STUDENT SUCCESS IS THE DNA OF NAU:

AN IHEP CASE STUDY ON NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

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EQUITABLE POSTSECONDARY VALUE IS:

" Meeting students where they are and helping them achieve their goals."

– CRISTINA BACIU, NAU DOCTORAL CANDIDATE AND ROADMAP FACILITATOR

Northern Arizona University (NAU) stands out as a leader in the Equitable Value Movement—a growing movement in higher education to look beyond equitable access and completion towards ensuring students from all backgrounds receive postsecondary value.

In May, NAU unveiled *NAU 2025 - Elevating Excellence*, a strategic roadmap that sets equitable postsecondary value as the university's north star and seeks to make NAU, a public, four-year, Hispanic-serving institution in Flagstaff, "the nation's preeminent engine of opportunity, vehicle of economic mobility, and driver of social impact by delivering equitable postsecondary value in Arizona and beyond."[1] To reach this ambitious goal, a team of NAU students, faculty, and staff, led by President José Luis Cruz Rivera, worked with the university community, other university partners, and local and regional stakeholders, to identify priorities that would chart the path forward.

LOCATION

NAU NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

FLAGSTAFF, ARIZONA

OVERVIEW

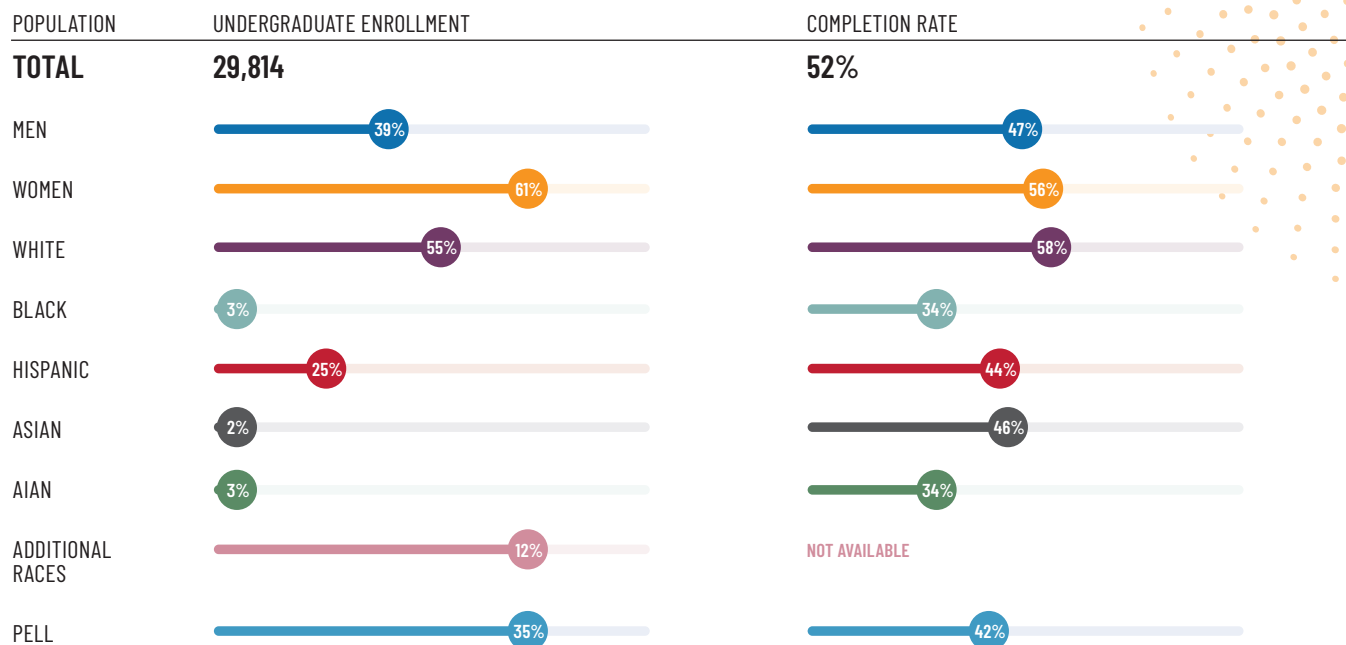## PUBLIC FOUR-YEAR
INSTITUTION TYPE

29,814
ENROLLMENT

83%
ADMISSION RATE

52%
COMPLETION RATE

4.33 YRS
ESTIMATED TIME TO CREDENTIAL

$42,340
MEDIAN EARNINGS[2]

