



Institutional Leadership and Structures that Support Equity

Findings From Four Institutions in the ACE-UP Community of Practice

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As an effort to advance equity in community colleges, the Urban Institute is documenting how colleges in the Advancing Community Equity and Upward Mobility (ACE-UP) community of practice address disparities in outcomes for students. By “equity,” we mean fair treatment and intentional strategies that eliminate disparities for historically marginalized and underserved students and ideally result in equal academic and career outcomes for all students. The goal of ACE-UP is to build capacity among participating institutions to design and implement best practices and emerging strategies to resolve institutional and workplace barriers contributing to inequity. This brief describes findings from interviews with staff and partners at four participating institutions and a review of documents about their efforts to advance equity through institutional leadership and structures that support equity. It is part of a larger series of briefs examining data and metrics, engagement with employers, and career and supportive services.

Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) leads the ACE-UP community of practice, providing participating colleges with a range of supports, including individual team coaching sessions, bimonthly virtual meetings providing professional development opportunities related to advancing equity, an in-person meeting for community of practice members, and other topical small group meetings.¹ The initiative was launched in January 2023 and will run through June 2025. Our primary source of data in this brief comes from interviews with team members, partners, and employers from 4 of the 14 institutions participating in the ACE-UP community of practice.² Specifically, this brief highlights staff

and partners' descriptions of their college's equity goals and strategies related to institutional leadership activities and structures that support equity at four institutions:

- Arkansas State University – Newport (ASUN)
- City Colleges of Chicago, a community-college system of seven independently accredited colleges
 - » Interviewees included system-level staff and staff members at two colleges within the system, Malcolm X College and Harold Washington College (along with partners)
- J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College (Reynolds Community College)
- Grand Rapids Community College

For profiles of each institution, see the appendix.

We interviewed 17 staff members and 6 individuals at partner organizations, including 2 employers, to understand colleges' equity goals, data and metrics, strategies implemented, key internal and external partnerships, and institutional supports for advancing equity. We also aimed to identify factors that helped or hindered progress toward their equity goals. The number and types of people we interviewed for each college varied.³ In addition to the interviews, we reviewed college strategic plans for information about each institution's priorities for centering equity and student success. We also conducted surveys of institutions participating in ACE-UP, which yielded additional insights that will inform an upcoming interim and final report. In interviews, college and partner staff shared examples that shed light on the work that they are prioritizing in ACE-UP. They also shared examples of other work, which is related to their equity goals but extends beyond their ACE-UP priorities.

Key Takeaways

Below in box 1 are key takeaways from our conversations with college staff about institutional leadership and support for equity initiatives at their colleges. Following a brief discussion of the literature, each strategy is described in more detail followed by challenges and opportunities to promote equitable outcomes.

BOX 1

Institutional Leadership and Structures that Support Equity: Key Takeaways

Strategies and Insights

- Shared leadership—including the perspective of administrators, faculty, and staff into institutional decisionmaking—helps ensure that diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are not isolated within specific roles but are instead spread across different levels at the institution.
- College staff emphasized the importance of equity-focused and data-driven decisionmaking in the development of strategic plans and strategies for bolstering student outcomes.
- Colleges use different institutional structures, such as specific offices or dedicated staff roles, to push their equity-focused work forward.

Challenges and Opportunities

- Framing efforts to advance equitable outcomes through the lens of student success can provide an opportunity for institutions to align existing student initiatives with their goals for advancing equity and may help with navigating a changing context around diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Colleges have an opportunity to center students and their lived expertise in equity initiatives using community-engaged methods. These methods include working with student advisory groups to inform student programming and involving students in the collection of data and interpretation of findings about program outcomes.
- Work to advance equitable outcomes takes time, and often involves the need to collaborate with partners within and outside of institutions, including employers. Embedding equity efforts into institutional strategic plans and priorities can help ensure alignment with broader, long-term institutional goals.
- Communities of practice like ACE-UP deliver professional development and technical assistance to colleges interested in advancing equity initiatives and can provide a structure for institutions to engage with peers around shared challenges.

Background: Institutional Structures that Support Equity

Underrepresented students at community colleges—especially students who are Black, Latine,⁴ or Indigenous—have lower rates of completion, credential attainment, and transfer due to systemic factors, including structural racism, which limit access to education opportunities. Evidence shows that Black and Latine students are less likely to complete a credential, transfer to a four-year institution, or obtain a bachelor's degree than white students (Lin et al. 2020). Despite evidence of an increase in overall community college completion rates, students of color and nontraditional students (including students ages 25 and older or attending part time) have lower retention rates than white students and full-time students. Latine and Black students are also less likely to complete a credential in six years compared to white students. Further, colleges across the country have also experienced enrollment declines due to the pandemic, and Black and Indigenous students had the highest drop in enrollment

(Complete College America 2022). These gaps speak to the importance of institutional structures and dedicated leadership needed to advance equity goals.

