Equity Now Toolkit

Advancing Racial Equity in Higher Education Through Federal Policy for Today's Students

TODAY'S STUDENTS
C O A L I T I O N

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Dear policymakers, leaders, and advocates,

Today's students of color face systemic inequities that are woven on campuses, in state halls, and in federal policies, and that are unfairly holding them back from achieving their goals. Despite the dedication and talent today's students bring to classrooms across the nation, many are not succeeding due to outdated and inequitable federal policies, allowing race to predict success and postsecondary outcomes. When we closely examine the data, Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, Latino, Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander students are disproportionately impacted by persistent gaps in our higher education system.

Even before the pandemic and the 2020 racial justice protests illuminated and exacerbated the racial barriers today's students face, we recognized the need for a diverse coalition of voices to push for urgently needed policy changes that will better serve today's learners, forming Today's Students Coalition (TSC) with 10 members in 2019. Today, TSC sits at the heart of a diverse group of the nation's leading policy and advocacy member organizations, affiliates, and student advocates united for impact on federal policy changes that better serve today's students.

TSC's *Equity Now Toolkit* builds on this critical work, a resource designed to guide and support our country's advocates and leaders in addressing racial disparities in higher education. The reforms in this toolkit offer a wide array of changes that can help bridge racial equity gaps in postsecondary student access, success, and completion. In the toolkit, you will find:

- Background information on racial equity and disparities in higher education outcomes;
- An overview of policy reforms that leaders can use to close racial equity gaps; and
- A list of resources readers can review to learn more about a particular issue.

Advancing racial equity in higher education should not be a partisan issue and must be championed by everyone. TSC is deeply committed to working with policymakers on both sides of the aisle to enact change for the benefit of today's students.

In Solidarity,

TODAY'S STUDENTS
C O A L I T I O N

Today's Students Coalition

Today's Students Coalition (TSC) defines racial equity in higher education as an intentional process of eliminating racial disparities and improving outcomes for today's students. This process includes identifying and dismantling policies, practices, viewpoints, and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race, and inevitably seeks opportunities to repair oppressive systems that harm historically marginalized students.

Current racial disparities in postsecondary education can be traced to decades of inequitable policy decisions that negatively impacted communities, such as the longstanding underfunding of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), lack of college preparation and counseling due to sorely under-resourced K-12 public schools beset by segregation, and inadequate investment in need-based financial aid policies.

Designed to support federal policymakers in leveraging existing research and evidence-based policy solutions to address some of the most persistent equity gaps in our higher education student outcomes, the toolkit is organized around four key pillars:

- Rethinking financial aid to serve today's students better;
- Investing in institutions that have primarily served students of color and supported their success;
- Improving and protecting data to advance racial equity; and
- Modernizing the Pell Grant with a focus on racial equity.

As our country reckons with the impacts of policies that maintain inequities, we must ensure that future policies — particularly at the federal level — not only seek to remedy these longstanding disparities but also meet today's students where they are by ensuring they have the tools and resources they need now to build a successful future. While the issues and solutions put forward in this toolkit are not exhaustive, they offer policymakers insights about addressing the racial disparities in our postsecondary education system.

