



GUIDEBOOK

CATALYZING STUDENT EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Executive Summary

As institutions of higher education work to adapt to evolving demographics, student needs, and changing social contexts, a student-equity-centric approach is critical to ensuring that students' voices and experiences are included in conversations on the future of higher education. This work empowers and enables students, treating them as full stakeholders in institutional decision-making, and focusing explicitly on disrupting inequity.

Many programs across the nation are already doing this work well, creating the opportunity for the sector to learn from the best practices and common insights drawn from existing experience. This project is a student-driven initiative to begin understanding what makes a truly student-equity-centric program. The guidebook profiles five specific programs across the nation, describing the purpose and function of each, alongside a discussion of key takeaways. Drawing from a months-long process speaking with students and administrators across the nation, this guidebook dives into the following important factors in catalyzing student-equity-centricity for institutional leaders and decision makers:

- 01 Dedicate sufficient and appropriate resources.**
- 02 Create and implement a plan for measuring the program's impact and establishing its importance.**
- 03 Ensure the program's practices value, compensate, and empower students as equal stakeholders.**
- 04 Actively seek out and utilize knowledge from others; institutional leaders and decision makers should be open to sharing their own knowledge with students.**
- 05 Cultivate strong professional relationships between students and administrators.**
- 06 Transfer leadership and ownership opportunities to students.**
- 07 Facilitate professional, academic, and interpersonal community-building among students.**

This is merely the beginning of much further research and development, which must and will continue long into the future if postsecondary education in the United States is to effectively reorient itself for new communities and a new nation. At the Sorenson Impact Center, the MAPS project and its Student Coalition on Higher Education will continue to work towards informing the future of higher education with students at the center and equity as a driving value. The future of higher education must center students, and this document has the unique opportunity to meet this need. Developed by students, with students and equity in mind, this guidebook will serve as a catalyst for driving institutional change with any institution's largest stakeholder at the core.



PREFACE

ABOUT SORENSON IMPACT

The Sorenson Impact Center helps organizations achieve their impact vision by connecting capital to social and environmental solutions, helping organizations measure, report, and improve impact, and integrating data science and people-centered storytelling into all that we do. Along with our clients and partners, we share a vision of an equitable and thriving world where everyone is valued, communities prosper, and the measured impact of our actions guides decision-making. As part of our mission to train future impact leaders, the Center integrates academic programming and experiential learning into each of its practice areas. The Center is proudly housed at the **University of Utah David Eccles School of Business**.

[Learn more](#)

ABOUT MAPS

The MAPS project is focused on Modeling, Analyzing, Prototyping, and Sharing student-equity-centric ideas in higher education. We believe that more equitable and student-centric futures in higher ed will be achieved through the concert of data science, student perspectives, and cross-sector collaboration. Through our efforts, we convene experts, fund research, and build models to demonstrate new ways of integrating student-equity-centric perspectives and foresight practices across higher education.

The Sorenson Impact Center created and manages the MAPS project. Sorenson Impact provides data, modeling, engagement, and spaces to explore ideas and prototype solutions. We are a neutral, non-expert voice and seek to navigate the interface between experts, informed audiences, and the general public.

[Learn more](#)

ABOUT THE STUDENT COALITION

The Student Coalition on Higher Education began in summer 2020 with three goals: understanding student experiences, amplifying student voices, and leveraging student expertise. This group of postsecondary students from across the nation work together to envision a more equitable and sustainable future for the higher education sector.

In its first year, the Student Coalition met with industry professionals, led conversations with fellow students, conducted research, and more, all with the aim of driving student-equity-centricity in the future of higher education. Conversations with students highlighted the new or exacerbated inequities present in students' education experiences. Again and again, the team heard that students did not feel understood by their institutions or involved enough in decision-making spaces. This guidebook serves as a tool to fill this identified gap. Now in its second year, the work of the Student Coalition continues to build upon these critical understandings.

[Learn more](#)

CONTACT INFORMATION

For any inquiries related to this guidebook or the Student Coalition on Higher Education, please reach out to Allison Boxer at [**Allison.Boxer@sorensonimpact.com**](mailto:Allison.Boxer@sorensonimpact.com) or Frederique Irwin at [**Frederique.Irwin@sorensonimpact.com**](mailto:Frederique.Irwin@sorensonimpact.com).

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From the Authors

Over the course of the 2020-21 academic year, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, students across the country adapted to changing home lives, social lives, and work commitments. Simultaneously, the pandemic forced educational institutions to adapt operations within this uncertain global context.

For postsecondary students, the precarious situation of the pandemic manifested in multiple ways. Some lost campus housing, faced deteriorating mental health without access to the necessary support services, or struggled to effectively engage in learning due to technological barriers. Students of color, those from low-income backgrounds or rural communities, and others of historically marginalized identities generally faced greater inequitable distribution of these negative impacts. Many of the inequities characteristic of the Covid-19 pandemic are not new, but simply exacerbated and brought into the spotlight.

