"OPENING THE PROMISE:"
THE FIVE PRINCIPLES OF EQUITABLE POLICYMAKING

IHEP
INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LETTER FROM THE CO-CHAIRS

Dear Higher Education Policymaker:

We convened the Advisory Committee for Equitable Policymaking Processes with the goal of developing actionable principles to imbue racial equity in every step of the policymaking process* and build a fair, inclusive, and just system of higher education that serves all students—Black or White, Indigenous or Latinx, Asian American Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AANHPI), and all other identities, backgrounds, and circumstances.

Over the past 18 months, Black and brown communities have been hardest hit by the global coronavirus pandemic and resulting economic downturn[1] and hate crimes against members of the AANHPI community have reached their highest levels in a decade.[2] As a country, we are facing a moral, ethical, social, and economic imperative to confront racial inequity and dismantle structural racism.[3] To do so requires effective large-scale efforts that include our system of postsecondary education.

An equitable postsecondary system would provide economic and non-economic benefits to students, their families, communities, our workforce, and ultimately the entire world—but only if the policies that shape that system are themselves equitable. To fully dismantle existing systemic barriers and improve opportunities for all students and all communities, we must dig beneath enacted policies and examine the entrenched inequities embedded in policymaking itself.

Equity in policymaking means just and fair inclusion in development processes as well as a prioritization of policies that create conditions that maximize the opportunity for all individuals to reach their full potential. In the postsecondary context, policymakers must assess historical inequities, racialized assumptions, and embedded practices in order to dismantle systemic obstacles to postsecondary enrollment, educational attainment, and post-college success outcomes for all students.

> AN EQUITABLE POSTSECONDARY SYSTEM WOULD PROVIDE ECONOMIC AND NON-ECONOMIC BENEFITS TO STUDENTS, THEIR FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, OUR WORKFORCE, AND ULTIMATELY THE ENTIRE WORLD—BUT ONLY IF THE POLICIES THAT SHAPE THAT SYSTEM ARE THEMSELVES EQUITABLE.

Congress and the current administration have demonstrated a commitment to explicitly engage in equitable policymaking and the implementation of equitable policy and programming.[4] Across the country, racial and ethnic diversity is increasing.[5] With this momentum, now is the time to ensure that the policymaking process itself promotes racial equity in postsecondary education and results in sustainable, impactful, and just decisions for future generations.

Given the potential of postsecondary education to transform lives and the structural inequities that currently hamper many students from realizing that transformation, we strongly believe that policymakers must prioritize policies that advance equity and embed equitable practices within the processes used to develop those policies.

We use the term "policymaking" to encompass all stages of the creation of new policy, amending of existing policy, determining of priorities, and setting the course of action for a body, whether a local, state, or federal government, or an institution or system of higher education.

To that end, we propose a new framework, which includes five interrelated principles:

1. An issue's **framing** shapes the creation of the relevant policy.
2. **Investments** signal priorities.
3. Who **participates** in policymaking decisions shapes the outcome.
4. **Data** and empirical evidence are essential to effective policy.
5. **Language** must be precise, inclusive, people-first, and respectful.

We call on policymakers to put into practice their stated commitment to equity and apply this framework to ongoing and future policymaking opportunities. Applying these five principles, policymakers at all levels—local, state, and federal lawmakers, and leaders in higher education—can make the goal of equity a reality and shape a more fair, inclusive, and just future. The benefits of opening the promise of educational opportunity extend beyond individual gain and instead represent a lucrative investment for the nation as a whole.

Sincerely,

Dr. Stella M. Flores & Mamie Voight

INTRODUCTION

Postsecondary education has the potential to transform individual lives, support families, strengthen communities, build a more robust workforce, catalyze economic mobility, and address persistent inequities in our society. To develop policies that can realize the full potential of higher education, it is essential that equity—particularly racial equity—be centered throughout the policymaking process.

