Aiming for Equity: A Guide to Statewide Attainment Goals for Racial Equity Advocates

By Tiffany Jones and Katie Berger

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Introduction

A college education has never been more important. Over 99 percent of all jobs created during the post-recession recovery went to workers with at least some college experience.[1] And 2.8 million of the 2.9 million "good jobs" created after the Great Recession — the ones with annual salaries, health and retirement benefits, and paid time off — went to job-seekers with a bachelor's degree or higher.[2] Nearly two-thirds of all jobs in the United States now require some form of postsecondary education.[3] For most Americans, in most communities, a high school diploma is no longer enough to access the middle class.

However, as higher education has become increasingly essential, access to college remains decidedly unequal. Nearly half of White adults in the U.S. hold an associate degree or above. That's not enough in today's economy, much less tomorrow's. But among U.S. Black adults? Less than a third hold a college degree. Among U.S. Latino adults? It's less than a quarter.[4]

While the share of Black and Latino adults with a college degree has climbed a bit over the last decade, the increases haven't been enough to narrow the racial degree attainment gap. The U.S. education system, from preschool through college, continues to serve students of color worse than their White peers. In such a diverse nation, this educational inequality is a threat to a healthy economy, which depends on well-trained workers, as well as to a healthy democracy, which depends on well-informed citizens.

Fortunately, there is some reason to be hopeful: Policymakers across the U.S. seem to be embracing a renewed commitment to expanding and enhancing educational opportunities. Driven by the widespread acknowledgement that the United States must increase the number of individuals with college degrees to fill workforce needs and secure the nation's position on the global economic stage, national and state leaders have set ambitious goals to increase "degree attainment" rates, or the share of adults with a college degree or postsecondary credential.

At the national level, former President Obama set a "2020 Goal" of reaching a 60 percent postsecondary degree attainment rate among 25- to 34-year-olds by 2020, while the Lumina Foundation aims to achieve a goal of 60 percent of adults age 25 to 64 holding degrees or certificates by 2025. At the state level, policymakers and higher education leaders in 43 states have established statewide goals for postsecondary degree attainment, many of which are complemented by local and regional targets.

While setting and working toward reaching college degree attainment goals are steps in the right direction, advocates for equity and racial justice must remain ever vigilant to ensure that these goals are designed with equity in mind and pursued with the same enthusiasm expressed during their adoption, and push policymakers and state leaders to incorporate an explicit and targeted focus on outcomes for students of color.

This guide offers a primer on statewide college degree attainment goals and ideas for what to demand from policymakers to ensure students of color are prioritized as part of statewide higher education strategies.

Why Equity Advocates Should Care About Attainment Goals

In setting an attainment goal, leaders acknowledge that a college education confers profound benefits not only for individual students, but for the communities in which they reside. As such, policymakers and stakeholders from across the community should share a commitment to, and responsibility for, expanding and enhancing postsecondary opportunities. As state leaders adopt degree attainment goals and acknowledge their responsibility for growing and supporting an educated workforce, advocates should work to ensure that they also take responsibility for addressing racial equity and closing gaps in access and success. These gaps did not come to exist by chance — they were enacted and reinforced through centuries of discriminatory policymaking — and they will not close on their own. In fact, gaps in degree attainment by race have grown slightly since the year 2000.[5] But the current moment presents a tremendous opportunity to reverse course and make significant strides in closing gaps in educational opportunity and achievement.

Why Racial Equity Should Be Central to Attainment Goals

While the momentum created by degree attainment goals has the potential to dramatically increase college access and success, the efficacy and impact of states' efforts to increase attainment will depend significantly on the extent to which they prioritize racial equity. If states are ever going to meet attainment goals and address gaps created by generations of injustice and discrimination, policymakers must take racial equity seriously by pursuing goals and strategies designed to support students of color.

There are deep and persistent racial inequities throughout the early education, P-12, and postsecondary pipelines, and in many states, it will be impossible to reach attainment goals and fill workforce needs without addressing these inequities and improving educational outcomes for students of color. States historically and currently have contributed to and exacerbated inequality by investing resources in ways that disadvantage the schools and colleges that serve the largest numbers of students of color. For example, selective public colleges are able to spend, on average, almost three times as much per student on instructional and academic support as open-access public colleges where students of color are more likely to attend. As a result of systemic barriers to college opportunity, the growing population of students of color are often those without a college degree. Longstanding disparities in college enrollment and completion have resulted in large gaps in degree attainment by race, with 47 percent of White adults holding an associate degree or higher, compared to just 30.8 percent of Black adults and 22.6 percent of Latino adults.[6]

Racial disparities greatly hamper the ability of states and the nation to meet their degree attainment goals. Michael T. Nettles of the education research nonprofit ETS projected that, if current trends continue, the nation will not meet the Obama administration's goal until 2041 and the Lumina Foundation's goal until 2056. Even more troubling, Black and Latino populations will not have met either goal by 2060, the latest year projected. Nettles concludes that "without extraordinary intervention, the goals are just plainly and simply beyond the realm of possibility for African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Hispanic men and women."[7]

