strong alignment between the PVC action agenda and the tactics implemented to effectively execute promising practices that enhance postsecondary value. Table 3 highlights selected elements of the PVC action agenda—specifically, those most relevant to the tactics examined in this paper.

Table 3 : PVC action agenda focus areas and what institutions should do to effectively enhance postsecondary value

PVC Action Agenda Focus Area	What Institutions Should Do
Expanding access to increase postsecondary value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement best practices in recruitment and develop robust partnerships with local schools, community colleges, and community organizations • Reduce barriers to enrollment for transfer students and improve credit recognition for students with transfer credits or college in high school credits
Removing affordability as an impediment to postsecondary value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocate institutional aid to help cover the full cost of attendance and eliminate unmet need • Address basic needs security for students and their families
Eliminating completion gaps and strengthening postcollege outcomes to ensure postsecondary value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer opportunities that expand students' minds and prepare them for the workforce • Bolster institutional supports, including robust, culturally responsive academic advising programs
Improving data to expose and address postsecondary value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage data assets • Develop a culture of data • Create systems dedicated to using data to identify and remedy gaps in enrollment, completion, and value
Providing postsecondary value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equip students with the skills and mindset to act responsibly and effectively in their workplaces and communities • Develop and implement detailed improvement plan to address identified gaps and monitor progress • Build strong local partnerships and contribute to the long-term well-being and development of the surrounding community

Furthermore, Figure 1 illustrates how the PVC recommendations, including the five focus areas and key elements of the action agenda, align with the strategies and tactics employed at RPIUs through promising practices.

Figure 1: The alignment between PVC recommendations and the strategies and tactics employed at RPUs through promising practices



These findings reinforce the PVC action agenda's relevance within the RPU context and highlight a shared commitment to advancing student success through value-driven strategies and tactics.

Credit: Nevada State University



FINDING #2

Successful Implementation of Promising Practices That Enhance Value and Prioritize Students, Workforce Development, and Community Needs

Prioritizing Students by Engaging in Intentional Student-Centered Design

Participants emphasized that prioritizing students by getting to know students—through data, listening sessions, and ongoing engagement—is the foundation for developing effective initiatives that enhance value and contribute to student success. As one institutional leader reflected on their university's successful initiatives focused nontraditional students, they emphasized the significance of this approach:

“If you are looking to impact post-traditional learners, then hearing from them about their needs, challenges, and opportunities—and then tailoring the program to those needs, challenges, and opportunities—is critical to the successful launch and sustainable growth of initiatives like [ours].” – Institutional Leader

In addition to seeking direct input from students, an executive from a southern regional board of higher education emphasized the responsibility of institutional leaders to reflect deeply on the composition and needs of their student body. This intentional awareness, they noted, is essential to designing programs and strategies that serve all students:

“Who are your students and what does their experience say about how you shape your initiatives? You want strategies that are going to work for all of your students, not just some of your students.” – Executive

Leaders also underscored the importance of challenging their own assumptions about what students need. They highlighted rethinking long-standing practices, stressing the importance of letting go of tradition and remaining open to change. As articulated by a provost:

“We have been around for 96 years so you can imagine that some of our processes are old; we need to be open to reviewing anything that is no longer working. We need to be more nimble and do that.” – Provost



Credit: University of Maryland Eastern Shore

An academic affairs senior executive from an HBCU recalled an initiative designed to support students on academic probation through a course aimed at helping them get back on track. Initially, the course featured faculty and staff as guest speakers. However, student feedback revealed that course participants found peer voices more relatable and impactful:

“ *After this change was made to have student panelists rather than staff, the [program] team saw that attendance at the student summit increased, resulting in an increase to student retention as well.” – Senior Executive*

Similarly, a vice chancellor for academic affairs shared that student input can significantly enhance the effectiveness of institutional strategies, including those related to academic facilities and classroom design:

“ *Faculty have always thought that our small class size was of primary importance to students. However, the design workshop with students revealed this to be a flawed assumption. A major complaint from students was being on a waitlist because classes would fill quickly ... and in some cases, forced students to look at options elsewhere, or worse, withdraw from college.” – Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs*

By intentionally engaging students as partners in decision-making, leaders and faculty can gain valuable insights into how institutional environments and practices impact learning and belonging, allowing for more holistic approaches to student learning and support. Integrating this approach into strategic planning was described by a provost as a significant accomplishment:

“ *We have approached this from a holistic perspective, the student being at the center of every conversation, looking at the student as a whole individual. We are proud of the fact that our [retention and graduation] plan addresses the full spectrum of the support structures our students need, whether it's about inclusion, academic needs, mental health counseling, whether it's about tutoring, whether it's about supplemental instruction, it's all in there.” – Provost*

Overall, participants consistently emphasized that moving from isolated interventions to coordinated, student-centered approaches, developed in partnership with students and aligned across academic and student affairs divisions, provides a more effective path for addressing student needs and ensuring their success.

