

# Equity Policy Academy

A CASE STUDY



# Prioritizing Equity

This brief tells the story of Lumina Foundation’s and states’ efforts to promote an equity agenda for higher education, featuring the 2015 Equity Policy Academy—which focused on improving educational equity for students from historically underserved groups—as a turning point. Based primarily on interviews with Lumina staff and key state leaders from the five states that participated in the Academy—Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Vermont, and Virginia—this story is designed to highlight the unique path each state took to prioritize equity in postsecondary attainment, and inspire ideas for leaders in other states.

“Before we got into the Equity Policy Academy, equity wasn’t something we had thought about a lot. The way we had talked about it before was just [to describe the state’s] changing demographics... [After the Academy], we went back and pulled all the data to see how severe the gaps were. And we called equity out not as a side note but as a more explicit imperative in the report.”

—Brandy Johnson, Michigan College Access Network



# A National Policy Agenda

Over the past several years, many factors have converged to persuade national and state leaders of the need to significantly increase residents' attainment of educational credentials beyond high school. Those factors include:



Economic and demographic changes—such as an increasing wage premium for earning a credential and substantial shifts in age, race/ethnicity and income among the population of many states—have highlighted the challenges that states face in building a skilled workforce.



Policymakers have raised concerns about the nation's ability to compete globally, given increasing education levels in many other countries.



Growing bipartisan agreement and increased messaging have drawn attention to the benefits of postsecondary education and the need to ensure that students not only enroll but also succeed in education and training beyond high school.



Public discussions about college affordability and rising loan debt have contributed to a feeling of urgency on this issue.

As these conversations have intensified, major initiatives funded by organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Helios Education Foundation, and Kresge Foundation—as well as intermediary organizations and initiatives such as Complete College America, the Community College Research Center, and Completion by Design—have offered support to states that are trying to improve students' access to and success in post-high school programs. These factors have helped align a diverse set of stakeholders around a national policy agenda that aims to increase educational attainment.

Lumina Foundation has played a key role in supporting this national attainment agenda. In 2009, Lumina launched an ambitious goal—known as Goal 2025—to encourage efforts to focus on improving educational attainment. Goal 2025 aspires to “increase the proportion of Americans with degrees, certificates and other high-quality credentials to 60 percent by 2025” (Lumina Foundation 2017a; Lumina Foundation 2009; Merisotis 2009). The goal's development was informed by projections of workforce needs at the national and state levels—projections made by Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce. Since Lumina set that national goal, many states have followed suit and set their own goals, often noting that the national attainment agenda inspired their efforts.

To help states consider how to increase attainment, Lumina Foundation developed a state policy agenda (Lumina Foundation 2017b). Although there are many important elements of this agenda, three critical factors have shaped Lumina's work: 1) the development of a

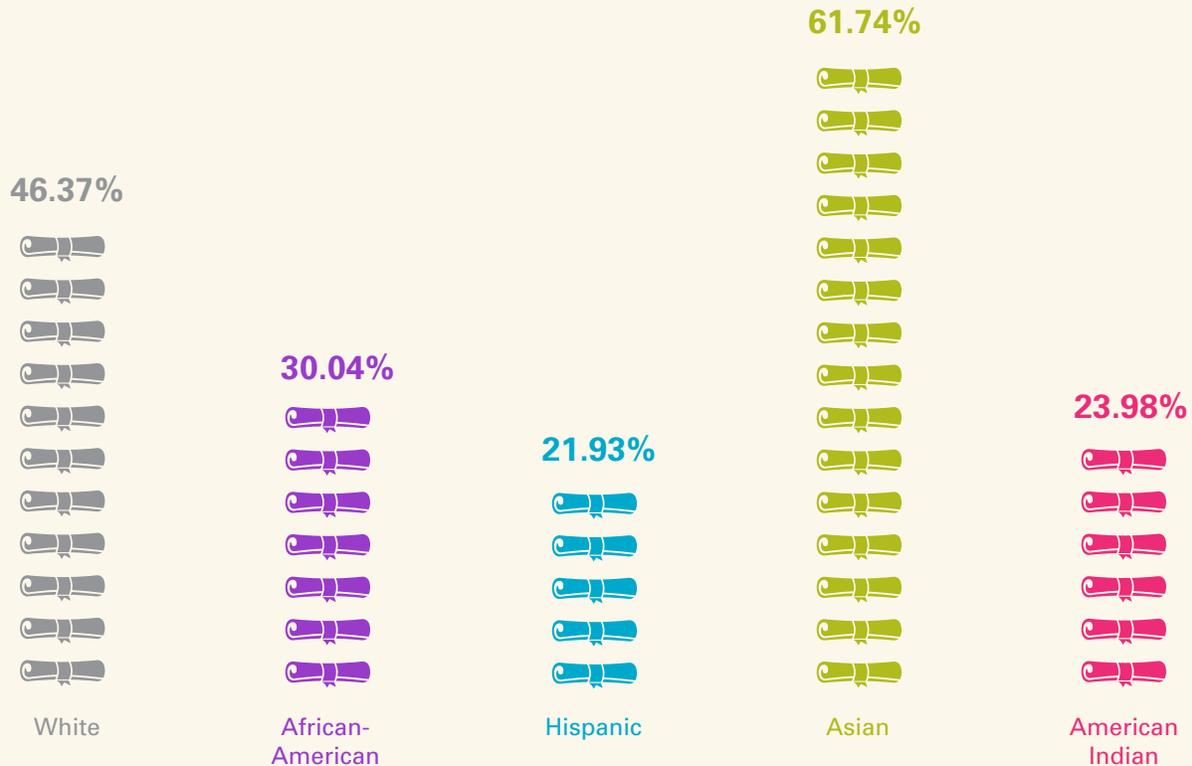
## What is Strategy Labs?