Demographic trends further contribute to the urgent need to address racial equity. Nationwide, the number of Latino adults has grown by 72 percent since 2000, while the number of Black adults has increased by 25 percent and the number of White adults has remained relatively flat.[8] In the next 25 years, people of color will account for half of the U.S. population and over half of the working age population.[9] Beyond being necessary for meeting attainment goals, addressing racial equity is necessary for fulfilling workforce needs, and according to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, closing educational achievement gaps would result in an estimated $2.3 trillion dollar benefit to the U.S. economy by 2050.[10]

How States Are Doing: A National Analysis of Racial Equity in Statewide Attainment Goals

To better understand the degree to which statewide attainment goals address these gaps, Ed Trust analyzed 43 attainment goals based on the level of priority, consideration, and thoroughness given to issues related to racial equity and students of color. States' plans for achieving their attainment goals range from ambitious and detailed to vague and perfunctory. And some states do significantly better than others at recognizing, tracking, and responding to gaps in postsecondary attainment based on race. To assess these differences, we asked the following questions of statewide degree attainment goals and related materials:

1. Does the state have a degree attainment goal?

2. Do the materials related to the goal mention race?

3. Do materials related to the goal include data on gaps in enrollment, persistence, completion, or attainment by race?

4. Do the state's attainment goal materials include a goal to improve outcomes for students of color and/or close racial equity gaps?

5. Is the state's goal to improve outcomes for students of color or close racial equity gaps supported by additional numerical targets, goals, benchmarks, and/or data analysis?

6. Do the attainment goal materials identify strategies the state has used, is using, or will use to improve outcomes for students of color or close racial equity gaps?

In order to be considered in our analysis, the state's materials related to the attainment goal had to be publicly available online, explicitly tied to the attainment goal, and issued by an entity responsible for developing or pursuing the goal. Although some states, such as Wyoming, North Carolina, and Maine, are in the process of setting or refining attainment goals, the results described below are based on materials available at the time the analysis was completed in summer 2018.

We found that while a majority of states take preliminary steps in acknowledging the existence of racial equity gaps and addressing them, states are less likely to have analyzed the causes of these gaps or identified strategies for closing them. Of the 43 statewide attainment goals we examined, 37 feature some mention of race, and 29 include data showing the extent of racial gaps in college enrollment, persistence, completion, and/or attainment. This indicates that policymakers are at least minimally aware of the scale of racial equity gaps in the state. A total of 30 states have set a goal to close racial equity gaps or improve outcomes for students of color within their statewide attainment goals, though these goals varied greatly in specificity. Examples of more precise racial equity goals are included in the next section of this guide.

Of the 30 states that have set a goal to improve outcomes for students of color or close racial equity gaps, just 18 supported their goals with additional numerical targets, goals, benchmarks, and/or data analysis. States that take this important step present valuable data about racial equity gaps throughout the P-12 and higher education pipelines, evaluate variation in outcomes by sector and institution, and explore contributing factors such as differential rates of remediation and credit accumulation. These states further bolster their equity goals with interim targets, interactive data tools, and regular progress reports. Such efforts demonstrate that these states are committed to diagnosing the causes of racial equity gaps and monitoring changes in outcomes for students of color as they continue to pursue their attainment goals. Importantly, these states also undertake these efforts in a public and transparent manner, allowing stakeholders and advocates to both hold states accountable and contribute to the work of advancing racial equity.