For higher education leaders, moving forward from this crisis presents a unique opportunity to better define the future of higher education. The sector can choose to adopt an agile, more equity-oriented approach to supporting current and future students. Alternatively, the sector may instead maintain the status quo and allow rampant inequity to persist.

In an effort to imagine a student-equity-centric future for education, we engaged with fellow students, administrators, and outside experts to identify programs successfully engaged in this work. We prioritized programs that address social inequity, provide holistic student support, empower students, and include representation of diverse voices. The models and takeaways in this guidebook provide insight and a way forward for future work in this area.

We see this research at a unique point of convergence: created by students, grounded in student equity, and applicable across the higher education sector in the United States. However, this research is far from comprehensive and, hopefully, far from the end. We hope that this serves to galvanize further research, conversation, and collaboration that will support the sector in shaping a student-equity-centric tomorrow.

For current students, administrators, faculty, staff, and others who may be interested, please reach out to the Sorenson Impact Center. Together, we can create a future in which institutions work collaboratively to create a more equitable and just world for our students, communities, and society. We hope you'll join us.

Thank you,



Austin Hendrickson (he/him)
Manager, *Student Coalition on Higher Education*
Graduate Student, *Harvard Graduate School of Education*



Taylor Kamhong (she/her)
Member, *Student Coalition on Higher Education*
Undergraduate Student, *University of Virginia*



INTRODUCTION

DEFINING STUDENT-EQUITY-CENTRICITY

“Student-equity-centricity” means the practice of centering equitable outcomes for students. There are three ways to think about equity:

1. an individual student’s experience in higher education and society,
2. an institution’s practices and policies, and
3. equity of access, opportunity, resources, and outcomes across the broader population.

The term student-equity-centric elicits important distinctions not contained in its separated concepts. For example, the term “student-centric” brings the focus to existing students, without attention to who has been excluded from becoming a student at all. The term “equity-centric” leaves students as stakeholders, but not co-creators and leaders. Student-equity-centric best captures the idea of centering students as leaders in creating equitable outcomes.

What does a student-equity-centric institution or governing body look like? This is what we hope to define and create as a core effort of this guidebook and in the future work of the MAPS project.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDEBOOK

This project serves as a starting point for supporting institutional leaders to overcome some of the barriers to adopting student-equity-centric approaches. Some of these barriers include lack of prior knowledge, uncertainty of success, and financial and temporal costs of experimentation. Institutional leaders need access to stories of success—and failure—from other institutions. Additionally, these leaders would benefit from the support of organizations like the Sorenson Impact Center and the voices from student experts, like those in the Student Coalition on Higher Education. Such resources can enable institutions to develop constructive practices for their current and future student bodies.

This guidebook compiles information on several specific student-equity-centric programs and insight from Student Coalition members. We hope this effort supports higher education institutions and leaders to capture the opportunities of the coming years to better serve students, especially those from historically marginalized communities, and move toward institutional and student success long into the future.

HOW THIS GUIDEBOOK IS ORGANIZED

This analysis of student-equity-centric programs in higher education begins with the key themes and takeaways derived throughout the research process. This synthesis contains generalizable considerations to guide higher education leaders as they envision the future of the sector.

The next section contains five case studies depicting diverse programs from institutions across the country. Each case study starts with a brief account of existing research on the social inequities the program seeks to address. This is followed by an overview of how the program operates to address its particular mission. Then, the research team provides thoughts on the strengths of the program, important considerations for engaging in similar work, and the potential future impact of the program. Links to sources and additional reading are interspersed throughout this guidebook, denoted by **this font**.

The guidebook concludes with a discussion of the implications of this work for the higher education system, as well as where this research and analysis will go in the future. Readers can continue to

understand successful practices in student-equity-centric higher education and consider applications to their own work.

LIMITATIONS

This analysis is not and does not strive to be an end-all-be-all to understanding student-equity-centricity in higher education. The programs investigated here represent a small sample of the countless programs working to address these issues. Additionally, the lessons learned from the programs featured here can be applied very differently in different institutional and other contexts. However, this can serve as the **start** of an intentional focus on programs that center students and equity, leading to continued research and conversations within and around the sector of higher education.



TAKEAWAYS

Several prominent themes appeared throughout this research process. These themes emerged in small and large programs, with missions varied across the spectrum of student-equity-centricity. They were also persistent across both private and public institutions. Leaders in any position in higher education can use these themes to begin to understand the underlying commonalities of programs making immense progress towards a more equitable system of postsecondary education.