FIGURE 1. NAU SNAPSHOT [3,4]

POPULATION	UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT	COMPLETION RATE
TOTAL	29,814	52%
MEN	39%	47%
WOMEN	61%	56%
WHITE	55%	58%
BLACK	3%	34%
HISPANIC	25%	44%
ASIAN	2%	46%
AIAN	3%	34%
ADDITIONAL RACES	12%	NOT AVAILABLE
PELL	35%	42%

THE ROADMAP FACILITATORS

This case study draws from conversations with some of NAU's roadmap facilitators, a group comprised of NAU faculty, staff, and students tasked with developing and refining the strategic priorities outlined in *NAU 2025 - Elevating Excellence* and led by a core team which included Laurie Dickson, vice president for university strategy and senior associate to the president; Julie Mueller, chief economic advisor to the president; Brian Register, chief of staff and; Margot Saltonstall, vice president of student affairs.[5] Dickson and Mueller were interviewed for this case study, along with President José Luis Cruz Rivera and NAU students Tyler Best and Cristina Baciu. These interviews help to highlight key strategies and recommendations that can be adopted by other institutions seeking to spark change and increase equitable postsecondary value for their students and communities.

Cruz Rivera, who became NAU's 17th president in June 2021, led this effort. He was motivated by the potential impact on the NAU community and Arizona's higher education landscape, as well as by his personal journey, noting "where I am in life and where my children are in life is directly related to the opportunities I had through my education." People across NAU, from students to administrators, expressed similar sentiments about the ways in which a postsecondary education can transform individuals and communities. For Tyler Best, an undergraduate who is entering his fourth year at NAU, higher education is "about discovering yourself and your passions and your abilities, so that by the time you get to a career you are able to succeed in it to its full potential." Julie Mueller explained that "we are committed to the economic mobility and social impact of our students, but we also are committed to the fact that when we support our students, we also provide a positive spillover effect to the larger community."

WHAT IS "POSTSECONDARY VALUE?"

The Postsecondary Value Commission, a national group of 30 diverse leaders representing colleges and universities, policymakers, advocates, researchers, the business community, and students was formed to recognize that while postsecondary education is a key path to economic and social mobility, various problems (the increasingly high cost for students, inequitable access to institutions and programs, completion rates that are still too low, differences in educational quality and supports, and disparities in post-college outcomes and debt load) were putting this route out of reach, especially for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. In 2021, the commission issued the following definition of "postsecondary value":

Students experience postsecondary value when provided equitable access and support to complete quality, affordable credentials that offer economic mobility and prepare them to advance racial and economic justice in our society.[6]

This definition and the framework put forward by the commission for measuring postsecondary value informed *NAU 2025 - Elevating Excellence*.

Courtesy of Northern Arizona University

BRINGING THE EQUITABLE VALUE MOVEMENT TO NAU: A TIMELINE

LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY (MARCH 2021 – JUNE 2021)

During the three-month transition before his official start, Cruz Rivera held listening sessions with the NAU community, including staff, students, alumni and with external constituents, Flagstaff community members, and elected officials. As he learned more about their aspirations for NAU, one of the most prominent concerns was the value of college. As Dickson recalled:

> The presidential transition process made it abundantly clear that there was an expressed need and desire to differentiate NAU's role within the state and national higher education landscape and to leverage our distinctive excellence to contribute to a more prosperous Arizona and beyond. President Cruz Rivera recognized that NAU was well-positioned to seize the moment and tackle the grand challenge facing institutions of higher education across the nation—the challenge of equitable postsecondary value—head on.