Number of Criteria Met:	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Number of States:	7	6	5	2	7	6	17
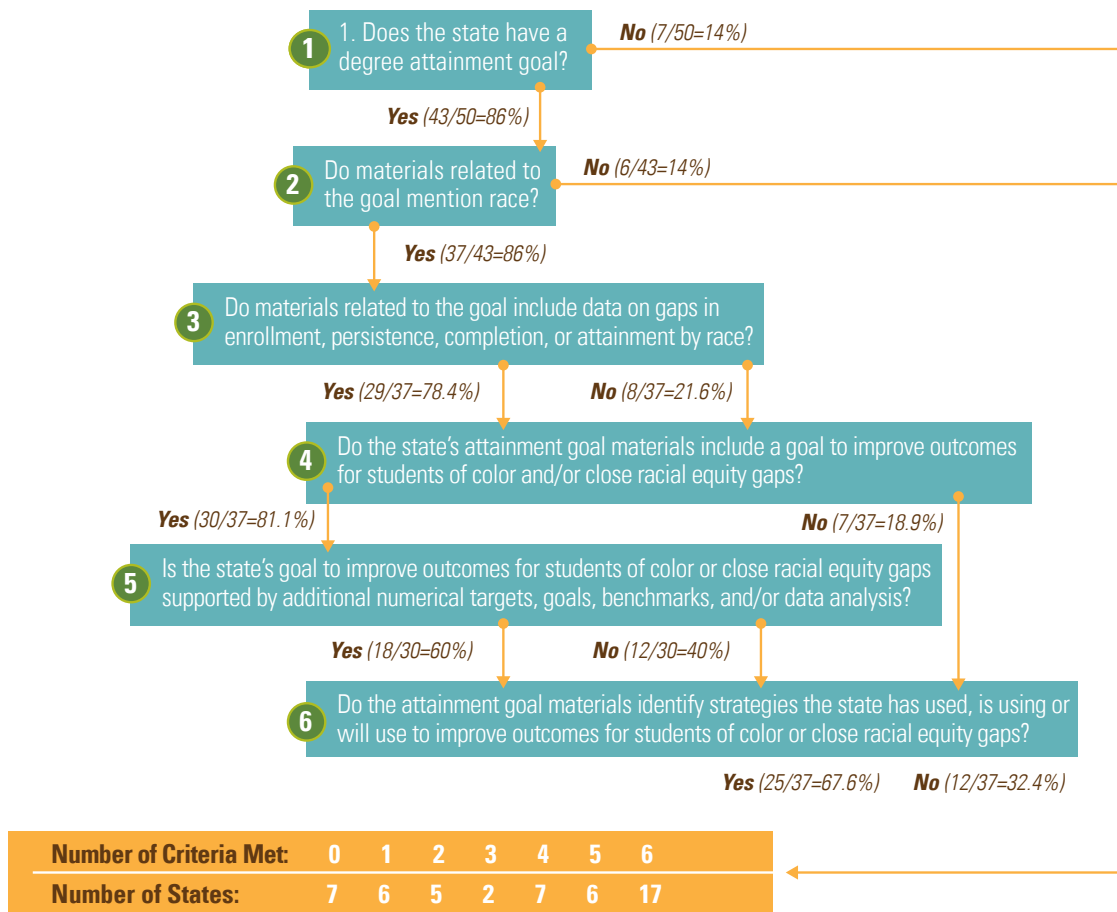
The most important part of a statewide attainment goal is not the text that's written on a page, but the change it helps catalyze. In order to move beyond admiring the problem of racial inequity to actually addressing it, states must identify and pursue strategies aimed at improving postsecondary access and success for students of color. Of the 43 state attainment goals we examined, 25 of them identified strategies for closing racial equity gaps or improving outcomes for students of color. These strategies varied in their scope and specificity, but their inclusion in attainment goal materials indicate that these states have at least begun a conversation about how to reach their ambitious goals for addressing racial equity. While individual state contexts will dictate which strategies will be the most feasible and impactful, it is important that policymakers identify and publicize their plans so that stakeholders can provide feedback, contribute, and monitor the impact of the chosen initiatives.

Best Practices: Models for Addressing Racial Equity in Statewide Attainment Goals

States have used data in a variety of ways to support and advance the racial equity components of their attainment goals. Best practices identified through our research include:

- Conducting data-driven analyses of equity gaps along the educational pipeline and factors that contribute to disparate outcomes

- Setting specific, separate, and trackable attainment goals for students of color

- Identifying and pursuing intentional strategies aimed specifically at improving outcomes for students of color, including:

    - Targeting students and faculty of color

    - Targeting institutions that serve large shares of students of color

    - Prioritizing equity in planning and policy development

- Adopting approaches that support transparency and follow through, including:

    - Establishing interim benchmarks

    - Creating data tools and reports that track progress over time

    - Tracking campus-level data on racial equity

States including Iowa, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Washington have conducted and published data-driven analyses of equity gaps along the educational pipeline to help identify the factors that contribute to disparate outcomes for students of color. Iowa's Metrics That Matter report, for example, includes the following data by race: attainment for each degree level, fourth and eighth grade NAEP proficiency scores, remediation rates, ACT readiness, college enrollment for each sector of higher education, and graduation rates. Pipeline data included in the Launch Oklahoma Strategic Plan reveal that, while Black students enroll in college at higher rates than their White peers, the reverse is true for postsecondary persistence and graduation rates. There are also states that examine differences in post-college outcomes by race: Massachusetts tracks racial differences in licensure exam passage rates and employment outcomes in their Time to Lead report, while Oregon's Higher Education Progress Indicators presentation includes data on earnings among completers by race/ethnicity.

States have additionally used data to translate their ambitious equity goals into more precise metrics that are easier to track and influence. We believe the best approach is to set specific, separate attainment goals for Black and Latino students, as well as other racial groups where appropriate based on state demographics. These goals should use the current attainment levels of the relevant racial subgroups as a baseline and aim to increase the rates of attainment among underrepresented groups more rapidly than the overall population. This will ensure that states are guided by a plan that seeks to close attainment gaps as statewide attainment rates rise. Without specific attainment sub-goals for various racial groups, states risk exacerbating existing equity gaps and placing a misdirected focus on the students who face the fewest barriers to college opportunity and success rather than those who face the most.