Fostering Campuswide Shared Responsibility for Student Success

Fostering campuswide shared responsibility for student success was highlighted by leaders noting that shared responsibility across campus units was paramount to this work of student success. During a team interview with a rural-serving RPU, the provost underscored that collaboration with the vice president for student affairs extends beyond routine coordination—it is a strategic partnership central to their student success agenda. Both leaders described meeting regularly to align priorities, co-lead initiatives, and ensure that academic and student affairs operate as a unified front in supporting students:

“ *We recruit students, we retain students, we educate students, we graduate students and we place them. ... And that's where academics and student affairs work together. We really work closely together because the [the vice president for student affairs] and I share those things.” – Provost*



Credit: State University of New York Brockport

“ Leaders also underscored the importance of challenging their own assumptions about what students need [and] rethinking long-standing practices, stressing the importance of letting go of tradition and remaining open to change.

The program coordinator for the same institution expanded on the provost's remarks, emphasizing that cross-campus collaboration among faculty and staff enhances their ability to build trust with students:

“*We really tried to make this a campus collaborative model because we have to have that communication and trust with one another so that we can reflect that when we're meeting with our students and so that [students] can then trust us as well.” – Program Coordinator*

Participants also underscored the university president's role in setting clear expectations for shared responsibility in student success. One provost, reflecting on the achievements of a student success task force, highlighted that the president was instrumental in ensuring the task force included representatives from different offices and roles across campus, all of whom supported students in different capacities:

“*[The president] requested the convening of a student success task force. It was important for the task force to be comprised of academic and student success representatives such as faculty, enrollment management, and the different programs that work closely with students. This allowed for a thorough understanding of the services being offered to students and what was effective and what was ineffective, etc.” – Provost*

Similarly, an advancement executive underscored the importance of presidential endorsement in fostering a culture of shared responsibility for student success, noting that visible support from the president encourages broad campus investment in promising practices that enhance student success while promoting stewardship:

“*The most important element ... is a broad base of cross-divisional and cross-department support combined with presidential endorsement. The large number of individuals and departments committed to the success of this [promising practice] is vital to ensuring its stewardship and growth.” – Advancement Executive*

The connection between shared responsibility for student success and effective stewardship was illustrated by a faculty program supervisor. Facing capacity and budget limitations in a university program designed to support the retention and academic success of first-generation students, the supervisor partnered with colleagues across the university to develop a course and a software application to sustain and expand the program:

“*The question became how can we expand, grow this to serve more students? And there wasn't really much funding to grow and expand the program ... so I spoke to some colleagues and what came out of that discussion was how about, instead of paying mentors, they receive academic credit to be a mentor and enroll in a class? ... So with that same funding that we had before, we went from being able to serve 60 students to capacity to serve about 180 students a year, so we tripled our capacity in one year and we went from having eight mentors, [to having] 25 mentors in one year.” – Faculty Supervisor*

The faculty program supervisor highlighted that collaboration with the computer science department was also a key factor to the program's growth. A professor teaching a graduate-level software engineering course partnered with the program, tasking his students with developing a web-based application to partially automate the coach-mentee matching process. This tool, built around key matching criteria, saved the program staff hours of manual work. The partnership not only stretched limited resources but also engaged more students in supporting the mentor program, showing how shared responsibility can amplify impact, even in resource-constrained settings.

Securing Industry Partnerships and Prioritizing Workforce-Ready Programs

Campus teams emphasized the importance of aligning academic programs in collaboration with faculty and industry partners to create clear career pathways that demonstrate postsecondary value. A program director overseeing a university initiative to reenroll former students who did not completed their degrees described the importance of building strong connections between faculty and industry partners.

“ *Build collaboration with program faculty and industry partners to ensure curriculum and student support services are strategically curated for adult learners in preparation for meeting the needs of today's workforce.” – Program Director*

Reinforcing the importance of faculty engagement, one institution launched a faculty-led career readiness initiative that underscored the university's role in leading and serving as a bridge between faculty and industry. The director of career services at this institution described ensuring both academic and industry partners are actively involved in developing critical pathways that prepare students for career success:

“ *So we have at least one, sometimes up to three faculty members from every college representing their college on the [career initiative] faculty work group ... we've been [also] really intentional about trying to involve our employer partners in our work. And I developed an employer work group ... that's been really helpful too.” – Director of Career Services*

In addition, multiple leaders described embedding paid internships, stackable credentials, and other forms of work-based learning into degree pathways to strengthen career alignment, with some programs creating a bridge between students and industry partners to increase their opportunities for success upon graduation. As a provost described:

“ *It's no longer enough to support students through the completion of their degree, but to ask, how are we supporting students [to help them] get their first job, beyond resume writing and interview preparation? ... [We are] connecting students to industry partners, coaching students on how to network, how to market their skills, and how to feel comfortable in corporate or professional environments.” – Provost*

Across these efforts, institutional leaders reinforced postsecondary value as a central focus, recognizing it as a growing concern among students, families, and policymakers. As a department dean noted:

“ *Directly aligning education to employment also helps counter the growing distrust among the public who may believe a college degree is 'not worth it.'” – Department Dean*

In addition, leaders highlighted the importance of responding directly to state and regional labor shortages while ensuring that the emerging workforce reflects the demographic composition of the populations they serve. As one institutional leader described:

“ *We see the [career pipeline program] as a model that could be used in other professional domains to help diversify the workforce in key sectors, support students' motivation for degree attainment, and provide robust, cost-effective educational pathways [for high school students].” – Institutional Leader*

These partnerships and pipelines are deliberately structured so that students graduate with industry-recognized skills, direct work experience, and a clear entry point into stable jobs—further demonstrating how closely the work of RPUs aligns with the goals and strategies outlined in the PVC action agenda.

