

Advancing Equity in Higher Education: 2021 Policy Priorities



Now more than ever, economic opportunity and financial security are intertwined with educational attainment. As New York State works to recover from the devastating economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic, the REACH NY network of civil rights, student-serving, veteran, and education organizations calls on state leaders to prioritize equity in higher education by addressing the disparities in postsecondary opportunity and success for first-generation college students and other historically underserved students — including students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

Here are four steps that state leaders can take in 2021:

1 Adopt an equity-driven postsecondary attainment goal

Setting an equity-driven attainment goal creates a clear and explicit target for the state, higher education sectors, and regions. An attainment goal also requires leaders at all levels to focus on the postsecondary needs of students who are too often underserved by the education system. Committing to an attainment goal of 60% for New Yorkers of all races and ethnicities by 2030 would mean that 6.5 million residents would hold a postsecondary degree or credential by 2030 — representing a 484,000 increase in postsecondary attainment over current projections.

2 Prioritize funding to improve affordability, access, and success

The financial uncertainty catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the need for institutions to have predictable and adequate state funding to ensure they can invest in meeting the dual goals of supporting students in college and beyond, including by keeping tuition affordable, and meeting the state's labor force needs. The pandemic has also heightened the need to address the academic and non-academic costs of attending college, and federal pandemic relief and recovery funding for higher education should be prioritized to help students from low-income backgrounds afford college, fund critical academic and non-academic advising services, and invest in proven initiatives like opportunity programs.

3 Strengthen transfer pathways to improve college completion

Students are facing unprecedented uncertainty, and the need to transfer from one institution to another may be even greater than before the pandemic. However, the transition from one institution to another is not always easy, and the state should establish policies that help achieve seamless transfers between institutions regardless of a student's postsecondary pathway. This includes, but is not limited to, ensuring credit for prior experiential learning — like apprenticeships, internships, employment, and other experiences that could translate into college credit.

4 Use data to support better outcomes for students

The state should establish statewide early childhood-to-workforce data connections that include college persistence and completion, wage and employment data, and data on whether students make it “to and through” college from each high school. This data can help identify and address equity gaps in the educational pipeline, assess how the pandemic is impacting the education-to-workforce transition, and support policymakers and institutions in prioritizing policies, programs, and services that will be most supportive for students during this unprecedented period.