States with specific, separate, and trackable attainment goals for students of color include Minnesota and Texas. As Minnesota demonstrates, states can establish an overarching goal based on an attainment rate and translate that goal into the number of new degrees needed to reach that rate for various racial and ethnic groups. In this way, states can have both a goal for attainment, which measures degree presence and is impacted by factors outside policymakers' control like migration patterns, as well as a complementary target for degree production, which can be more directly influenced using policy levers and interventions like financial aid, recruitment efforts, and evidence-based college completion initiatives.[11]

In addition to setting specific goals for students of color, it's important that states identify and pursue strategies aimed specifically at closing racial attainment gaps. While states often identify strategies aimed at improving attainment overall, or for an umbrella group of "underserved" or "disadvantaged" students, there are also numerous examples of states that are intentional and direct in addressing issues of racial equity. Some states in our analysis identify strategies that target students and faculty of color, such as an Academic Leadership Development Institute for early career faculty of color (Kentucky), efforts to recruit and retain faculty of color (Missouri), and grants for Minority Male Initiatives (Texas). As a part of their statewide attainment goal, the Minnesota Legislature in 2016 created an Equity in Education and Job Connection Grant Program under which a total of $480,000 was provided to three public colleges to support research-based, best practice services within the following categories: social and campus integration; services that promote long-term academic success; appropriately structured developmental education; and expanding paid internships that directly relate to degree programs. Importantly, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education reports annually on the progress of the funded initiatives and their long-term sustainability.

Other states have taken the approach of targeting institutions that serve large shares of students of color. For example, Maryland's State Plan for Higher Education includes strategies for ensuring equal educational opportunities by way of strengthening historically Black colleges and universities. The 2017 plan follows Maryland's 2015 Report on Best Practices and Annual Progress Toward the 55% Completion Goal, which also includes a section on best practices targeted toward "encouraging higher enrollment and graduation of minority students" with five specific strategies for achieving the goal. More detail on those strategies is included in a supplemental volume. Nevada's Expanding by Degrees plan, which lays out the Nevada System of Higher Education's plans for pursuing the state's attainment goal, includes a Hispanic Serving Institution task force, which "provides a system-wide approach in supporting its six emerging Hispanic-serving institutions… as they work toward receiving full HSI designation."

A number of states have also taken steps to prioritize equity in planning and policy development. Kentucky developed a statewide diversity policy and directed campuses to develop "plans to increase the racial, economic, and ethnic diversity of students, faculty and staff; promote cultural competence; increase enrollment, retention, and graduation; and foster a culture of equity and inclusion." Of note, the plans go beyond words written on a page — they "include performance targets on select goals, and annual progress will determine eligibility for new academic programs."

The Minnesota Office of Higher Education conducted an Equity Institute in 2017, in which experts from the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education trained attendees from 10 colleges on "how to facilitate conversations about race, use course completion data constructively, qualitatively assess teacher quality in a multicultural setting, and build buy-in at their campus for specific changes." Attendees were also armed with "research-based tools to train administrators, staff, and faculty to become best practitioners of equity-mindedness and to facilitate institutional culture change."

The Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) holds annual, daylong diversity summits with sessions related to diversity and inclusion, student success initiatives, workforce and economic development, and community engagement. NSHE also convenes two groups of stakeholders and experts that address diversity initiatives — the Chancellor's Diversity Roundtable, composed of "community and business leaders representing diverse communities," and an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Council composed of campus presidents and system diversity officers.

Of course, these approaches to race-conscious strategies are not mutually exclusive — states can and should pursue targeted initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for students of color and prioritize equity throughout statewide planning activities. One example of such an approach can be found in Oregon. The state's Higher Education Coordinating Commission's (HECC) Strategic Plan for 2016-2020 directs colleges to address racial justice and campus climate issues,

calls for public reporting on outcomes with an equity focus, and sets the stage for the consideration of state funding formula changes including weighting for underrepresented students. Oregon's plan is anchored by the HECC Equity Lens, "which commits the HECC to ensuring its policy and resource allocation decisions advance equity."

To ensure that the best laid plans actually contribute to the closing of gaps and improvement of outcomes for students of color, some states have adopted a number of approaches that support transparency and follow-through, including setting interim benchmarks, developing interactive data tools, publishing progress reports, and measuring racial equity at the institutional level. There are a variety of models for setting interim benchmarks and tracking progress over time. Texas' goals for increasing the number of Hispanic and African American students completing a certificate or degree to at least 285,000 and 76,000, respectively, by 2030, include interim targets based on the same measures, one each for 2020 and 2025. The state's website for their completion goal tracks progress toward these goals, comparing them with the interim benchmarks and final goal.