Institutional leaders can develop policies to advance equity across institutions (Complete College America 2022). Leadership support for increasing attainment for students of color has been associated with heightened discussions of racial equity gaps, greater visibility on interventions addressing these gaps, and allocating more resources to address them (Research for Action 2020). College leadership is responsible for creating a positive campus culture and can create an inclusive and welcoming environment through diversity in faculty and staff and culturally responsive curricula, programming, and events (US Department of Education Office of the Under Secretary 2023). Leadership is also responsible for creating policies and practices for the institution that impact all students, faculty, and staff and can influence students' sense of belonging. Offering specific resources and spaces for students of different backgrounds, such as cultural centers or affinity groups, also fosters a sense of belonging.

Community college leaders need to have a clear understanding and definition of equity across the campus in order to advance it (Person et al. 2020). The importance of incorporating student voice into policy and practice change at both programmatic and institutional levels is cited as a best practice in several studies (Basavaraj and Taylor 2024; Person et al. 2020; Research for Action 2020). Institutions can use surveys and other data-collection methods to assess campus climate and students' sense of belonging (US Department of Education Office of the Under Secretary 2023). The absence of student voice can impede the implementation of initiatives aimed at reducing equity gaps (Research for Action 2020). Case studies from two colleges in the Working Students Success Network indicated that creating a strong equity framework with institutional goals that take differing student needs into account and incorporate student input is vital. A one-size-fits-all approach was seen as unlikely to improve equity. Such approaches, which overlook the variation of student needs, could hinder the achievement of the colleges' equity goals because of the capacity constraints involved with trying to meet all students' needs rather than the students that needed assistance the most (Person et al. 2020).

College leaders can help support student equity efforts by creating a culture of mandated data-derived student success efforts on which the institutional research department and faculty can collaborate (Kisker 2019). Multiple studies have indicated the importance of using disaggregated data to show equity achievement gaps (Basavaraj and Taylor 2024; Kisker 2019; Research for Action 2020). College leaders can also offer stipends or some other form of compensation for the additional equity work that staff are putting in (Kisker 2019). They can also create spaces or forums for faculty to discuss student success barriers in their departments, plans for addressing them and successful outcomes. These spaces can be informal or involve a formal community of practice structure like ACE-UP, where staff can share resources and the successes and challenges that they face in supporting their students.

Strategies and Insights

Institutional Leadership Is Vital for the Advancement of Equity Goals

Institutional leadership plays an important role in implementing policies and practices to advance equity because college leaders define the institution's strategies and values (Kezar 2021). College staff shared examples of how institutional leadership, including shared leadership, helps drive equity goals forward and how colleges carry out initiatives and create a shared vision and strategy for promoting equal outcomes for all students.

THE VALUE OF SHARED LEADERSHIP

Shared leadership includes the perspective of administrators, faculty, and staff into institutional decisionmaking (Kezar 2021). Shared leadership ensures that diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are not isolated within specific roles, and therefore increases the likelihood of sustaining an equitable campus culture of success.⁵ Staff from all four colleges described working with faculty and staff to develop strategies to advance their equity goals. Box 2 describes City Colleges of Chicago's Equity Partners Program, which is a multiyear, grant-funded initiative designed to expand the system's equity work to close achievement gaps. City Colleges of Chicago staff emphasized the important roles that faculty, staff, and first-year student experience directors play in promoting equity.

BOX 2

City Colleges of Chicago's Equity Partners Program

City Colleges of Chicago's "north star" goal is to close racial equity gaps in student achievement to promote improved outcomes for Black and Latine students. The Equity Partners Program is a grant-funded initiative aimed at advancing equitable outcomes for marginalized students, with a focus on continuous improvement and building on past work and lessons learned to inform future initiatives. Each college within the system has its own Equity Partners Program. Each year, the programs focus on a different project that will be "supported and led through the scope of equity" and reviewed through the lens of continuous improvement. When the program was launched, City Colleges of Chicago partnered with an organization that focused on the continuous improvement aspect and provided trainings and worked with selected equity partners across the system. In the second stage of this work, City Colleges of Chicago collaborated with community members through the Chancellor's Leadership Forum to identify what people across the district considered important areas of focus. These conversations informed the focus on first-year student experience with the underlying theme of student connectedness and belonging.

A City Colleges of Chicago staff member described being more intentional and strategic in this phase of the work, as well as the desire to create an environment where stakeholders across the system are involved in equity work. The staff member shared, "We wanted to create a team environment where folks can collaborate." Important internal partners include first-year student experience directors, faculty, and staff from the colleges' president's office. The staff member indicated it is important to involve staff that students engage deeply with, as well as representatives from college leadership to ensure that leadership is involved in

institutional equity work. The Equity Partners Program work is housed under City Colleges of Chicago's Office of Institutional Excellence.

