

ATTAINMENT FOR ALL: POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS

*Overcoming the Cumulative Effect
of Racial and Ethnic Discrimination
Across the Education Continuum*



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INTRODUCTION

From Fall 2019 through Spring 2020, The Hunt Institute released a series of policy briefs, [Attainment for All: Postsecondary Pathways](#), that highlighted scalable state-level strategies to boost postsecondary attainment rates among specific student subpopulations including high school graduates, first-generation students, and adult learners. Building upon the momentum of this series, the higher education team at The Hunt Institute has authored a follow-up series of briefs that further explore the intersection between equity and efforts to raise postsecondary attainment rates.

This brief is the first of the three-part **Attainment for All: Postsecondary Pathways** follow-up series. This brief explores the idea of embedding equity across the education continuum to boost postsecondary attainment, identifies barriers to achieving equity, and includes examples of states' work to ensure equity across the education continuum. The second brief will examine wraparound student support services and their role in providing an equitable postsecondary experience. The series will conclude with a third brief examining the use of disaggregated data to narrow equity gaps in postsecondary education.

Note: throughout this issue brief, various terms are used to refer to different racial and ethnic groups. The use of different terms is intended to accurately reflect the framing used in the methodologies of the various underlying studies cited.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EQUITY AND POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court declared education “a right which must be made available to all on equal terms” in its [Brown v. Board of Education](#) decision, overturning the “separate but equal” doctrine that had applied since the Supreme Court's Plessy v. Ferguson ruling. The Brown v. Board decision made it clear that separate was, in fact, not equal and that school systems across the nation must open their doors to all children in a community.

It has been over 65 years since this ruling and the idea of equity in education is still an aspiration rather than a reality. Integrating schools proved to be just the first step in a long, ongoing journey toward education equity in the U.S. structural and social barriers inhibiting education equity for all, including in the pursuit and attainment of postsecondary degrees and credentials.

Pursuing a high-quality postsecondary education is one of the most important investments students can make. Americans with postsecondary degrees [are more likely](#) to live healthier lives, be more engaged in their communities, have higher-paying jobs, and have more job security. Postsecondary attainment is not only important for individuals; as a whole, America's economy is reliant on a highly educated workforce.

While the importance of and attention to postsecondary attainment has grown in recent decades, the ability to enroll and attain a postsecondary degree or credential remains largely unequal, as significant racial and socioeconomic inequalities still exist. It is estimated that the U.S. economy misses out on nearly [\\$1 trillion](#) each year due to education equity gaps that persist across income and race/ethnicity. By acknowledging where inequities exist and the barriers they create to educational attainment, we can better achieve solutions and innovations to close these equity gaps. The remainder of this brief will explore the importance of creating equity in postsecondary attainment, the current barriers to equity, and the ways states are working to combat the inequities that currently exist.



SNAPSHOT: RACIAL AND ETHNIC INEQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

For those ages 18 to 24, Asian (59 percent) and white (42 percent) students had higher [postsecondary enrollment rates](#) than their Black (37 percent) and Hispanic (36 percent) counterparts. Black students have been and continue to be [underrepresented at more selective colleges](#), while white and Asian students tend to be overrepresented. More than 30 percent of Black and Hispanic students with [high school GPAs of 3.5 or higher](#) attend community colleges, compared to only 22 percent of their white peers. Since 1995, 82 percent of white students who were [first-time college enrollees](#) attended one of the 468 most selective colleges, while 72 percent of new Hispanic enrollees and 68 percent of new Black enrollees went to two-year community colleges.

These enrollment inequities continue throughout education, as [selective colleges](#) spend anywhere from two to five times as much on instruction and services per student compared to two-year and open access public universities. Asian and white first-year postsecondary [students persist](#) at a rate of 87 and 79 percent respectively, compared to 69 percent of Hispanic students and 65 percent of Black students. Ultimately, [these inequities manifest in degree attainment](#), as 49 percent of white adults and 65 percent of Asian adults have obtained an associate's degree or higher, compared to just 26 percent of Latinx students, 32 percent of Black students, and 25 percent of Indigenous students.

It is important to note that the statistics for Asian and Hispanic students are inclusive to the diaspora of ethnicities and subpopulations within both racial groups. While data surrounding these populations may demonstrate higher levels of student success, it may not account for attainment gaps for Asian and Hispanic ethnic subpopulations and/or the intersection of SES or immigration status. Due to the nuance in Asian and Hispanic student data, it's vital that policymakers ensure policy adequately supports students at the intersection of race/ethnicity, SES, and immigration status to ensure equity gaps are addressed. In brief three, we will further explore disaggregated student data and a more nuanced understanding of student success.



