

Five Principles for Creating Equity by Design



Reducing inequities in educational attainment by race and ethnicity will require deliberate and explicit effort. In this handout, we outline strategies for higher education institutions to take action based on the five overarching principles for ensuring *equity by design**:

Principle 1: Clarity in language, goals, and measures is vital to effective equitable practices.

Principle 2: ‘Equity-mindedness’ should be the guiding paradigm for language and action.

Principle 3: Equitable practice and policies are designed to accommodate differences in the contexts of student’s learning—not to treat all students the same.

Principle 4: Enacting equity requires a continual process of learning, disaggregating data, and questioning assumptions about relevance and effectiveness.

Principle 5: Equity must be enacted as a pervasive institution- and system-wide principle

*The content in this handout was adapted from *America’s Unmet Promise: The imperative for equity in higher education*, written by Witham, K., Malcom-Piqueux, L. E., Dowd, A. C., and Bensimon, E. M. (2015). To order a copy of this publication or to learn about other AAC&U publications, visit www.aacu.org.



1

Clarity in language, goals, and measures is vital to effective equitable practices.

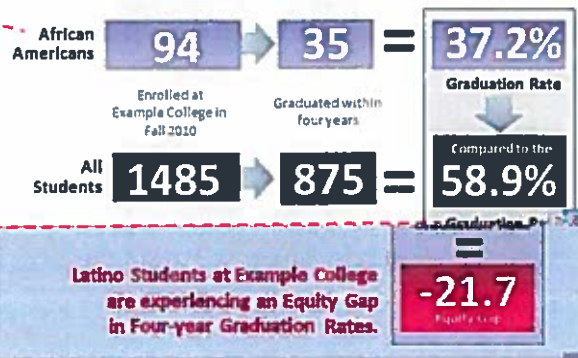
Institutions achieving **Principle 1** in a strategic plan, for example, would name:

The racial/ethnic student group(s) reforms are meant to support. (Avoid terms that continue to aggregate and hide differences in outcomes, like underrepresented minority--URM).

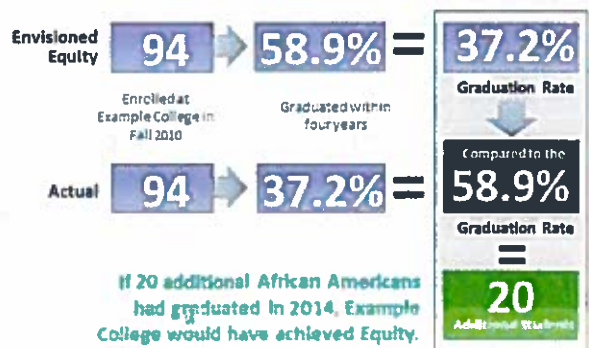
A plan for ongoing assessment of the impact of the proposed equitable practices & policies.

Example strategic plan text.

Equity Gap: African American students' four-year graduation rate in 2014 was 37.2%. Compared to the all student graduate rate of 58.9%, this represents a -21.7 percentage point equity gap.



Equity goal: By 2020, we will increase Latino/a student's four-year graduation rates to 63% -- or to ideally matching the 2020 all student graduation rate.



The following strategies will be implemented to achieve this goal:

- All academic departments and student support programs will report to the provost each semester on the participation and/or success rates of students, disaggregated by race/ethnicity.



2

'Equity-mindedness' should be the guiding paradigm for language and action.

Institutions achieving **Principle 2**:

A. Adopt language (in syllabi, websites, admissions materials, course catalogs, advising materials, etc.) that focuses on the actions of educational institutions and systems, *not the actions of students they have been failing.*

This language:

Foregrounds institutional responsibilities rather than students' deficiencies.

Names positive goals and the expectation that all students can achieve them.

B. Remove all language that:

Reflects assumptions about students' views of their own identities (For example, who self-identifies as "at risk" or "disadvantaged"?).

Blames students.

C. Providing regular training for faculty and staff that:

- Includes ways to engage them in understanding how their practices may communicate assumptions that students perceive as discouraging, alienating, or even hostile.
- Builds authentic opportunities and incentives for faculty and staff to learn and engage in changing their practices.