FINDING #3

Other Key Tactics

Several additional implementation tactics emerged as important across promising practices. These included strengthening college-going pipelines through K-12 partnerships, setting data-informed goals to enhance institutional accountability, reducing financial barriers for students, and prioritizing community needs through partnership and service efforts.

Strengthen College-Going Pipelines Through K-12 Partnerships

Participants emphasized that cultivating strong, trust-based partnerships with K-12 educators and administrators requires an intentional and sustained effort. They described effective tactics such as hosting recurring meetings with K-12 partners, approaching collaborations from a position of mutual respect rather than hierarchy, and maintaining open channels for dialogue and idea exchange. As one chief enrollment officer explained:

“Gone are the days of this high university collegiate bureaucratic hierarchy. No, local K-12 school staff and leaders have my cell number as [an executive officer of the university]. I can tell them, ‘You have my contact information, and you just call. If you need anything, you call and we’ll get you what you need or get you to the president, if necessary. We’ll get you to whoever you want to get to.’” – Chief Enrollment Officer

Set Data-Informed Goals to Ensure Accountability for Postsecondary Value

Executive leaders and their teams explained that analyzing disaggregated data to identify student success gaps enabled them to better understand the scope of disparities and establish measurable goals for improvement across student populations. Several leaders reported integrating enrollment trends, faculty feedback, and student survey results to identify specific barriers and redesign programs and services accordingly. One communications officer highlighted how findings from a student survey directly informed the university’s strategy for enhancing professional and career development opportunities:

“National data, anecdotal information from regional employers, and surveys of [our] graduates helped our steering committee identify our need for a university-wide plan to address professional and career development. We spent a year examining our Strategic Plan, Scorecards and Blueprints, internal and external data, and feedback from various groups regarding the success of our graduates.” – Communication Officer

Credit: Northern Arizona University



Remove Financial Obstacles for Students

Several leaders described prioritizing initiatives aimed at removing cost as a barrier to access and completion, including tuition guarantees, targeted scholarships, and revised aid packaging that ensured the lowest cost of attendance in the state. Others reported partnering with philanthropic organizations and industry partners, securing private and grant funding to close aid gaps, and leveraging work-study eligibility to expand financial support. Collectively, the efforts described required an intricate level of coordination across institutional units and external partners. A senior leader in the department of workforce development noted:

“This student aid project required significant collaboration between Student Financial Services and the key academic programs to collect all information needed in order to award funds to these students. Advancement staff were instrumental in obtaining additional grant funds to support nursing students. ... In addition, the placement sites were instrumental in the program’s success, as they provided the information and support necessary for proper tracking and reporting of work [study] hours.” – Senior Workforce Officer

Put Community Needs First Through Partnerships and Service

RPU leaders and their teams described their institutions as deeply embedded in, and fundamentally in service to, their communities, considering it a privilege to be a part of the community. Some described their strong community partnerships as essential for advancing initiatives that enhance postsecondary value, particularly—as described by a vice president for student affairs—when those partnerships are grounded in trust, reciprocity, and cultural awareness:

“As a higher education institution, know first-hand the people and culture of the community. We consider it a privilege to serve the people of [the region]. Our goals and ambitions are shared. In other words, we are working WITH our friends in [the community] in a mutually beneficial partnership. Listening and collaborating take priority over prescribing and dictating.” – Vice President for Student Affairs

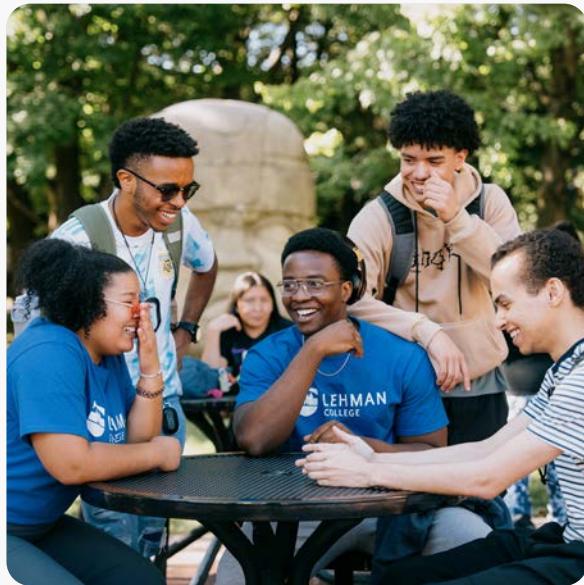
Soliciting key strategies and tactics from RPU leaders for the effective development and implementation of promising practices to enhance postsecondary value produced a wide range of insights, many grounded in principles of service to students and the broader community. Leaders and their teams also shared key takeaways and lessons learned from their experiences, often reflecting on both successful approaches and missteps, highlighting what they might have done differently and what practices they believe could benefit peer institutions. The following section presents these key takeaways, as identified by institutional leaders.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Before developing solutions, campus leaders advise their peers in similar roles to consider the following key takeaways and lessons learned.