CREATING A SHARED VISION AND STRATEGY FOR EQUITY INITIATIVES

Institutional leadership is also important for developing and implementing policies and priorities aimed at eliminating disparities across institutions. A staff member from Grand Rapids Community College described engaging key stakeholders, including campus leadership, in conversations about equity. At the time of interviews for this study, Grand Rapids Community College was beginning to develop a “definition of equity,” and staff were participating in the process with input from the board of trustees, students, faculty, and staff. These efforts were aimed at improving understanding of what equity means at the institution. Literature emphasizes the importance of having a common understanding of equity among community college leaders and partners. The lack of a clear, common definition of equity may hinder progress toward achieving it (Person et al. 2020).

An ASUN staff member shared that their college had a diversity, equity, and inclusion committee comprising faculty and staff and indicated that having someone to serve as a “visionary” is important for moving forward toward equity goals. An ASUN staff member also discussed how the chancellor and executive cabinet have “empowered [their] voices” by instituting a leadership council that includes members of ASUN’s ACE-UP team. The leadership council has provided a space for campus leadership to strategize collaboratively around institutional policy and advancement. Another ASUN staff member said the leadership council has “made for easier movement [on institutional priorities] and getting things done.” The staff member noted that having the support of the dean is important to start affecting change, especially when strategizing new initiatives to advance equity. In fall 2024, the leadership council expanded its membership to include the faculty association president and staff senate president to ensure all voices are considered in institutional decisions.

Now that I've had the time to reflect on changes at the institution and what leadership has done, I could say that [ASUN] ACE-UP members are very valued advice givers to [the] executive cabinet now.

—ASUN staff member

Key Staff and College Divisions Driving Equity Efforts

Existing literature emphasizes the important role college leadership plays in fostering an inclusive environment for students, which includes hiring diverse faculty and staff and demonstrating a

commitment to student belonging (US Department of Education Office of the Undersecretary 2023). Equity-focused leaders are committed to student success because they understand how systemic barriers drive inequity (Equal Measure 2022). ACE-UP college staff and partners shared examples of the various roles and positions focused on advancing equity at their institutions. These can include dedicated offices, departments, or staff roles, as well as collaborating with other partners across campus to advance student success.

DEDICATED OFFICES AND STAFF

Colleges across the country are reconfiguring their equity-focused staff positions and offices in response to changing policies around diversity, equity, and inclusion. In interviews, college staff shared how their institutions are creating new roles and positions to focus on accelerating equity. At Grand Rapids Community College, college leadership have reimagined the position of vice president of equity into a new position: vice president of people, culture, and equity. This realignment came after discussions with groups both on campus and off campus. A Grand Rapids Community College staff member said the realignment was in response to “understanding that there is systemic change that we need to do here” and shared hearing about other institutions that are also reorganizing their diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies.

We spoke with two staff members at City Colleges of Chicago and ASUN whose roles are dedicated to advancing equity initiatives in the institution. At City Colleges of Chicago, equity-focused staff have important roles in the Equity Partners Project, which is an initiative aimed at fostering student connectedness and belonging across all seven colleges in the system (described earlier in box 2). A City Colleges of Chicago staff member whose position focuses on equity shared that their role was developed in 2022. The staff member shared that the role was developed in response to the institution’s “north star” goal to close racial equity gaps and support student achievement for Black and Latine students.

We have gone through the evolution [of] having an equity office. And it is really now an integrated enterprise, and they have resources associated with it.... The people in that equity office [now] are the ones who do continuous improvement and train all of us on continuous improvement with an equity lens.... As we learned from other organizations, if they didn't have any direct reports, if they didn't have any power, if they didn't have any money, the Diversity Office [had less impact].” Instead, [now] this is a group that has best practices, continuous improvement. All of that sits in that office, and so it influences all of us and the work that we do keeps it front and center—that our purpose here is equity.

—City Colleges of Chicago staff member

The configuration of staffing to support equity goals and initiatives varied across the colleges we interviewed. The staff that made up college teams participating in ACE-UP reflected this range of approaches (see box 3).

BOX 3

How Colleges Organize Their ACE-UP Work

- **ASUN:** ASUN's ACE-UP team consists of four staff from the college's Academic Affairs and Outreach and Institutional Advancement departments. Team members' roles at the college include community outreach, building employer partnerships, oversight of the institution's CTE programs, and management of the college's pre-college programs and grant applications. A staff member we interviewed indicated that the institution's participation in ACE-UP has been helpful for connecting with other community colleges engaged in equity work.
- **City Colleges of Chicago:** City Colleges of Chicago's team includes staff from the system and a staff member from two of the seven independently accredited colleges that comprise the City Colleges of Chicago system. The ACE-UP team also includes a staff member whose role focuses on equity. One staff member interviewed said that the college's participation in ACE-UP is not separate from the institution's existing equity work, particularly in the apprenticeship and work-based learning space. Another ACE-UP member described the institution's participation in ACE-UP as an opportunity to collaborate and learn best practices related to how to help employers "walk the walk" instead of "checking boxes that...will not move the needle."
- **Grand Rapids Community College:** Grand Rapids Community College has four ACE-UP team members. One team member leads the institution's Strengthening Community College grant, which is a US Department of Labor grant focused on building community colleges' capacity to support students in obtaining employment and meet employers' skill needs.^a A staff member interviewed described the focus on increasing the representation of students of color in health care programs as "the impetus for wanting to do this [work]," due to low enrollment and completion rates. A Grand Rapids Community College staff member shared that the ACE-UP work with their health care employer partners has helped increase the diversity of students in the medical assistant program, and staff are using that model to improve other health programs. ACE-UP team members also work with community organizations in local neighborhoods with high unemployment rates.
- **Reynolds Community College:** Reynolds Community College's ACE-UP team consists of college staff and staff from partner organizations, including an employer partner. The team includes a STEM faculty representative because the institution is focusing on increasing representation in STEM programming. The ACE-UP team also includes a staff member from Network2WorkRVA, which is a technology-based platform that helps connect jobseekers to local resources, and an employer representative from an "equity-focused" local health care employer.