**Strategy Labs** is a resource and network for leaders and influencers in all 50 states to share research, data and professional experiences to advance postsecondary attainment so that, by 2025, 60 percent of Americans hold a degree or other high-quality credential. It enables state and system-level policymakers and higher education leaders to connect and collaborate with one another and with experts in the field to develop strategies to increase educational attainment. Strategy Labs also aims to “encourage peer learning and provide opportunities for on-request support from Lumina Foundation and its state policy partners.” (Strategy Labs 2015).

States can apply for support for nonpartisan, evidence-based policy expertise, such as:

- Experts and facilitators for meetings.
- Convening and facilitation.
- Peer learning engagements or multi-state discussions.
- Advisement of policymakers through testimony or briefings.
- Research such as data collection and analysis.

## Degree-Attainment Rates Among U.S. Adults (Ages 25-64), by Population Group



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014-16 American Community Survey PUMS files

national attainment goal and encouragement of statewide attainment goals; 2) the alignment of postsecondary funding with state attainment priorities, such as outcomes-based funding; and 3) an intentional focus on equity across student populations. Lumina’s Strategy Labs team works closely with states that are crafting policies to increase educational attainment. Lumina has emphasized that states—and the nation a whole—will not be able to increase attainment without an intense focus on equity and on strategies leading to success for all students, particularly those from underrepresented groups.

A primary purpose of Strategy Labs is to share state policies and practices through peer learning to advance the goal of increasing attainment nationally. To that end, Lumina Foundation has commissioned three publications that share various aspects of the work. This brief explains how Strategy Labs has worked to promote the last key element of the agenda—an intentional focus on equity across student populations, with an emphasis on members of historically underrepresented groups.

## The Importance of Educational Equity

Equity, as Lumina Foundation notes in its Equity Imperative, requires a “recognition of the need to eliminate disparities in educational outcomes of students from historically underserved and underrepresented populations” (Lumina Foundation 2017c). In the United States, gaps in educational attainment confront many demographic groups, including individuals whose parents did not attend college, those from lower-income backgrounds, those from rural areas, and more recently, those who are male. However, equity gaps in post-secondary attainment based on race and ethnicity are particularly significant. Adults who are white or Asian are much more likely than those who are African-American, Hispanic, or American Indian to have obtained a post-secondary degree. Census figures show that 62 percent

of Asians and 46 percent of whites, ages 25-64, hold at least an associate degree; the same is true of only 30 percent of African-Americans, 22 percent of Hispanics, and 24 percent of American Indians in that age group.

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Moreover, a focus on equity can make the many benefits of higher education accessible to Americans who are part of under-represented minority groups. Many individuals from these groups recognize the importance of higher education. For instance, 73 percent of African-Americans and 72 percent of Hispanics say it is very important to

increase the number of Americans who hold a postsecondary credential, compared with 56 percent of whites (Lumina Foundation 2017d). Nonetheless, without significant changes in education policy and practice, postsecondary attainment is unlikely to increase for historically underserved groups.