Commit to Getting to Know Your Students and What Works for Them

"Look at who is at your table. Ever since we decided to adopt a student-centric model, we always make sure that we have students 'at the table.' It has really centered the student at [our university] instead of the process or the institution." – P18, Assistant Provost



Credit: City University of New York, Lehman College

Foster Campuswide Collaboration and Shared Responsibility for Student Success

"What sets [our university] apart is the culture of shared responsibility for student success. At [our university], faculty, staff, and administration see themselves as responsible for helping students complete their degrees. This sense of ownership extends across the university, with all executive sponsors deeply committed to the mission of supporting students through their educational journey." – Vice President for Enrollment Management

Serve Your Surrounding Community

"I would say take time to grow partnerships beyond your university. You have to leave your university to better serve community needs. This means we have to have, especially for Hispanic and Indigenous populations, ... a face-to-face approach." – Faculty Program Director

Partner Deeply With Faculty

"We thought it was very important to have the faculty perspective [in the development and implementation of the promising practice]. Department chairs also played an important role. ... So not only are [faculty] helping and supporting the students, but they have also developed into ambassadors for the institution and connecting students to the institution and going back to their departments and sharing with other faculty the resources that exist to support students." – Provost

Leadership Endorsement Is Essential

"The fact that we have and had support from our president and our cabinet all the way down from day one has been critical and has made things much easier in terms of implementation and expansion." – Associate Vice President/Dean of Students

Align Goals With Data



"Demonstrate value through data collection. From the beginning, building a process for collecting data is important." – Faculty Program Supervisor

Start Small for More Efficiency Later



"Start smaller than you think you need to. New concepts take time to gain traction, and initial projections may be overly ambitious. That slower start gave us time to refine messaging, adjust recruitment strategies, and identify the right student audience, ultimately helping the program grow more effectively." – System Leader

Build Capacity and Infrastructure First



"We could have easily let this program grow very fast if we wanted to, but we were very intentional in slowly building the program based on the infrastructure. Cautious growth is key." – Associate Vice President/Dean of Students

It Takes Time to Change Campus Culture



"I think my takeaway or tip for other schools would be patience that this kind of project is a culture change. We're trying to transform what career development looks like in higher ed, and it's a new model that people are going to have to get used to, and that takes years, but it is worth it." – Career Services Director

Results—Phase II

The policy-focused survey and interviews in Phase II yielded insights into how policies at different governance levels support or hinder the implementation and scaling of value-centered practices at RPUs. Findings revealed both the characteristics of effective policies and challenges in the current policy landscape for RPU executive leaders.

Institutional leaders provided candid perspectives of policy effectiveness across local, state, and federal levels, while articulating clear priorities for policymakers seeking to support scaling student success efforts. The following sections present these findings, beginning with broad patterns of policy effectiveness before exploring the specific themes that emerged from leader perspectives.



Credit: Nevada State University

Key Findings

1. Policies that support the scaling of value-centered promising practices are student-centered and found primarily at the institutional and university system levels.
2. State and federal policy play a supportive role in advancing student success.
3. Policy must align with the needs of today's students, recognize the distinct role of RPUs, and expand investment in student aid to support lasting student success.

FINDING #1

Policies That Support the Scaling of Value-Centered Promising Practices Are Student-Centered and Found Primarily at the Institutional and University System Levels

Student-Centered Policy Must Align With Student Needs

Findings from Phase I of the project indicated that ensuring postsecondary value is a central priority for RPUs. Consistent with this focus, RPU leaders emphasized that policy development—at the institutional, state, and federal levels—should be student-centered, with careful attention to its implications for academic program planning and career pathways. A point of friction raised by participants is the disconnect between well-intentioned state and federal policy mandates and the practical realities of degree requirements and career preparation. While discussing the implications of state policy directives at their institution, an institutional leader highlighted how reducing credit requirements at the state level can unintentionally counteract postsecondary value efforts for technical careers:

“[Degree requirement changes] get in the way of our ability to effectively help students navigate through their curriculum, even though it’s intended to be the opposite. It’s intended to get [students] done [faster], but it can actually hurt their education and their longer-term success. Success for us is not just, did you finish with your degree? It’s then, were you able to get the job that you’re interested in, or at least in the career that you were hopeful for, and are you successful there?” – Institutional Leader

Additionally, leaders highlighted the need for policymakers to develop a more accurate and current understanding of today’s students—particularly those attending RPUs—in order to design policies that effectively support their success. One institutional leader noted that policies that are most supportive are developed with active input from institutional leaders who understand the needs of their students and campuses:

“If we are talking about ... being able to shape the rules for engagement, then I would say the state and the [university] system [are] most supportive, because that’s when we are fully seated at the table.” – Institutional Leader

In addition, effective policies were described as those that accelerate institutions’ ability to support student success by removing barriers to degree completion, reflecting a sense of urgency to address students’ immediate needs and career aspirations:

“Being able to serve all our students effectively is what we want to do. And our students are complex in terms of what they bring with them to our institutional settings. And I can speak for [our university], and I feel like I can generalize across our [RPU] sector, we need to be able to best serve those students as effectively and quickly as we possibly can.” – Institutional Leader

Throughout the interviews, RPU leaders articulated a sustained and deliberate commitment to student outcomes, demonstrating a clear awareness of how policy decisions either support student progress or reinforce barriers that impede their success. They also emphasized the importance of having a voice in state and federal policy development to promote decisions that incorporate student needs and institutional realities. Collectively, their comments reflected a strong commitment to public service and a student-centered approach to leadership.