01 Dedicate sufficient and appropriate resources.

As programs begin, it is common to see understaffing, under-budgeting, and other forms of tight resource allocation. This might make sense as a means of protecting resources from being allocated ineffectively. However, this practice impairs programs' ability to fully carry out their mission. Rather than expecting programs to run on skeleton crews and unrealistically tight budgets, institutional leaders should take decisive action to ensure that programs focusing on student-equity-centricity receive the support they need to effectively operate.

Discussion of resources usually focuses on financial allocation. However, these conversations should also bring in staffing, including staffing numbers, competencies, skills, and dedication to the program's mission. This allows for sustainable workloads *and* successful impact. Resource discussions should also address physical space for staff, students, and other programmatic functions. Appropriate resource allocation is the starting point for effective student-equity-centric programs.



EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE

CUNY's **Accelerated Study in Associate Programs** receives a high level of financial support, which allows it to support its 25,000 students. Program leaders structured ASAP to operate most effectively at this scale, thus ensuring its sustainability into the future.

ASAP also allocates its own resources with a deep dedication to supporting its students. A significant amount of funding goes directly to students, through holistic academic advising for ASAP students and scholarships for textbooks, fees, and tuition.

02 Create and implement a plan for measuring the program's impact and establishing its importance.

As the adage goes, “we measure what we treasure.” For programs that treasure student-equity-centricity with the end goal of improved student outcomes, impact measurement is integral to student success. From the very beginning, programs should determine *what* the program aims to do (the goals) and *how* progress toward these goals will be measured.

This can happen in a variety of ways, with both numbers and stories being essential for measuring progress. Quantitative methods are more traditional for monitoring and evaluation, by allowing progress to be conceptualized more simply and intuitively. Qualitative measurement captures information and nuance that is not quantifiable. There is no single correct way to measure impact. Different programs could justifiably take similar or divergent approaches to data collection and analysis. Each should make a decision about the type that works best in its own circumstances and establish the necessary infrastructure to carry out this type of measurement.

This is important not only to determine whether a hypothetically beneficial program is truly helpful in practice, but also to support advocating for sufficient resource allocation. “Data-driven” decisions continue to grow in importance among organizations of all types. Financial allocation decisions are not exempt from this practice. For leaders seeking to ensure the effect and sustainability of student-equity-centric programs, this takeaway is essential.



EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE

Since the beginning, CUNY’s **Accelerated Study in Associate Programs** focused on collecting and analyzing data to establish itself as a meaningful support for CUNY students from low-income backgrounds. The program even conducted randomized control trials and comprehensive cost-benefit analyses.

03

Ensure the program's practices value, compensate, and empower students as equal stakeholders.

Institutions benefit from students' time, energy, and emotional labor in taking on additional work within their institutions. Student input is critical to student-equity-centricity, but it is often devalued when students are offered volunteer or low-pay positions. For example, administrators receive salaries and benefits, and operate with significant authority across many parts of the organization. On the other hand, students rarely receive compensation, adequate power, or support for their work in institutional decision making.

This undermines the purpose of authentic student engagement. When students are *told* they are valued, but are not *treated* as such, students may be reluctant to participate in the process. Furthermore, this type of practice perpetuates systemic inequity: students able to engage in additional, uncompensated work are those who have the privilege to do so without threatening their financial health and wellbeing.

Higher education leaders must continue to engage students and do so in ways that demonstrate their belief that students are co-equal stakeholders. On top of paying students for their time and expertise, leaders should create decision-making and communication processes that empower students as much as any other stakeholder.

**EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE**

Students in Bellevue College's **Neurodiversity Navigators** program receive competitive pay for their work to support other students. Additionally, the program regularly gathers and shares feedback about students' experiences, thus creating and sustaining a culture that furthers its student-equity-centric impact.

04

Actively seek out and utilize knowledge from others; institutional leaders and decision makers should be open to sharing their own knowledge with students.

As evidenced by this analysis, programs and institutions across the country use impactful strategies for catalyzing student-equity-centricity. However, success stories like these can remain siloed within institutions, forcing others to recreate the wheel each time they seek to address the same problem.

While this can foster innovation as different programs tackle old problems in new ways, it also keeps existing knowledge from reaching its greatest potential level of impact. Rather than restrain the dissemination of information for the sake of competitive advantage, institutions should uphold the value of collaboration and collective problem-solving, thereby amplifying the impact of their work. Knowledge sharing is key to systemic change.



EXAMPLES IN PRACTICE

At the University of Michigan's **Program on Intergroup Relations**, staff developed an annual convening program and consulting arm, supporting other institutions to develop intergroup dialogue programs of their own.

Bellevue College's **Neurodiversity Navigators** program participates in the Alliance of Autism College to Employment Programs, sharing knowledge with other programs on effectively serving autistic students at postsecondary institutions.

CUNY's **Accelerated Study in Associate Programs** runs an entire replication arm within its office, supporting other community colleges across the nation to develop and assess similar programs.