## Promoting an Equity Agenda for Higher Education Policy

Attention to educational equity based on race and ethnicity has long been a part of Lumina's work. Since its first *A Stronger Nation through Higher Education* report, in 2009, Lumina has tracked the nation's progress toward that 60 percent attainment goal by looking at race and ethnicity. Following the release of a new strategic plan in 2013, the Foundation has made educational equity an explicit focus of its work.

## Strengthening Our Nation

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**Equity and excellence must be co-driving forces to meet the needs of students in a 21st century economy and society.**



# Lumina's Equity Imperative

In its *Strategic Plan 2013-2016*, Lumina made a strong case for emphasizing equity in efforts to increase postsecondary attainment. As the plan explains:

Not only will the nation fall short of the attainment levels it needs unless these gaps are closed, the fact that they exist must be rejected on moral grounds given the increasingly severe consequences of not obtaining a postsecondary credential. America's democracy and its economy are ill-served by a system that fails to tap all of our talent. At Lumina, we will redouble our efforts to close these gaps through our work, and we call upon all our partners and stakeholders to do the same (Lumina Foundation 2013).

This resounding call put the Foundation in the forefront of efforts to reduce educational inequity in the United States. The explicit emphasis on equity in the strategic plan stimulated conversations within Lumina about how to define equity and how best to address this focus in its work. The Foundation hired a consultant, Estela Mara Bensimon, director of the Center for Urban Education (CUE) at University of Southern California, to examine the ways in which Lumina staff members thought and communicated about educational equity. This work, along with many internal conversations, helped the Foundation decide to focus intently on the needs of underrepresented minority students. While not denying that equity gaps exist based on factors such as gender and socioeconomic status, Lumina recognized that its decision to break out race and ethnicity in the *Stronger*

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*Nation* reports underscored the importance its leaders placed on combatting educational attainment gaps for African-Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians.

As these conversations were taking place, the work to implement Lumina's new strategic plan was also in motion. Susan Johnson, a strategy officer who had moved into the new position of director of equity and inclusion, was charged with identifying areas within the Foundation's strategy that could dovetail with its Equity Imperative. One such area was state policy, in which the strategy director and officers, as Johnson puts it, "really took up the banner around how ... to embed equity into the work."

Foundation staff saw state policy as crucial to increasing educational equity because of the states' central role in higher education governance. As Lumina President Jamie Merisotis noted in a speech to state policymakers:

We need to find better ways to serve real students, millions of whom face real struggles as they strive for college success. There's no top-down method for this redesign process, no one-size-fits-all way to close those equity gaps. Each state—really, the various cities, regions and locales within each state—must craft their own solutions, tailored to fit their own specific needs and circumstances (Merisotis 2015).

At the very outset of their work with states, Lumina staff members chose to explicitly link equity with attainment. They said that, for any state to have an attainment goal deemed "strong," that goal must include a commitment to close postsecondary attainment gaps for underserved students. Including an equity component in these goals helps policymakers communicate about the importance of equity concerns, approach policy development and assessment from an equity perspective, and identify actions that should be taken to reduce attainment gaps (Lumina Foundation and Center for Urban Education 2015).

## The Equity Policy Academy

Lumina's work on equity and state policy reached a turning point in 2015 with the decision to make equity the focus of the first Strategy Labs State Policy Academy, an event designed to help states develop strong higher education attainment goals. Foundation and Strategy Labs staff saw that several states lacked only one criterion for meeting Lumina's standards for an attainment goal—the equity component—and decided to hold a convening to help states find ways to incorporate equity into their plans. Lumina then reached out to the leaders in each of these states, inviting them to apply to participate and assemble a state team to attend the academy.

States that participated in the academy were also eligible for \$50,000 grants to implement their equity planning. This grant, while not large, provided a useful incentive. As one state team member explained, "In state government, you don't usually have flexible money, so having that resource—that technical assistance, support, and money—was really helpful." In addition, Foundation and Strategy Labs staff believed that state teams would obtain compelling information at the academy that could help them understand and articulate the value of making equity a central part of their state attainment goal.

Five states—Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Vermont, and Virginia—assembled five-member teams to attend the academy. Lumina and Strategy Labs staff established guidelines for these teams to ensure that the appropriate players were involved. Team members included governors’ staff, legislators and legislative staff, and state higher education officials, as well as leaders in workforce and economic development, business, and the nonprofit sector. The goal was to include individuals who were empowered to make decisions about state higher education policy and who could serve as influencers.