Many policies at institutions of higher education and at the local, state, and federal levels have created the inequitable outcomes we see today. While policies may be drafted with the intention of being neutral and absent of bias, history shows that the impacts rarely are. For example, while 48 percent of White adults have an associate's degree or higher, this is true for only 32 percent of Black adults, 24 percent of Latinx adults, 25 percent of American Indian or Alaska Native adults, and 28 percent of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander adults.[6]

Many policies are poorly designed, at best, and rooted in racism, at worst (e.g., legacy admissions policies). As a result, White Americans for centuries have had disproportionate access to the economic and non-economic benefits of higher education compared to their Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented Asian American Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) peers. These multigenerational injustices reverberate today within the postsecondary education system and beyond, into the workforce, our economy, and our shared future.

The United States is in urgent need of equity-driven policymaking processes. The COVID-19 pandemic both laid bare and worsened health, economic, and educational gaps, landing with unequal impact on Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AANHPI communities. The country continues to reckon with racism and racial injustice.

The Biden-Harris administration has stated a commitment to support historically marginalized and underrepresented communities by advancing equity-driven policy and programs.[7] In the words of President Biden on his first day in office January 20, 2021, on signing the Executive Order on Racial Equity: "We need to open the promise of America to every American. And that means we need to make the issue of racial equity not just an issue for any one department of government; it has to be the business of the whole of government."

WE NEED TO OPEN THE PROMISE OF AMERICA TO EVERY AMERICAN. AND THAT MEANS WE NEED TO MAKE THE ISSUE OF RACIAL EQUITY NOT JUST AN ISSUE FOR ANY ONE DEPARTMENT OF GOVERNMENT; IT HAS TO BE THE BUSINESS OF THE WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT.

– PRESIDENT BIDEN

Equity in the policymaking process means that racism is acknowledged and named, investments prioritize long-term change, solutions center the expertise and lived experiences of marginalized and directly impacted communities, data and research are representative of those experiences, and language is intentional and inclusive. Strategies and solutions should seek to topple systemic barriers to success and build new structures that meaningfully engage all communities at every step in a sustainable way.

Direct and deliberate prioritization of racial equity in the selection, design, processing, and implementation of higher education policy can be the difference between a well-intentioned but counterproductive policy and one that achieves transformation, today and for generations to come. In other words, what we see—and hear, consider, and measure—in the policymaking process is what we get; how a policy or program is created strongly affects the impact it will have and on whom.

EQUITY IN THE POLICYMAKING PROCESS MEANS THAT RACISM IS ACKNOWLEDGED AND NAMED, INVESTMENTS PRIORITIZE LONG-TERM CHANGE, SOLUTIONS CENTER THE EXPERTISE AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MARGINALIZED AND DIRECTLY IMPACTED COMMUNITIES, DATA AND RESEARCH ARE REPRESENTATIVE OF THOSE EXPERIENCES, AND LANGUAGE IS INTENTIONAL AND INCLUSIVE.

What we see – and hear, consider, and measure – in the policymaking process is what we get; *how* a policy is created determines the impact it will have and on whom.

THE FIVE PRINCIPLES

To support advocates, researchers, and policymakers in "opening the promise" and creating equitable policy, Dr. Stella M. Flores and the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) convened the Advisory Committee for Equitable Policymaking Processes (member list included in the acknowledgments). The advisory group brought together the diverse voices and skill sets of advocates, institutional faculty and researchers, and nonprofit leaders to develop a framework to build racial equity into the policymaking process. This brief outlines their recommendations and the resulting five principles.

PRINCIPLE	ACTION ITEMS
An issue's **framing** shapes the creation of the relevant policy.	▪ Frame an issue by including the specific "why" of the work and "what" of the problem. ▪ Apply an equity lens to outcomes, even for seemingly race-neutral problems. ▪ Reach hearts AND minds.
Investments signal priorities.	▪ Plan for long-term, sustainable, systemic change. ▪ Invest in long-term, sustainable, systemic change.
Who **participates** in policymaking decisions shapes the outcome.	▪ Ensure the representation and voices of impacted communities hold influence.
Data and empirical evidence are essential to effective policy.	▪ Disaggregate, disaggregate, disaggregate. ▪ Ensure the evidence base is informed by researchers of color* and reflects racially diverse populations.
Language must be precise, inclusive, people-first, and respectful.	▪ Take an asset-based approach. ▪ Be specific and respectful. ▪ Be people-first and inclusive.