There are several ways to measure student success in postsecondary education. For this toolkit, we chose to focus on and apply a racial equity lens to four key metrics, including postsecondary enrollment, retention, credential attainment, and median earnings. The purpose of the *Equity Now Toolkit* is to heighten the focus on disparities shown in the data and reinforce both the need for the implementation of the toolkit's policy recommendations and the imperative federal policymakers have to advance policy changes that bridge racial equity gaps.
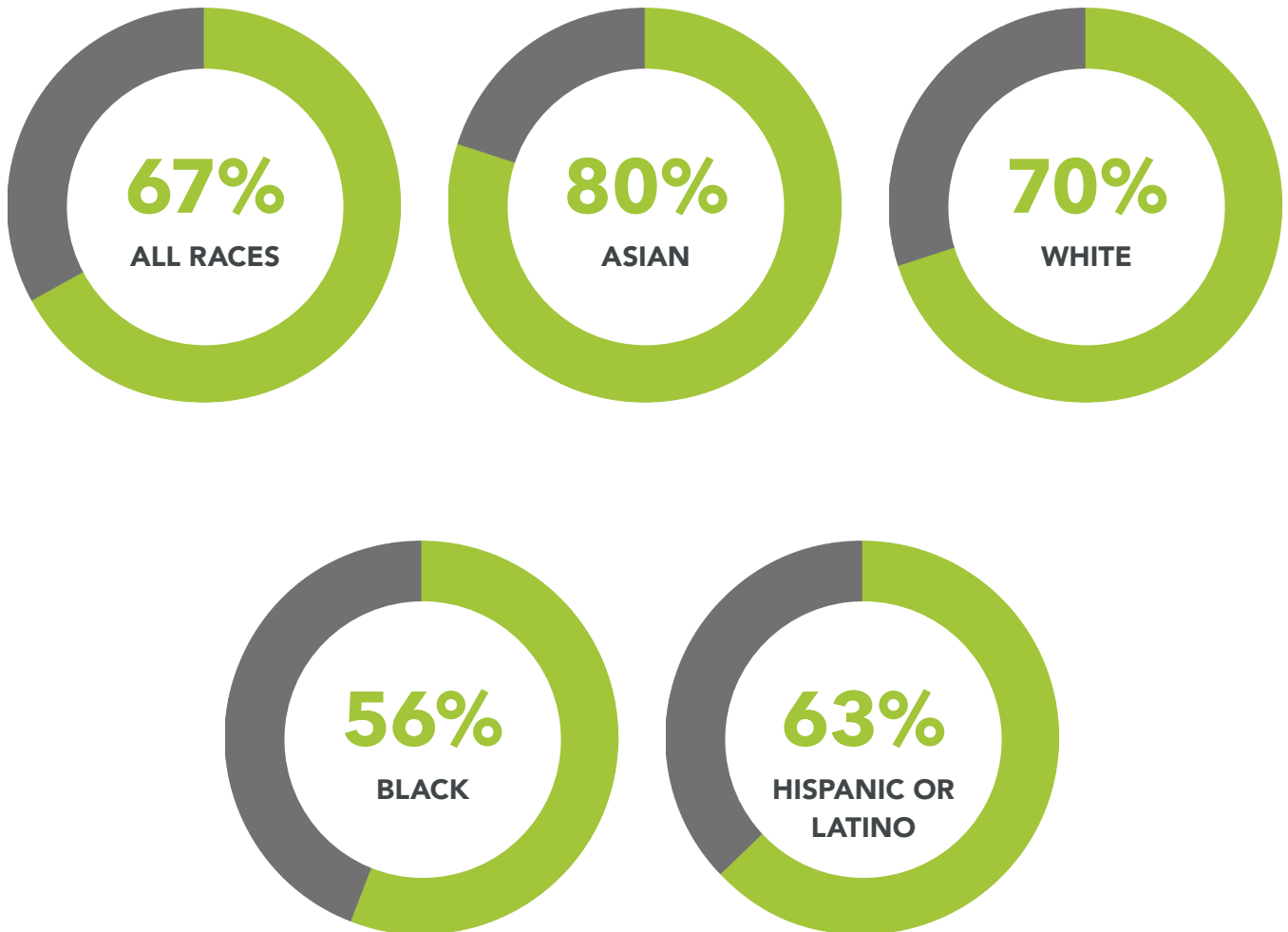
POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT

18- 24-year-olds Enrolled in Postsecondary Education, by Race and Ethnicity: 2021[1]

38%
ALL RACES

60%
ASIAN

38%
WHITE

37%
BLACK

33%
HISPANIC OR LATINO

28%
INDIGENOUS

RETENTION[2]

First-Year Retention, by Race and Ethnicity*: 2021[3]

67%
ALL RACES

80%
ASIAN

70%
WHITE

56%
BLACK

63%
HISPANIC OR LATINO

Data on Indigenous students is not available as it did not meet the source's reporting standards.[4]

POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT

Postsecondary Attainment of Adults Ages 25 and Older, by Race and Ethnicity: 2021 (Associate Degree or Higher)[5]