The two-day academy—held April 30-May 1, 2015, in Chicago—focused on providing the state teams with the information and support they would need to undertake this challenging effort. Policy experts from CUE at the University of Southern California prepared a guide to help the state teams develop plans of action that included equity in their state’s higher education attainment goal. A customized version of that guide was provided to each state. State teams also heard insights from panelists who had worked through similar efforts to address attainment gaps in their own states; the teams then drew upon those insights in their planning. Substantial time was allocated for teams to actually work on this planning during the academy—an important factor for

participants. “I would say that maybe the most valuable part was that team time to have the five of us talk together, reflect on what we heard, and then reflect on how it would change our thinking,” one member of a state team noted.

For Lumina, the Equity Policy Academy served as a test case for the feasibility of promoting the discussion of equity—particularly race-based equity—in higher education. Many state policy-makers are more comfortable discussing equity in terms of socioeconomic status rather than race, but the academy increased confidence among Lumina staff that they could change approaches to equity through information and advocacy.

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## History of Strategy Labs

The concept of Strategy Labs developed gradually, beginning with Lumina Foundation’s Productivity Grant program in 2009. The program emerged from Lumina’s first strategic plan (2009-12). Designed to extend support to the 11 states that had applied for Lumina Productivity Grants, Strategy Labs focused on offering research, promising practices and advice aligned to Lumina’s “Four Steps to Finishing First” agenda. This state policy agenda emerged from the work within the productivity states and focused on four policy areas: institutional incentives (outcomes-based funding), student incentives (financial aid and affordability), innovation and technology and business practices to promote savings (Lumina Foundation 2011).

As the process for providing customized state support developed, Lumina wanted to continue the peer learning conversation beyond those initial 11 states. By 2014, Lumina was offering the flexible, evidence-based and nonpartisan Strategy Labs resources to all 50 states (see Page 2, “What is Strategy Labs?”). Strategy Labs’ support evolved to focus on Lumina’s 2013-2017 state policy agenda, which included a range of policy actions grouped under three overarching objectives each state should have for its post-secondary system: improved student outcomes, aligned investments and smarter pathways. The Strategy Labs team now supports states to consider and adopt any part of Lumina’s 2017-2020 state policy agenda, including setting a statewide attainment goal, aligning finances (both institutional and student) to that goal and supporting multiple lower-priced pathways to credentials.

# Attainment Goals



## Michigan

Increase the percentage of Michigan residents with degrees or postsecondary certificates to **60 percent** by the year 2025.<sup>1</sup>



## Minnesota

Working to increase the percentage of Minnesotans ages 25-44 who have attained a postsecondary certificate or degree to **70 percent** by 2025.



## Ohio

**65 percent** of Ohioans, ages 25-64, will have a degree, certificate or other postsecondary credential of value in the workplace by 2025.



## Vermont

By the year 2025, **70 percent** of Vermont's working-age adults will possess a postsecondary degree or credential of value.



## Virginia

The Virginia Plan for Higher Education's objective is to become the best-educated state by 2030. The estimated rate to reach best-educated status by 2030 is **70 percent** of its working population (ages 25-64) with a workforce credential or degree.

## Equity and State Higher Education Policy

Strategy Labs and CUE staff provided support for the five participating states as they implemented the work plans they had developed following the academy. The planning guide that CUE developed for the academy highlights key strategies for state policymakers interested in embedding equity in their plans for increasing attainment. Using lessons drawn from interviews with leaders from Colorado, Indiana, Maryland, and Texas (states that had already included a commitment to equity in their attainment goals), the guide provides a framework for state policymakers as they tackle the often-difficult conversation about equity and underrepresented minority groups (Lumina Foundation and Center for Urban Education 2015). The subsequent work of the five states that participated in the academy reflects the importance of these strategies.

## Know Your State

Each state is unique in the demographic characteristics of its population, its economic sectors, and its key industries. The first steps in embedding equity into a state higher education attainment goal are to investigate the demographic and economic situation in that state, identify underserved populations and high-need occupations, and assess how attainment gaps limit the economic prospects of the state and its residents. As the CUE guide explains, "Effective state attainment goals are based on an understanding of for whom and by how much higher education access and success must improve" (Lumina Foundation and Center for Urban Education 2015).