Institutional- and University System-Level Policies

Survey and interview findings revealed a slight hierarchy in institutional leaders' perceptions of policy effectiveness in advancing student success and postsecondary value. As illustrated in Table 4 institutional- and system-level policies were viewed as the most supportive for scaling and amplifying student success initiatives. These levels were also identified as presenting the fewest barriers to scaling initiatives.

Table 4: At what level does your institution receive the greatest support in scaling and amplifying student success strategies?

Level of Support	Frequency	Percentage
University system (e.g., CSU, CUNY, Texas A&M)	5	38%
Institutional/board of trustees/leadership	4	31%
State	3	23%
Federal	1	8%
Total	13	100%

Table 5: At what level does your institution face the majority of its policy barriers in scaling and amplifying student success more broadly?

Level of Majority Policy Barriers	Frequency	Percentage
State	4	31%
Other (please specify)	3	23%
Federal	2	15%
Local	2	15%
Institutional/board of trustees/leadership	1	8%
University system (e.g., CSU, CUNY, Texas A&M)	1	8%
Total	13	100%

In addition to RPU leaders identifying institutional- and university system-level policies as the most supportive levers for scaling student success strategies as seen in Table 5, they also consistently pointed to these levels as areas where they experience the fewest barriers, suggesting a greater degree of influence and autonomy in their roles as presidents and chancellors and greater empowerment to implement and expand promising practices within their institutions and systems, compared to navigating federal- or state-level constraints.

Survey findings also highlighted significant variations in policy impact across governance levels, prompting the research team to conduct follow-up interviews to better understand the nuanced experiences and perspectives of institutional leaders regarding policy barriers and facilitators.

The interviews provided rich qualitative context that both reinforced and expanded upon the survey findings, revealing specific insights that institutional leaders wanted to share with policymakers committed to meaningfully advancing student success and promising practices enhancing value. Consistent with the survey findings, interview findings indicated that local institutional and system-wide policies were perceived by some participating campus leaders as the most supportive in scaling student success strategies. As one institutional leader described:

"I think the greatest support we get is institutional. So, it really is our own efforts that are focused on the students. Not saying that other levels don't have contributions, certainly contributions towards the student success spectrum and our ability to do the good work there. But from our perspective, if I were to measure the impact on student success, different initiatives, different policies, I would say the ones that we drive that are basically our local policies and approaches, our initiatives, are the ones that really have the most impact, frankly." – Institutional Leader

Through thematic analysis of the qualitative responses, several policy characteristics emerged as particularly important. These included access-oriented admissions policies, articulation agreements with local community colleges to support transfer pathways, and policies that preserve institutional autonomy.

Access: Policies that ensure all students, including rural students and adult learners over the age of 25, can access the resources, technology, and support needed to enroll and succeed

Seamless Transfer Pathways: Policies that establish clear, enforceable articulation agreements between two- and four-year institutions, ensuring students do not lose credits and can complete bachelor's degrees on time.

Flexibility and Local Autonomy: Policies that set broad statewide goals, while allowing institutions the flexibility to tailor implementation to the unique needs of their student populations.

Affordability and Financial Access: Policies that expand need-based financial aid and reduce the cost burden for low-income and rural students.

These findings align with survey responses indicating that policies at institutional and system levels are viewed as the most supportive for advancing student success within institutions. In addition, during interviews, participants pointed to the importance of state and federal financial aid policies—particularly those that enhance affordability and access—for implementing and maintaining these efforts. These insights set the stage for the next section, which examines how state and federal policy environments impact institutional capacity for student success.

FINDING #2

State and Federal Policies Play a Supportive Role in Advancing Student Success

When asked which specific policies—at the institutional, regional, state, or federal level—have been most effective in supporting students from all backgrounds, a majority of participating presidents identified the state level as the most supportive. Leaders emphasized that need-based grant programs, in particular, can significantly reduce barriers to access and persistence:

“ *I will say at the state level, our state has some of the most amazing support for undergraduate students, through the [state] grant. So when you think about serving a low-income population, that policy, even though the state has some of the lowest college going rates in the United States, ... is incredibly helpful.” – Institutional Leader*

One executive leader underscored the importance of state- and system-wide policies that provide institutions with the flexibility to respond to local needs:

“ *The largest support for scaling student success at [our university] would be [at the] state level. We are part of the university system of [the state], and when you talk about our policies, we work together to provide an overarching sense of how to govern the universities from a system standpoint. And then from those policies, each individual institution ... all provide their own individual take on that policy.” – Executive Leader*

A different institutional leader highlighted a successful collaboration with state policymakers that led to the development of an academic program addressing a critical workforce shortage. The leader emphasized that this kind of sustained state support is essential for regional institutions:

“ *I think the thing for our [university] is the ability to work with state lawmakers to find pathways, whether just our base funding to support our operations or to invest in these types of programs that seem to meet the goals that the state has.” – Institutional Leader*

The interview findings suggest that when institutional leaders receive effective support from the state—through student aid, local autonomy, and collaborative policymaking—student success efforts are well-positioned to thrive.