The principles, explained below in detail, apply to all policymaking processes—whether legislative, regulatory, or institutional—and they apply to designing new policies and interrogating existing ones. This framework is designed to help policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels and at institutions of higher education prioritize racial equity in the processes, practices, and procedures required to develop and implement postsecondary policies. The policymaking process itself must embrace equitable design principles.

In this brief, we identify racial and ethnic groups both by name and use the collective "[noun] of color." We purposefully only use the collective nomenclature when discussing an issue that impacts most or all non-White groups. If an issue primarily affects specific groups, we will call those examples by name. See Principle #5 for more information.

PRINCIPLE #1: AN ISSUE'S FRAMING SHAPES THE CREATION OF THE RELEVANT POLICY.

Advancing equity requires being explicit about inequities and identifying the root or historical causes of injustice a policy or program aims to solve. To advance equity in higher education, the lack of equity must be named. If equity is not part of the framing of an issue throughout the policymaking process, equity likely will not be part of the result either. Only when an issue is seen through an equity lens can policymakers align strategies and solutions. Equity framing not only creates a guiding principle for the policymaking process but also holds policymakers accountable for ensuring comprehensive solutions.

FRAMING includes the choices, concepts, perspective, and historical contexts—visible or invisible, conscious or unconscious — that influence how people see and understand an issue. Framing determines what is emphasized or ignored in public discourse and policy debates. Beyond messaging or marketing, "framing" is the way an issue is viewed and understood throughout the policymaking process.

Frame an issue by including the specific "why" of the work and "what" of the problem.

At present, framing in policymaking is often implicit, but to further equity, it must be explicit. Through every step of the policymaking process, from internal memos to requests for comment to public remarks, include the "why" of the work. This "why" should capture the goal of furthering equity through the policy (e.g., promoting racial equity so all students can realize their full potential through higher education, regardless of race, background, or circumstance). The "what" of the problem must be explicit as well; the structural injustices that the policy aims to combat should be named. In addition to race, the framing of an issue should provide an understanding of cumulative disadvantage and the compounding impact of intersectional identities (i.e., socioeconomic status, gender, geographic location, disability, caregiving status, etc.). For example:

- If the U.S. Department of Education seeks to implement a gainful employment rule because the current policy disproportionately harms Black or Latinx borrowers, that goal should be explicitly part of the framing of the issue.
- The framing of the College Equity Act is clear in its purpose to close achievement gaps for students of color, students with disabilities, and veterans, and the fact that the bill seeks to address inequities in enrollment, completion, and post-college outcomes.[8] The press release announcing the legislation names these groups specifically and how targeted federal funding can support students and the institutions that serve them.

Apply an equity lens to outcomes, even for seemingly race-neutral problems.

At the outset, not all policy matters or programming decisions may seem to have equity implications. However, given that historical influences may not be readily visible, policymakers should apply an equity lens throughout all processes and proactively assess how proposed rules or processes would impact outcomes for all student populations. These impact assessments should include marginalized and non-marginalized populations alike in order to fully understand the implications of the policy, prepare for counterarguments, and ensure the end result is a more fair, inclusive, and just postsecondary system. For example:

- In the same way that the Congressional Budget Office scores bills for impact on the budget, federal agencies should evaluate policies' impact on equity. Include equity assessments and impact analyses in the development of programs and policies to understand how proposed solutions might affect Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AANHPI students, as well as White students.[9]
- Consider how approaches like targeted universalism (see sidebar) have a clear, intended impact on a specific group but also provide rolling, positive impacts for society at large. When we center racial equity in policy conversations and processes, all groups win, not only those who have been historically marginalized.

Reach hearts AND minds.

