

REOPENING WITH EQUITY:

10 Questions for Campus and System Leaders

New York State’s college students and higher education institutions are grappling with enormous uncertainty as the new academic year approaches. Even as many colleges and universities are making extraordinary efforts and facing increased financial strain in these unprecedented circumstances, students need greater support than ever before.

REACH NY is a network of civil rights, student-serving, veteran, education, and civic organizations dedicated to a statewide postsecondary equity agenda that results in more first-generation and other under-represented students earning a college degree or high-quality workforce credential. As colleges and universities across New York continue to prepare their plans for reopening this fall – whether in-person, through distance learning, or a blend of the two – we believe that equity issues must be explicitly addressed alongside the paramount health and safety concerns.

The pandemic has drawn needed attention to the underlying inequities in our education system, society, and economy, even as it has exacerbated many of these challenges. Many postsecondary institutions have begun to earnestly confront the inequities that we know many underserved students have struggled with for years: connecting students

with the needed academic and non-academic supports, closing the digital divide, securing internships, meeting basic needs, and adequately preparing for life post-graduation. At the same time, the nation is simultaneously undergoing a necessary reckoning with the systemic racism that is at the foundation of these disparities. For the sake of all students, colleges and universities should urgently tackle this second pandemic – which has been historically evident in student enrollment, persistence, and completion outcomes – by creating inclusive environments that are student-centered and equity-focused.

These dual pandemics are the context for the coming academic year.

We do not know yet what “the new normal” will look like – but it is certain that it must be different both for higher education institutions, which are facing a sudden shock to their operating models, and for students, especially those who have been historically underserved by our education system. In response, REACH NY calls on the state and all colleges and universities to recognize the urgent need to support students both during and in the aftermath of the dual pandemics and set a path to a stronger, more equitable higher education system for the future.

1

What information did the institution collect from its student body – specifically from first-generation college students – and from faculty about their **experience during campus closures** in the spring semester and how has it shaped the institution’s plans for the fall?

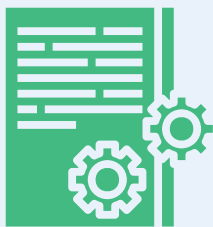
EQUITY STAT:

Based on their experience during campus closures, New York State college students identify the following as top areas of improvement needed to support student success:



instruction and course quality

59%



studying tools

56%



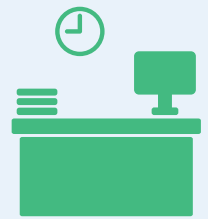
tutoring or other academic support resources

52%



collaboration tools for group work or projects

51%



academic advising

45%

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN EQUITY-DRIVEN REOPENING PLAN:

- Meaningful student feedback from first-generation college students and specifically from under-represented student groups on what worked and didn't work during campus closures and how to impact equity for next fall and beyond
- Meaningful faculty feedback to ensure that faculty have support in providing an improved student experience if remote instruction continues
- Strategies – including improved outreach efforts – to identify and close the gaps between the services students need and the services that were provided last semester
- Use of the institutional portion of CARES Act funds aligned with these strategies

2

How will institutions provide specific support to **incoming first-year students**, especially those who are first-generation college students and other traditionally underserved students?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN EQUITY-DRIVEN REOPENING PLAN:

- Use of summer bridge programs to improve academic preparedness for college-level work
- Commitment to provide corequisite, credit-bearing courses instead of traditional remediation for students who need additional academic support
- Description of how students will be connected – remotely or in-person – to faculty and to peers to strengthen their ties to the campus community
- Use of the institutional and financial aid portions of CARES Act funds aligned with these strategies, including for increased tutoring and advising support



3

How will institutions meet the needs of students and help them **stay on track to graduation and successful transition to the workforce** regardless of whether fall instruction is in-person, remote, or blended?

EQUITY STAT:

More than four in five students in New York are concerned about being on track to graduate from their program. These concerns are particularly high among Black and Latinx students.



81%
are concerned
about being on
track to graduate

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN EQUITY-DRIVEN REOPENING PLAN:

- Strategies that include clear roles for academic and career counselors
- “Intrusive” advising that proactively identifies students who are at risk and directs support to them
- Strategies to leverage alumni networks and private industry partnerships to support students with internship and job opportunities
- Strategies that strengthen students’ connection to faculty
- Increased use of culturally responsive and trauma-informed pedagogy, supported by professional learning for all student-facing faculty and staff
- Use of the institutional portion of CARES Act funds aligned with these strategies

4

How will institutions prepare to meet the specific needs of students in **blended or distance learning**?

EQUITY STAT:

More than half of New York college students report that being disconnected from their classes, professors, and classmates are among the most challenging aspects of being enrolled in college during the pandemic.



WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN EQUITY-DRIVEN REOPENING PLAN:

- Plans to assess and meet student and faculty technology needs
- Strategies for ensuring high quality of instruction
- Regular and substantive interactions and check-ins with students
- Strategies for using every check-in and interaction with a student as an opportunity to assess well-being and needed support
- Partnerships with community-based organizations to strengthen connection to students and promote engagement
- Use of the institutional portion of CARES Act funds aligned with these strategies

5

How will institutions help students meet **basic needs** including housing, health, food, school supplies, transportation, and child care?

EQUITY STAT:

Only 42% of New York college students think they will be able to afford basic expenses like food, housing and tuition if the pandemic continues. Three out of four students say they will need more financial aid when they return to school this fall. One in three students report skipping a meal or reducing how much they eat as a result of the pandemic.



WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN EQUITY-DRIVEN REOPENING PLAN:

- On-campus food supports including food pantries and grab-and-go food services
- Plans to provide campus-sponsored housing options for students who are housing insecure if a future campus closure is required
- Proactive financial aid counseling to increase FAFSA renewal rates and identify financial aid opportunities
- Targeted use of the student aid portion of CARES Act funds with priority for the students with the greatest needs
- Partnership with community-based organizations to supplement supports and services students may need, but institutions may not be to fully meet
- Use of the institutional portion of CARES Act funds to support housing, health, food, school supplies, transportation, and child care

6

How will institutions address **physical health, mental health, and wellness supports** for students – including support students dealing with illness, loss, recovery, and other hardships?

EQUITY STAT:

Four in five New York college students report higher levels of stress than usual and say they are concerned about their risk of developing or worsening depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues. Forty percent say they are concerned about their risk of developing substance abuse or addiction during the pandemic. An extraordinary 84% of students are worried about a family member or friends being infected with the coronavirus.



81%

report higher levels of stress



81%

are concerned about their risk of developing or worsening mental health issues



40%

are concerned about their risk of developing substance abuse or addiction



84%

are worried about a family member or friends being infected with the coronavirus

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN EQUITY-DRIVEN REOPENING PLAN:

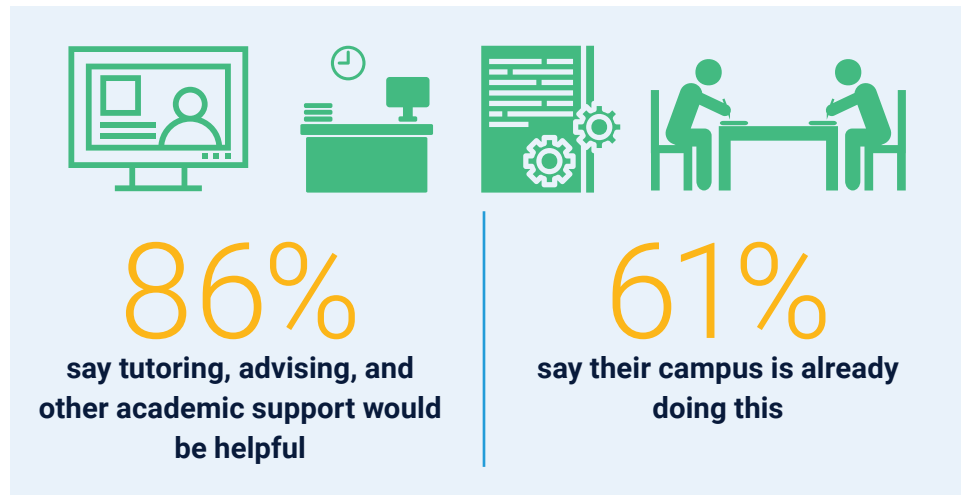
- Support strategies that are based on proactive outreach from the institution to students instead of relying on students to identify their own needs and seek resources/support
- Use of the institutional portion of CARES Act funds to support therapists, grief counselors, social workers, substance abuse counselors, and providing student support groups
- Plans to address the academic and non-academic needs of students who may contract COVID-19 and need to be quarantined

7

How will institutions expand **academic supports** for students?

EQUITY STAT:

Survey findings reveal large gaps between the support students prioritize and the resources their campus has made available to them, including 86% of New York students who say tutoring, advising, or other academic support would be helpful and only 61% who say their campus is already doing this.



WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN EQUITY-DRIVEN REOPENING PLAN:

- Free online textbooks, online study tools, tutoring services (in-person and online), and virtual academic resources
- Connections to academic and career advising
- Use of technology and technology supports
- Use of the institutional portion of CARES Act funds aligned with these strategies

8

How will institutions prioritize **student retention and completion**?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN EQUITY-DRIVEN REOPENING PLAN:

- Strategies that leverage peer-to-peer connections, peer mentoring, and informal peer networks
- Outreach and retention supports that work closely with historically underrepresented student communities
- Centers and programs working with students who are low-income, first-generation students, students with mixed family statuses, and students of color
- Use of the institutional portion of CARES Act funds to support successful evidence-based programs, including CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), SUNY's Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK), and other opportunity programs like EOP and HEOP