Other participants redirected the conversation when discussing effective policy, expressing frustration with the rapidly shifting and often misaligned regulatory landscape at the state and federal levels. Several institutional leaders described the current federal policy environment as overly complex and difficult to navigate, noting that constant changes frequently require operational and financial adjustments and divert attention from core student-centered priorities:

“ *I probably spend 80% of my time putting out fires that are caused by things outside of our institution. ... So I think policymakers need to understand that ... all of us have our hearts focused in [thinking about ways to help our students], but because we have had to be so responsive to the chaos that's happening outside of our institutions, it has made it much more difficult for us to have the bandwidth to do that.” – Institutional Leader*

Highlighting the tangible impact of shifting federal policies, one institutional leader noted that such changes can jeopardize their tuition-free guarantee, place significant strain on the institutional budget, and compel difficult decisions about whether to maintain or eliminate programs:

“ *If the Pell Grant maximum goes down, that would mean that for us to keep our university's tuition-free guarantee, our institutional commitment has to go up, or we change the threshold of eligibility, or we just discontinue the program.” – Institutional Leader*

The same institutional leader further emphasized that frequent federal policy changes introduce significant operational instability for RPUs. They explained that adjusting to such shifts can take one to two years, disrupting long-term planning and complicating the institution's ability to prioritize postsecondary value efforts aimed at reducing affordability barriers for students:

“ *Anything that is uncertainty at the end of the day, that's what kills us because if [policymakers] want to do new rules, it's new rules, but every time there are new rules or uncertainty around them, then our confidence in our programs that were developed under the previous rules goes down and it creates problems for us.” – Institutional Leader*

Other leaders redirected the policy discussion, putting more emphasis on institutional culture and student-centered leadership. As one senior leader shared:

“ *When I think about the things that help our students succeed, so much of it is the practices that we've developed. And so I don't know that they're really policy-related. I'm thinking, for example, our peer mentoring program.” – Institutional Leader*

Continuing their response, the same leader shared what they believed was central to student success:

“ *I think it's that ethic of students first. If you're always thinking about students first, then you've got a greater chance of helping every student succeed. Most institutions are faculty-first institutions. I think if you shift the focus to students first, you've got a greater chance of figuring out what is exactly your student population and what does your particular student population need.” – Institutional Leader*

A similar sentiment was expressed by another institutional leader, who noted that student success is less about policy and more about a campus culture of support:

“ *So, when I said our board of trustees has been supportive of policies that support student success, what I'm basically saying is that we have a culture of support ... that removes barriers and supports academic success for our students. So it's less about a policy ... but more about the support that our board has for our mission.” – Institutional Leader*

Building on this perspective, the findings show that leaders view state policies as most effective when they are removing affordability barriers for students. While comprehensive financial aid is seen as essential to student success, leaders also emphasized that policy alone is insufficient. Some institutional leaders highlighted that strategies such as peer mentoring, alongside a student-first ethos, are essential complements to policy in driving student success.

FINDING #3

Policy Must Align With the Needs of Today's Students, Recognize the Distinct Role of RPUs, and Expand Investment in Student Aid to Support Lasting Student Success

A central objective of this project is for this paper to serve as a blueprint for institutional leaders interested in implementing promising practices that enhance value and policymakers seeking to more effectively support RPU leaders in advancing value-centered strategies at scale. In pursuit of this aim, AASCU determined it was important to ground the interview questions in the lived experiences and perspectives of RPU leaders. Accordingly, leaders were asked the following question during interviews: *What insights would you like policymakers to understand about the best ways to support your institution?* The following quotes from participating leaders offer insights for policymakers that illuminate both the support institutional leaders need and the conditions that enable postsecondary value work to flourish.



Credit: Murray State University (KY)

Policymaking Should Be Guided by Students' Lived Experiences:

“ I wish [policymakers] would pay more attention to the typical student experience and how they receive and are compelled to navigate through our higher education systems.” – Institutional Leader

“ I would like [policymakers] to understand how, first of all, how hard my students work. They're working. I don't know how many jobs outside of school, but so many of them are working jobs outside of the school. ... They're extraordinarily hardworking ... the vast majority of [students] live 20 miles, 30 miles from campus.” – Institutional Leader

Effective Policymaking Requires Insight From RPU Leaders:

“ I think [policymakers] need to be educated more about how higher education works to understand that this [policy] is not going to have the impact they want. If they'd asked us, we could have explained that to them.” – Institutional Leader

Regional Public Universities Require Distinct Policy Approaches:

“ We are not like others. ... [We have] a very unique collective mission as RPUs. And that unique mission also means that the students we serve have their own unique life challenges. So unlike a lot of the institutions we see in the news these days that are on the East coast and associated with Ivy, that's not us. And even our flagship institutions that have highly selective criteria and therefore a different subset of type of student that they serve and often able to devote a hundred percent of time to study and going to class instead of working to pay their way through or life challenges that are much less challenging unfortunately than some of our working students have. So just recognizing that the type of student we serve has their own set of unique challenges.” – Institutional Leader

Protect and Expand State and Federal Grant Aid

“ One of the greatest challenges, policy challenges, we face right now to student success is any policy that impacts access to the institution ... and any policy changes that impact funding are our greatest concern because our mission is to serve the underserved community and to help the new majority. These are the students who will be first-generation college students. These are the adult learners who have been in the workforce and have now gone back because they understand the impact of higher ed on salary and generational change. Anything that impacts student loan borrowing will impact the students that we are directly meant to serve.” – Institutional Leader