^a "Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants Program," US Department of Labor, accessed October 7, 2024, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/skills-training-grants/scc>.

OTHER INSTITUTION-WIDE PARTNERS

ACE-UP college staff also shared examples of ways they are working with partners across the colleges to make services more accessible to students. Supportive services and career services are important for

advancing student achievement because they provide support that targets systemic barriers that limit underrepresented and underserved students' abilities to persevere through an academic program.

For example, the Community College Workforce Alliance is the shared workforce division of Reynolds Community College and Brightpoint Community College that offers short-term noncredit credentials. The Community College Workforce Alliance is part of the Workforce Coalition RVA, a regional coalition that convenes the Network2WorkRVA program, which uses a technology-based program to connect jobseekers to resources that can help them access job opportunities or wraparound services. The Community College Workforce Alliance staff includes three career coaches, a staff member focused on liaising with employers in the network, and a staff member who works with "community connectors," who help connect jobseekers to resources in their own communities. Because the Community College Workforce Alliance is focused on nontraditional students who face barriers to employment, a staff member shared that this workforce division helps broaden access to a postsecondary credential for historically marginalized individuals.

We want to increase partnerships, and we want those partners to increase the number of students that they're engaging with.

—City Colleges of Chicago staff member

Strategic Planning Furthering Equity Efforts

A college's strategic plan outlines institutional priorities, goals, initiatives, and pathways toward institutional success. By emphasizing the importance of equity in strategic planning and developing strategies for bolstering student outcomes, college leaders can demonstrate a commitment toward student achievement and reducing barriers to equal outcomes that threaten students' ability to persevere through their academic programs. One study noted that strategic plans guide an organization's decisionmaking processes, promote accountability, and measure progress. A well-executed strategic plan can also strengthen an institution's commitment to equity (Zapata et al. 2018). College staff shared examples of how they have woven student achievement into institutional planning. This includes explicitly embedding equity into strategic plans, emphasizing student success, and creating space for continuous growth and improvement.

EMBEDDING EQUITY INTO STRATEGIC PLANNING

Grand Rapids Community College and Reynolds Community College embed equity directly into their institutional strategic plans. When interviews for this study were conducted in early 2024, a Grand Rapids Community College staff member described how the institution's new strategic plan embeds

equity in all sections of the plan, including student success, community outreach, and infrastructure. Previous iterations of the strategic plan separated equity from the rest of the plan’s initiatives.

Reynolds Community College also embeds equity into institutional strategic goals and planning. Reynolds Community College leadership was described as “laser-focused” on following the strategic plan carefully and ensuring it centers equity. Staff also shared that Reynolds Community College joined Achieving the Dream in 2021 to help accelerate institutional strategic planning (box 4).

BOX 4

Reynolds Community College’s Work with Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream is an organization that works with community colleges to build customized growth plans to address institutional challenges and barriers and craft solutions to close achievement gaps and advance student success.^a Equity is one of Achieving the Dream’s core areas of expertise, and the organization’s equity services help community colleges’ leadership, faculty, and staff build strategies to redesign policies and practices with the goal of improving the completion rates of underserved students.^b

Reynolds Community College staff shared that the college’s work with Achieving the Dream inspired equity-focused initiatives to drive student success. Staff also shared that when they joined Achieving the Dream, they wanted to join a network of colleges across the country to develop strategies to increase success outcomes, particularly for the college’s underrepresented student population.

^a“College is a Catalyst for the Community,” Achieving the Dream, accessed November 22, 2024, <https://achievingthedream.org/our-work/>.

^b“Equity,” Achieving the Dream, accessed November 22, 2024, <https://achievingthedream.org/areas-of-expertise/equity/>.

City Colleges of Chicago⁶ and Grand Rapids Community College’s⁷ strategic plans also emphasize the colleges’ commitment to equity. One of the overarching principles of Grand Rapids Community College’s strategic plan is that equity encompasses all goals. City Colleges of Chicago’s strategic plan aims to achieve equitable student outcomes by helping all students succeed, especially students from marginalized communities.