To structure the vision that would address the concerns and meet the needs of the community, Cruz Rivera turned to the work of the Postsecondary Value Commission. In his words, "the equitable value framework was probably the best thing that I had to grab onto, to get some coherence around the narratives that I was hearing on campus; it presented a way to organize our work."

> **" 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**

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ASSEMBLING A TEAM
(AUGUST 2021 - SEPTEMBER 2021)

With the Value Framework in hand, and a campus community primed for transformative action, Cruz Rivera assembled a core team to organize an approach to improving equitable postsecondary value at NAU. The team determined that the institution needed a strategic roadmap that would chart a clear course while allowing them to be nimble and responsive to the institution's needs. On August 31, 2021, NAU announced plans for developing this roadmap. In the month that followed, the core team recruited 35 roadmap facilitators: students, staff, faculty members, and subject matter experts.

DEVELOPING THE STRATEGIC ROADMAP
(OCTOBER 2021 – MAY 2022)

The core team set out an ambitious timeline, to produce a robust draft of a three-year strategic roadmap with input and buy-in from the full NAU community by the end of the fall 2021 semester – a little over three months' time.

The core team moved with both urgency and intention. Leaning on the Postsecondary Value Commission's Value Framework, as well as NAU's previously implemented and current strategic plans, the core team outlined key areas of interest that would make up the roadmap's strategic priorities. Each priority would include aspirational goals and objectives for furthering equitable value.

EQUITABLE POSTSECONDARY VALUE IS:

" About not leaving anything to chance. If you want to make sure that someone can meet their full potential, regardless of what their background is or circumstances are, then you have to be very intentional about how you provide differentiated approaches towards expanding access, broadening participation and supporting them through their education."

– JOSÉ LUIS CRUZ RIVERA, PRESIDENT

By assessing prior strategic plans and evaluating feedback raised during listening tours, the core team was able to quickly identify and communicate the priorities of focus for the roadmap, which included[7] Academic Excellence, Student Success, Commitment to Indigenous Peoples,[8] Impactful Scholarship, Mission-Driven and Diverse Faculty and Staff, Community Engagement and Sustainable Stewardship of Resources. Then the roadmap facilitators were organized into seven, five-person working groups that corresponded to a designated priority.[9] Over a period of three engagement phases, the working groups slowly reduced a list of more than 120 objectives down to three to five per strategic priority, integrating feedback gathered from community members through each phase.[10]

In March 2022, NAU shared its third draft of the strategic roadmap for one more round of public comment. In May 2022, the team unveiled *NAU 2025 – Elevating Excellence*, the official title of the new roadmap, following endorsement from the University Advisory Board. Shortly after, the university presented it to the Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) for adoption, which it did with unanimous and enthusiastic support for the clear vision of driving attainment and delivering value in Arizona. With that approval, NAU promptly turned to implementation.[11]

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

NAU employed three key strategies to catalyze the equitable value movement on its campus—strategies that can be adopted by other campuses:

1. Engage Authentically with the Campus and Surrounding Community.
2. Employ Disaggregated Institutional Data to Drive Decision-Making.
3. Make Incremental Changes to Address Urgent Student Needs.

STRATEGY #1: ENGAGE AUTHENTICALLY WITH THE CAMPUS AND SURROUNDING COMMUNITY

NAU 2025 - Elevating Excellence was developed by and for the NAU community. The listening tour Cruz Rivera embarked on during the presidential transition was the impetus for developing a strategic roadmap focused on equitable postsecondary value. The broad, community-wide support for the roadmap is a direct result of intentional and authentic engagement with students, faculty, staff, community organizations, and the Arizona Board of Regents.

A commitment from the top levels of leadership and a strategy to engage all parts of the campus community are essential elements of the engagement necessary to drive change towards more equitable postsecondary value. To foster strong community engagement and build buy-in among key stakeholders, NAU:

- Formed working groups that included students.
- Maintained open and transparent lines of communication.
- Employed several strategies for soliciting community input.
- Responded to and incorporated community input.