9

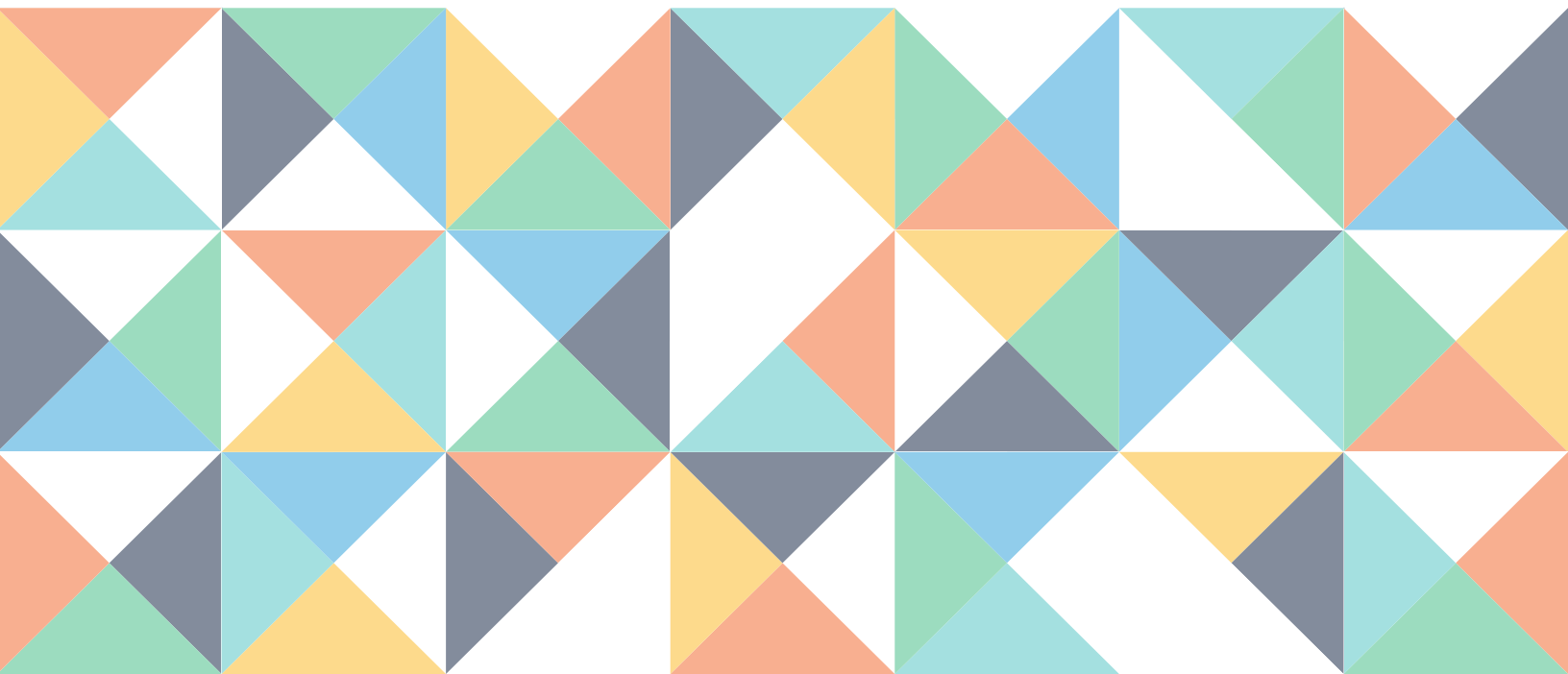
How will institutions implement **anti-racist policies and practices** in order to improve student success and campus diversity and demonstrate their commitment to establish a diverse, equitable, and inclusive space for learning and development?

EQUITY STAT:

Students of color report lower levels of support for their college's handling of the pandemic nationwide, along with less access to the services and assistance needed to stay on track to graduate.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN EQUITY-DRIVEN REOPENING PLAN:

- Use of campus climate surveys, informed by student input, to assess how well institutions are supporting first-generation students, students of color, and students with mixed family statuses, and ensuring that students feel safe and affirmed in all of their identities on campus
- Meaningful improvements in faculty hiring practices, campus policies on race- and gender-based discrimination, affirmative action admission policies, and the role of campus police



10

How will institutions use **data to support student persistence, completion, and success?**

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN EQUITY-DRIVEN REOPENING PLAN:

- Use of disaggregated data to track student success at key benchmarks, including matriculation, persistence, completion, and employment
- Direct link between the data findings and evidence-based interventions
- Connections to “P to Workforce” data systems that draw on both P-12 and workforce data for the college’s students/alumni

Poll results in this policy brief are drawn from a survey conducted by Global Strategy Group on behalf of The Education Trust–New York. The survey was conducted from 5/14-5/19 and had a confidence interval of +/-3.1% for the nationwide sample, +/-8.5% for the New York State oversample, and the confidence interval for subsamples is higher.