Colorado's Master Plan Dashboard tracks equity completions for Hispanic, Native American, African American, and Pell-eligible students on an annual basis and compares annual degree production for these groups with current performance targets and aspirational goals. Indiana has set a goal of closing the gap in college completion between underrepresented and majority populations by 2025. Their annual Statewide Achievement Gap Analysis (one of many annual progress reports the state releases) compares the size of completion gaps over time to "half closed" and "gap closed" markers and includes indicators for "on-track," "some progress" and "not on-track" for outcomes of Black and Hispanic students by sector. Racial equity data are included for each college in individual campus progress reports, and Indiana's completion dashboard includes a tab for "closing the achievement gap" where users can toggle between campus, the on-time and six-year graduation rates, and graduation rates for Black students, Hispanic students, or both. Data in the dashboard are presented over time with "half closed" and "gap closed" lines for comparison.

Campus-level data on racial equity like those available from Indiana's annual reports and completion dashboard are valuable for both transparency and planning. Stakeholders and advocates have a right to know how well campuses are serving students of color and whether campuses are making progress on closing racial equity gaps. If gaps in access and success are found to be larger within certain institutions or sectors, policymakers and administrators can work to identify causes and target interventions. Policymakers can also explore what's happening on campuses with smaller racial equity gaps to identify promising practices.

In addition to Indiana, Colorado and Hawaii have collected and publicized data disaggregated by race at the campus level in conjunction with their statewide attainment goals. Texas takes a slightly different approach by focusing on regional variations in postsecondary outcomes. Their Regional Target Starter Kits include data for 10 separate regions on racial demographic growth, completions for Hispanic and African American residents by institution, college enrollment, and graduation rates by race.

Action Items: What Equity Advocates Can Do

Next steps for advocates will depend on where their states currently are in setting an attainment goal and centering racial equity. Find your state in one of the categories below to get suggestions for how to move forward. Then look up your state in the appendix to find additional state-specific details and links to related materials.

Start a Conversation

States without attainment goals
States with goals that don't address race
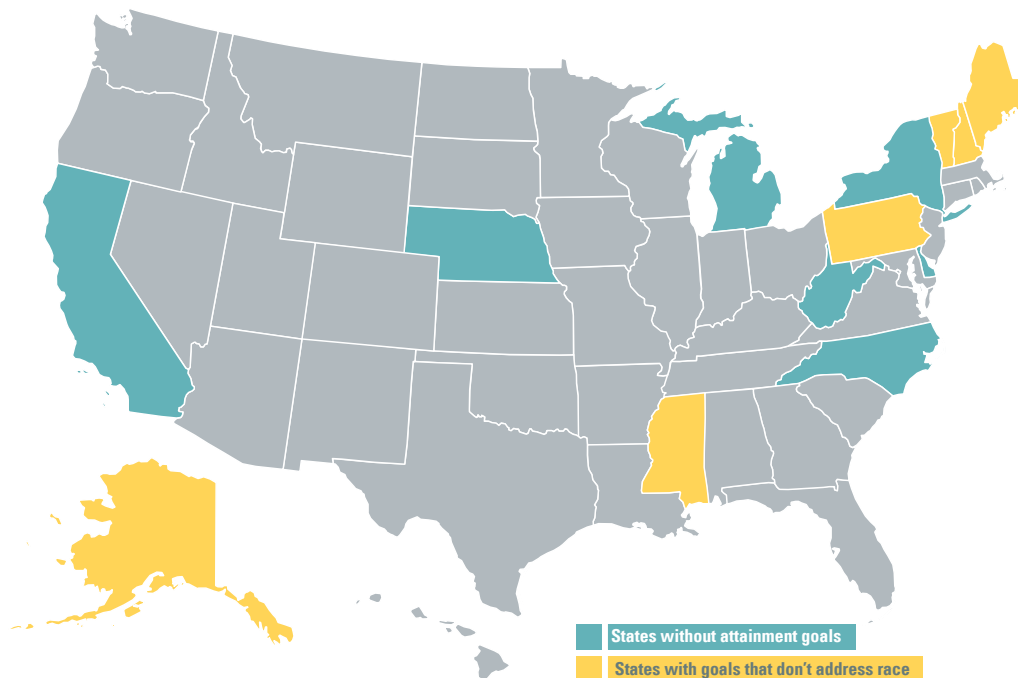
Advocates in the seven states that have not yet, as of the writing of this report, adopted a statewide degree attainment goal have the opportunity to get in on the ground floor and significantly impact how their states choose to address racial equity in their goals and associated plans.
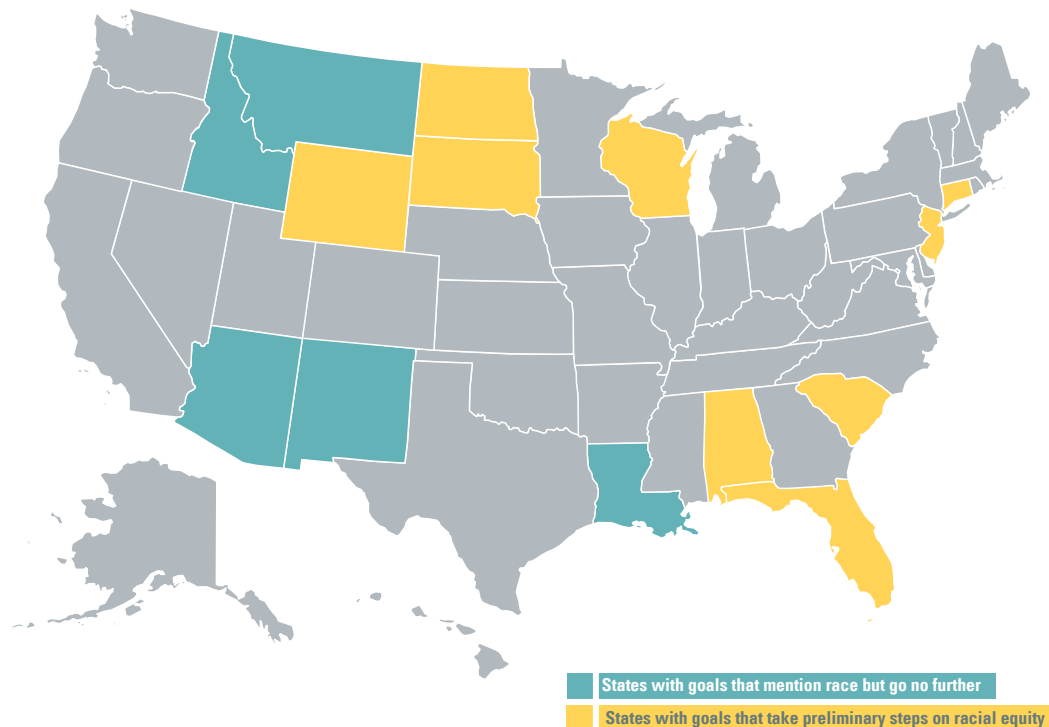
>>> **ACTION ITEMS:** Advocates in these states can urge policymakers to center racial equity from the start, and to make improving outcomes for students of color a central part of their goal setting and strategic planning processes. They should start a conversation about the importance of a college degree and the gaps in educational opportunity and success that exist in their states. Ed Trust's The State of Higher Education Equity and the Lumina Foundation's A Stronger Nation provide data on the importance, availability, and attainment of postsecondary education in each state.

