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EQUITY FIRST: Priorities for Higher Education Partnerships and Investments

Universal approaches have not sufficiently improved higher education outcomes for Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, and students from low-income backgrounds because these broad interventions are not targeted toward specific populations. Student voices and interests must be centered in policy and practice, and higher education leaders and institutions that work with and on behalf of Black, Latino, or Indigenous students are well positioned to identify the programs, partnerships, and investments that will most benefit those students. Having clear alignment on the high impact policy and programmatic priorities of these higher education leaders helps funders, policymakers, and technical assistance providers make investments that are more racially equitable.

To help foster that alignment and develop a shared understanding about promising investments for promoting success for Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, and students from low-income backgrounds, The Education Trust convened key leaders from a number of intermediary higher education organizations. These leaders discussed policy and programmatic priorities that would support the equitable distribution and implementation of public and private higher education funding; their discussion consisted of two parts:

- A convening of members of the higher education community — including higher education intermediaries, researchers, and advocates (referred to as "higher education leaders" throughout this document), as well as representatives from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) and other philanthropic foundations, who attended as observers.

- A post-convening debrief for funders to reflect on higher education leaders' discussions and add their own perspectives.

Throughout the convening, Ed Trust staff intentionally centered the perspectives of the intermediary organizations that work most closely with Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, and students from low-income backgrounds. Following robust discussions in small- and whole-group formats, participants identified three core areas of need that will require critical investments to effectively serve Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, and students from low-income backgrounds:

- Institutional capacity building — including financial resources; physical infrastructure, such as facilities and internet connectivity; and human infrastructure, such as faculty and staff

- Comprehensive, wraparound student supports, and flexible and equity-focused funding to support these

- Asset-based, human- and student-centered approaches that prioritize those who will be most affected by an investment or initiative

PANELISTS AND PARTICIPANTS REPEATEDLY HIGHLIGHTED FIVE PRIORITIES THAT WILL HELP TO ENSURE EQUITY IN THESE HIGHER EDUCATION INVESTMENTS:

1. Put student voices first.

2. Rely on existing experts and invest in building expertise.

3. Build cultural competence and show humility toward students, their communities, and the organizations that represent them.

4. Interrogate data and reevaluate underlying assumptions and metrics.

5. Focus on flexible dollars that institutions can use to address students' greatest needs.

PRIORITIES FOR EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION INVESTMENTS

1) Put student voices first.

The most promising programs for improving the success of Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, and students from low-income backgrounds are those that center students. Panelists noted that colleges should be "student ready" — meaning that they should be heavily focused on supporting students and helping them to graduate rather than merely enrolling them — and advocated for the use of curricula and practices that center student success. Panelists and attendees also highlighted the importance of listening first and foremost to the students themselves, noting that programs should give students agency to make their own educational choices, rather than prescribing set paths, and consider how students' identities inform how they learn and engage with university course matter.

As a part of being responsive to students, institutions must also provide wraparound supports to meet students' basic needs and ensure that they can learn in healthy environments. The pandemic not only exposed alarming rates of food and housing insecurity among college students, but compounded the challenges facing many students who were already vulnerable.[1] Panelists and attendees called for a number of interventions to help meet students' holistic needs, including emergency student aid; culturally responsive mental health resources; mentorship programs; greater access to technology, coupled with support for using technology; and various programs designed to foster connections to students' cultures and address food and housing insecurity.

2) Rely on existing experts and invest in building expertise.

Funders should draw on the expertise of individuals with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds; those already working with Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, and students from low-income backgrounds; as well as intermediary organizations and service providers that understand the specific needs of students of color and know which institutions are serving those students well.

One panelist, for example, noted that at tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), investments that bring on service providers from Indigenous backgrounds or those already trained in Indigenous cultures can help ensure that everyone involved does what's best for TCUs and Indigenous students, while minimizing the need to repeatedly train new providers on how to work with them and meet their unique needs. Similarly, investments could be made in recruiting faculty from within communities of color via Grow Your Own programs, so that students can have professors with diverse worldviews and with whom they identify.

1. https://edtrust.org/resource/how-to-end-the-hunger-and-homelessness-crisis-among-college-students/

3) Build cultural competence and humility toward students, their communities, and the organizations that represent them.

Funders and higher education leaders should directly engage with the communities they seek to serve before they act. They should also reach out to those who already represent and engage with Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, and students from low-income backgrounds. Funders should spend more time listening to, understanding, and building trust in communities, rather than jumping right into developing or training community members. Participants agreed that funders "can't just come into wanting to do equity work without understanding communities first."

One small group, for example, challenged funders' assumptions about Indigenous communities' interest in summer programs. Instead of assuming that Indigenous students have no interest in such programs, funders might, by listening to community members, come to understand that there are important cultural practices, events, and rituals taking place at that time of year that may take priority over attending summer programs. To maximize impact, funders must find ways to consult, connect, and collaborate with the communities they wish to serve. Possible strategies might include formal consultation — such as creating funded advisory boards comprised of institutions and intermediaries that are closest to Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, and students from low-income backgrounds — and informal and intentional engagement with community members and trusted local partners to deepen relationships with impacted communities.