The process of disaggregating data can build awareness about the importance of an equity perspective in achieving a state's postsecondary attainment goal. In Michigan, for example, the focus prior to the academy had been on the decline in state population, particularly among the state's young people. After the academy, the workgroup reviewed state data disaggregated by race, income, and region and identified several gaps in educational attainment. Virginia, too, gained new insight into equity gaps by closely examining its data after attending the academy.

<sup>1</sup> Michigan's goal has not yet been codified or formalized in a way that influences policies and programs.

Similarly, policymakers in Ohio came to recognize the need to examine equity gaps at local and regional levels rather than just statewide.

A key point raised at the academy was that definitions of underserved populations differ from state to state. For example, Minnesota has used its robust state data to identify substantial attainment gaps across black, Hispanic and American Indian populations within the state (Minnesota Office of Higher Education 2016). Michigan and Ohio, on the other hand, have found it useful to examine differences in higher education attainment by geographical region and across rural/urban divides. Vermont, which has a very small nonwhite population, also emphasizes equity for first-generation and low-income students (Vermont Student Assistance Corporation 2017).

## Build a Careful Process

For states interested in integrating equity into statewide plans for increasing higher education attainment, the process itself may be as important as the outcome, in part because the planning process offers many opportunities to build buy-in from a range of stakeholders. The CUE guide suggests several steps that are important to the process of building buy-in, including taking time to help stakeholders learn about data and best practices and seeking guidance from outside experts. For the participating states, the academy provided such an opportunity.

After attending the academy, the state teams typically assembled larger workgroups that brought in representatives from a range of sectors—including higher education,

## Virginia—Know Your State



Virginia's participation in the Equity Policy Academy came on the heels of its 2014 release of a new strategic plan for higher education in the state. This plan set the goal for Virginia to become the best-educated state by 2030 and established additional goals in the areas of affordability, student success, innovation and investment, and economic development. One-on-one meetings were held between college presidents and the Secretary of Education to help inform the goals. The topic of equity came up often during the development of the plan, and one of the targets set for the student success portion of the plan was annual improvement in completion rates of underrepresented students—students of color, Pell Grant recipients, students 25 or older, and students from cities or counties that ranked in the lowest quintile for degree attainment in the state (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia 2014).

At the academy, the state team built on the strategic plan to develop a work plan that emphasized data analysis to identify current and potential equity gaps in higher education. This deep dive into education data provided important insights for state leaders. As one of their workgroup participants stated:

The analysis helped us understand things more. We looked at student record data and Census data as part of the exercise. We also were partnering with [the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce] because we were very interested in workforce credentials, and we think that those are potential pathways for individuals who may not be the traditional college-bound. That dialogue helped us ... dig through where we are in terms of rankings both for the working-age population, which is what our goal is, but also looking at subpopulations as well.

Once the analysis was complete, the state team used the information about equity gaps to undergird other aspects of its work: identifying, promoting, and funding affordable academic pathways and student success initiatives that could support underserved students. During the most recent legislative session, for example, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) produced a series of one-page briefing memos for legislators that highlighted important aspects of higher education in the state. One of these memos used relevant data to emphasize the need to close attainment gaps (SCHEV 2017).

K-12, workforce and economic development, business, and philanthropy—to ensure that a range of viewpoints were represented. Several states—including Ohio, Vermont, and Virginia—also held statewide convenings to present their attainment gap data to an even broader constituency and to engage those stakeholders in a discussion of how best to address these gaps. All of the state teams also emphasized the importance of sharing draft plans widely in order to surface concerns and new ideas sooner rather than later.

## Craft a Strong Message

As the CUE guide notes, “Important to the success of creating an equity-focused state attainment goal and plan is crafting a message that creates a sense of ‘urgency’ and

creates buy-in across the state among the wide range of actors necessary to the achievement of the goal” (Lumina Foundation and Center for Urban Education 2015). States employ a variety of rationales to promote equity in attainment goals, ranging from the need to promote economic growth to the moral imperative of equal opportunity. Michigan and Ohio, for example, emphasize the need to educate more residents to support workforce and economic development. Virginia focuses on changing demographics and on better serving today’s students. Minnesota, on the other hand, points directly to the need to reduce educational disparities across racial and ethnic groups. And Vermont uses several of these arguments, emphasizing equity and individual opportunity, economic development, and the public benefits of higher education.