Another 13 states are able to tout having an attainment goal, but don't have one that focuses on racial equity.

>>> **ACTION ITEMS:** It is important to challenge these states to revisit their goals and incorporate a more explicit focus on race. These state and higher education leaders must be reminded that their overall attainment goals are not achievable without addressing gaps in attainment by race. To do so, advocates will need to arm themselves with compelling data on the extent of racial disparities, such as that found in Ed Trust's The State of Higher Education Equity and the Lumina Foundation's A Stronger Nation. They can also point to demographic trends in their state and the growth in the shares of students who are Black and Latino to emphasize the urgency of improving the ways public schools and colleges support students of color.

Dig Deeper

States with goals that mention race but go no further
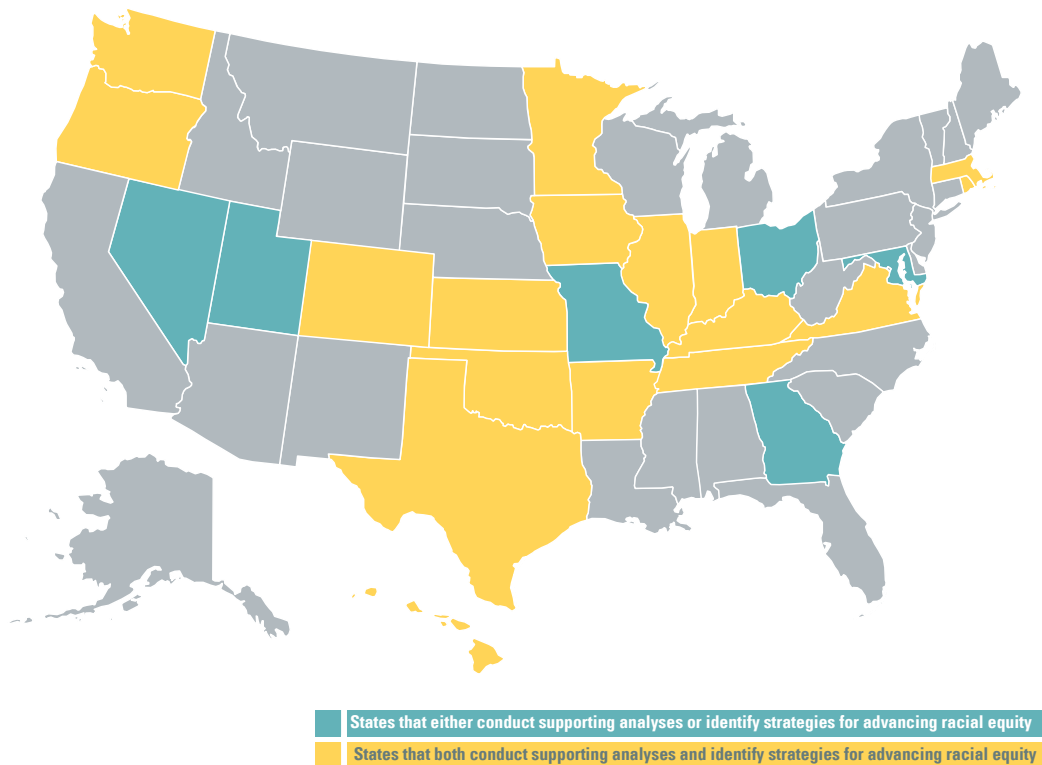States with goals that take preliminary steps on racial equity