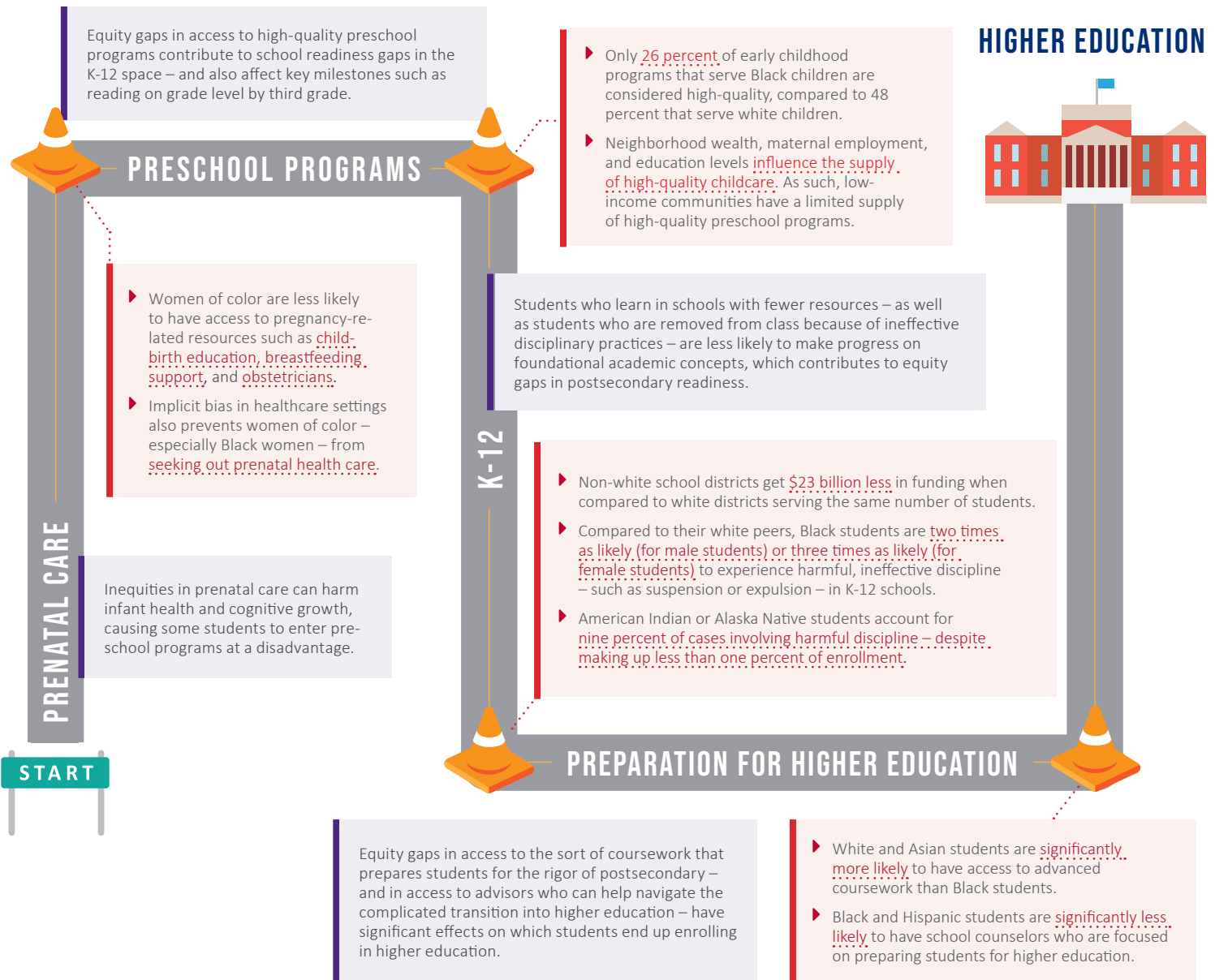


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EQUITY ROADBLOCKS ALONG THE PATH TO HIGHER EDUCATION

As state leaders consider policies related to attainment, they must remember that every student arrives at the doorstep of higher education with distinct lived experiences and educational backgrounds. Rather than retroactively embedding equity into policy, policymakers should ensure policy is designed to meet the needs of all students. This especially pertains to those historically excluded from postsecondary opportunities, including Black, Indigenous, Latinx, low-income, disabled, and adult learners.



BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLES OF STATE EQUITY INITIATIVES

While numerous barriers to equity exist along the education continuum, states and institutions of higher education are innovating to try to address these roadblocks. In order to overcome the barriers and close equity gaps, stakeholders and policymakers must create an explicit focus on equity to inform all portions of their work. Equity-focused policies prioritize institutional accountability and assess the impact of policies and programs on marginalized groups and equity gaps. Below are examples of state and institutional equity-focused policies and programs that are designed to break down the barriers to equity that currently exist across the education continuum.



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Educational Funding and Finances

One of the most prevalent ways to close equity gaps across the education continuum is to ensure that school funding and financial support are distributed equitably. There is invariable evidence that increases to funding have a statistically significant positive impact on student achievement.

Early Childhood and Pre-K Funding Recommendations and Best Practices:

- ▶ **Design a preschool/early childhood education system** that can be delivered in multiple settings, including family child care.
- ▶ **Invest in Head Start and other programs** that provide equitable access to families and children who may not be able to afford current early childhood education options.
- ▶ **Invest in early education that includes infants and toddlers** to better the entire early childhood system.