The framing of an issue should account for both emotion and reason; an issue will be addressed if stakeholders both feel a desire to do so and doing so makes logical sense. Reaching hearts and minds in framing an issue requires qualitative and quantitative approaches. To fully understand the "why" of the work and "what" of the issue, personal stories should be included throughout the policymaking process alongside data that capture the extent of such experiences and the structural obstacles that exacerbate them. The power of personal story to bring an issue to life is unparalleled, while the broader context and data demonstrate the scale of an issue. Both are essential in creating effective policies that solve complex social challenges. For example:

- When determining research funding priorities for policymaking purposes, include both quantitative and qualitative studies, as demonstrated in IHEP's The Cost of Opportunity.[12] This report shares numerous student voices, including that of Ashley, whose story illustrates the need to balance work and school to navigate financial obstacles—a challenge faced by 75 percent of today's college students.[13]
- Other examples of qualitative research studies explore college access[14] (Trevino, Scheele, Flores, 2014), persistence[15] (Harper and Newman, 2016), and teacher preparation[16] (Toldson and Pearson, 2019) from the point of view of the stakeholders who these policies impact. These research projects are just a few examples of how lived experience can be used to examine broader policies and practices at the federal, state, and institution levels.

TARGETED UNIVERSALISM is a framework for policy design and implementation that accounts for structural and cultural dynamics to support inclusive policies. While policy debates often become trapped in the binary of targeted solutions or universal responses, targeted universalism sets standard goals for all groups concerned and undertakes specific and focused processes to achieve those goals, based upon how those groups are situated within structures, culture, and geography to obtain the universal goal.[11]

> When we center racial equity in policy conversations and processes, all groups win, not only those who have been historically marginalized.

PRINCIPLE #2: INVESTMENTS SIGNAL PRIORITIES.

Where and how government and higher education institutions invest resources reflect which groups they prioritize. Equitable investments focus on communities that have been historically underrepresented and marginalized. These investments seek to dismantle systemic oppression and build sustainability.

INVESTMENTS are the money and human capital that government or institutions dedicate to solving problems through policies and programs.

Plan for long-term, sustainable, systemic change.

Racial inequities are the result of centuries of oppression, resulting in cumulative disadvantages and advantages. Remedying them will require multi-faceted, long-term policy solutions; there are no "miracle cure" solutions. Systemic change requires continuous assessment, adjustment, and reassessment. This cycle should be integrated into policymaking strategies with the understanding that change happens over time and requires ongoing course adjustments to maximize impact. For example:

- Design policies and programs to account for the fact that they may not yield immediate results. Planning and implementation tools like logic models and continuous improvement plans should include outputs and outcomes that include both the duration of the immediate program and strategies for sustainability beyond state or federal funding.
- Recognize the importance of identifying, collecting, and learning from early indicators of impact and allow for flexibility to pivot as needed due to unintended consequences of policy or program implementation.

Invest in long-term, sustainable, systemic change.

To catalyze and sustain systemic change, policymakers must invest in the full lifespan of policies and programs and in the stakeholders that promote equity in postsecondary education. Research demonstrates that failing to invest in equitable postsecondary policies and programs costs society more than the price of making such investments.[17] Yet the scope of existing inequities requires multi-year investments. Further, impacted individuals must be involved in identifying and implementing solutions funded by equity-minded investments. For example:

- Incentivize continued investments in equitable, evidence-based programming and policies, particularly in times of crisis and budget shortfalls. The ability to weather fiscal storms should be built into funding structures to ensure that equity is not just a fair-weather consideration in higher education. This consistency is particularly important for historically underfunded institutions and systems that serve a disproportionate share of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AANHPI students. A recent example of these investments is the $500 million proposal from the House in support of the College Completion Fund, which would help institutions better support their students through evidence-based, equity-driven programming.[18]

- Invest in researchers and organizations that reflect the communities to be served by the policies and programs. Recognize the history of unequal and discriminatory funding practices and instead fund policies and programs that amplify impacted voices, promote equitable decision-making, and yield greater impact within the community being served.

THE ABILITY TO WEATHER FISCAL STORMS SHOULD BE BUILT INTO FUNDING STRUCTURES TO ENSURE THAT EQUITY IS NOT JUST A FAIR-WEATHER CONSIDERATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION.

PRINCIPLE #3: WHO PARTICIPATES IN POLICYMAKING DECISIONS SHAPES THE OUTCOME.