It’s our responsibility to make sure that equity is central to our strategic plan. If you ask anybody at this college from part-time work all the way up to the chief executive, they will tell you that.

—Reynolds Community College staff member

A STRONG FOCUS ON STUDENT SUCCESS

All four colleges emphasized offering services to advance student success, which is reflected in their strategic planning.⁸ In addition to providing career and supportive services, the colleges engage in other innovative methods of promoting equity-focused student success. City Colleges of Chicago is building equity initiatives into all seven colleges in the system through the Equity Partners Program. One goal of their strategic plan is to “create an exceptional student experience,” which includes transforming the student enrollment and onboarding process, creating clear pathways for students to navigate employment opportunities or further education, and implementing a holistic student success strategy and culture across all seven institutions. Reynolds Community College’s strategic plan⁹ describes a tactic to implement strategies to collect qualitative data from students, including basic needs welcome survey analysis. The institution will also develop benchmarks to assess the impact of supportive services.

Equity is part of our overall strategic framework for the college.

—Harold Washington College staff member

TRACKING PROGRESS TOWARD EQUITY GOALS

All four ACE-UP colleges are focused on data-driven decisionmaking and are reflecting this emphasis in their strategic planning. See box 5 for more information about how each college plans to use data.

BOX 5

How ACE-UP Colleges are Emphasizing Data in their Strategic Plans

- **ASUN** has four strategic priorities as part of its 2022–27 strategic plan,¹⁰ including institutional excellence, with an emphasis on data-driven decisionmaking and the use of data to strengthen operational systems and processes. ASUN recently partnered with Achieving the Dream to review data needed for addressing equity gaps, which has expanded the institution’s review of disaggregated data by race and gender to support decisions with strategic recruitment and retention related to the persistence and success of all students.
- **City Colleges of Chicago** set key performance indicators, focusing on student success outcomes, such as enrollment and retention, to measure the success of their strategic plan. City Colleges of Chicago and the seven independently accredited colleges in the system will use the key performance indicators to monitor progress toward the goals outlined in the plan. Examples of key performance indicators include enrollment, retention, and a four-year outcome measure that incorporates completion and transfer.
- **Grand Rapids Community College’s** strategic plan aims to use data to inform practices and decisionmaking related to improving student achievement. The plan includes using data to explain why flexible schedules are important to accommodate students’ diverse needs. The plan also includes using data to inform practices and guide decisionmaking. Grand Rapids Community College has a Strategic Initiative Dashboard that measures progress toward institutional goals, priorities, and initiatives as part of the strategic plan.¹¹

- **Reynolds Community College's** strategic plan describes a tactic to improve data-collection, analysis, and reporting of post-Reynolds outcomes, which fall under the teaching and learning focus area aiming to prepare students for high-demand careers and transfer pathways. The tactic will embed labor market intelligence to identify the employment outcomes for each program, which will help faculty and administrators ensure the programs lead to a high-value credential and job providing a family-sustaining wage. The plan also includes advancing student success through disaggregated data on early momentum, persistence, and completion.

Challenges and Opportunities

College staff and partners described several challenges they face and highlighted opportunities for improving institutional structures and support for initiatives that promote equitable outcomes for underserved and underrepresented students. In the section below, we draw from insights shared in our interviews and related work with community college staff to identify additional opportunities for improvement.

Reframing Efforts to Advance Equity Can Support College Leaders and Staff Navigating a Changing Policy Context

Federal and state policy changes have resulted in a challenging context for conducting equity-related work in higher education and in the workplace.¹² Reframing efforts to advance equity through the lens of student success can provide an opportunity for institutions to align existing student initiatives with their goals for reducing barriers to equal outcomes and may help with navigating a changing context around diversity, equity, and inclusion. As described earlier, all four colleges emphasized in their strategic plans the importance of offering services to advance student success. Aligning student success strategies with federal grant program and data reporting requirements, such as supporting special populations served under Perkins V,¹³ may be one approach to focusing on the success of students with specific needs without using specific diversity, equity, and inclusion terminology.

Ensure Equity Efforts Center Students and Their Lived Expertise

Given the focus of many institutions on student success, institutional leadership and support for equity efforts that center students is also important. As described earlier, Grand Rapids Community College is involving students in the process of defining what equity means to their institution, as part of creating a shared vision and strategy for equity initiatives. Another opportunity to center students and their experience to inform equity work is by using community-engaged methods. Community-engaged methods that incorporate student voice in programming and data collection are instrumental for gaining insight into how structural racism affects students of color at colleges; for example, when course curricula or faculty composition is not as diverse as the student population it serves. Community-engaged methods could include training students to collect data and having students interpret and

report research findings about the outcomes of programs they are involved in (Payne et al. 2024). Student advisory groups provide a structure colleges can utilize to inform student programming, participate in the analysis and interpretation of data (such as student survey data), and inform programming and policy. One example from the field is the 2024 Texas Community College Student Advisory Council, which is a cross-institution group of diverse students that help advocate for policy change in community college education.¹⁴ The group includes first-generation college students, student-parents, student government leaders, and individuals from various races, ethnicities, ages, and backgrounds.

