PRINCIPLES FOR RACIAL EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION
Key Strategies and Policy Reforms

From our deep experience fighting for and alongside Black students and other students of color inside and outside the courts, the Lawyers' Committee has identified a core set of principles that can help chart the path toward racial equity and justice in higher education. Each principle is aligned with strategies and policy changes that are equity-focused, practical, and meaningful and can help foster more accessible, diverse, and inclusive campus communities.

1. Build learning environments that advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice.

Building learning environments that advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) is foundational to ensuring equal opportunity and a high quality, meaningful education for all students. DEIJ initiatives–from adopting culturally relevant curricula to ensuring racially diverse hiring pools for faculty to deconstructing systemic barriers–create opportunities for students to engage across different lived experiences and perspectives, which help students develop the skills to be effective leaders in a multiracial democracy.

The strategies and policy recommendations below help guide colleges and universities in creating a healthy campus environment in which all students can thrive.

➤ Proactively build more inclusive and culturally relevant curricula, programming, and activities across disciplines that are also led and informed by traditionally excluded voices. The curricula should speak to students' diverse lived experiences, and challenge narratives that reinforce racism, classism, ableism, ageism, anti-Black racism/afro-phobia, oppression of Native Nations, xenophobia, homophobia, religious discrimination, and other forms of exclusion.

➤ Push back against attempts to stifle speech and campus life most central to the college experiences of students of color.

➤ Strengthen language access for students and families with limited English proficiency.

➤ Support student and alumni organizations that seek to address the needs of specific racial, ethnic, religious, and gender communities.

➤ Attract and retain a diverse and inclusive faculty by revising policies and norms around pay equity, creating more pathways to tenure track positions, recognizing and valuing past experiences in teaching diverse students, and ensuring underrepresented faculty are fairly compensated and supported for their service work.

➤ Ensure classroom teaching methods are fair and inclusive.

2. Adopt holistic and equitable admissions practices that value and affirm the identities, strengths, achievements, and experiences of all applicants and confront the advantages of wealth and privilege that stifle opportunities for underrepresented students.

Colleges and universities should engage in admissions processes that evaluate applicants' demonstrated capacity and strengths in light of the resources and opportunities available to them. It is imperative that they revisit or eliminate policies and practices that artificially exclude students from opportunity, such as consideration of standardized test scores, which tend to under predict the talent and potential of Black and Brown students; and legacy preferences, which function as a modern-day "grandfather clause" by opening doors of opportunity to those whose ancestors had opportunity, while leaving those doors virtually closed to others.

The strategies and policy recommendations below will help institutions address longstanding inequities in admissions and enrollment policies and practices that have limited the chances for admissions for historically underrepresented and excluded students.

➤ Adopt equitable guaranteed admissions policies that ensure college admission to high school students who meet certain criteria such as a minimum GPA or class rank. These policies have been found to encourage talented students from low-income backgrounds to seek selective universities that match their academic credentials.[1]

➤ Adopt holistic admissions plans that evaluate a broad range of factors reflecting the applicant's academic readiness including their unique experiences, their personal achievements, and demonstrated potential. A holistic admissions process might solicit and consider:

▪ each individual applicant's relevant experiences, including racialized experiences.

▪ how an individual applicant's unique heritage or cultural history, e.g., language ability, enrollment in a federally recognized Indian tribe, or status as a descendant of enslaved Africans, contributes to student body diversity.

▪ whether an applicant is the first in their family to attend college and whether an applicant comes from a socioeconomically disadvantaged background or a low-wealth family, or other measures that may reduce the impact that wealth and other socioeconomic advantages have on GPA and standardized test scores.

▪ whether an applicant is from a geographic area, neighborhood, or high school that is underrepresented in the college community.

➤ Reform selective admissions criteria that give weight to certain extracurriculars and internship experiences that are more readily available to students with greater wealth.

➤ Eliminate reliance on standardized testing for admissions and scholarships, which has been shown to unfairly disadvantage underrepresented people of color, students with disabilities, English learners, and students from economically marginalized backgrounds.[2]

➤ Abolish early action programs and all other "back door" and "side door" admissions programs which have historically favored the wealthy and well-connected like donor and athlete preferences which systematically disadvantage Black, Latinx, and Asian American students[3] and legacy admissions, which is the largest single factor driving wealthy students' advantage in elite college admissions.[4]

➤ Eliminate the consideration of arbitrary course requirements that are irrelevant for entry into certain degree programs and majors.

3. **Expand access** for all students by making college more affordable, building pipelines with traditionally underrepresented communities, and strengthening transfer policies.

Efforts by colleges and universities to achieve racial equity must ensure equitable admissions processes coupled with the expansion of the applicant pool through comprehensive efforts that attract and embrace talented students from all backgrounds. Improving college affordability is critical to expanding access for Black and Brown students who disproportionately bear the burden of the student loan debt crisis.[5] Building pipelines with high schools and middle schools from underrepresented communities and developing robust transfer pathways with community colleges has immense potential for advancing equal opportunity in higher education.

The strategies and policy recommendations below will help expand the applicant pool ensuring more students have access to the economic mobility that earning a college degree can offer.

➤ Build relationships and pipelines with high schools, middle schools, and even elementary schools in underrepresented communities surrounding the institution and across the state.