Example A: Support program website language.

College Student Support Program

The Pathways to Academic Success Program is designed to ***make academic requirements and sequences more clear and accessible, and to remove barriers that delay students' progress,*** particularly for underrepresented students, toward ***earning a credential or transferring.***

Example B: Support program website language.

College Student Support Program

The Pathways to Academic Success Program is designed to help ***at-risk students...***

...make good choices about courses in order to make timely progress toward earning a credential or transferring.



3

Equitable practice and policies are designed to accommodate differences in the contexts of student's learning—not to treat all students the same.

Achieving equality in outcomes does not mean—in fact cannot mean—treating all students as though they are the same. Rather, equity in design means *it is our responsibility to inquire into, understand, and account for the different ways students may access educational opportunities.*

Institutions achieving **Principle 3**:

A. Assess and adapt their education models so that they:

Best fit local contexts and populations.

Allow for ongoing **adaptability and flexibility** by incorporating different approaches to learning.

Create **feedback loops** and points of input for students to help shape their own experiences and to evaluate and improve initiatives.

Example of equity-minded design.

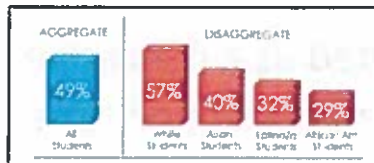
First-year Experience Program



A large public university develops a first-year experience program **organized around cohorts of students, including cohorts of residential, commuter, and transfer students.** Academic and social supports are built into students' schedules **depending on the times when they are most likely to be on campus,** including adjacent to evening course times.

B. Monitor programs and innovations to ensure that they do not create or exacerbate patterns of stratification. Examples of questions to monitor equity-in-design include:

- *Does the program/innovation create stratification between different student groups, for example, commuters and residential students, or between those who have regular access to the Internet and those who do not?*
- *What is the racial/ethnic representation among participating student groups (commuters, residential students, students with/without internet access) – are there racial ethnic groups that are over- or under-represented in a way that could cause further inequities?*



4

Enacting equity requires a continual process of learning, disaggregating data, and questioning assumptions about relevance and effectiveness.

Enacting equity as a principle for the design of new educational models requires that we build into the process of implementation the capacity to continue to *learn, question assumptions, and evaluate outcomes*.

Institutions achieving **Principle 4**:

Collect data disaggregated by race and ethnicity each semester to determine if there are inequities in representation or outcomes.

Conduct self-assessment (like interviews with faculty, staff, and students) to determine actual day-to-day practices and how students experience them. *Do not be deterred by initial findings that blame students* – continue on until you discover how institutional practices are or are not serving specific student group needs.

Use findings from self-assessment to change practices to fit the unique needs of their students.

Create plans to re-evaluate practice changes after they are implemented – it's important to see if the changes are addressing the root cause of any inequities.

An example of on-going learning.

First-year Experience Program



A public Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) realizes that its ***Latino students are retained at lower rates than other students***. ***Administrators survey first-year students*** and find that many Latino students express a lack of awareness about academic and social supports available to them. ***Administrators also survey faculty and professional staff*** and find that many on campus believe that the university “does enough” to support Latino students, but that the students themselves do not make time to seek out support. ***The institution redesigns the summer orientation program*** so that students and their families have an opportunity to meet with representatives from various student support services. The institution also implements ***ongoing professional development for faculty and student affairs staff on cultural inclusivity***.



5

Equity must be enacted as a pervasive institution- and system-wide principle

Equity has to be a pervasive quality of institutional practice and policy. At Institution's achieving **Principle 5**:

- Equity initiatives permeate all areas of the institution, including “core” management operations such as budgeting, hiring and promotion policies, assessment, and internal accountability structures and indicators.
- There is clear, compelling, and consistent messaging about the urgency of reducing disparities through equitable policies and practices – and these messages are adapted to the needs of unique audiences.
- Messages about the importance of achieving equity are communicated from all levels of campus leadership.
- Equity is an explicit dimension of the framing and communication of all new models and model-reforms (e.g., alongside economic or other rationales). Equity does not appear as an “add-on” goal buried within the messaging about an initiative.