Work to Advance Equity Requires Long-Term Investment and Integration into Institutional Strategic Priorities

Achieving equity as a desired outcome requires long-term investment and is an iterative process of designing, implementing, and evaluating strategies for effectiveness. The time required and a lack of desired internal or external partners at the table can pose a barrier to equity work, especially when efforts are not integrated into a college's broader strategic priorities. As described earlier, staff at two colleges we spoke with described how equity was embedded into their strategic plans. Aligning efforts to advance equity with institutional priorities, rather than a one-off initiative, can help to reduce fragmented priorities. This includes connecting participation in initiatives like ACE-UP with ongoing strategic planning, so that colleges are identifying strategies for advancing equity that are aligned with their broader institutional goals.

Communities of Practice Provide a Structure for Institutions to Engage in Peer Learning around Shared Challenges

Communities of practice provide an important structure for colleges to advance equity and connect with peers about shared challenges they are experiencing. For example, Grand Rapids Community College staff were motivated to join ACE-UP because they wanted to better understand the diversity in their health care programs and what the completion rate looks like for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Staff heard from students that, although they felt prepared for the work, they experienced unwelcoming work environments, especially from some supervisors. Grand Rapids Community College staff wanted to hear from others in the community of practice to learn how to increase the quality of these health care jobs. Participation in communities of practice like ACE-UP provides institutions with professional development, technical assistance, and opportunities to engage with and hear from peers conducting similar work.

Conclusion

Strong institutional leadership is fundamental to a college's success in achieving its goals and especially pertinent for efforts to advance equity, which are continually under federal and state scrutiny. The college staff we interviewed for this study described examples of institutional structures that support

equity including shared leadership approaches, strategic plans, and staffing plans and offices dedicated to advancing equity. By focusing on student success and centering students and their lived expertise, participating in communities of practice like ACE-UP, and aligning equity work with ongoing strategic priorities, college leaders and staff can work toward long-term changes that are needed to ensure equitable outcomes for learners at their institutions. With the right support in place, college staff are better suited to successfully implement their work to advance equity for historically marginalized and underserved students.

Appendix: College Profiles¹⁵

Arkansas State University – Newport

Arkansas State University – Newport (ASUN) has three campuses located in the Delta Region of Arkansas. The main campus is in Newport, Arkansas, and other locations include campuses in Marked Tree and Jonesboro.¹⁶ ASUN campuses serve three counties (Jackson, Poinsett, and Craighead),¹⁷ covering a largely rural area with low levels of employment, especially in Jackson County (42.6 percent). 11.9 percent of Jackson County residents have a bachelor's degree or higher.¹⁸

In spring 2024, ASUN served 1,860 students enrolled across all three campuses. Most students (64.3 percent) were white, and Black students (17.6 percent) also made up a substantial portion of the student body. Six percent of students were Hispanic or Latino and 1 percent were Asian; 65.3 percent of students were female, while 34.4 percent were male. Most students (70.2 percent) were 18 and older. About two-thirds (67 percent) of students were enrolled part time at the college, and 33 percent were enrolled full time.¹⁹ From 2022 to 2023, 56 percent of students received Federal Pell grants, and 86 percent received any type of student financial aid, including federal work study aid.²⁰

ASUN offers degree and certificate programs across sectors. Staff described a particular focus on advanced manufacturing, but other key sectors include industrial safety and leadership, business, and computer applications. Health care programs have the fastest growth at ASUN, and examples of expanding programs include emergency medical technician, radiologic technology, surgical technology, and licensed practical nursing. Additionally, the high voltage lineman technology and data analytics programs are anchors of a new emphasis on energy and grid resilience for the institution.

City Colleges of Chicago

City Colleges of Chicago is the largest community college district in Illinois. City Colleges of Chicago is composed of seven independently accredited colleges: Harold Washington College, Harry S Truman College, Kennedy-King College, Malcolm X College, Olive-Harvey College, Richard J. Daley College, and Wilbur Wright College. The system also includes five satellite sites: Arturo Velasquez Institute, Dawson Technical Institute, South Chicago Learning Center, Malcolm X College West Campus, and Wright College Humboldt Park,²¹ and dozens of adult education instruction off-sites citywide.²² Chicago has an employment rate of 62.8 percent, and 43.7 percent of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher.²³

As of fiscal year 2024, 66,258 students were enrolled at City Colleges of Chicago. More than half (51 percent) of enrolled students were Latine. Black students made up over a quarter of the study body (27 percent). Thirteen percent of students were white, and 6 percent were Asian;²⁴ 58 percent of all students are female. Two-thirds of students are taking credit classes, another 28 percent are taking free adult education (high school equivalency or English as a Second Language), and 9 percent are taking personal or professional development noncredit continuing education courses. Among credit students, 50 percent are Pell eligible.

