



KEY QUESTIONS

Holding Colleges and Universities Accountable for Racial Equity

Despite what the headlines might suggest, colleges and universities still have a moral, ethical, and legal duty to promote equal opportunity. This was true during the days of de jure segregation before *Brown v. Board of Education* and remains true today following the Supreme Court's ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina* and *Harvard*. And despite the Trump administration's recent executive orders and threats to dismantle safeguards that ensure access to equitable education for marginalized communities—particularly Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students—colleges and universities must reaffirm their commitments to centering opportunity for all.

While the Court made it more difficult to engage in race-conscious admissions, colleges may still—and should—continue to pursue diversity and racial equity. However, there is growing concern that higher education institutions are overreading the decision, wavering in their commitments to diversity and opportunity for all, and retreating from their obligations to address persistent racial inequalities. **We can't let that happen.**

At this critical juncture, colleges and universities must reassert their commitments to racial equity and dismantle policies and practices that reproduce racial inequities across the student experience from recruitment and admissions to campus climate and completion. **And we must hold them accountable. To do so, we must ask the right questions.**

The Lawyers' Committee developed an equity-based framework—**Recruitment, Equity-in-Practice, Accountability, Social Inclusion, Opportunity Culture, and Networks**—that conceptualizes how racial equity might be achieved at colleges and universities. The REASON framework served as an organizing mechanism to coalesce key stakeholders—*grassroots organizers, community members, policy advocates, and students and alumni*—to guide the exploration of policies and practices

at flagship institutions, and inspire innovative solutions. Each pillar of the framework contains a set of questions geared to help students and other key stakeholders begin to map out what racial equity looks like at a particular college across the full spectrum of student experience from recruitment and admissions to campus climate and completion. These questions are not all encompassing and are meant to lay the groundwork for inquiry, meaningful discussions, and ultimately advocacy in action.

REASON

Recruitment

Recognizing and valuing students' strengths, talents, and achievements beyond traditional indicia of "merit" which have been used to justify the exclusion of Black students and other students of color from educational opportunities is critical to advancing racial equity in admissions. The questions below seek to understand how and to what extent universities utilize all permissible means to increase representation from historically marginalized groups.

KEY QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS:

- Does the institution adopt an asset-based mindset towards communities of color and low-income communities, valuing their contributions and strengths?
- Are students from low-income communities and communities of color actively recruited to the university, ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities?
- How does the university brand itself? How and to whom does it market and advertise, prioritizing outreach to underrepresented demographics and promoting inclusivity in its messaging?
- What types of relationships exist between the admissions office and high school guidance counselor offices throughout the state, and how

does the university ensure equitable access and support for students from all backgrounds?

- What policies has the state or university adopted to eliminate barriers due to long-standing economic and racial inequities, and is there an ongoing commitment to prioritizing justice and equity in admissions and recruitment practices?
- What faculty recruitment practices does the university employ, and how does it ensure equal opportunity in its hiring processes, recognizing the importance of diverse perspectives in academia?
- To what extent does the university prioritize the implementation of comprehensive P-20 pipeline support initiatives, meticulously tailored to uplift communities grappling with educational disparities, thereby fostering a more equitable pathway to academic success?
- How does the university approach the admissions process? Does it embrace a holistic approach that recognizes the multifaceted talents, experiences, and contributions of students from underserved communities, thus enriching the academic community and promoting diversity and inclusion at all levels?

Equity-In-Practice

Fostering supportive and inclusive environments and promoting the success and well-being of all students, particularly students from underserved communities may require addressing their individual needs, backgrounds, and circumstances. The questions below seek to understand how committed institutions are to meeting students where they are through their investments in programs and initiatives that provide robust academic and financial support and create pathways for meaningful inclusion and advancement for all students.

KEY QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS:

- Is the university fully committed to ensuring that students are equipped with the resources to excel in their academic pursuits like: financial assistance, employment opportunities, secure housing, adequate nutrition, tailored tutoring initiatives, comprehensive summer bridge programs, dedicated academic support centers, and access to high-caliber academic advising services?
- Does the university demonstrate a steadfast commitment to fostering socioemotional support

structures essential for traditionally underrepresented students to acclimate and actively contribute to the academic and social fabric of the institution?