Regional and Statewide Solutions Start With Investing in RPUs

“ I would love policymakers really to understand that investing in [RPU] students is investing in the economic development of our region, and that when you invest in students and you invest in the institutions that serve students, you're actually providing this economic multiplier that's serving a much wider range. And I think if policymakers understood that, it would make the conversation so much easier.” – Institutional Leader

“ If I look at our governor ... and if I look at [their] biggest policy priorities ... there is one force in our state that helps to solve all of those things. And it's higher education. We are the thing that actually helps to solve those [policy priorities]. So if we're only looking at a reactive crisis and not spending the investment to actually diminish these [social problems] over time ... then I think we're missing out. ... I want policymakers to think more broadly about the long-term and make the investments that actually ultimately will make their jobs easier.” – Institutional Leader

Credit: Nevada State University



“

I would love policymakers really to understand that investing in [RPU] students is investing in the economic development of our region, and that when you invest in students and you invest in the institutions that serve students, you're actually providing this economic multiplier that's serving a much wider range.

– Institutional Leader



Credit: Elizabeth City State University (nC)

Discussion

Amid increasing public skepticism of higher education and growing demands for tangible evidence of its value, this study offers a comprehensive view of how RPU leaders enact their institutional missions. The findings highlight a sustained commitment to advancing student success, particularly for first-generation, low-income populations, not only through degree attainment but through pathways that lead to meaningful workforce participation and long-term socioeconomic mobility. For RPUs, ensuring postsecondary value for its students is intrinsic to their purpose. The findings from this project also provide a multifaceted view of how RPU leaders are advancing postsecondary value through promising practices and the policies that shape their impact. Leaders consistently emphasized that student success is grounded in intentional student-centered design, strong community partnerships, and institutional cultures that prioritize student success. This finding is consistent with other studies in the field (Basavaraj & Taylor, 2024; Muollo et al., 2018). At the same time, the analysis highlights tensions between what institutional leaders perceive as the most supportive levers—local and system-level policies and practices—and the complexity, instability, or limited influence of state and federal policies. Taken together, these insights underscore both the strengths of RPUs in driving student and community outcomes and the policy gaps that must be addressed to scale and sustain promising practices nationwide.

This project also highlights the importance of recognizing both the potential and the limitations of state and federal policies in addressing student success. The qualitative data underscored the importance of institutional values, mission alignment, and a deeply embedded culture of student-centered support as core drivers of impact. Participants frequently described these campus-level factors as equally, if not more, influential as state and federal policy mandates, highlighting the essential interplay between external policy environments and internal institutional commitment in achieving meaningful and sustainable student outcomes that drive value.

Recommendations to Advance Postsecondary Value

The message from RPU leaders in this study is clear: Advancing postsecondary value at scale requires placing students at the center of every decision, policy, and practice. For institutional leaders working to improve student outcomes and enhance postsecondary value, the study's findings highlight that progress is rooted in student-centered leadership and a strong commitment to serving local communities. *Student-centered* refers to approaches that prioritize student needs taking a holistic view that includes their academic, social, and mental health well-being (Hall & Weiss, 2025; Hallett et al., 2023). The institutional leaders in this study described student-centered practices as an inherent part of their work. This reflects the long-standing core mission of RPUs, which is to serve and support students. The following recommendations build on effective practices already underway at RPUs as described by participants in this study, offering a roadmap for institutional action and the policy support needed to expand its impact.



Credit: California State University Stanislaus

FOR INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS

Leverage the Postsecondary Value Commission (PVC) Action Agenda and Postsecondary Value Framework (PVF)

The PVC action agenda and the PVF offer a research-based structure for advancing postsecondary value and are closely aligned with many of the strategies and tactics identified in this study. Importantly, these tools provide a common language and cohesive framework that reflects and reinforces the work many RPUs are already doing on their campuses. By adopting and integrating the PVC frameworks and tools, institutions can strengthen value-driven efforts while positioning RPUs collectively as a sector with shared priorities, practices, and policy needs. AASCU's strategic planning readiness guidebook for campus leaders, *Making Value the Strategy: Infusing the Postsecondary Value Framework Into Strategic Planning*, can support integration of value into institutional planning processes.

Model Student-Centered Leadership Across the Institution

As articulated by institutional leaders in this study, presidents and senior leaders should consider setting the expectation that student success is a shared, campuswide responsibility. This includes fostering cross-functional collaboration in student success initiatives, creating meaningful opportunities for student engagement in institutional decision-making, and actively learning from students about which efforts are most effective in supporting their success.

Engage Local Communities to Strengthen Institutional Solutions

Institutions that aim to enhance postsecondary value should intentionally position themselves as workforce connectors to employers and trusted partners to local communities. Institutional leaders in this study underscored the need to dismantle the traditional "ivory tower" mindset by establishing strategic, mutually beneficial partnerships with local K-12 districts, industry partners, and community-based organizations. These collaborations are important for addressing institutional challenges, such as recruitment and enrollment, as well as regional needs that extend beyond campus boundaries, including workforce development and labor shortages in particular sectors.