Centering equity requires centering the experiences of and contributions from impacted communities, including in power sharing, active solicitation of feedback, and ultimate decision-making. Policymaking processes generally include opportunities for higher education stakeholders to weigh in, but if procedural gatekeeping and systemic obstacles dissuade participation and limit the power to be part of decision-making, such opportunities are a mere illusion of inclusivity. Centering equity overcomes gatekeeping and participation obstacles by ensuring impacted communities are actively engaged, remain the focal point of the process, and are supported by the outcome.

PARTICIPATION is not solely about who sits at the table; participation is about how and why individuals and communities are engaged at the table, along with their agency to influence the direction and outcomes of policy, programs, and the creation and implementation process.

Ensure the representation and voices of impacted communities hold influence.

For equity to be truly centered in higher education policy, programming, and the policymaking process, impacted communities must have thorough representation and voice and influence over decision-making. Otherwise, those with privilege risk perpetuating racist and classist systems. Centering equity requires examining traditional processes, dismantling limiting structures, and developing novel strategies to ensure representation of impacted populations. This shift includes, but is not limited to, proactively seeking ideas and feedback from diverse participants — including current, aspiring, and recent students—and making decisions based on feedback. Such strategies require deliberate and thoughtful multiracial and multidisciplinary participation in the policymaking process. While it can be helpful to require a minimum level of participation, such as involving at least one student on federal Department of Education advisory panels, equity cannot be accomplished solely by quotas. For example:

- Involve impacted students and marginalized communities in policymaking processes, including advisory committees, public comment periods, testimonies, working groups, and speaking roles at events.

- Ensure impacted students and individuals from marginalized communities do not have to sacrifice means or resources to participate fully in policymaking processes. This requires understanding the full cost of participation and ensuring equitable support through operational and monetary resources. Those from communities which historically have been excluded from these processes may need specific supports to participate on equal footing with their non-marginalized counterparts.

- Ensure racial diversity in formal appointments, hiring, groups, and panels, such as the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI), negotiated rulemaking panels, technical review panels, and Congressional hearings. Diversity is especially important for positions of power and decision-making authority.

- Conduct outreach to impacted communities in ways that meet community members where they are and ensure participation. For example, rather than simply publishing a post about higher education in the *Federal Register* and hoping impacted communities find it, conduct listening sessions to gather input from and involvement of those communities. Document this outreach and determine which approaches are most effective. Use those approaches in future outreach.

- Partner with philanthropy, businesses of all sizes, and community-based organizations to empower community participation in higher education policymaking with resources and capacity. Examine existing and future partnerships to understand how their structures may or may not prioritize impacted communities in higher education.

CENTERING EQUITY OVERCOMES GATEKEEPING AND PARTICIPATION OBSTACLES BY ENSURING IMPACTED COMMUNITIES ARE ACTIVELY ENGAGED AND REMAIN THE FOCAL POINT OF THE PROCESS.

PRINCIPLE #4: DATA AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ARE ESSENTIAL TO EFFECTIVE POLICY.

For policymaking to be equity-driven, it must also be data-informed and evidence-based. Yet too often, available data are incomplete and unrepresentative of impacted communities. Policymakers should prioritize improved postsecondary data and representation in that data, promote equitable access to that data, and ensure data reflect language used by impacted communities.

DATA in the policymaking process include any information collected, reported, created, or used through policy development or enactment, be they qualitative or quantitative, administrative or research derived.

### Disaggregate, disaggregate, disaggregate.

Aggregated data hide inequities pervasive within our systems; top-line numbers can mask differences between subgroups of students within the whole. Disaggregation—breaking down by race, age, income, enrollment status, language, and/or other demographic factors—allows for contextualization of analyses and findings. In the absence of disaggregated postsecondary data, the policymaking process can perpetuate inequities through uninformed investments, programming, practices, and other steps within the process. For example:

- Collect and disaggregate metrics for use in the policymaking process, such as completion rates for part-time and transfer students, Pell Grant receipt and amount, loan receipt and amount, earnings outcomes, cumulative debt burden, cohort default rates, and repayment rates by race/ethnicity, economic status, first-generation status, and country of origin.[19] This includes outcomes for AANHPI students, for whom finer-grained data would unmask disparities within AANHPI statistics.[20]

- Ensure the use of research methods that include data on American Indian/Alaska Native populations.[21] In many cases, data are suppressed due to sample size, which in turn can erase their experiences and the systemic inequities that they face.