## Vermont—Build a Careful Process



Although Vermont had developed a state higher education goal several years earlier (by 2020, 60 percent of the adult population would have a postsecondary degree), that goal did not include an equity component and had not generated strong commitment among stakeholders. Through the academy, state participants recognized the importance of focusing on attainment gaps for subpopulations such as adult students, first-generation students and low-income students. They also learned that building buy-in would require careful work. As an academy participant from the state explained: “We were recognizing that there was still a distrust and a disbelief in the value of a college education, so we knew that the heavy lifting would be selling people on the idea that this is critical to Vermont’s future.”

After the academy, the state formed a workgroup of representatives from the Vermont State College System; the University of Vermont; the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC); state education, commerce, and economic-development agencies; public and private higher education institutions; K-12 school districts, career and technical education; funders, and employers. This group’s work led to the decision to revise the state’s higher education attainment goal and create an

explicit focus on closing attainment gaps (VSAC 2017). To build commitment to the new goal—that by 2025, 70 percent of Vermont’s working-age adults will possess a postsecondary degree or credential of value—the group organized a statewide convening of employers, legislators, and representatives from higher education and state agencies. As a participant described the convening: “It was kind of a rally, a case-making kind of event. Make the case, have people discuss and generate some initial ideas around the goal, and spotlight a few that we thought were promising directions just to fuel people’s thinking.”

As support for the new goal began to build, the workgroup recognized the need for an ongoing structure that would continue to bring stakeholders together across sectors, and it identified VSAC as the appropriate institution for this work. VSAC also has maintained the statewide emphasis on equity that began at the academy—in particular, the effort to close attainment gaps. Other important outcomes have included new federally funded work on community engagement and community-based approaches to student support, as well as the inclusion of the college-continuation rate for dual-enrollment students as an accountability measure for the K-12 system.

# Minnesota—Craft a Strong Message



Interest in increasing educational attainment and closing gaps across various populations began to build in Minnesota in 2014. Responding to concerns from the business and nonprofit communities, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education brought in several national experts to talk about higher education attainment. Former State Sen. Terri Bonoff, Chair of the Senate Higher Education Committee, drafted and advocated for legislation to establish a state goal for higher education attainment. Based on recommendations from the Office of Higher Education, Sen. Bonoff incorporated policy goals tied to reducing educational attainment disparities across race/ethnicity into the legislation.

While policymakers were working on this legislation, a state team had the opportunity to attend the Equity Policy Academy, which helped them view attainment through an equity lens. Team members noted several factors of importance in their discussions. First, Minnesota has relatively high educational attainment already, but the state's nonwhite populations—which have comparatively low attainment rates—are growing. As a result, any effort to increase overall attainment in the state must focus on closing attainment gaps. Second, the state's crucial problem is not access to college but rather college completion, particularly at open-admissions institutions. Third, student populations tend to be segmented across postsecondary institutions based on race and income; this means the most vulnerable students are often enrolled at institutions that lack the resources to support them well.

The attainment goal passed by the Minnesota state legislature in 2015 explicitly calls for closing attainment gaps and requires the Office of Higher Education to report on attainment disaggregated by race. The legislature also

funded the Equity in Education and Job Connection Grant Program, which in 2016 awarded a half million dollars to three state colleges to establish evidence-based services that would support educational and employment outcomes for underserved students (Minnesota Office of Higher Education 2017). This focus on supporting institutions helped appeal to higher education stakeholders and also increased interest in practices that support equity on college campuses. In the fall of 2017, with further support from Lumina, CUE participated in a meeting in Minnesota designed to support additional institutions in developing plans to improve equity.

Because of this high-profile work, which drew considerable attention to issues of educational equity, the state has begun to see changes in how people talk about higher education across a range of sectors and stakeholders. As a state team member explained:

People know the term attainment; they've heard of it, they know what it is, they understand how it differs from completion, they understand that there's an overall attainment goal but then we've also got to pay attention to the subgroups. I think that awareness is much clearer now here than it was before...And I would say it's state policymakers, state agencies, nonprofit groups, business groups, groups that represent communities of color—they all [are] more aware of this. The media will talk a little bit more about it. And...they're all beginning to think, "So what's my role in this? How can I make a difference?"

## Know What Works

As the CUE guide notes, “Understanding what is in place and what works is an essential starting point for making state attainment goals and plans actionable at the state and institutional levels” (Lumina Foundation and Center for Urban Education 2015). An important aspect of this process is to identify existing organizations, policies, and programs in the state that could help in the effort to close attainment gaps. For example, even prior to the Equity Policy Academy, the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation had been using data to highlight and address ongoing attainment gaps in the state; therefore, it was seen as the best agency to lead the work following the academy. In addition, the state, which had identified the low rate of college enrollment among recent high school graduates as a key problem, was able to focus attention and funds on expanding dual-enrollment opportunities for high school students.