Authenticity means forming working groups that included students

From the beginning, NAU prioritized the engagement and representation of students, staff, faculty, and community members in the development of its roadmap. Student facilitators were selected through a nomination process and assigned to one of seven working groups that most closely aligned with their interests and expertise. Baciu, who served on the Impactful Research, Scholarly and Creative Activities working group said "it was a really positive experience. I definitely felt like my voice was heard and that it made a difference." Best, who served on the Equitable Student Access, Momentum, Graduation and Post-Graduation Success working group felt similarly: "I'm a student that hasn't even gotten a bachelor's degree yet, and yet I was allowed the privilege to sit on the highest possible committee that there was at NAU at the time, helping to shape university decisions, multi-year decisions."

The roadmap engagement process ensured that students' perspectives and experiences are reflected in the vision for NAU's future. Dickson said, "it is critical to involve students in all aspects of planning, they are the reasons we are here! Students, through participation in the articulation of the strategic priorities and the associated components, are helping to shape our institution to better serve students from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences."

Authenticity means maintaining open and transparent lines of communication

To ensure that all members of the NAU community were aware of opportunities to shape *NAU 2025 -Elevating Excellence*, Cruz Rivera sent regular email communications about them and documented them on a webpage on the NAU site. The updates contained detailed accounts of the roadmap facilitators' progress in completing each of the three engagement phases, information on where and when roadmap facilitators would be holding listening sessions and upcoming opportunities for NAU community members to provide additional input and feedback.[12]

Authenticity means employing numerous strategies for soliciting community input

The core team sought to provide as many opportunities as possible for members of the broad NAU community to review the outlined strategic priorities and objectives for success. Throughout the drafting process, each working group held a series of listening sessions where community members could ask questions about and share thoughts on the current strategic priority draft. The NAU community was also able to provide feedback via IdeaScale, an interactive crowdsourcing tool that offered transparency and facilitated easy participation. Community members could also share feedback via email to an inbox set up by the core team or share anonymously by completing an online survey.[13] This wide range of feedback mechanisms helped to ensure an inclusive process that reduced barriers for community members to contribute.

> 66 Dr. Cruz Rivera made it very clear that none of this was secretive. So, I could go out and tell whoever I wanted exactly what happened in every single meeting."
>
> – TYLER BEST, UNDERGRADUATE AND ROADMAP FACILITATOR

ACTING WITH BOLDNESS AND BRAVERY

President Cruz Rivera's mission to improve parity and economic mobility for NAU students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, helped to invigorate a community already committed to helping its students succeed and it increased the urgency with which it advanced the work.

"It's incredibly contagious what's going on. You can feel how the university is moving forward. It's like there is this big force that's pushing and fueling everybody to do their best, as they've always done, but with really renewed energy and enthusiasm," Baciu said. Mueller reflected on the bravery of multiple leaders across campus. "It's been so inspiring to see, not just the president, but so many people here at NAU being willing to say, 'just because we've done something in a certain way for X number of years does not mean we have to do it now. How can we change to drive this bigger goal of better serving our students?'" The bold and courageous direction taken by NAU leadership and embraced by students, faculty, staff, and community members was a pivotal part of developing engagement, buy-in, and trust.

Courtesy of Northern Arizona University

Recognizing that institutions of higher education impact the future of the areas in which they are located, the core team incorporated feedback from representatives of the wider community to ensure alignment between the public's vision for NAU and the roadmap's goals. Like all feedback gathered throughout this process, the core team took what it heard and made adjustments—in this case, adding emphasis on how NAU delivering excellence to all of its students will create a bold and boundless future for students and communities in Arizona and beyond.

By employing multiple methods to solicit input from the community and campus, roadmap facilitators were able to collect and incorporate extensive feedback. The first draft of the document, for example, received more than 5,000 reactions, which included verbal and written feedback collected through IdeaScale, online surveys, direct email outreach, and facilitator hosted townhalls.[14]

Authenticity means responding to and incorporating community input
Recognizing that authentic engagement requires responding to community input, roadmap facilitators worked diligently to address the feedback they received. For example, after hearing feedback from NAU's Indigenous community on an early draft, they incorporated those suggestions. The second draft of the roadmap included a strategic priority establishing an explicit commitment to Indigenous Peoples, and a new working group was assembled to develop and refine the objectives and strategies that would fall under that priority. This is just one example of how NAU community members can point to specific aspects of the roadmap that reflect their voices, perspectives, and input.[15]