- Disaggregate data submitted to the U.S. Department of Education on the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) on emergency federal aid by race and ethnicity to better understand the impact of this aid on marginalized populations.[22]

- Enable and support streamlined and linked data systems at the institution, state, and federal levels to leverage existing postsecondary data to investigate similarities and differences in outcomes by state and region. The incomplete, duplicative, and disconnected state of the federal postsecondary data infrastructure inadvertently masks gaps in data coverage and representation of various student subgroups. This must be remedied to develop a robust evidence base for equity-driven policy and programming.

- Ensure the final policy or program promotes the collection and use of quality postsecondary data. In addition to data-informed steps within the process, policies themselves should include disaggregated data collection to illuminate impact and inform future policy improvements.

Figure 1.

Differences in highest level of educational attainment for adults age 25 and older among AAPI student subgroups is one illustration of why disaggregation beyond topline numbers is critical to understanding students' experiences.

Completed less than a high school diploma

Vietnamese	25%
Lao	25%
Hmong	24%
Cambodian	29%
All Asian	12%
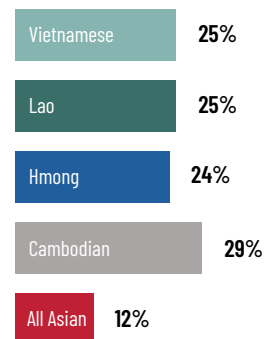
Completed high school (or equivalent) but no college

Vietnamese	20%
Lao	31%
Hmong	24%
Cambodian	26%
All Asian	15%
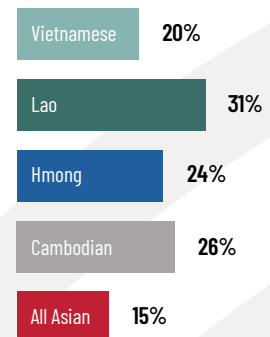
- Data interpretations often focus on student behavior rather than systemic conditions. Understanding student trends is undoubtedly important, but policymakers must use data to examine systems and seek to remedy the inequities inherent in them. For example, students of color often are enrolled in institutions with lower instructional expenditures per student and worse outcomes. This tells us there is a problem with our finance systems and college access pathways, not the students themselves.[23]
- Account for intersectionality. Beyond disaggregation, analyses of postsecondary data must acknowledge and honor the intersectional experiences of students and their communities.

Ensure the evidence base is informed by researchers of color and reflects racially diverse populations.

To be effective, policymaking must be evidence-based. But the available research that yields that evidence is influenced—just like policymaking—by those involved in the process. Those who conduct the research determine which topics are studied, what populations are involved, and the research methods used. To inform postsecondary policy and programming, policymakers should invest in and use research that reflects the diversity of the potential student body and invest in and listen to researchers of color. For example:

- Consider the diversity of selection teams and/or research teams for grant applications and whether teams are reflective of the groups studied. Policymakers must ensure that the researchers funded by taxpayer dollars are racially diverse and that projects and research agendas explore solutions for a diverse array of communities. Further, the selection committees themselves should be racially diverse. Only once the researchers and research base are diverse can policymakers be reasonably sure they are able to rely on representative, inclusive data to inform decision-making.
- When reviewing research to inform policy or program decisions, ensure the findings are inclusive of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AANHPI students and the institutions that serve them.
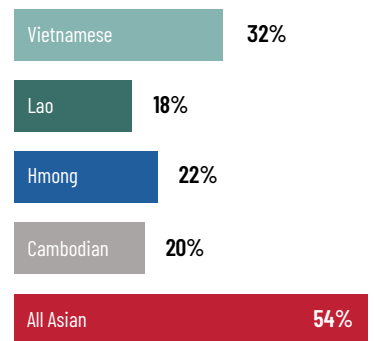
Data must be disaggregated to reflect the diverse and intersectional demography of the educational pipeline.