Occidental College shares knowledge and resources with other liberal arts administrators through the Liberal Arts College Racial Equity Leadership Alliance, which aims to drive forward racial equity in campuses and communities across the country.

05

Cultivate strong relationships between students and administrators.

As higher education leaders focus on centering student equity in their programs and practices, professionals must acknowledge the power disparities between students and administrators. Students may perceive administrators as intimidating, simply because of the immense differences in power. While students have little-to-no power over the day-to-day lives of an administrator, the reverse is much less true. This dynamic can hinder students' authentic participation in institutional processes. Voicing opinions or experiences contrary to those of institutional leaders can lead to dangerous, larger implications for students' lives.

To address this, higher education leaders should spend time developing strong relationships with students that enable them to work productively together and overcome the barrier of power imbalance. This can look like working to get to know each other as individuals. This process takes *time*, which administrators should be ready and willing to dedicate in service of building a strong, collaborative foundation.

Additionally, leaders should consider the representative match between administrators and the students they will serve. This match can occur along numerous axes of identity, background, community, and more. Doing so will show students that their lived experiences are valued, while also providing role models and potential mentors who may share those experiences. This can facilitate further power sharing between students and administrators.

**EXAMPLES IN PRACTICE**

The University of Utah's **First Ascent Scholars** program enables students and program administrators to develop relationships more akin to family than to staff/student. This not only enhances the program's ability to better meet students' needs, but centers the *humanity* of the students and staff in question.

Administrators of Bellevue College's **Neurodiversity Navigators** program meet one-on-one with students before they begin the program. This allows each party to become acquainted, develop a common understanding about the program, and begin building a strong relationship that continues throughout a student's journey.

06

Transfer leadership and ownership opportunities to students.

Relating to the previous discussion of empowering students with legitimate roles in decision-making spaces, students should be included in implementation as well. Program leaders should ensure that students serve as active participants with considerable roles in every aspect of work focused on student-equity-centricity, including current and future initiatives and programs.

However, this effort requires a delicate balance to ensure students' efforts are *not* misused. Students should not be asked to work for less money or to complete less desirable tasks. Students may need support in political maneuvering, making budgetary decisions, and drawing from traditional expertise. This support from professional staff should be targeted to students' needs and the task at hand, while allowing students to maintain leadership and ownership over their work.

Often students do not receive leadership and ownership responsibilities because there is not a process of knowledge and authority transfer between outgoing and incoming students. To solve this, programs and institutions can create a cultural ethos of leadership and responsibility by intentionally cultivating and training new student leaders. Students can engage in incrementally increasing responsibilities over time, while also training future student leaders to assume future levels of responsibility and authority.



EXAMPLES IN PRACTICE

Students at **Occidental College** manage the Diversity & Equity Board and Renewable Energy & Sustainability Fund. This allows students to maintain substantial authority over the allocation of their time, energy, and funding.

In the **Program on Intergroup Relations** at the University of Michigan, students serve in leadership roles during certain stages of the program. This creates space for students to develop and facilitate intergroup dialogue experiences for their peers.

07 Facilitate professional, academic, and interpersonal community-building among students.

The learning experience sits at the core of the postsecondary experience in the United States. Its effects are amplified by community support. Students value on-campus relationships both during and after attending an institution. Communities not only support students' mental and emotional wellbeing, but provide a natural system of scaffolding for academics and professional networking.

The specifics of community-building can look different from institution to institution and program to program. One might focus more on helping students develop deep and lasting relationships that extend beyond their common student experiences. Others might focus on guiding students to collective learning in the classroom environment. Oftentimes, professional, interpersonal, and academic communities and networks overlap. Regardless of the form it takes, institutions and their leaders can and should support students to foster a deep sense of community that can serve them for years to come.



EXAMPLES IN PRACTICE

In the University of Utah's **First Ascent Scholars Program**, students regularly develop strong interpersonal, academic, and professional relationships with their cohort. Students also connect with alumni, board members, and other community members who support various aspects of their journeys.

At Bellevue College, the **Neurodiversity Navigators** program places its students in cohort-specific courses to establish strong learning communities. The program provides meaningful connections through its mentorship offering and facilitated study groups with peers.



CASE STUDY

FIRST ASCENT SCHOLARS

BACKGROUND

Higher education data from recent years shows that college and credential attainment rates tend to be lower among students from first-generation and low-income backgrounds. As demographics of postsecondary student bodies continue to shift, institutional survival hinges on better supporting increasingly diverse communities. This adaptation requires a mindful approach to equity.

Starting in 2015, the First Ascent Scholars program at the University of Utah's David Eccles School of Business began investing in the academic, professional, and personal success of students from first-generation and low-income backgrounds. The program invites board members, donors, and Eccles School partners to see the cultural value these scholars bring to the school. This program provides institutional leaders with a functional model from which they can learn.