46% ALL RACES

66% ASIAN

50% WHITE

34% BLACK

28% HISPANIC OR LATINO

25% INDIGENOUS[32]
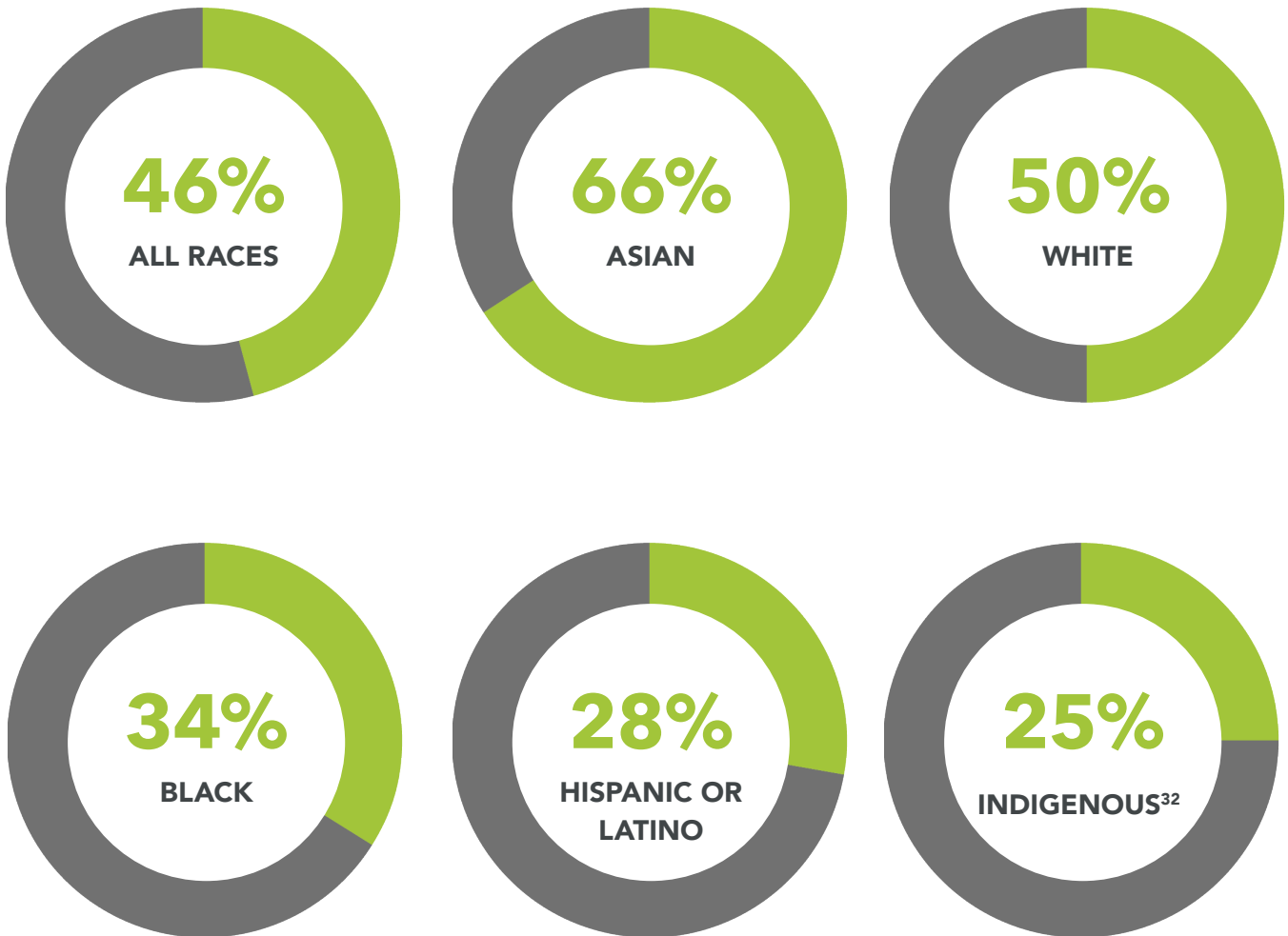
MEDIAN EARNINGS

Median Annual Earnings of Workers Ages 25 to 34, by Race and Ethnicity*: 2021[6]

	High School Diploma	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree or Higher
All Races	$39,710	$45,000	$65,000
Asian	$39,200	$44,690	$84,790
White	$41,810	$45,470	$67,000
Black	$35,050	$40,600	$54,340
Hispanic or Latino	$37,680	$42,180	$55,040

Data on Indigenous students is not available as it did not meet the source's reporting standards.[7]

Federal financial aid programs, including the Pell Grant, play an essential role in expanding higher education access and success for students with low incomes, many of whom are students of color. However, existing policies governing financial aid are outdated and leave too many of these students behind. To combat racial disparities in postsecondary education, federal policymakers should look at ways to rethink financial aid policies to fit the needs of today's students.

CREATE A PERMANENT FEDERAL EMERGENCY AID GRANT PROGRAM

Many students of color, parenting students, and students from low-income backgrounds seek higher education to attain a credential that will enhance their career prospects and economic mobility. However, these students face many barriers while pursuing their education, especially in meeting their basic needs and addressing any emergencies during their course of study. While federal need-based aid programs like the Pell Grant help students afford the direct costs associated with postsecondary education, it was not designed to meet unexpected variable expenses, like a car repair, a child care interruption, or a job loss.