City Colleges of Chicago employs a sector-based strategy through which programs in the highest-demand, fastest-growing industry sectors—like health care, IT, manufacturing, transportation, distribution and logistics, culinary and hospitality, engineering and computer science, education and scientific technology and innovation, construction technology, health care, and business and professional services—are organized into centers of excellence. Centers of excellence offer employers and other partners in each of these industry sectors a central point of contact that coordinates employer and industry partner engagement, customizes training facilities, provides leadership for the rest of the system as sources of best practice and curricular innovation, and connects students to work-based learning, apprenticeships, and other career opportunities.

Grand Rapids Community College

Grand Rapids Community College's main campus is in downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan, which is the second-most populous city in Michigan. Grand Rapids has an employment rate of 68.4 percent, and 41.4 percent of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher.²⁵ Classes are also offered at the Lakeshore campus in Holland, Michigan.²⁶

In fall 2023, Grand Rapids Community College served 12,157 students.²⁷ The majority (59.4 percent) of students were white, 18.4 percent of students were Hispanic or Latino, 10.4 percent were Black, and 3.8 percent were Asian; 55.1 percent of students were female and 44 percent were male. Most (87.2 percent) students were 18 and older. Most (70.6 percent) students were enrolled part time, and 28.7 percent were enrolled full time.²⁸ From 2022 to 2023, 38 percent of students received Federal Pell grants, and 63 percent received any student financial aid, including federal work study aid.²⁹

Grand Rapids Community College currently offers 12 academic pathways, and each academic pathway houses a variety of programs.³⁰ Staff highlighted a particular focus on the health care industry and described key partnerships with local health care employers. The college provides training to employers to promote employee retention through a sector-based industry partnership that convenes health care employers.

J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College

J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College (Reynolds Community College) has four campuses, including a downtown campus in Richmond, Virginia, the Parham Road Campus in Richmond, Virginia, The Kitchens at Reynolds in Richmond, Virginia (which houses Reynolds Community College's culinary arts,

hospitality, and entrepreneurship programs³¹), and the Goochland Campus in Goochland, Virginia. Reynolds Community College serves the City of Richmond, as well as Goochland County, Hanover County, Henrico County, Louisa County, and Powhatan County.³² The City of Richmond has an employment rate of 64.9 percent, and 45.8 percent of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher.³³

Reynolds Community College served more than 11,000 students during the 2021–22 academic year and assisted more than 5,500 learners through the Community College Workforce Alliance, which is the college's workforce development division.³⁴ In fall 2022, 7,527 students were enrolled. Almost half (46 percent) of the students were white, and a substantial portion (29 percent) of students were Black, 9 percent of students were Hispanic or Latino, and 6 percent were Asian. Most (61 percent) students were female, and 39 percent were male, and 65 percent were 24 years old and under. Most (69 percent) students were enrolled part time, and 31 percent were enrolled full time. Forty-nine percent of students were awarded Federal Pell grants, and 76 percent received any student financial aid, including federal work study aid.³⁵

Reynolds Community College offers 103 unique programs of study,³⁶ and staff highlighted a few particularly strong programs, including automotive technology, health care, and biotechnology.

Notes

- ¹ For information on ACE-UP, see “About the ACE-UP Community of Practice,” Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, accessed July 31, 2024, <https://ace-up.org/about/>.
- ² The number of ACE-UP participating institutions is current as of July 2024.
- ³ One individual from Grand Rapids Community College was interviewed for this report.
- ⁴ Throughout this report, we use “Latine” as an inclusive term to describe people who are commonly referred to as Hispanic, Latino, or Latinx. However, we acknowledge that language is constantly evolving and that some individuals may not identify with this term.
- ⁵ “Everyone’s Work,” Inside Higher Ed, accessed October 3, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/career-advice/diversity/2023/04/27/everyones-work>.
- ⁶ “Our Path Forward, City Colleges of Chicago, accessed October 18, 2024, <https://strategicplan.ccc.edu/>
- ⁷ “Strategic Initiative Dashboard,” Grand Rapids Community College, accessed November 7, 2024, <https://www.grcc.edu/faculty-staff/instructional-support-institutional-planning/strategic-planning/strategic-initiative-dashboard#goal1>
- ⁸ Another brief in this series discusses the supportive services strategies ACE-UP college staff and partners are implementing to advance their institutions’ equity goals. For more information, see Petrov, Stephanie and Hailey D’Elia. 2024. *Using Supportive Services to Advance Community College Equity Goals*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- ⁹ “Strategic Direction,” Reynolds Community College, accessed October 18, 2024, <https://www.reynolds.edu/brand/strategic-direction.html>
- ¹⁰ “ASUN Flight Plan,” Arkansas State University – Newport, accessed October 18, 2024, https://files.asun.edu/strat_plan/ASUN_Flight_Plan2022-2027_web.pdf