HOW IT WORKS

First Ascent is a multifaceted program that takes a whole-person approach to supporting each student. The program provides financial support in the form of a comprehensive scholarship covering tuition, fees, textbooks, and on-campus housing for four or more years. First Ascent also provides support to help students pay for other expenses, like medical insurance and meal plans. The program's administrators and funders recognize that true financial equity in higher education comes not only from typical expenses around tuition and books, but also from addressing costs related to living and maintaining well being.

Another critical aspect of the program comes in the form of network- and community-building. With a few dozen alumni over the past half decade, First Ascent's small cohort size provides students the opportunity to form deep connections with one another, as they spend four (or more) years together as something akin to a family. The program intentionally connects students to administrators and professionals (e.g., a dedicated academic advisor and career coach supporting the entire cohort, a specific financial aid administrator, or housing & residential life staff). Participants learn how to navigate a campus of more than 30,000 students with this high-touch support. Further, First Ascent students have the opportunity to develop strong relationships with board members and program alumni who can provide mentorship and professional connections.

DISCUSSION

First Ascent is one of the newest and smallest programs reviewed for this analysis. However, it stands as a strong example of student-equity-centricity in practice. This program clearly defines and executes its role as a critical student support initiative within the larger institution. A few program characteristics set First Ascent apart, making its work effective and impactful:

- + **comprehensiveness:** First Ascent Scholars clearly goes above and beyond in the resources it provides its students. This understanding of the non-institutional costs of higher education might be common, but the willingness to account for them certainly is not. Additionally, the program surrounds each individual with the necessary resources and navigable structures to persist to degree completion. For students from first-generation and low-income backgrounds, these supports can decrease or eliminate the need to take on student loan debt, and help students graduate with financial stability and flexibility.
- + **intentional connection-building:** First Ascent Scholars helps students create a system they can lean on during their time in school and beyond by connecting students to a network of champions. These connections include close relationships with cohort-mates and program staff, assistance navigating financial aid and housing systems, and access to professional networks and mentorship. Scholars can receive job opportunities or ask staff or board members for letters of recommendation for graduate school applications.
- + **dedication to humanness:** First Ascent Scholars' dedication to centering students' humanity resonates across its holistic financial and academic supports. Students receive resources for in- and out-of-school needs, underscoring their multiple identities and contexts. The program frames "student success" beyond proxy metrics of GPA, retention and graduation, and post-graduation salary figures. First Ascent also uses qualitative student stories to describe the program's impacts on students' personal goal attainment, changes in perception of themselves or others, and improvements in decision-making processes or outcomes.

Going forward, we see tremendous opportunity for programs across the country to learn from First Ascent's model, enabling institutions to better support students who face sometimes overwhelming barriers to access and success in postsecondary education.

CASE STUDY

NEURODIVERSITY NAVIGATORS

BACKGROUND

Studies show that students on the autism spectrum enroll in postsecondary education at lower rates than students with other types of disabilities and nondisabled students. Institutions often remain vastly underprepared to adequately serve neurodivergent students. Bellevue College, located in the Seattle-metro area, seeks to break this norm.

Bellevue College's Neurodiversity Navigators program is run by and for neurodivergent members of the school community. The program first came to life in 2011 as the Autism Spectrum Navigators program, which specifically focused on supporting autistic students through their experiences at the institution. After operating as a unit within the college's Disability Resource Center for several years, it gained institutional support to open its own office with dedicated space, staff, and resources. Bellevue College is recognized as a top-ranked college in the United States for serving students with autism, thus serving as a strong example for other institutions focused on adopting student-equity-centric approaches.

HOW IT WORKS

The Neurodiversity Navigators (NdN) program uses the social justice model of disability, focusing on neurodivergence as an aspect of human diversity that should be honored, celebrated, and supported rather than pathologized. This model, embedded in the program strategy, does not rely upon "teaching" students "social skills" to conform to neurotypicality. Instead, NdN creates spaces for students to develop their identities, understand their strengths, and learn to leverage these aspects of themselves as they navigate the world.

The program offers a wide range of resources to its students. Senior students receive compensation for mentoring junior students around planning, organization, and navigating coursework and faculty relationships. As one student says, program mentors and other supporters "won't always hold your hand, but they will help you figure out what way you need to go." NdN also receives institutional funding to provide no-fee/no-tuition classes to students focused on identity exploration and career preparation. Students can access program-specific study groups and spaces for all coursework.

These resources are offered at varying levels of engagement to Bellevue College students. Students can opt into only specific, smaller program offerings, or they can choose full enrollment to receive access to the entire suite of resources. Thus, the Neurodiversity Navigators program effectively makes itself and its resources available to students fully enrolled in the program, as well as the broader Bellevue College community.