Fourteen states met between two and four of Ed Trust's criteria for examining the racial equity components of statewide attainment goals. Five of these states include at least a passing mention of race in their attainment goal materials but do not meet any other criteria, meaning they fail to include data on the size of racial gaps in college access, success, or attainment or set a goal related to racial equity or improving outcomes for students of color. Two states met one additional criteria, and seven met a total of four criteria.

>>> **ACTION ITEMS:** Policymakers in these states should enhance their goals by including data on current attainment rates by race and setting specific targets that would demonstrate progress, and including plans and strategies for how they will achieve those goals. Advocates in these states can help policymakers paint a more complete picture of educational inequities and identify contributing factors by providing data on disparities along the P-12 and higher education pipelines and within various postsecondary sectors and institutions, which can be found in Ed Trust's Education Watch and College Results tools. They can also urge policymakers to publicly adopt and pursue strategies that will improve outcomes for students of color. To identify these strategies, advocates can look to the best practices cited in this guide and talk to local practitioners who have direct experience working with students. College administrators and faculty, teachers, college access professionals, counselors, and advisors can provide invaluable insights about what strategies they've found to be most effective and what support they need from the state to improve and expand services.

Turn Words Into Action

States that either conduct supporting analyses or identify strategies for advancing racial equity

States that both conduct supporting analyses and identify strategies for advancing racial equity

Over half of the states with degree attainment goals met either five or six of Ed Trust's criteria. Five states set a goal racial equity goal and identify strategies to pursue those goals, but do not set additional targets or provide supporting data. One state, Ohio, provides supporting data in an interactive dashboard but does not identify strategies for achieving its racial equity goal. The remaining 17 states met all six of our criteria by both identifying strategies and providing supporting data for their racial equity goals.

>>> **ACTION ITEMS:** Despite residing in states that meet most or all of our criteria, advocates in these 23 states still have important work to do, work that is arguably the most vital for securing the positive impact of statewide attainment goals and policymakers' stated commitments to racial equity. They should start by exploring the data analyses that their states have published, evaluating the quality of the strategies that have been identified, and pushing for revisions and expansions where needed. They should additionally hold policymakers accountable for achieving their goals and providing regular updates in the form of progress data and feedback on the effectiveness of strategies used to improve educational attainment for students of color. And in states with thorough, thoughtful goals centered on racial equity, advocates should help raise awareness and encourage public support to ensure that degree attainment and racial equity goals persist through leadership transitions and new administrations.

Working Around the Ban: Attainment Goals in States With Bans on Affirmative Action

Eight states currently have a statewide ban on affirmative action, and while this may create challenges for directly addressing race in public policy, there are ways that it can be done.

Advocates in these states can arm themselves with information on best practices both nationally and in other states with affirmative action bans and push leaders to adopt similar approaches.

Table 1. Results of Ed Trust's Analysis in States With Affirmative Action Bans

	HAS AN ATTAINMENT GOAL	MENTIONS RACE	INCLUDES DATA ON SIZE OF RACIAL GAPS	SETS A RACIAL EQUITY GOAL	SUPPORTS RACIAL EQUITY GOAL WITH DATA ANALYSIS	IDENTIFIES STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING RACIAL EQUITY
AZ	Yes	Yes	No	No	—	No
CA	No	—	—	—	—	—
FL	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	—	No
MI	No	—	—	—	—	—
NE	No	—	—	—	—	—
NH	Yes	No	No	No	—	No
OK	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
WA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Three states with bans on affirmative action — California, Michigan, and Nebraska — do not currently have statewide attainment goals in place. New Hampshire has adopted an attainment goal, but it does not include any mention of race. Attainment goal materials from the Florida College System include minimal mentions of race — one presentation has data on attainment rates by race and ethnicity — but the state does not have a goal related to racial equity or improving outcomes for students of color. The website for Arizona's attainment goal, Achieve60AZ, recognizes that Latino students complete college at a lower rate than their White peers and states that Arizona would "recognize tremendous benefits if more Latinos earned their degrees from higher education institutions," but does not include data on the size of racial gaps in college completion or resolve to address those gaps.