Financial Reform to Create more Equitable and Adequate Funding Formulas at K-12 Level:

- ▶ **Ensure that basic allotments of funds** cover all costs associated with providing a standardized, quality education.
- ▶ **Support special student programming and educational needs**, such as for students who are English Language Learners or deemed at-risk due to poverty, to ensure the additional resources needed to educate these populations are available.
- ▶ **Provide a dedicated stream of funding for facilities and infrastructure maintenance and updates** to ensure students have school buildings and transportation that support their education.

Targeting Funding and Financial Aid to Postsecondary Students Most in Need:

- ▶ **Prioritize need-based aid over merit-based aid** to ensure that those from disadvantaged backgrounds have the funds to attend postsecondary education.
- ▶ **Align state aid eligibility requirements** with current needs and demographics in order to better serve the student population.
- ▶ **Design financial aid programs as comprehensive systems** that holistically support students and their unmet needs, and allow aid to complement other sources of finances.

Academic Exposure and Opportunities

Along with more equitable funding, creating opportunities for students to be exposed to postsecondary education, and all the pathways that lead to a degree or credential, it is essential to close equity gaps. This is particularly true for students from low-income communities and communities of color, as these groups remain largely under-represented in postsecondary education across the nation.

Early Exposure to College in High School:

- ▶ **Utilize fee-free dual enrollment programs**, or the practice of enrolling in two academic institutions at once, usually at a high school and college. Dual enrollment courses in high school allow students to earn college credits, prepare for the rigor of a college class, and increase the likelihood that students will pursue and complete a college degree or credential.
- ▶ **Provide students and families with information on the college-going process.** Simplifying the process by which students obtain information on college applications and financial aid improves the likelihood a student will successfully complete applications and access higher education. This may be done through college preparation programs and/or creating an easy-to-find resource page on the internet that answers questions students and families might have about applying to and affording college.

Utilizing multiple pathways to postsecondary degrees/credentials:

- ▶ **Educate students about all paths to postsecondary degrees/credentials.** When discussing greater financial investments and improving access to higher education for students, policymakers should promote the various pathways to attain credentials and degrees beyond the traditional 4-year undergraduate pathway, such as stackable credentials and transfer processes.



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- ▶ **Explore shorter-term, online credentials.** Short-term and online credentials provide an opportunity for individuals to receive skills-based credentials tied to specific career pathways. These credentials can provide a high-wage pathway for those seeking to enter the workforce quickly, or those who plan to stack credentials over time.

Student Support Services

A final area in which equity gaps can be closed is through investment in student support services. Students across the education continuum have unique needs, and support for these needs is critical at every step of the education journey. Fortunately, states can explore several areas of opportunity that provide more personalized support for students of all populations.

Building Social Capital Across the Education Continuum:

- ▶ **Invest in creating a college-going culture in high school.** Students are more likely to attend postsecondary education when they attend a school with a strong college-going climate. This includes teachers that push students to go to college, intentional efforts to ensure students are prepared, and staff from the school who support students in completing their applications.
- ▶ **Market the benefits of a degree.** Postsecondary education continues to be a leading factor to improve intergenerational wealth. Policymakers should explore ways to market the benefits of a degree and state financial levers to support student access to postsecondary education.

Wrap-Around Student Services:

- ▶ **Cover all types of services that support students in the completion of their programs,** including traditional academic services such as career counseling and academic advisement, as well as other services such as mental health services, transportation assistance, childcare vouchers, and basic needs insecurity resources.

Data-Driven Interventions:

- ▶ **Technological advancements in programs such as Student Information Services (SISs)** allow school leaders and policymakers to track longitudinal data that is used to draw conclusions and create targeted interventions.
- ▶ **The creation of a robust state longitudinal data system (SLDS)** that contains student-level data throughout the entire education continuum can strengthen the effectiveness of student support tools by better informing the use of various tools.





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GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

For policymakers who are interested in narrowing equity gaps in postsecondary education, the above best practices and state exemplars are attractive policy strategies. Many state leaders may ask themselves: **How could I implement similar strategies in my state?** The following guiding questions will help policymakers identify current equity barriers that exist across the postsecondary education continuum in their respective states.

IDENTIFYING AND ELIMINATING RACIAL AND ETHNIC BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION ATTAINMENT

- What systemic and institutional structures exacerbate racial barriers in postsecondary education? How can state leaders work to diminish those barriers?
- How can equitable funding for students across the educational continuum reduce or eliminate racial barriers to postsecondary attainment?
- What data would be valuable to support policymakers in eliminating racial barriers in education?

STRATEGIES TO CREATE EDUCATION EQUITY

- Why is it important to address the entire educational continuum when trying to create educational equity and postsecondary attainment equity?
- What are easy strategies that policymakers could implement that would take little financial support or political capital?
- What strategies would be most successful in reducing educational inequity? What would it take to get consensus on these possible strategies?

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