Effective policy levers vary from state to state. In Minnesota, policymakers recognized low college-completion rates among students of color as a key concern and funded a state grant program designed to help colleges and universities reduce attainment gaps. In Virginia, which has a decentralized system of higher education, one of the most important policy levers was simply “shining a spotlight” on the issue of equity gaps, as one state leader put it, and then working behind the scenes to promote policies that would benefit under-represented students. Ohio, which moved to 100 percent outcomes-based funding by 2015 (Snyder 2015), had already built equity measures into its two- and four-year funding formulas. This gave the state a policy lever to encourage postsecondary institutions to focus more on local and regional equity goals.

## Ohio—Know What Works



When Ohio sent a state team to the Equity Policy Academy in 2015, the state had already moved to an outcomes-based funding approach in its state funding formula for higher education but had not set its own specific attainment goal. The academy helped the state team begin to develop an attainment goal and also to dig further into its data to identify attainment gaps linked to race and ethnicity, income, first-generation status, urban/rural populations, and region of the state, with a particular focus on Appalachian Ohio.

One important takeaway from the academy was the fact that an attainment goal may be statewide, but the work to achieve that goal and close attainment gaps occurs locally and regionally within the state. Ohio was well-placed to focus on regional attainment goals because it already had a network of regional college access and success partnerships that covered more than a third of the state’s 88 counties, including all of the major urban areas (Ohio Department of Higher Education 2016). “We had regions in our state [that] were years ahead of us in this work. Some of our major metropolitan cities had done the data work, had data-sharing agreements in place, and had really done some strategies in terms of equity in underserved populations that we had never done at the state level,” a team member noted.

After returning from the academy, the team assembled a working group that included statewide actors such as the Ohio Department of Higher Education, which was leading the work, the Ohio Association of Community Colleges, the Inter-University Council of Ohio, and Philanthropy Ohio. The group also included representatives from the regional college access and success partnerships, several of which were then grantees of Lumina Foundation’s Community Partnerships for Attainment effort. This state/local approach appeals to actors in a state known as “a state of city-states” where, as one team member commented: “The Ohio way is making sure that we have some state leadership but also local leadership.”

The working group’s first charge was to develop Ohio’s attainment goal, which was announced in 2016 through a joint resolution of the Department of Education, Department of Higher Education, and the Governor’s Office of Workforce Transformation (Demaria, Carey, and Burgess 2016). It also has begun to address what one team member called “the heaviest lifting.” That is: “How do we unpack (the statewide goal) by local areas or regional areas and look at the data in those local regions, look at the demographics, and figure out who owns what part of that goal?” For this work, the regional partnerships serve as a model of best practice in how to use disaggregated data to develop localized strategies and engage local businesses and funders in promoting increased attainment.

## Make the Plan a Living Document

The constant pace of change in states means that simply setting a postsecondary attainment goal and identifying strategies through which to achieve that goal are not sufficient. State populations and economic needs change over time. States must update their plans for increasing postsecondary attainment regularly and keep state leaders and the public informed of progress toward the goal. In Minnesota, for instance, the legislation that established the state goal directs the Office of Higher Education to measure and report annually on postsecondary attainment in the state. Stakeholders in Ohio have been working to strengthen reporting requirements and develop indicators and a dashboard to measure progress.

States also face frequent changes in leadership. New policymakers and higher education officials are elected or appointed who may not have been part of the work already undertaken to increase attainment. In Michigan, for example, the state team learned from what happened following the initial development of a state attainment goal a decade ago. As a team member described it, “There was a lot of momentum at the beginning when the governor was promoting it, but then when the governor ultimately was term-limited out of office, there was no energy behind this higher ed agenda.” In response, the workgroup that developed a new attainment goal for the state has continued meeting to maintain the momentum.

## Michigan—Make the Plan a Living Document



In 2004, Michigan created the blue ribbon “Cherry Commission,” chaired by then Lt. Gov. John D. Cherry Jr. It was tasked with identifying strategies to achieve the state’s goal of doubling the numbers of residents with postsecondary credentials over the next 10 years (Lieutenant Governor’s Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth 2004).