While Washington's initial 2013 Roadmap did not set a specific goal related to closing racial equity gaps or improving outcomes for students of color, subsequent materials such as the 2017-2019 Strategic Action Plan do include racial equity goals, and the state provides extensive data on racial gaps in access and outcomes in their Roadmap Dashboard. They further identify strategies aimed at addressing racial inequities, including in their 2017 annual report, which calls for "a system-wide approach addressing the whole student" and collaboration between "K-12, higher education, community-based organizations, and other critical partners."

Despite having a ban on affirmative action in place, the executive order creating an attainment goal in Oklahoma includes the following language related to racial equity: "The strategic plan shall include, but is not limited to… Metrics and benchmarks to demonstrate progress toward the seventy (70) percent goal. These metrics and benchmarks shall include, but are not limited to… Progress toward reducing the socioeconomic, ethnic and racial achievement gaps in PK-12th grade and increasing equity in post-secondary enrollment." While these benchmarks do not appear to have been set as of summer 2018, the Launch Oklahoma strategic plan does include extensive data on racial equity gaps along the K-12 and higher education pipelines and identifies the following racially conscious strategy for addressing equity gaps: "Identify partner agencies serving immigrants and provide outreach to staff about adult basic education and postsecondary training and education programs available, including ESL services."

Conclusion

While equity and racial justice advocates may very well encounter resistance among some policymakers to directly addressing race in public policy, the fight is worth it — indeed, it's fundamentally necessary for making progress. Using income as a proxy is insufficient and ineffective, as racial gaps persist even after controlling for income and other relevant characteristics. When considering students from the same family income bands, Black and Latino students are significantly less likely to earn a college degree than their White and Asian peers.[12] And inequities persist outside schools and college as well, particularly for Black Americans. Black bachelor's degree completers are more likely to default on federal loans (21 percent) than White college dropouts (18 percent).[13] Over half of Black Americans born in the lowest income quintile stay in that bottom quintile, while only 3 percent reach the top quintile. Meanwhile less than a quarter of the poorest White Americans stay in the bottom quintile, and 16 percent reach the top.[14] These are just a few examples from a wide body of research demonstrating that income is not a sufficient proxy for race, and that when policymakers focus solely on income, they do a disservice to people of color.

Opportunity has been defined as "a situation or condition favorable for the attainment of a goal." Thus, the focus on attainment goals isn't about giving policymakers credit for saying the right thing, but rather utilizing the opportunity that can result from the momentum created by rallying around a goal or target. Our hope is that, using the information provided here, advocates will push state policymakers and higher education leaders throughout the U.S. to take advantage of this incredible opportunity — the overwhelming support for improving higher education access and outcomes — and ensure that their efforts focus on addressing racial inequities. In addition to establishing formal attainment goals, advocates should push states to acknowledge and address inequity by measuring and tracking racial attainment gaps and implementing strategies to close them. Those responsible for developing strategic plans should also ensure that goals do not problematize or blame students, but focus on undoing injustice and designing fair systems. And finally, goals should serve as catalysts for actual changes to mindsets, policies, and practices.

State attainment goals — even those supported by the most detailed and equity-focused plans — are only as good as the policies and resources that back them up. To truly make progress and fill workforce needs, policymakers must ensure that disadvantaged students can access and afford college, and that the institutions committed to serving them have the funding and support necessary to do so, which matters because institutions can have different results even for students of similar backgrounds.[15] Beyond setting equity-focused attainment goals, lawmakers should ensure that state policies aimed at increasing attainment such as free college, outcomes-based funding, and the scaling of evidence-based completion strategies are designed to positively impact racial equity. State attainment goals should further be considered within the broader education policy context, based on how they are complemented or contradicted by existing accountability, funding, and P-12 structures. The road to reaching ambitious equity-driven attainment goals won't be short or easy, but with dedicated effort, requisite resources, and well-targeted approaches, advocates and policymakers can help all students, and especially students of color, succeed. ■

ENDNOTES

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4   Andrew Howard Nichols and J. Oliver Schak, "Degree Attainment for Black Adults: National and State Trends" and "Degree Attainment for Latino Adults: National and State Trends," The Education Trust, June 14, 2018, https://edtrust.org/the-state-of-higher-education-equity/

5   Andrew Howard Nichols and J. Oliver Schak, "Degree Attainment for Black Adults: National and State Trends" and "Degree Attainment for Latino Adults: National and State Trends," The Education Trust, June 14, 2018, https://edtrust.org/the-state-of-higher-education-equity/

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