- Are professors and teaching assistants equipped with pedagogical expertise and curricula crafted to optimize learning outcomes and empower all students to engage with course material and advance academically?
- Is the university's distribution of scholarship and grant funding reflective of a cognizance of any historical complicity in perpetuating injustices, prioritizing initiatives that seek to redress past harms and promote equity and inclusion?

Accountability

These questions seek to understand the institutional commitment to transparency and accountability for racial equity and to what extent university leaders prioritize authentic student and alumni engagement and collaboration with community partners.

KEY QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS:

- Does the university annually assess its progress in recruiting and retaining students and faculty of color?
- Has the university undertaken a comprehensive racial equity audit? If so, how often?
- Does the university prioritize transparency, disseminating reliable and disaggregated data on key indicators for racial equity?
- Does the university conduct a thorough evaluation of its pipeline for historically underrepresented students?
- Does the university employ assessment mechanisms to ascertain its effectiveness in fostering a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students?
- Are students of color actively engaged in the university's accountability processes, and what meaningful role do they assume in shaping these endeavors?

Social Inclusion

These questions seek to understand the institutional commitment to fostering a vibrant, thriving, and inclusive learning community for students, faculty, and staff.

KEY QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS:

- Does the campus foster an inclusive and hospitable environment that embraces students from diverse backgrounds?

- Are students' identities validated and celebrated through the programs and customs established on campus?
- Are there any programs or initiatives developed to honor the contributions of historically marginalized communities to the campus or off-campus community?
- Do the faculty members and academic curricula comprehensively embody the diverse intellectual perspectives and narratives of traditionally excluded groups?

Opportunity Culture

For many students, achieving a college degree disrupts intergenerational cycles of poverty and open pathways to social and economic mobility. It is among the most powerful and transformative avenues for narrowing disparities in wealth and income, as well as advancing the rights, opportunities, and socioeconomic status of historically underrepresented communities. The questions below seek to understand the institutional commitment to providing the comprehensive support and resources necessary for students to transcend socioeconomic barriers and achieve meaningful success in their personal and professional endeavors.

KEY QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS:

- Is the university undertaking deliberate measures to enhance socioeconomic mobility opportunities for racial and ethnic minorities within its community?
- Does the university prioritize the provision of financial literacy programs aimed at fostering the cultivation of generational wealth among its students and alumni?
- Does the university incentivize students and alumni to pursue career paths aligned with their aspirations, in accordance with the institution's overarching mission? For instance, are there initiatives supporting financial considerations for those entering public interest fields or encouraging women to pursue STEM careers?
- Is the university's allocation of scholarship and grant funding structured to incentivize enrollment from

traditionally underrepresented groups and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds?

- From recruitment to graduation and beyond, does the institution systematically assess its effectiveness in facilitating socioeconomic mobility for its alumni, encompassing factors such as retention, persistence, and career advancement?
- Do the university's curriculum offerings and major selections reflect the evolving demands of the contemporary job market? Additionally, are students provided with comprehensive guidance on the implications of their choice of major or concentration?

Networks

By harnessing its resources, expertise, and influence, colleges and universities can foster collaboration with local communities and organizations to address barriers to higher education. The questions below seek to understand the institutional commitment to leveraging its social capital to serve as an impactful community partner and establish pathways to college access for historically marginalized groups.

KEY QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS:

- Does the university demonstrate adept collaboration with pipeline programs dedicated to serving underrepresented communities, effectively fostering pathways to higher education?
- Does the university cultivate strong relationships with educational leaders and college guidance counselors within minority communities, ensuring meaningful engagement and support for students from these backgrounds?
- How does the alumni office actively engage with educational institutions situated in traditionally underrepresented communities, fostering partnerships and initiatives aimed at promoting access to higher education?