- ¹¹ “Strategic Initiative Dashboard,” Grand Rapids Community College, accessed October 31, 2024, <https://www.grcc.edu/faculty-staff/instructional-support-institutional-planning/strategic-planning/strategic-initiative-dashboard>
- ¹² “Tracking Higher Ed’s Dismantling of DEI,” The Chronicle Of Higher Education, accessed September 13, 2024, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/tracking-higher-eds-dismantling-of-dei>.
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- ¹³ “Maximizing Access and Success for Special Populations in Career Technical Education,” Advance CTE and the Association for Career and Technical Education, accessed September 13, 2024, https://careertech.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Intro_Maxmizing_Access_Success_Special_Populations_Advance_CTE.pdf.
 The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act amended the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 (Perkins IV) and was signed into law on July 31, 2018. The amended Act is now Perkins V.
 “Perkins V,” US Department of Education, accessed November 22, 2024, <https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/adult-education-laws-and-policy/perkins-v>
- ¹⁴ “Introducing the 2024 Texas Community College Student Advisory Council,” EdTrust, accessed September 20, 2024, <https://edtrust.org/press-room/introducing-the-2024-texas-community-college-student-advisory-council/>.
- ¹⁵ The data included in each college profile are the most recent data provided online or by the college.
- ¹⁶ “History and Mission,” Arkansas State University – Newport, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.asun.edu/history>.
- ¹⁷ “Arkansas State University – Newport (ASU-Newport),” Encyclopedia of Arkansas, accessed August 30, 2024, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/arkansas-state-university-newport-5629/>.
- ¹⁸ “Jackson County, Arkansas – Census Bureau Profile,” United States Census Bureau, accessed August 30, 2024, https://data.census.gov/profile/Jackson_County,_Arkansas?g=050XX00US05067.
- ¹⁹ “ASU - Newport Enrollment and Demographic Data,” Tableau, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/elizabeth.wakefield5808/viz/ASUNEnrollmentDemographics/EnrollmentDashboard>.
- ²⁰ “Arkansas State University – Newport,” College Navigator, National Center for Education Statistics, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=arkansas+state+university+newport&s=all&id=440402#finalid>.
- ²¹ “About City Colleges,” City Colleges of Chicago, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.ccc.edu/menu/About-City-Colleges/>.
- ²² “City Colleges of Chicago at a Glance,” City Colleges of Chicago, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.ccc.edu/menu/city-colleges-of-chicago-fact-sheet/>.
- ²³ “Chicago City, Illinois – Census Bureau Profile,” United States Census Bureau, accessed August 29, 2024, https://data.census.gov/profile/Chicago_city,_Illinois?g=160XX00US1714000.
- ²⁴ “City Colleges of Chicago FY22 Statistical Digest,” City Colleges of Chicago, accessed August 29, 2024, https://www.ccc.edu/wp-content/uploads/departments_Documents_FY2022-Statistical-Digest.pdf.
- ²⁵ “Grand Rapids city, Michigan,” – Census Bureau Profile,” United States Census Bureau, accessed August 29, 2024, https://data.census.gov/profile/Grand_Rapids_city,_Michigan?g=160XX00US2634000.
- ²⁶ “GRCC Fast Facts,” Grand Rapids Community College, accessed August 28, 2024, <https://www.grcc.edu/faculty-staff/institutional-research-planning/documents-reports/fast-facts#enrollment>.

- ²⁷ Grand Rapids Community College also served 12,068 noncredit students.
- ²⁸ “Fall 2023 Enrollment Report,” Grand Rapids Community College Institutional Research, accessed August 28, 2024, https://www.grcc.edu/sites/default/files/docs/irp/reports/enrollment_report_fall_2023_ada.pdf.
- ²⁹ “Grand Rapids Community College,” College Navigator, National Center for Education Statistics, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=grand+rapids+community+college&s=all&id=170055#find>.
- ³⁰ Grand Rapids Community College also has more than 30 career and technical education programs that provide national credentials.
- “GRCC Fast Facts,” Grand Rapids Community College, accessed August 28, 2024, <https://www.grcc.edu/faculty-staff/institutional-research-planning/documents-reports/fast-facts#enrollment>.
- ³¹ “About the Kitchens at Reynolds,” Reynolds Community College, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.reynolds.edu/kitchens/about-the-kitchens.html>.
- ³² “About Reynolds,” Reynolds Community College, accessed August 29, 2024, https://www.reynolds.edu/who_we_are/about/default.html.
- ³³ “Richmond City, Virginia – Census Bureau Profile,” United States Census Bureau, accessed August 29, 2024, https://data.census.gov/profile/Richmond_city,_Virginia?g=050XX00US51760.
- ³⁴ “About Reynolds,” Reynolds Community College, accessed August 29, 2024, https://www.reynolds.edu/who_we_are/about/default.html.
- ³⁵ “J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College,” College Navigator, National Center for Education Statistics, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?id=232414#find>.
- ³⁶ “About Reynolds,” Reynolds Community College, accessed August 29, 2024, https://www.reynolds.edu/who_we_are/about/default.html.

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