After the Cherry Commission published its report, however, the changing political and economic situation in the state—which included the devastating impact of the 2008-09 recession and the election of a new governor in 2010—slowed momentum on implementation of the recommended strategies. In 2014, leaders in the state’s education and nonprofit sectors came together to develop new goals and strategies for increasing postsecondary attainment in Michigan. With funding from the Kellogg and Kresge foundations, they assembled a workgroup of approximately 25 representatives from government, higher education, K-12 education, business, nonprofits, and philanthropy and began meeting monthly.

As the group’s work proceeded, members learned about the Equity Policy Academy, and the group applied to participate. The academy gave the Michigan team new insight into the importance of emphasizing equity gaps in attainment, and

team members returned to the state inspired to disaggregate their state attainment data and rewrite their recommendations with a new emphasis on closing those gaps. Since the report was released in December 2015, many of its recommendations have been adopted, including a substantial increase in need-based student financial aid, and legislation requiring school counselors to have more formal training in college- and career-readiness advising (Michigan Postsecondary Credential Attainment Workgroup 2015). “I think that one way we’ve been successful using the equity lens is making sure financial aid resources are targeted to low-income students,” a state team member observed.

In addition, drawing from the experience that happened following the release of the Cherry Commission Report, the work group also has recognized the importance of ensuring that momentum is maintained. To that end, they created the Michigan Higher Education Attainment Roundtable (MI-HEART), which meets regularly to promote state policy actions designed to increase postsecondary attainment. The work done by this group has led the governor and state legislature to increase their focus on increasing attainment. It also has increased the engagement of state agencies and postsecondary institutions with this issue.

# The Future of Equity as a Focus of Lumina's Work

As Lumina has continued its work on increasing higher education attainment, eradicating inequity has remained a central focus for the Foundation. Lumina's strategic plan for 2017-2020 reiterates the importance of the Equity Imperative (Lumina Foundation 2017e). As the plan is implemented, strategy directors are asking pointed questions about how the projects that Lumina funds will close attainment gaps or change the circumstances that create or widen those gaps.

This commitment, and the lessons learned from the Equity Policy Academy and subsequent state work, can be seen clearly in the Foundation's plans. As explained by Danette Howard, Lumina's senior vice president and chief strategy officer:

I think that moving forward, particularly with our new strategic plan and our new state policy agenda, you will see a laser-like focus on equity. We've made a lot of progress over the last several years. We've helped a lot of states take that first important step, which is developing attainment goals. We think that the next frontier in our state policy work is about closing these gaps. And so, the totality of our new state policy agenda is in service of doing that.

For Lumina, leading with equity gives state policymakers an opportunity to speak directly about equity and to initiate difficult conversations. As Howard put it, "We believe that having this focused, unapologetic commitment to closing equity gaps is the right thing to do, and so we are going to continue to do that. And we are also going to lift up and support those leaders who are willing to do that very same thing."

## Conclusion

The Equity Policy Academy was, in many ways, a turning point for Lumina's state policy work. It built on Lumina's longtime commitment to equity, and also extended the equity focus into state policy. The success of the academy encouraged the Foundation and Strategy Labs to continue pushing states to begin challenging conversations about equity in postsecondary attainment. As explained by Scott Jenkins, Lumina's strategy director for state policy: "That was rather a novel idea three years ago. And there was no foregone conclusion that it would be successful. [W]e've had over a dozen states since then that have adopted a rigorous attainment goal that includes a focus on closing attainment gaps." The success of explicitly working with states to adopt equity-focused attainment goals has fueled a renewed commitment at Lumina to push states even harder to eradicate equity gaps.

## Additional Resources to Advance Equity in State Higher Education Policy

In 2017, drawing on its work for the Equity Policy Academy and with participating states, CUE released a series of three resources for state higher education policymakers. The first resource, *Making Equity Part of Your State's Postsecondary Planning*, is a version of the planning guide used at the academy (Center for Urban Education 2017a). The second resource, *Overcoming Common Challenges to an Equity Agenda in State Policy*, offers strategies for handling difficult conversations about race, overcoming the paralysis that can result from dealing with mounds of complex higher education data, and helping colleges and universities develop policies and programs that can close attainment gaps (Center for Urban Education 2017b). The final resource, *Protocol for Assessing Equity-Mindedness in State Policy*, offers indicators that can help policymakers assess "whether and how effectively equity is addressed in policies that structure higher education priorities, outcomes, and resource allocation" (Center for Urban Education 2017c).

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