Different situations may require different approaches. Depending on the context and factors like existing relationships or capacity, it may at times be appropriate for a funder to rely on a trusted institution or intermediary to help build cultural competence and train others. At other times — for example, if a funder is working with a marginalized community with which it has not engaged previously — the funder might be better off listening first — for example, holding a campus listening session to get student perspectives — and acting later.

4) Interrogate data and reevaluate the underlying assumptions and metrics.

Funders should invest in improving institutional data infrastructure and consider whether existing data standards accurately capture the higher education experiences and needs of Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, and students from low-income backgrounds. The discussions about data highlighted the need for better data infrastructure and the limitations of existing data standards. Leaders of intermediary organizations noted that many institutions can't begin to assess how well they are serving students of color, apply for grants, or meet grant deliverables without first obtaining baseline data.

Participants also noted how existing race and ethnicity data standards can limit the ability of funders, intermediaries, and institutions to understand the communities they are trying to serve. For example, existing race and ethnicity data standards fail to capture some Indigenous students — particularly those who associate with multiple tribes or no tribes. As a result, Indigenous students who need greater resources to succeed in higher education may be invisible or overlooked because they show up as statistically "insignificant" in the data or are aggregated as "others." Diverse Asian American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students are similarly rendered invisible by current data standards, which can conceal significant disparities between ethnic groups by averaging outcomes. Census data, for example, reveals that Southeast Asian Americans are less likely to have attained any form of postsecondary education compared to Asians overall, White students, and the national average; but you wouldn't know that if the data regarded all Asian American students as a single, homogenous group (which they most certainly are not). Examining intersectional identities — such as the intersection of race and ethnicity with gender, sexual orientation,

and class — would also yield a richer and deeper understanding of students' higher education experiences, but these intersections are not often cross-tabulated and interrogated. Some participants said they view disaggregated data as crucial and "non-negotiable."

Participants noted that funders should consider tying culturally responsive metrics to grants. In addition to metrics like enrollment, completion, and attainment, funders could assess institutions based on campus racial climate — which is key for the success of students of color — using metrics for faculty diversity and the number of student cultural centers on campus that support students of color and foster a sense of belonging. Investments and programs should account for different beliefs that Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, and students from low-income backgrounds may hold about higher education because of their lived experiences.

5) Focus on flexible dollars that institutions can use to address their greatest needs.

Institutions that serve Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, and students from low-income backgrounds must be adequately and equitably funded. Longstanding underinvestment has left institutions serving the most students of color with fewer resources to serve students who have greater needs. In 2021, Maryland directed an additional $577 million to the state's HBCUs after years of state-supported segregation and inequity. Meanwhile, a report by the Tennessee Office of Legislative Budget Analysis found that the state owes Tennessee State University (TSU), the state's only public HBCU, between $150 million and $544 million in land-grant funds. With sufficient funding, these institutions will be able to make long-term, sustainable changes to increase capacity. They'll be able to invest in faculty through improved salaries and professional development; shift staff culture toward a student-centered approach; re-evaluate hiring practices with an eye toward how new positions and new recruits can advance equity and student success; and improve human resource policies by offering time off for restoration and mental health supports.

HBCUs, minority-serving institutions, and tribal colleges and universities understand the needs of Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, and students from low-income backgrounds, but they are often underfunded and underutilized. Additional funds would equip them to address the specific needs of more underserved students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency support helped many under-resourced HBCUs, TCUs, and MSIs respond to the pandemic and meet the needs of vulnerable students in the same ways that more well-resourced institutions could. That funding should not be a one-time allotment that's reserved for a national emergency like a pandemic.

Funders need to rethink their funding strategies to ensure resource equity and long-term sustainability. This could entail moving away from typical three- to five-year grant cycles and adopting longer time frames that give institutions the capacity to build up their balance sheets and leverage resources to provide even more opportunities for Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, and students from low-income backgrounds. Intermediaries and funders should also work to minimize forced competition for funding. Funders should be proactive about identifying and soliciting communities and institutions in need of additional resources but with less capacity to pursue grants, instead of always giving opportunities to better-resourced institutions with greater grant-seeking capacity. Funders could aggregate funding to intermediaries, which might help target funds toward smaller institutions. Intermediaries could minimize inequities in the competitive grant selection process by helping institutions meet funders' grant application requirements — e.g., by assisting with applications or performance reports — and leaving institutions to do the actual work of serving students.

While the pandemic has heightened the needs of Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, and students from low-income backgrounds and laid bare the ways in which higher education has thus far failed to serve _all_ students, a number of philanthropic leaders and policymakers have stepped up to ensure that the most vulnerable students get the resources they need to succeed. Yet, without an explicit commitment to centering the needs of those students, any new investment — no matter how sizeable — may end up perpetuating educational inequities. The priorities for funding equity outlined here reflect the expertise of organizations that have worked closely with marginalized students, and we hope that they will generate a deeper exploration of funding and resource equity. Some of the higher education organizations that participated in this convening are listed below, and we encourage other higher education leaders and funders to adopt these priorities and make racial equity a foundational pillar of their programming and investment strategies.

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS INCLUDED:

American Indian Higher Education Consortium

Campaign for College Opportunity

Community College Research Center

Complete College America

Excelencia in Education

Institute for Higher Education Policy

National Indian Education Association

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities

Thurgood Marshall College Fund

United Negro College Fund