A 2022 survey of students who received emergency aid grants through the federal Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) reported that the majority used these funds to meet their basic needs.[8]

61%
Food

50%
Housing

40%
Transportation

Policy Recommendation: Similar to programs established during the pandemic, federal policymakers should establish a permanent federally-funded emergency aid grant program, which would be a critical tool in supporting students through temporary, unanticipated emergencies and enable them to complete their educational programs.

Read more:

- **The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice:** Continuing the Federal Investment in Emergency Aid Grants
- **Higher Learning Advocates:** What Works for Today's Students – Microgrants
- **Today's Students Coalition:** College Emergency Aid – The Safety Net That Proves its Value for Today's Students

ENSURE QUALITY IN POSTSECONDARY PRISON EDUCATION PROGRAMS

In July 2021, the federal government lifted the ban on incarcerated students receiving Pell Grants for postsecondary prison education programs. This policy reversal is welcome news for justice-involved students and advances racial equity in higher education, as Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous Americans Americans are disproportionately incarcerated in the U.S.[9] However, since Pell Grants were last fully available to these students in 1994, the landscape of higher education in prison has substantially transformed.

Policy Recommendation: As new higher education programs in prison scale up, federal policymakers must take steps to ensure quality and completion of a high-quality credential leads to equitable postsecondary value for students upon release. Creating competitive federal grants to implement, expand, and rigorously evaluate postsecondary education programs for incarcerated learners receiving the Pell Grant is an important start.

The restoration of Pell Grant eligibility for justice-involved students means about **760,000 people in prisons** could eventually afford higher education.[10]

Read more:

- **Institute for Higher Education Policy:** Higher Education in Prison KPI Framework

- **Achieving the Dream:** Broadening our view of equity work: Supporting justice-impacted individuals

- **Education Trust:** Beyond the Ban: A Toolkit for Advancing College Opportunity for Justice-Impacted Students

SUPPORT AND FUND EFFORTS TO AWARD CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING

Data shows that awarding students academic credit for skills gained from life and work experiences — also known as credit for prior learning (CPL) — can save as much as $10,000 in tuition and an entire year of study.[11] CPL boosts credential completion rates for adult students and can close persistent equity gaps in credential attainment. However, current federal financial aid policies do not allow Title IV aid, including Pell Grants, to be utilized for the assessment and award of CPL.

Adults who earn credit for prior learning (CPL) are 17% more likely to graduate than adults who do not. The CPL completion benefit is

25%	**24%**	**13%**	**19%**
for adults at community colleges	for Hispanic or Latino adults	for Black adults	for Pell Grant recipients.[12]

Policy Recommendation: To improve the rates of completion among adult learners and students of color, federal policymakers should allow the use of Title IV financial aid for the assessment and awarding of CPL. Processes should also support institutions of higher education (IHEs) in developing and scaling best practices to implement the work well, which can include professional development and capacity building.

Read more:

- **Higher Learning Advocates:** How Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) Can Benefit Today's Students

- **Council for Adult and Experiential Learning:** How They Pay: The Voices of Adult Learners on College Affordability, and How Institutions Are Responding

PROVIDE AN AUTOMATIC RESET OF SATISFACTORY ACADEMIC PROGRESS (SAP)

Federal law and regulations require higher education institutions to establish criteria students must meet to remain eligible for financial aid, including Pell Grants. Satisfactory academic progress (SAP) is defined as maintaining a minimum 2.0 GPA and passing enough classes to graduate within 150% of the expected timeframe. Unfortunately, if a student falls short of SAP due to circumstances such as transportation challenges, lack of access to child care, illness of a family member, or a job loss, they can lose access to critical aid and are often forced to drop out of postsecondary education with a complicated road to reentry that is long, winding, and uncertain. Existing SAP policies disproportionately impact students of color and returning adult students.

A 2021 report of student experiences with SAP in California found that Black, Hispanic, Latino, and Indigenous students failed to meet SAP **more than twice the rate** of their white peers.[13]

Policy Recommendation: To close racial disparities in student completion and support the more than 40 million American adults with some college but no credential, federal policymakers should update current SAP legislative language to better reflect the realities of today's students. This would include, after two years of non-enrollment, granting students who lost access to their federal financial aid due to falling short of maintaining SAP an automatic reset of their academic standing.