DISCUSSION

The successful work of Bellevue College and the Neurodiversity Navigators program earned the institution local and national recognition for their leadership in the neurodiversity inclusion space. Three critical factors that underlie the program's success and enable them to engage authentically in this work:

- + **the program team:** The staff supporting the Neurodiversity Navigators program plays a major role in its success. The team's own experiences with neurodivergence inform their dedication to build relationships with students and provide culturally competent support. This enables the program staff to work alongside students to support them through their educational journeys, while centering their voices in ongoing program improvement efforts.
- + **buy-in from the community:** In Neurodiversity Navigators' initial stages, support from the Bellevue College community and others outside the institution played a large role in resourcing the program's operations. As the program began to prove its impact on student experiences, it gained increasing moral and financial institutional support, which enables continued growth.
- + **willing engagement from students:** To engage in this program, students self-identify as autistic and/or neurodivergent and express a willingness to participate. Students meet with staff before becoming part of the program to determine whether it is the right fit for their needs. Students who do not officially enroll in the program can still access many program resources. This adaptable program allows students to join or exit the program at various points throughout their academic career, ensuring the support remains accessible as students' needs change.

One of the greatest benefits of the Neurodiversity Navigator program lies in this two-tiered approach. Many programs either provide a high level of support to a small number of students, or reach a broader group with a lighter touch. NdN's program structure effectively provides both, significantly impacting its ability to drive equity for neurodivergent students at Bellevue College.

The Neurodiversity Navigators program continues to grow and improve. NdN leadership joined the **Alliance of Autism College to Employment Programs**, a group of six organizations working to support students on the autism spectrum in postsecondary education. The Alliance releases **resources and guidance** for organizations and higher education institutions to better support their autistic students. This collaboration disrupts institutional siloing and more effectively supports the efforts of programs seeking to effect broader change in neurodiversity inclusion across the sector.

CASE STUDY

ACCELERATED STUDY IN ASSOCIATE PROGRAMS

BACKGROUND

Much of the two-year post-secondary sector in the United States faces concerning low graduation rates. The Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), nested within the City University of New York (CUNY) system, seeks to address this.

ASAP seeks to drive improved outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds. ASAP began in 2007 as a research-and-data-heavy program with a goal of quickly demonstrating its own impact. With an awareness that many strategies do not drive significant impact in isolation, the program combed research literature to craft a unique strategy for supporting student graduation rates. Its success garnered national attention and praise, which catalyzed CUNY to adapt the model for its four-year institutions, a program called Accelerate, Compete, and Engage (ACE). Together, these programs serve 25,000 students across eleven CUNY institutions. ASAP leads the way for institutional leaders seeking to effectively adopt student-equity-centric approaches across large higher education systems.

HOW IT WORKS

ASAP blends a combination of proven support practices, delivering students a uniquely holistic program. Students receive scholarships and funding to fill gaps between financial aid awards and the cost of tuition, fees and textbooks, a MetroCard, and an ASAP-dedicated student advisor.

Throughout its interwoven set of supports, ASAP also creates space for students to develop strong relationships and community. Through cohort-specific classes, students become acquainted with their fellow students as individuals. They learn with and lean on one another throughout their academic experiences. The advising model—built on data and staff dedication to student success—provides students with a proactive and trustworthy advocate. These advisors possess a greater understanding of students’ circumstances and the program than a “typical” college advisor.

In conversations with previously enrolled students, many mentioned the importance of ASAP’s wide-ranging financial support. This allows students to focus their time and energy on their academics. Students reported no longer needing to hold several jobs to afford education on top of their basic living expenses. Students also cite the advising system for its ability to develop skills that empower them to proactively navigate life after graduation, either at four-year institutions or in the workforce.

In addition to managing its own student services, ASAP runs a research and evaluation arm to continually assess and improve its own effectiveness. External studies analyzing the program found improved student outcomes, including a twofold increase in graduation rates, and large financial returns. The program also provides a replication service to help other institutions of higher education apply the ASAP model themselves. To date, ASAP supported institutions in Ohio, California, and West Virginia to develop their own programs and begin to measure their impact.

DISCUSSION

It is easy to see why CUNY ASAP continues to receive high praise from researchers, fellow administrators, and government officials, and program alumni. Additional impressive aspects of the ASAP model include:

- + **research orientation:** ASAP stands out as uniquely prepared to prove its impact for policymakers and senior administrators seeking to make data-driven budget decisions. The program's ability to draw a causal link between its model and doubled graduation rates has implications for the community college sector at large.
- + **ethic of cooperation, not competition:** ASAP's dedication to supporting other institutions in implementing the model is admirable. While many higher education institutions operate in silos, ASAP's replication service breaks down barriers that can hinder cooperation. These institutions seem poised to make a clear impact in a sector where low graduation rates reflect socioeconomic and racial inequity.
- + **resource allocation:** ASAP acquired significant support from decision-makers. Program leaders constructed the program for large-scale efficiency and reach. Further, the allocation of resources to provide ASAP-dedicated mentors, advisors, and paid student employees bolsters its progress towards its mission.