Credit: California State University Stanislaus



Engage Students and Alumni as Partners in Driving Value

A student-centered approach also involves engaging students in meaningful dialogue about the broader concept of postsecondary value and soliciting alumni perspectives to inform and strengthen institutional efforts to deliver that value (Kezar, 2021). As emphasized by multiple leaders in this study, ensuring students graduate is no longer a sufficient measure of success. Regional public university leaders in this study are focused on preparing students for economic mobility and long-term job security after graduation. For guidance on how to leverage alumni perspectives into this work, see AASCU's [Leveraging Alumni Perspectives to Drive Value](#) tool kit.

FOR POLICYMAKERS

Policymaking Should Be Guided by Students' Lived Experiences

The findings indicate that RPU leaders perceive a disconnect between policy development and the lived experiences of university students. Participants described a range of challenges students face, including food and housing insecurity, multiple work obligations, family responsibilities, and long commutes, among others. These conditions are often overlooked in legislative processes, resulting in policies that lack alignment with student needs. Addressing this gap requires the intentional integration of student perspectives into policy design. Policymakers are encouraged to establish student advisory councils at state and federal levels, with representation from first-generation, low-income, and rural students enrolled at RPUs. Policymakers should also consider supporting institution-led research that captures student experiences through qualitative and quantitative methods and fund studies on alumni career and economic outcomes, particularly among RPU graduates. Regular site visits to RPUs by state and federal legislators may also be considered to promote direct engagement with students and a clearer understanding of their needs.

Effective Policymaking Requires Insight From RPU Leaders

Findings suggest that certain state-mandated policies, particularly ones governing degree and graduation requirements, may inadvertently impede the student success outcomes they are designed to achieve. This finding has important implications for policymakers who may not fully recognize how policy affects institutional capacity to implement and sustain promising practices delivering value. Future policy development should actively engage RPU leaders in both state and federal policymaking processes to ensure policy recommendations are guided by students' lived experiences and on-the-ground realities faced by RPUs. AASCU's [Public Policy Agenda](#) offers a valuable framework for elevating these voices and aligning policy priorities with the mission-driven work of regional public universities.

Reduce Policy Burden to Strengthen Institutional Effectiveness

Our findings align with AASCU's [Public Policy Agenda](#) that "burdensome, duplicative, non-germane, and ineffective regulations have proliferated at an alarming rate" (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2025a). The findings highlighted that institutional leaders spend disproportionate time responding to unforeseen external policy changes rather than focusing on strategic student success initiatives. This reactive stance represents a significant opportunity cost, diverting leadership attention and institutional resources away from proactive student-centered work. The data suggests that policy instability creates administrative burdens that can take institutions months or even years to navigate and resolve. Future policy development should consider not only the intended outcomes, but also the implementation burden and the cumulative effect of multiple policy initiatives on institutional operations.

Address Policy-Practice Gap Through Institutional Autonomy

The findings reveal a significant policy-practice gap that reflects broader tensions between accountability demands and institutional autonomy in higher education. RPU leaders in this study consistently identified local and system-level policies as most effective, suggesting that proximity to implementation context and engagement in the development process enhance policy utility. This pattern aligns with organizational theory, suggesting that policies developed closest to the point of service delivery tend to be more responsive to local conditions and constraints (Clark, 1986). The leaders' emphasis on flexibility and local autonomy indicates that effective policy frameworks should establish broad goals while allowing institutions sufficient autonomy to adapt strategies to their unique student populations and regional contexts.

Protect and Expand State and Federal Grant Aid

The overall findings underscore the critical role of state and federal policies related to grant aid in enabling institutions to support students who might not otherwise be able to afford college. Reliable and well-aligned resource allocation policies are foundational to maintaining access and advancing student success, particularly at institutions serving large numbers of low-income and first-generation students. Future policy development should expand federal and state support for regional public universities, which enroll and graduate large percentages of low-income, first-generation students; raise the Pell Grant maximum; and increase funding for low-resource campuses to reduce opportunity gaps and drive socioeconomic mobility.

Regional and Statewide Solutions Start With Investing in RPUs

The findings make a strong case for sustaining and expanding investment in RPUs. Representing 86% of the nation's public four-year institutions and enrolling 70% of university students, RPUs are essential to the U.S. higher education system. With an average in-state tuition of \$10,000, they provide a cost-effective alternative to more selective institutions and offer a meaningful return on investment for students and families (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2025b). In a 2024 survey of 1,828 alumni from AASCU member institutions, five- and 10-years postgraduation, 83% reported satisfaction with their current career, and 78% expected to surpass the income level of their childhood household. Among first-generation graduates, that number rose to 89%, underscoring RPUs' role in advancing economic mobility (Maldonado, 2025). Institutional leaders interviewed for this policy study echoed this impact and cited RPUs as key drivers of statewide educational and economic priorities, often while operating with constrained resources. Their perspectives point to the need for policies that support, rather than limit, the institutional capacity required to deliver on this mission.



Credit: Colorado State University

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Credit: Chicago State University (IL)



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Credit: Nevada State University

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We tell our students, and I tell them at student orientation: If they want to come to a place where they can get lost in the crowd and no one cares, this isn't a good fit for them because we're going to do all the things to support them. We follow up with students, and if they're not going to class, if they're not doing well, we want to know. And then we want to find out why. We really want students here to feel that they're cared for and that they matter because that's very important.”

-EXECUTIVE LEADER, REGIONAL PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

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