STRATEGY #2: EMPLOY DISAGGREGATED INSTITUTIONAL DATA TO DRIVE DECISION-MAKING

Equitable postsecondary value requires strong institutional, state, and national data systems to help identify and diagnose inequities along racial, gender, and economic lines. Institutions can and should leverage their available data assets to develop a culture of data use and make data-informed decisions that help inform institutional initiatives and strategic plans.[16]

NAU is developing strategies to advance the seven priorities from the roadmap and is designing internal metrics for each one. These metrics will focus on attainment, enrollment, post-college outcomes, and social and economic impacts for Arizona more broadly. The metrics will include disaggregation for key demographic groups, since aggregate data can hide inequities within a system, making it difficult for an institution to assess the persistence, completion, and economic outcomes of its students from historically marginalized populations. Disaggregation by race/ethnicity, income, gender, age, enrollment status, language, and other demographic factors allows for equity-driven policymaking that is data-informed and evidence based.[17] By disaggregating key metrics, NAU will gain a deeper understanding of what inequities exist and the actions it can take to better serve its student body.

FIGURE 2. THE ECONOMIC VALUE THRESHOLDS

0 **MINIMUM ECONOMIC RETURN:** A student meets this threshold if they earn at least as much as a high school graduate plus enough to recoup their total net price plus interest within ten years.

1 **EARNINGS PREMIUM:** A student meets this threshold if they reach at least median earnings in their field of study (or, if field of study data is unavailable, the median earnings for the institution's predominant degree type).*

2 **EARNINGS PARITY:** This threshold measures whether students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women reach the median earnings of their systemically more advantaged peers (White students, high-income students, or men).**

3 **ECONOMIC MOBILITY:** This threshold measures whether students reach the level of earnings needed to enter the fourth (60th to 80th) income quintile, regardless of field of study.

4 **ECONOMIC SECURITY:** While sufficient earnings can create a stable life, wealth is key to building the type of security needed to withstand life's financial shocks. This threshold therefore measures whether students reach median levels of wealth.

5 **WEALTH PARITY:** Mirroring the earnings parity threshold, this threshold measures whether students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women reach the level of wealth attained by their more privileged White, high-income, or male peers.

MEASURING VALUE

To help policymakers and practitioners measure the economic returns that come from education after high school, the Postsecondary Value Commission developed a series of six thresholds that measure how and how much better off students are after having attended college.[18] The Economic Value Thresholds (thresholds), as shown in Figure 2, account for everything from minimum economic returns, earnings and wealth parity, economic mobility and security and earnings premiums .[19] The thresholds enable institutions to assess how their median earnings measure against each of the thresholds, and gain clarity on how groups of students - particularly students of color, students from low-income backgrounds and other historically underrepresented student populations - are and are not meeting these measures. Examining how institutions, programs, and groups of students fare against these measurements can inform institutional efforts to increase value for students and promote equitable outcomes.

HOW NAU PERFORMS ON THE ECONOMIC VALUE THRESHOLDS

The Equitable Value Explorer (EVE) is an interactive online data tool that operationalizes the Postsecondary Value Commission's Value Framework, allowing users to explore how institutions perform against the thresholds by using institutional data.[20] The thresholds provide a benchmark to assessing the economic value that institutions provide their students relative to earnings among their state population. Ten years after initial enrollment, the median earnings for NAU students is $42,340. This is much higher than the level students need to earn to achieve minimum economic returns on their investment, measured by Threshold 0. At NAU, students would have to earn at least $34,244 to make as much as a high school graduate and to recoup their college costs. What's more, the median earnings of NAU students are higher than the fourth income quintile of earners in their state ($38,862; Threshold 3), demonstrating that NAU generates economic mobility for their students.