Read more:

- **Higher Learning Advocates:** Satisfactory Academic Progress: Making Financial Aid Work for Today's Students

Invest in Institutions that have Primarily Served Students of Color and Supported Their Success

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving-Institutions (HSIs), Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs), and community colleges are all critical parts of the higher education system for today's students. However, they are also unique in that they serve the greatest share of students of color. For far too long, these institutions have been chronically underfunded, limiting their ability to expand their impact on students. As federal policymakers look for ways to advance racial equity in higher education, increasing investments in these high-impact, yet historically under-resourced institutions is an essential first step.

IMPROVE CREDIT TRANSFER PATHWAYS

For many students of color, starting their postsecondary journey at a community college and transferring to a four-year institution to earn a bachelor's degree is a reliable pathway to socioeconomic mobility. However, transferring academic credit between institutions and programs can be a complex and misaligned process, creating barriers for students in their pursuit of higher education. The broken system often leaves students with lost academic credit and exhausted financial aid eligibility due to the need to take redundant courses.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

15%
are Black

24%
are Hispanic or Latino

2%
are American Indian or Alaskan Native

7%
are Asian

45%
45% are from families making less than $25,000 per year.[14]

42%
of all student parents nationwide are community college students.[15]

Policy Recommendation: While addressing credit transfer issues requires collaborative efforts at all levels, federal policymakers should continue to push for more data transparency on student experiences and outcomes throughout the transfer process. Investing in institutions that prioritize transfer improvement to identify and scale best practices will strengthen transfer pathways for today's students.

Read more:

- **Institute for Higher Education Policy:** The Most Important Door That Will Ever Open: Realizing the Mission of Higher Education through Equitable Recruitment, Admissions, and Enrollment Policies — **Chapter 7:** Strengthening Transfer Pathways

- **Excelencia in Education:** Latino College Completion 2023 Fact Sheet — United States

- **Campaign for College Opportunity:** Chutes or Ladders? Strengthening California Community College Transfer So More Students Earn the Degrees They Seek

ENHANCE BROADBAND ACCESS AND CONNECTIVITY

The Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program (CMC), a temporary initiative, provided $268 million in grants to 93 institutions, including HBCUs and Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) to expand community technology hubs, upgrade classroom technology, and increase digital literacy skills at their school. The final tranche of funding for the CMC program was distributed to institutions in March 2023, and institutions have made significant strides. For instance, a $3.57 million grant to Tuskegee University in Alabama focused on upgrading the fiber optic network and classroom cabling, enhancing the cybersecurity posture of the institution, and increasing the capacity of learning spaces to support hybrid instruction.[16]

Policy Recommendation: To build on the progress made possible by the Connecting Minority Communities program and better equip these institutions to strengthen their broadband infrastructure, federal policymakers should sustain the CMC program beyond its pilot phase.

Read more:
- **Institute for Higher Education Policy:** Online Isn't Optional: Student Polling on Access to Internet and Devices

To date, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration has awarded CMC grants to 93 institutions, including 43 HBCUs, 24 HSIs, 21 MSIs, and five TCUs.[17]

INCREASE FACULTY AND STAFF DIVERSITY

Research shows faculty and staff diversity at IHEs significantly impacts college completion and student belonging.[18] All students benefit from diversity, but Black, Hispanic, and Latino students, in particular, are more likely to graduate when they are able to identify with the faculty on campus. Yet today, only 11.3% of full-time faculty at U.S. colleges and universities are Black, Hispanic, and Latino — and they are disproportionately on the non-tenure track.[19] Additionally, recent studies have shown that the racial diversity of U.S. tenure-track and tenured faculty is not increasing any faster than the diversity of the American public.

Across 1,250 institutions, the percentage of underrepresented tenure-track faculty members increased by 0.23 percentage points each year on average between 2013 and 2020. Meanwhile, the U.S. Census projects that the percentage of these same demographic groups in America's population will increase by 0.2 percentage points per year.[20]

Policy Recommendation: Federal policymakers can bolster faculty diversity and college completion by increasing funding for federal programs that support undergraduate and graduate research and the Institute of Education Sciences. Campus-based federal programs such as TRIO, Upward Bound, the McNair Scholars Program, Graduate Research Fellowship Programs, and Title III — B grant opportunities support both college completion for underrepresented students, and provide academic rigor to help future academics and researchers transition into faculty careers.

Read more:
- **Education Trust:** Faculty Diversity and Student Success Go Hand in Hand, So Why Are University Faculties So White?
- **New America:** What the Research Says About Faculty Diversity and Student Success
- **Excelencia in Education:** Latino Faculty in Postsecondary Education

ENSURE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO DUAL ENROLLMENT

Dual enrollment programs are unique partnerships between higher and K-12 education that allow high school students to enroll in college courses, earn college credit, and demonstrate college and career readiness. Participation in these programs correlates with improved graduation rates, postsecondary attendance, and more. Research has found that dual enrollment programs lead to higher degree and credential attainment for students from low-income backgrounds. Despite these benefits, disparities based on race and wealth persist in dual enrollment participation.