CUNY ASAP boasts remarkable success in a phenomenally difficult space. The program leads the way on multiple fronts to provide a guiding light for the higher education sector. In the coming years, the program can continue to expand access, while maintaining the direct, and personally supportive approach for students. ASAP's success stands as a strong example of a program on an upward trajectory.

CASE STUDY

PROGRAM ON INTERGROUP RELATIONS

BACKGROUND

In recent years, higher education institutions, like many other sectors, witnessed an increase in conversations around racial justice. People across the country continue to seek out resources to learn more about effective engagement with these topics. One growing method for scaffolding such conversations in college classrooms comes in the form of intergroup dialogue. This practice is defined as “a facilitated, face-to-face encounter that seeks to foster meaningful engagement between members of two or more social identity groups that have a history of conflict.” Research shows that intergroup dialogue guides students' understanding of power, privilege, and systems of oppression. The practice also supports students to learn how to understand and enthusiastically engage with people from different identity groups and political persuasions. This concept serves as an additional consideration for higher education leaders across the country.

HOW IT WORKS

The University of Michigan's Program on Intergroup Relations (IGR) describes itself as a social justice education program, focused on guiding students to understand social identity and dynamics with an end goal of furthering effective intergroup dialogue. Founded in 1988, it was the first program of its kind and is now the frontrunner in the space, inspiring countless similar programs across the country.

Student training and academic coursework reside at the core of IGR. Students may elect to pursue a minor in Intergroup Relations Education, take IGR classes to fulfill requirements in other degree programs, or simply take the courses as elective credits. Students gain proficiency with social-emotional concepts and academic learning through structured conversations with peers. Topic focus on relationship-building and identity categories, including race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Experienced students receive compensation for facilitating these courses, allowing them to deepen their knowledge and skills in an authentic context.

In addition to its central classes, the Program on Intergroup Relations runs a number of other initiatives that round out its work in intergroup dialogue education. The CommonGround program offers students the opportunity to continue expanding their facilitation skills by running one-off workshops for student groups across campus. IGR also hosts the National Intergroup Dialogue Institute, an annual conference building on the program's years of research on effective intergroup dialogue. Attendees from institutions across the country learn about how to replicate the IGR program and expand the reach of social justice education and facilitation to students nationwide. (Examples can be found at University of Massachusetts Amherst and Skidmore College.)

DISCUSSION

The Program on Intergroup Relations is the most established and well-known intergroup dialogue program in the higher education sector. With over three decades of experience under its belt, the program serves as a leader in the space, even going so far as to allow other institutions to hire their experts on contract to support the development of other dialogue programs.

As higher education institutions work to develop similar programs that address social injustice in other ways, leaders should consider the historical and present power dynamics that can present themselves in conversations on inequity. For students from non-dominant social identity groups (e.g. students of color; women and femme students; queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming students; those with disabilities; or students from lower-income backgrounds), conversations about identities and systems of oppression that show up in their day-to-day lives may be traumatizing. This can occur when such topics become intellectualized by peers who hold relatively more privilege and power and lack familiarity with issues of historical and contemporary social injustice. Since intergroup dialogue necessitates conversations among groups with differing identities, programs must commit to sustaining the wellbeing and learning of students with marginalized identities in this process. The following includes key considerations for the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes of developing dialogue programs:

- + **intragroup dialogue before intergroup dialogue:** Students holding dominant social identities may have limited to no experience grappling with the systems of oppression and injustice experienced by students with marginalized identities. *Intragroup* spaces allow students to engage in critical sharing and learning about identities with students of similar identities (e.g. similar racial identities if engaging in a conversation on race and whiteness, similar gender identities if engaging in one on gender). This harm-reduction approach creates an atmosphere for students to build their conversational competency before entering *intergroup* spaces.
- + **trauma-informed care and healing justice:** When a student, facilitator, or other community member causes harm, the potential need for care of the individual(s) harmed should be addressed. Healing justice, often utilized in the context of movements for Black liberation, can provide one of many possible pathways through which to imagine supporting the person(s) harmed.
- + **accountability and transformative justice:** Causing harm while navigating intergroup dialogue is often commonplace in these discussions. In addition to supporting the individual harmed, it is equally important to work with the perpetrator(s). Transformative justice, rooted in centuries-old Indigenous and other practices, offers a framework to hold perpetrators accountable and address underlying causes of harmful behavior, thus mitigating recurrence.

Utilizing practices like these, institutions of higher education can more effectively create intergroup dialogue programs within inclusive environments and systems. This enables institutions to move towards goals of social justice education without unduly burdening some of their students.