While NAU surpasses thresholds 0 and 3—providing students with minimum economic returns and economic mobility—former NAU students do not earn as much as the typical bachelor's degree holder in Arizona ($46,912; Threshold 1; See Figure 3). Part of the reason for this gap is that the earnings data available for NAU includes both students who graduated and those who did not complete their degree. The earnings of students who did not graduate likely pulls down the overall median earnings, so one way the institution can boost performance against Threshold 1 is to increase completion rates so students can reap the value of not just college attendance, but college completion. Overall, the Economic Value Thresholds shed light on NAU student outcomes, unearthing both strong performance and areas for improvement. These data and the framework serve as a tool to support the institution's goal of continuous improvement to serve as an engine of opportunity and economic mobility for its students.

FIGURE 3. OVERALL ECONOMIC VALUE THRESHOLDS

This figure highlights the economic value that NAU provides to its students relative to multiple earnings thresholds that reflect the economic circumstances in the state of Arizona[21]

$27,136	$34,244	$38,862	$42,340	$46,912	$60,817
25TH PERCENTILE	OVERALL T0	OVERALL T3	MEDIAN	OVERALL T1	75TH PERCENTILE

* If data for field of study is not available, the framework then uses the most predominant degree level (e.g., median earnings among bachelor's degree holders). This can be calculated by using pooled 5-year American Community Survey data.

** Available public data do not currently support the production of this threshold for students from low-income backgrounds.

Notes: Thresholds 0-3 are estimated by using College Scorecard data, with some limitations. Institutions and systems can apply these thresholds with greater detail and specificity if they have the data and analytic resources available. Thresholds 4-5 stand as conceptual goals rather than operable analyses due to the lack of quality data available to measure wealth.

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STRATEGY #3: MAKE INCREMENTAL CHANGES TO ADDRESS URGENT STUDENT NEEDS

To begin realizing the vision articulated in the *NAU 2025 - Elevating Excellence* roadmap, NAU identified opportunities to make impactful policy and practice changes that could expand equitable access. A small team of dedicated NAU staff analyzed available resources and determined whether existing policies were aligned with the goal of providing postsecondary value to students, regardless of their race, background or circumstance. Dickson shared that by working "concurrently with the development of the strategic plan, NAU has fast-tracked the development and implementation of several transformative, equity-driven initiatives, reducing barriers for access and recalibrating investments to align with access and workforce development goals that prioritize student participation and engagement."

This approach allowed NAU to create initiatives that lead to more immediate impacts for the campus community and resulted in two new, student-centric programs: Access2Excellence and the admissions pilot program.

Access2Excellence (A2E): Starting in the fall of 2023, this initiative will provide free tuition to Arizona students who come from households with a family income of $65,000 or less, the median household income in the state.[22] As noted in the press release, A2E is an impressive "embodiment of [NAU's] commitment to excellence and delivering equitable postsecondary value to all our students."[23] The program will be available to first-year and transfer students who attend the Flagstaff campus or any of the other university satellite campuses in Arizona.[24] In addition to helping alleviate financial burdens for individual students and their families—opening NAU's doors to students who may not otherwise feel a college degree is financially feasible—A2E has the potential to expand access and attainment for Arizonans and drive economic mobility in the state.

Admissions Pilot Program: Currently, approximately 50,000 high school students from grades 9-12 in Arizona have limited access to the 16 core courses, especially second language and math courses, that are required for assured admission to NAU.[25] The admissions pilot program, slated to launch in fall 2023, will maintain the current 3.0 GPA requirement for guaranteed admission to NAU, but will eliminate the structural barrier imposed by requiring a second language course and will increase flexibility in acceptable math courses.

"Our leaders here are brave," Mueller reflected, "to be able and willing to change things and willing to respond and think about things that they've been doing for a long time to make changes, even if they're small change. It takes courage."

The university's steps towards change also strongly resonated with students. "It's not just saying that you're going to do something," Best noted, "it's taking that extra step towards implementing changes."

While these changes are set to take place in the fall of 2023, NAU is already working to determine which metrics to use in evaluating whether it increases access to postsecondary education for all students.

EQUITABLE POSTSECONDARY VALUE IS:

" Increasing the number and range of students who have the opportunity to realize the benefits of higher education. So individuals, regardless of their background, have similar opportunities to experience and benefit from higher education."