STUDENTS ENGAGE IN DUAL ENROLLMENT PROGRAMS.[21]

1 in 10
white students

1 in 15
Hispanic of Latino students

1 in 20
Black students

Policy Recommendation: As federal policymakers consider any legislation associated with improving and scaling dual enrollment programs, they should ensure that provisions prioritize access and support for low-income students and students of color.

Read more:

- **Jobs for the Future:** Achieving Equity in College in High School Programs
- **College in High School Alliance:** Evidence of Success / Higher Education Act
- **New America**: Who's Participating in Dual Enrollment?

Improve and protect student data to advance racial equity

Data is a critical tool to help ensure every student has transparent information, equitable opportunities, and the resources they need to succeed in higher education. However, barriers to disaggregated data collection, as well as fragmented and antiquated data systems, make our higher education system data rich, but information poor. Our existing postsecondary data systems are unprotected, incomplete, duplicative, inefficient, burdensome, and — worst of all — cannot answer pressing questions about student success and education equity. To advance policies that improve transparency and equitable access to opportunities for today's students, federal policymakers must improve how we collect, share, protect, and use data to inform decision-making.

IMPROVE FEDERAL STANDARDS FOR DATA COLLECTION AND REPORTING

Accurate and precise data is critical to advancing racial equity in higher education. The methods by which we collect, analyze, and report data on the race and ethnicity of students impact our ability to identify and address racial disparities in postsecondary education. The Biden administration has initiated efforts to update the standards for collecting and presenting student data on race and ethnicity for all federal reporting. However, there is still much work to do. For instance, many students are combined into an Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) category for purposes of data, masking inequities in outcomes between subgroups. Also, because Indigenous students make up a small portion of the population, many researchers tend to overlook or erase their data due to statistical limitations.

From 2010 to 2018, the country's **Asian American population grew by 28%**, and the **Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander population grew by 19%**, compared with only **6% growth for the total U.S. population**.[22]

Policy Recommendation: To ensure that all students are represented in policy and programmatic decisions, federal policymakers should pass legislation that requires government agencies and higher education institutions to disaggregate race and ethnicity data. A robust federal mandate would ensure consistency in how data are disaggregated and reported through clear guidance.

Read more:
- **Institute for Higher Education Policy**: Everyone Deserves to be Seen: Recommendations for Improved Federal Data on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders
- **American Indian College Fund**: Creating Visibility and Healthy Learning Environments for Native Americans in Higher Education

SUPPORT STATES IN IMPROVING POSTSECONDARY DATA SYSTEMS

Improving data quality and availability is critical for policymakers to better understand and effectively address longstanding racial inequities in higher education. However, robust postsecondary data collection and reporting requires time, skill, and funding. For decades, states have fallen short of adequately funding public higher education institutions, and these challenges were only exacerbated by the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic.

As of January 2020, only 16 states and the District of Columbia had full P-20W systems that captured data on early learning, K-12 education, postsecondary education, and workforce outcomes.[23]

Policy Recommendation: As states and higher education institutions continue to grapple with these funding challenges and strive to bridge equity gaps, federal policymakers should fund states to ensure the availability of racially disaggregated data on postsecondary graduates and workforce outcomes such as graduation rates, student debt and repayment, and median earnings.

Read more:

- **The Institute for College Access and Success**: Data for Equity: Closing Racial and Economic Gaps Through a Federal-State Partnership

- **National Skills Coalition**: Data for an Inclusive Economic Recovery

HELP STUDENTS MORE SEAMLESSLY CONNECT TO PUBLIC BENEFITS

Each year, a disproportionate number of students of color struggle to pay for their postsecondary education and meet their basic needs, including food, housing, health care, and child care. Many of these students may be eligible for existing federal support such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and other means-tested benefits. Still, these programs require beneficiaries to complete multiple applications for benefits — requiring time, resources, and information that may be difficult for students living with low-incomes.

Annually, nearly **2 million students** who are eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) do not participate, leaving about **$3 billion in benefits on the table**.[24]

Policy Recommendation: In April 2022, the U.S. Department of Education issued guidance to institutions of higher education on how they can use FAFSA data to inform students of their potential eligibility for the Affordable Connectivity Program, Child Tax Credit, Medicaid, and SNAP. However, federal policymakers and IHEs should do more to seamlessly connect data already possessed by the government about students' incomes and other eligibility requirements through FAFSA to ensure more students are aware of and can access the resources for which they are eligible.