Figure 1 continued.

Completed some college or associate's degree

Vietnamese	23%
Lao	26%
Hmong	31%
Cambodian	24%
All Asian	20%
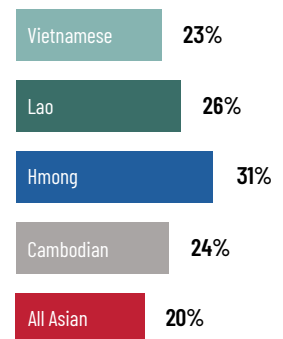
Completed higher than associate's degree

Vietnamese	32%
Lao	18%
Hmong	22%
Cambodian	20%
All Asian	54%

Source: 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year estimates, a product of the U.S. Census Bureau

Figures rounded to nearest whole number.

PRINCIPLE #5: LANGUAGE MUST BE PRECISE, INCLUSIVE, PEOPLE-FIRST, AND RESPECTFUL.

The words we use matter, both in how we describe systemic problems and their proposed solutions. Language influences all who are involved and all who are impacted and sets the tone for policy-related conversations. Policymakers should use inclusive, people-first language, and lead with an asset-based approach.

LANGUAGE is the words and phrases used in the policymaking process, and it should be consistent with the equitable goal of the process.

Take an asset-based approach.

An asset-based approach means framing and defining communities by their strengths, and consciously avoiding deficit framing, negative stereotypes, or any implication that students or other populations need to be "saved." Whether describing a new grant program, initiative, or legislation, policymakers should use asset-based language that recognizes the strengths of diverse institutions, communities, and students. For example:

- Use language that reflects problems in the systems, not the people. Instead of seeking to "reduce dropout rates" or "close the achievement gap," consider language that describes "addressing systemic obstacles to graduation," "increasing graduation rates," and "dismantling inequities."

- Avoid describing students or communities as simply "underserved" or "at risk" without explanation of the service not being provided or the risk being faced. On their own, terms like these perpetuate harmful stereotypes about marginalized communities.

Be precise and respectful.

The policymaking process should account for the lived experiences of impacted communities, and language is one way to do so. Language is complex, fluid, and holds power. Committing to racial and socioeconomic equity means using clear, specific, and respectful language. For example:

- Wherever relevant, name race as a focus and be specific in naming the racial or ethnic identities of those who will be impacted. Do not say "students of color" if you mean Black students.

- Reconsider language in messaging, program titles, or datasets that use terms such as "minority" (e.g., minority-serving institutions) or "alien" (e.g., non-resident aliens in IPEDS).

- Use accurate and respectful terminology. Use "from a low-income background" or "without resources to pay current levels of tuition," not "needy."

- Describe equity, not simply diversity. Beyond stating differences, be specific about ways different populations use different tools or resources to reach their full potential to overcome systemic barriers.

Be people-first and inclusive.

Language reflects a community's identity. Confer with the communities themselves in conversations about their preferred language and how they choose to identify. Choose language that centers on the person, not their circumstance or characteristics. For example:

- Update language to reflect a community's current usage. Using outdated terminology may be inaccurate and confusing, at best, or disrespectful and harmful, at worst.

- Use language that is inclusive of intersectional identities, to recognize the range of experiences within a group and how dimensions of inequity can interact and intersect. A queer Black woman may face racism, sexism, and homophobia, for example.[24]

- Use language like "students from low-income backgrounds," not "low-income students."

- Use "students who are incarcerated" or "students who are impacted by the legal system" instead of "prisoners" or "criminals."

CONCLUSION

Now is the time to reevaluate both postsecondary policies and the processes that yield them. In the absence of deliberate action, including the implementation of these five principles, our system of postsecondary education can perpetuate the structures and systems that have for too long marginalized and minoritized students and communities. But when policymakers at the federal, state, local, and institutional levels center racial equity throughout policies and processes, higher education can realize its full transformative potential for students, their families, our communities, our workforce, our economy, and our shared future.

ENDNOTES

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