–LAURIE DICKSON, VICE PRESIDENT FOR UNIVERSITY STRATEGY AND SENIOR ASSOCIATE TO THE PRESIDENT

Courtesy of Northern Arizona University

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVANCING EQUITABLE POSTSECONDARY VALUE ON YOUR CAMPUS

Institutions have a unique opportunity and responsibility to equitably serve students regardless of race, income, gender, background, or circumstance so all have the opportunity to reach their full potential by participating and succeeding in higher education. Policies and practices shape who has access, who persists and completes, and who experiences the economic and social mobility higher education promises. As summarized in this case study, the strategies employed by NAU to center equitable postsecondary value offer four key lessons for institutions seeking to undertake similar work on their campuses.

1. COMMIT EXPLICITLY TO PRIORITIZING EQUITABLE POSTSECONDARY VALUE.

The words and actions of leaders help shape staff priorities, departmental goals, resource allocations, student sentiments, and day-to-day activities. So to catalyze change that delivers greater postsecondary value, regardless of students' race, background, or circumstance, leaders must embed the idea of equitable value in their approach. Each leader will face different circumstances and contexts and should embrace their own style. But, regardless of whether an institution is drafting and adopting an entirely new strategic plan, newly focusing on value, or long committed to these ideals, leaders seeking to move the needle on postsecondary value must lead with boldness and clarity. A leaders' commitment to equitable postsecondary value should clearly express the "why" of the work and the "what" of the problem.[26]

2. 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. Creating inclusive, intentional, and accessible opportunities for engagement, as NAU did, helps to engage the campus and surrounding community in decision-making. Institutions can and should do the following: ensure racial diversity in formal appointments, hiring, groups, and panels; conduct meaningful outreach to impacted communities; and partner with philanthropy, local businesses, and community-based organizations.[27]

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THE VALUE DATA COLLABORATIVE

In June 2022, IHEP launched the Value Data Collaborative (VDC). This new initiative will further advance the field's understanding of the return on investment in postsecondary education – both for students and their families, and for society writ large – by implementing the Value Framework with state and institutional data. The VDC, whose membership is comprised of state agencies, systems and institutions, will expand upon the Value Framework to generate analyses on the value that institutions and programs provide, and outline opportunities and strategies for improvement.[29] The inaugural cohort of states includes Arkansas, Indiana, and Kentucky, and builds upon pilot work done by the University of Texas System.

LEVERAGE STATE LONGITUDINAL DATA SYSTEMS AND STRENGTHEN FEDERAL DATA SYSTEMS

Gaps in data availability limit institutions' ability to fully understand and address inequities in the value they deliver to students. For example, despite a strong desire on the part of NAU to prioritize equitable value, it lacks access to the data needed to fully understand students' earnings and wealth outcomes. States should strengthen statewide longitudinal data systems that link P-20W data and collaborate with institutions to leverage these data for improvement purposes, such as implementing the Value Framework.[31] Such data systems can increase institutional capacity and offer better clarity on post-college earnings and wealth inequities, key elements in understanding return on investment and implementing the Value Framework.

Currently, the College Scorecard stands as one of the best sources of data for institutions to understand how they deliver value to students. However, these data have their own limitations, and we recommend that the U.S. Department of Education improve[32] these data to further support this work. The federal government can further support institutional capacity for value assessments by building a more robust student level data network (SLDN), as proposed by the bipartisan and bicameral College Transparency Act. An SLDN would ensure that policymakers at all levels can make value-centered decisions and ensure that students and their families have the high-quality data necessary to make informed decisions.[33]

3. LEVERAGE DATA TO DRIVE VALUE-CENTERED CHANGE WITHIN YOUR INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT.

NAU's institutional metrics and disaggregation of data will increase its capacity for making evidence-based, value-centered policy decisions. Data, especially disaggregated data, has the power to unearth barriers to student success, bright spots of progress, and creative solutions for improvement. To drive measurable increases in value for students, institutional leaders must create a culture of data-use on their campus: leverage the data sources and tools available to them, strengthen linkages with workforce data systems to assess return on investment, build evidence into daily decisions, and consistently measure and evaluate impact to inform continuous improvement efforts. The Value Framework[28] helps to measure equitable value in ways that identify inequities and point towards solutions that can increase value for all students, regardless of race, income, gender, background, or circumstance. Several states are beginning to embrace this framework to inform their evidence-driven, student-centric improvement efforts (see Sidebar: The Value Data Collaborative).