CASE STUDY

OCCIDENTAL COLLEGE

BACKGROUND

During the 2020-2021 academic year, students across the country joined the **calls for increased conversation and action** on racial justice. Students **organized** to demand more action on campuses and in communities. Some institutions **responded**, largely in the form of statements of support and expanded services for students. However, **few students indicated** that their universities responded well. Instead of taking a decisive, proactive, sustained, and powerful stance against injustice, many institutions responded with reactive uncertainty. **Occidental College**, located in Los Angeles, CA, provides a path forward for institutional leaders seeking a non-reactive student-equity-centricity approach.

HOW IT WORKS

From its student government association (SGA) to its leadership across the higher education sector, Occidental College centered social and racial justice many years before these increased calls for racial justice. The institution integrates a progressive approach that centers and empowers students as central stakeholders across day-to-day operations.

Many SGAs are structured to mimic the United States federal government, with three co-equal branches charged with differing, but general, responsibilities. While this organizational choice has its benefits, it can create a bureaucratic experience characterized by powerlessness for students within and outside of this governing structure.

The Associated Students of Occidental College (ASOC) uses a four-branch structure. While maintaining some similarities to traditional SGA structure, ASOC elevates the **Renewable Energy & Sustainability Fund** and the **Diversity & Equity Board** to operate alongside the other branches of government. Each group receives dedicated funding and possesses significant authority over expenditures. For instance, the 2020-21 Diversity & Equity Board allocated portions of its funding to support students experiencing difficulty due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This included paying for graduate school exam fees or preparation supplies and purchasing food, technological resources, and transportation needs.

This commitment to equity and justice is reiterated from the president's office. In late 2020, Occidental's president **became one of six founding members** of a national alliance of liberal arts colleges across the nation seeking to bolster anti-racism and other equity work within their institutions and communities. Since its inception, dozens of other institutions joined the Liberal Arts College Racial Equity Leadership Alliance (LACRELA), committing resources to staff development, culture assessment, and collective problem-solving.

DISCUSSION

Occidental College is clearly leading the way towards a more equitable vision of American higher education. Though this is a goal without a finish line, meaning that this and every institution has room for improvement, Occidental serves as an example of campus-wide integration of student-equity-centricity. Two particularly interesting aspects of Occidental's culture that underpin its success in this area include:

- + **campus-wide dedication to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI):** Increasingly common JEDI practices among institutions include the creation of dedicated offices, hiring new vice presidents or deans, and the development of strategic plans. These efforts can become siloed in central administration, failing to extend across campus. At Occidental, however, JEDI makes its way into the work of students, faculty, and staff in all areas of the institution. In addition to the Diversity & Equity Board's leadership on diversity and equity initiatives, students created a culture of institutional memory. Students pass down experiences and learning to the next "generation" of Occidental students, leading to long-term student-directed advocacy work.

The faculty and staff remain dedicated to JEDI as well. Administrators committing time, money, and other resources to engage in the work through strategies like LACRELA. Staff center this work in everything, from early conversations with potential students, to new student orientation. Faculty also engage students in deep discussions of equity and justice topics across multiple disciplines and coursework.

- + **mutually supportive relationships between students & other campus stakeholders:** On postsecondary campuses, conflict can arise around the diverging needs and incentives for students, faculty, and administrators. Many examples arose during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Students generally favored returning to in-person learning in fall 2020, while faculty remained hesitant. Students advocated for tuition costs to be cut, while administrators worried that doing so would amplify their financial strain.

At Occidental, however, students, faculty, staff, and administrators maintain strong alignment and seem to take an "in it together" approach to campus hardships. Students protested for higher faculty pay and greater diversity in hiring processes. Since then, committees invited students to participate in the hiring process through moderating community interviews and creating opportunities for students to provide feedback. Administrators are accessible to students, holding walk-in office hours for all members of the Occidental community. Care for one another's well being and satisfaction is an ethos carried across the institution and amongst all stakeholders.



CONCLUSION

The current trajectory of higher education in the United States presents the sector with an opportunity to reinvent itself to thrive in the coming decades. To effectively serve the students of today and tomorrow with a student-equity-centric approach, postsecondary institutions must be prepared to collaborate and innovate in ways that will be new, uncertain, and uncomfortable. The Student Coalition developed this guidebook to support and prepare higher education leaders and institutions for this work. We invite leaders from institutions to join us in engaging with this vision, learn from these identified best practices, and take the charge to adopt student-equity-centric approaches at their own institutions.

Research and development around this work must continue to move the sector toward a more just system. This research must draw upon diverse sources of knowledge and student voices to ensure the sector's equitable future. With this in mind, the MAPS Project and the Student Coalition will continue to provide insight to shaping the future of higher education with students and equity at the core. We hope you will join us.