

STUDENT SUCCESS IS THE DNA OF NAU:

A CASE STUDY ON NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

The words and actions of institutional leaders help shape staff priorities, departmental goals, and resource allocations. When institutional leaders make explicit commitments to delivering equitable postsecondary value, institutions can orient themselves to better serve all students. When that commitment is combined with an investment in disaggregated data on student outcomes, campus resources start to flow to the students who need them most.

Northern Arizona University (NAU) is a public four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution located in Flagstaff, Arizona. In June 2021, José Luis Cruz Rivera became president of NAU and launched an ambitious strategic plan centered on the equitable delivery of postsecondary value, particularly for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander students, students from low-income backgrounds, and women. Through the investments, policies, and practices stemming from this strategic plan, NAU further solidified its role as an engine for economic mobility in Arizona. Ten years after enrollment at NAU, the typical student earns \$54,129. That places them roughly \$7,500 above the 60th percentile of earners in Arizona.¹

Informed by interviews with campus administrators and NAU students, this case study showcases how NAU developed, implemented, and evaluated their strategic plan under Cruz Rivera's leadership. NAU's approach and the lessons shared in this case study can be leveraged by any institution seeking to measurably improve the value offered to students.



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Student success is the DNA of NAU. First and foremost, NAU cares deeply about educating students, and we want to increase opportunities for students and communities, especially for those who historically haven't been afforded these opportunities.”

— Laurie Dickson, Vice President for University Strategy and Senior Associate to the President

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVANCING EQUITABLE POSTSECONDARY VALUE ON YOUR CAMPUS

1. Engage your community to understand and address concerns.

Leaders have the power to offer members of the campus and broader community, especially students, an opportunity to share their perspectives, experiences, and thoughts on an institution's future. When NAU began drafting their strategic plan, they made extensive efforts to receive input from stakeholders on and off campus, resulting in broad buy-in and enthusiastic approval from the Arizona Board of Regents. The first draft alone received over 5,000 pieces of feedback, including from staff, faculty, students and the surrounding community.

2. Leverage disaggregated data to drive decision-making.

Disaggregated data on student outcomes increases an institution's capacity to make evidence-based, value-centered policy decisions. NAU recognized that a key component of actualizing their strategic plan would be to identify and track relevant institutional metrics including on enrollment, post-college outcomes, and social and economic impacts for Arizona more broadly. By disaggregating data by key demographic groups, institutions can identify inequities that might be obscured by aggregate data. This allows institutions to assess outcomes more accurately for students from historically marginalized populations.

3. Address student needs with institutional resources.

Commitments alone can't generate value for students. NAU backs up its commitments to students by restructuring institutional resources to support their success. The Access2Excellence program is just one example. This program provides free tuition for in-state students from households making less than \$65,000. Another example is NAU's Admissions Pilot Program, which focuses on aligning the university's admissions criteria more closely with Arizona's high school graduation requirements to increase college access.

Institutions of higher education can promote economic mobility in their local community and more broadly. Explicit commitments from leadership, broad stakeholder buy-in, and disaggregated data on student outcomes contribute to institutions' ability to realize this potential. NAU offers lessons all institutions can apply to equitably improve postsecondary value.



This case study is part of a series on Minority-Serving Institutions. Read [*Believing in The Potential of Every Student: A Case Study on LaGuardia Community College*](#) and [*Creating a Culture of Data Use: A Case Study of the University of North Texas*](#) for more recommendations to advance postsecondary value.

Photos courtesy of Northern Arizona University

¹ According to recent data from the [Equitable Value Explorer](#), an open-access tool that provides insights into college costs and student outcomes, the typical student earned \$54,129 ten years after enrollment in 2024. This represents a significant increase from 2022, when the average graduate's earnings were \$42,340, approximately \$3,500 above the 60th percentile of earners in Arizona.