➤ Develop pre-college programs that provide exposure to campus and college preparatory opportunities for incoming first-generation, first-year students like summer bridge programs.

➤ Provide a suite of non-traditional recruitment opportunities, like virtual meetings with admissions counselors and campus tours, for students who cannot visit campus.

➤ Expand efforts that engage families in the recruitment process to aid in recruiting diverse and first-generation, historically marginalized, and underrepresented students.

➤ Become a more "transfer friendly" institution–creating a robust transfer pipeline that enables students to move from technical and/or community colleges to four-year institutions.

➤ Remove barriers for students affected by the criminal legal system, like admissions questions about conviction history not narrowly tailored to admissions eligibility criteria which not only place them at a disadvantage relative to similarly qualified applicants, but also may deter formerly incarcerated potential students from applying to college in the first place.[6]

➤ Invest resources to reach and support historically underrepresented groups by deploying diverse alumni for outreach and recruitment efforts in their communities.

➤ Partner with communities and grassroots organizations interested in supporting a thriving education pipeline from early childhood through postsecondary education and training.

➤ Increase and expand need-based financial aid and remove financial barriers to enrollment.

➤ Revisit and redefine "merit-based" scholarships and aid to ensure criteria are not excluding underrepresented students and favoring wealthy students.

4. Support the **success and wellness of all students** by directing resources that respond to needs inside and outside the classroom.

In addition to expanding access, colleges and universities should support the success and wellness of all students by building institutional support systems, staff capacity, and professional development across institutions to meet students where they are. This means investing in the resources and strategies that address students' academic needs, mental and physical health, and socioemotional well-being.

The strategies and policy recommendations below will help colleges and universities eliminate barriers to equity and student success by addressing all the factors that impact the student experience both inside and outside of the classroom.

➤ Invest in systems that make mental health services safe, culturally competent, and quickly and financially accessible.

➤ Provide dining options that are nutritious, easily accessible, and affordable.

➤ Expand and streamline assistance programs to address students' basic needs like housing, nutrition, and medical care, and supporting the needs of students with caregiving responsibilities.

➤ Conduct systematic reviews of the quality of academic advising across colleges and departments, and make the necessary changes to bolster college completion.

➤ Consider non-policing alternatives for campus safety and well-being to build safer and more empowering campus environments for students, staff, faculty, and surrounding communities such as restorative justice and Good Samaritan policies.

5. Establish mechanisms for **transparency and accountability for racial equity** that center authentic student and alumni engagement and collaboration with community partners.

Colleges and universities should make substantial commitments to holding themselves accountable for racial equity across the student experience from recruitment to completion. This includes setting goals for diversity, equity and inclusion, engaging in research and assessment to measure progress on a regular basis, and adopting a culture of transparency and collaboration with students, alumni, and other community stakeholders to achieve those goals through all permissible race-conscious and race-neutral means.

The strategies and policy recommendations below will assist colleges and universities in ensuring a transparent system of metrics and assessment for key indicators for racial equity.

➤ Create opportunities for more students of color to have their voices and perspectives heard by campus leadership.

➤ Implement easily accessible online systems to report experiences of bias, prejudice, harassment, and discrimination on campus that are effective and responsive.

➤ Track and collect racial demographic data throughout the admissions process, as required by federal and state law, to analyze potential barriers to equal access in the admissions process; and analyze retention and graduation rates along racial and ethnic lines to identify potential barriers disproportionately impacting Black and Brown students.

➤ Conduct institutional climate reviews using validated campus climate surveys and meaningfully addressing survey results.

Endnotes

1   Lincove, J., and Cortes, K. "Match or Mismatch? Automatic Admissions and College Preferences of Low- and High-Income Students." National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 22559, Aug. 2016, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w22559/w22559.pdf.

2   Extensive research has documented how the SATs and ACTs are systematically skewed to underpredict the potential of Black and Brown students, hindering upward mobility. See W. Kidder et al., How the SAT Creates "Built-In Headwinds": An Educational and Legal Analysis of Disparate Impact, 43 Santa Clara L. Rev. 131 (2002); Saul Geiser, Norm-Referenced Tests and Race-Blind Admissions: The Case for Eliminating the SAT and ACT at the University of California (2017); Richard V. Reeves Reeves & Dimitrios Halikias, Race gaps in SAT scores highlight inequality and hinder upward mobility, Brookings (2017).

3   Arcidiacono, P., Kinsler, J., & Ransom, T. "Divergent: The time path of legacy and athlete admissions at Harvard." *Journal of Human Resources,* 59(3), 653–683. 2024

4   Chetty, R., Deming, D. J., & Friedman, J. N. Diversifying society's leaders? The causal effects of admission to highly selective private colleges (No. w31492). National Bureau of Economic Research.(2023).

5   Geiman, J., Taylor, A. S., Disproportionately Impacted: Closing the Racial Wealth Gap through Student Loan Cancellation, Payment Reforms, and Investment in College Affordability. Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), & National Consumer Law Center (NCLC). https://www.clasp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022_Disproportionately-Impacted.pdf. 2022.

6   Rosenthal, A., NaPier, E., Warth, P., & Weissman, M. (2015). Boxed out: Criminal history screening and college application attrition. Retrieved from Center for Community Alternatives, Inc., website: http://www.communityalternatives.org/fb/boxed-out.html.