Read more:

- **Federal Student Aid:** Use of FAFSA Data to Administer Federal Programs

- **The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice:** Closing the College SNAP Gap

- **Higher Learning Advocates:** Back to Basics: Solving Today's Students' Food, Housing, and Basic Needs Insecurities

SUPPORT HBCUs IN PREVENTING CYBERATTACKS

Since 2022, several higher education institutions, including more than six HBCUs, have fallen victim to campus-wide cyberattacks. These incidents resulted in disruptions to student learning, such as class closures, registration delays, and data ransoms. Protecting these schools should be a top priority for federal policymakers, especially given the longstanding funding inequities that have plagued these institutions.

In 2022, Lincoln College, an HBCU in Illinois, closed its doors after 157 storied years of serving students due in part to the impacts it sustained as a result of a cyberattack.[25]

Policy Recommendation: In late 2022 and early 2023, the Biden administration announced they are awarding grants through the Project School Emergency Response to Violence (SERV) program to HBCUs after a wave of targeted bomb threats.[26] Federal policymakers should identify a funding source and mechanism similar to SERV grants, but in a proactive manner, to provide these institutions with the resources needed to shore up their data systems and protect against cyberattacks and other impediments to student learning.

Read more:

- **Federal Bureau of Investigation**: HBCUs at Risk: Examining Federal Support for Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Modernize the Pell Grant with a focus on racial equity

Since 1972, the Pell Grant has been a critical component of financial aid and higher education access for students from low-income backgrounds, as well as nearly 60% of Black undergraduates and almost half of all Hispanic and Latino undergraduates. However, despite the rising cost of postsecondary education and the increasingly diverse demographics of today's students, not much has changed about the program. To ensure that more low-income students and students of color have access to the benefits associated with higher education, federal policymakers must make changes to the program that prioritize the needs and realities of today's students.

DOUBLE THE MAXIMUM AWARD OF THE PELL GRANT

In 1975, at the peak of the program, the maximum Pell Grant award covered three-fourths of the average cost of attendance at a four-year public institution for low- and middle-income students. Today, despite recent boosts (of $400 in 2022 and $500 in 2023), the maximum award of $7,395 still covers the lowest share of costs (30%) in the program's 50+ year history.[27]

The majority of full-time undergraduate students of color received Pell Grants[28]

71.8% OF BLACK

61.6% STUDENTS

59.8% OF INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

58.5% OF PACIFIC ISLANDER STUDENTS

Policy Recommendation: To ensure that the Pell Grant maintains its success in unlocking higher education access for students from low-income backgrounds, federal policymakers should increase the maximum award of the Pell Grant to at least $13,000 so that it covers at least roughly half of the average cost of attendance at a public four-year institution.

Read more:
- **National College Attainment Network**: Double Pell for College Affordability
- **Double Pell Alliance**: The Case for Doubling Pell

EXPAND PELL GRANT ACCESS TO UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS

One in 5 recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program are enrolled in higher education, and another one-third of DACA recipients are in high school, examining their postsecondary and workforce options after graduation. While DREAMers bring tremendous grit and determination to our country, they are currently ineligible to receive federal financial aid, including the Pell Grant.

The United States of America is home to **more than 427,000** undocumented college students, including DACA recipients.

As of 2023, 18 states and the District of Columbia provided undocumented students with access to state financial aid.[29]

Policy Recommendation: To reduce financial barriers and help more people realize their American dream, federal policymakers should expand federal financial aid eligibility, including Pell Grants to students with qualifying incomes who are eligible for the DACA program, Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and Deferred Enforced Departure (DED).

Read more:
- **Higher Education Immigration Portal**: Undocumented Students in Higher Education
- **Education Trust**: Higher Education Access and Success for Undocumented Students Start with 9 Key Criteria

PROVIDE A RESET OF LIFETIME LIMITS ON PELL GRANTS

Returning adult learners with some college but no degree, who are more likely to be Black, Hispanic and Latino, may have already exhausted their lifetime Pell Grants during their previous attempts at a college credential. Too often, this is because their credits did not transfer or they had to pause their studies to care for themselves, their children, or a relative. Federal financial aid policies allow students to take up to 7.5 years to finish their bachelor's degree, but a legislative change enacted in 2011 limited Pell Grant eligibility to only six years, creating a different and unfair standard for Pell Grant recipients (many of whom are considered low-income) than for other students.