4. IMPLEMENT POLICIES AND PRACTICES TO DELIVER EQUITABLE POSTSECONDARY VALUE.

A2E and the admission's pilot program are two examples of how restructuring institutional resources and policies can generate value. Institutions can leverage leadership, community engagement, and data to orient towards policy and practice changes. By investing in the continual assessment, evaluation, and adjustment of policies and programs, leaders can design multi-faceted policy solutions that further equity and postsecondary value on their campuses. Leaders should be open to exploring innovative solutions. They should prioritize evaluating if and how reorganizing institutional resources can address pressing student needs and concerns.[30]

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INVESTING IN INSTITUTIONS

While high school graduation rates have improved steadily nationwide in recent decades,[34] college completion rates have not kept pace and racial and socioeconomic gaps in degree attainment persist.[35] The benefits of higher education are nothing short of transformational, but only if students make it over the finish line. Today's students stop out from college for a myriad of reasons, including navigating complex college processes like course selection, degree planning, and transfer; balancing work and family obligations; and covering basic needs and unforeseen expenses. These barriers to completion loom largest for students who have been historically excluded from higher education, including students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and first-generation college students.

While institutions work to support students on their path to a degree, many - especially those that have been historically underfunded, like community colleges, Minority Serving Institutions, and regional public institutions - lack the resources and capacity to expand solutions in a sustainable way. For colleges and universities to address barriers to college completion, target equity-focused interventions, and provide student-centered supports, they need sustainable funding.

Federal investments in higher education allow institutions to build their human, financial, and technological capacity to support student persistence and completion. For example, recent funding of Postsecondary Student Success Grants (PSSG) to support the implementation of evidence-based and data-informed retention and completion initiatives will strengthen our economy and increase the public return on investment – both economic and non-economic – in higher education.[36]

The federal government must continue such investments, and at levels proportionate to the magnitude of the challenge at hand, to ensure that institutions can provide students the resources necessary to complete their postsecondary degrees and achieve their highest potential.

For more recommendations on how state and federal policymakers can improve equity and postsecondary value for all students, visit postsecondaryvalue.org/our-work/taking-action/ to read the Postsecondary Value Commission's Action Agenda.

ENDNOTES:

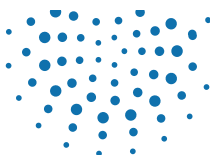1. Northern Arizona University (2022, May 2). *NAU 2025– Elevating excellence: A bold and boundless future for all.* https://nau.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/197/0613_742018_OOP-Elevating-Excellence-Brochure-FY22_9x9_ADA-FINAL.pdf

2. Median earnings are calculated for students who began their college journey at NAU 10 years earlier and received federal student aid. Given limitations with disaggregating College Scorecard earnings data by completion status, the median earnings presented here include students who started at NAU, whether they completed a degree or not. Despite this data limitation, which likely leads to earnings results that are lower than they would be if reported only for students who did complete their degree, NAU's median earnings still surpass Economic Value Thresholds 0 and 3 (See Sidebar: Measuring Value), which suggests strong economic returns for NAU students.

NAU's median earnings surpass Economic Value Threshold 0, signaling that, 10 years after first enrolling in NAU, individuals have a higher median earning than an Arizona high school graduate, and were able to recoup the cost of their investment in higher education. NAU also surpasses Threshold 3, meaning that its median earnings are high enough for individuals to reach the fourth income quintile or above in Arizona, regardless of credential level.

3. The Equitable Value Explorer (EVE) is an interactive data tool that helps users understand how institutions create value and compare institutions against the six thresholds in the Postsecondary Value Framework. The EVE leans on several publicly-available sources, including the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), American

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