As of 2023, more than:

- **40.4 million** adults have some college but no credential (SCNC);

- **43%** of the total SCNC population are Black, Hispanic, and Latino;

- compared to **34.7%** of the overall undergraduate population.[30]

Policy Recommendation: Federal policymakers should provide a reset of Pell lifetime limits for select adult learners. A strategically implemented reset could target those seeking to pursue credentials leading to high-demand occupations in industries that are critical to our country's economic growth.

Read more:
- **Council for Adult and Experiential Learning**: How They Pay: The Voices of Adult Learners on College Affordability, and How Institutions Are Responding

ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR STUDENT OUTCOMES IN ALL PELL REFORM

Because so many students of color rely on the Pell Grant to access higher education, any reforms to the program should be driven by transparent student data and a desire to ensure accountability for student success measures. Federal policy should guard students from inferior program offerings and ensure when they complete a program, they have a strong return on their investment.

Policy Recommendation: As federal policymakers consider making adjustments to the Pell Grant program, including those associated with the aforementioned recommendations as well as Workforce Pell, they should ensure accountability for student outcomes is prioritized. Improvements to the Pell Grant program will require policymakers to address systemic inequities through a racial equity lens to identify and address the root causes of economic and racial disparities in student enrollment and success.

Read more:
- **Young Invincibles**: Reimagining Federal Pell Grants

~6.2M

undergraduate students received a Pell Grant in the 2021-2022 award year.

Of these recipients, the average award was

$4,160

and just over

77%

had family incomes of less than

$40,000 [31]

Conclusion

Advancing racial equity in higher education is paramount and requires collective action to support and uplift all of today's students. When we challenge and interrogate policies that have historically left communities behind, we can build an equitable future that makes all Americans proud of themselves and their country. A future in which more students can receive the resources they need to learn, finish their education, earn a credential, and improve their lives through economic mobility. As noted earlier, the policy solutions put forth in this toolkit are not exhaustive, but a necessary starting point that policymakers and institutional leaders can pursue to reverse some of the persistent racial inequities in higher education access, success, and completion.

Acknowledgments

Today's Students Coalition (TSC) sits at the heart of a diverse group of the nation's leading policy and advocacy member organizations, affiliates, and student advocates united for impact on federal policy changes that better serve today's students. The Coalition is dedicated to forging the future of higher education through bipartisan initiatives focused on the needs of learners who are working adults, parenting students, military-connected, and first-generation students. Learn more at www.todaysstudentscoalition.org

Policy positions of the Today's Students Coalition represent the prevailing viewpoints of its membership and do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints and perspectives of each individual member.

Richard Davis Jr. is is the lead author of this toolkit. This toolkit would not have been possible without the valuable insight, support, and input of TSC's Racial Equity Subcommittee — Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, Center for First-Generation Student Success, Generation Hope, Higher Learning Advocates, Institute for Higher Education Policy, Jobs for the Future, Scholarship America, UPCEA, and Young Invincibles.

TSC would also like to acknowledge the dedication and determination of those at the heart of all our work — today's students.

[1] National Center for Education Statistics, "College Enrollment Rates (College enrollment rates of 18- to 24-year-olds, by race/ethnicity: 2010 and 2021)," May 2023, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cpb/college-enrollment-rate#2.

[2] "Retention rate" refers to the percentage of students who return to the same institution for their second year.

[3] National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, "Persistence & Retention – 2021," July 2023, https://nscresearchcenter.org/persistence-retention.

[4] Data on Indigenous students is not available as it did not meet the source's reporting standards.

[5] Lumina Foundation, "A Stronger Nation Report," Jan 2023, https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress/racial_equity.

[6] National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics: Median annual earnings of full-time year-round workers 25 to 34 years old, October 2022, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_502.30.asp?current=yes.

[7] Data on Indigenous students is not available as it did not meet the source's reporting standards.

[8] National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, and HCM Strategists, "Evaluating Student and Institutional Experiences With HEERF," September 2022, https://www.nasfaa.org/uploads/documents/Evaluating_Student_and_Institutional_Experiences_with_HEERF.pdf.

[9] Mike Wessler, "Updated charts provide insights on racial disparities, correctional control, jail suicides, and more," Prison Policy Initiative, May 2022, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/05/19/updated_charts.

[10] U.S. Department of Education, "U.S. Department of Education to Launch Application Process to Expand Federal Pell Grant Access for Individuals Who Are Confined or Incarcerated," June 2023, https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-launch-application-process-expand-federal-pell-grant-access-individuals-who-are-confined-or-incarcerated.

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