UTAH SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Utah System of Higher Education Equity Lens Framework

An *equity lens framework* is a tool comprised of shared beliefs, common definitions, and critical questions through which an organization commits to continually evaluating any existing or new strategy, policy, or initiative. The beliefs and definitions ensure the organization begins from a common understanding and sets the groundwork for clear accountability, allowing all efforts to be focused on closing opportunity gaps for marginalized populations. Underlying this framework is how data is collected and synthesized to impact policy and systemic change.

USHE Equity Lens Framework

To guide the Utah Board of Higher Education in its implementation of strategies and initiatives, policymaking, and more, the Board must ask itself the following questions that make up the Equity Lens. These questions will guide state education leaders through the decision-making process to ultimately take action in essential areas.

Equity Lens Questions

Assess
- Does the decision being made maintain, sustain, or intervene in existing educational disparities, or does it produce other unintended consequences?
- What is the impact of this decision on eliminating attainment gaps?
- How does the policy, initiative, resource allocation, or strategy, etc. advance opportunities for historically underserved students and communities?
- What are the barriers to more equitable outcomes?
- What resources exist that could be leveraged to challenge these barriers? These might include political, emotional, financial, programmatic, or managerial resources.

Examine Data
- What does the current data tell us about representation among students, staff, and faculty groups? Check the source of the data for quality and impartiality.
- Where do current data collection methodologies fail to measure the extent of underrepresentation?
- Does your data infrastructure support forward-thinking measures of representation?
- What data sources will you use to understand the impacts of race, ethnicity, gender, and native language?
- Is qualitative data needed to support and better understand impacted communities more holistically?

Engage and Plan
- What is your commitment to, and understanding of, equity, specific to the policy, initiative, resource allocation, or strategy?
- What resources are you allocating for training that includes stakeholder instruction?
- How have campus and community stakeholders, who may be affected by this potential course of action, been purposefully involved?
- How will you modify or enhance your strategies to ensure the needs of the community and each learner's individual higher education and career goals are met?

Implement
- What is your decision after looking at this course of action through the Equity Lens?
- Has your approach or decision changed after looking at this topic through the Equity Lens?
- What action will be taken, if any?

Measure Success
- How do you identify and measure the success of a potential policy, initiative, resource allocation, strategy, etc.?
- Does that success measure properly evaluate the success relative to underrepresented populations?

The Board recognizes the following set of shared beliefs:

We believe that every student has the ability to learn, and that the System has an ethical and moral responsibility to ensure optimal learning and workplace environments exist on USHE campuses for all students, faculty, and staff.

We believe students who are academically underprepared for college are being inadequately served by multiple societal systems, including health, education, housing, criminal justice, and others.[1,2] To remedy this reality, the System and its 16 colleges and universities must meet students *where they are* and work to build on and improve each student's educational outcomes.

We believe that speaking a language other than English is an asset for participating in a growing global economy and workforce. We celebrate those qualities and are committed to culturally-responsive support and academic pathways for students.

We believe we must be inclusive in all facets, including accessibility services, by providing appropriate accommodations through the Americans with Disabilities Act, and celebrating diverse populations, including those with disabilities.

We believe that ending disparities and gaps in college attainment begins in the delivery and quality of college and career readiness programs, initiatives, and policies. These statewide efforts are best coordinated through regional K-16 alliances.

We believe that underrepresented communities have unique and important solutions for improving educational and career outcomes. Our work will only be successful as we sincerely partner with each of Utah's 16 public colleges and universities and their local communities.

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[1] Ellsworth, Harding, Law, and Pinder. 2022. "Racial and Ethnic Equity in US Higher Education." https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/racial-and-ethnic-equity-in-us-higher-education.
[2] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. 2022. "Social Determinants of Health." https://health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health

We believe every learner should understand the broad array of college and career pathways available at Utah colleges and universities, the importance of advanced course-taking while still in high school (e.g., Concurrent Enrollment, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate coursework), and other career-focused opportunities such as apprenticeships.

We believe our institutions will provide students with the best educational outcomes when students, faculty, and staff reflect the growing diversity in Utah and across the nation.

We believe each student's history and culture is a source of pride that we should embrace and celebrate. Our ability as an educational System to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population is critical to achieving state attainment and other strategic goals.

We believe that all students should graduate from college having better cultural awareness and a greater understanding of why diversity, equity, and inclusion are important values that will help them be better workforce participants, community members, and global citizens.

Finally, we believe in the importance of instruction, processes, policies, goals, and strategies that adapt to the changing global society. An equitable education system requires we provide faculty and staff with the tools and support necessary to meet the needs of each student.

Shared Definitions

The Board recognizes the following definitions of common equity, diversity, and inclusion terms:

1. **Anti-racism:** We define *anti-racism* in accordance with the Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre:

    > *Anti-racism is the active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organizational structures, policies and practices, and attitudes so that power is redistributed and shared equitably.*[3]

2. **Attainment Gap:** We define the *attainment gap* as:

    > *The lack of access that underserved groups face, due to systemic barriers, when seeking educational advancement or gainful employment.*

    This framing shifts the attention from the emphasis on individuals to more fundamental questions about social, systemic, and structural access. In the State of Utah, students of color are disproportionately impacted by lower rates of enrollment and completion. The same is true when socioeconomic status is factored in for rural and urban students.[4]

3. **Culturally Responsive:** We define *culturally responsive* as:

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[3] Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre. 2022. "Anti-racism Defined." https://www.aclrc.com/antiracism.
[4] Utah System of Higher Education. 2020. "A New Look at Utah's Growing Opportunity Gap, 2020." https://ushe.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/reports/issue_brief/2020/2020_Aug_opportunity-gap-IB.pdf.

*Recognizing the diverse cultural characteristics and knowledge of learners as assets.[5]
Culturally responsive teaching and advising empower students intellectually, socially,
and emotionally by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.[6]*

4. **Equity:** We define *equity* in line with the Lumina Foundation's Equity Imperative:

   *Equity is the recognition and analysis of historic, persistent factors that have created an
   unequal [higher] education system.[7]*

   This includes assessing, identifying, acknowledging, and addressing System policies, and
   initiatives supporting and/or sustaining inequity and disparities.

5. **Intersectionality:** A term originally coined by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw;[8] we define
   intersectionality as:

   *the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of
   oppression, domination, or discrimination.[9]*

   Students who are underserved based on multiple identities (e.g., race, gender, class, etc.) may face
   additional discrimination, marginalization, and inaccessibility to higher education.

6. **Marginalization:** We define *marginalization* as:

   *The process through which persons are peripheralized based on their identities,
   associations, experiences, and environment.[10]*

   LGBTQIA+, veterans, students with disabilities, previously incarcerated, and students facing
   food, housing, or technology insecurity are all examples of marginalized student groups. These
   students or student groups may be treated or feel as insignificant or unseen on a college campus.

   *see #10 Underrepresented

7. **Privilege:** We define *privilege* as:

   *Refers to certain social advantages, benefits, or degrees of prestige and respect that an
   individual has by virtue of belonging to certain social identity groups. Within American
   and other Western societies, these privileged social identities—of people who have
   historically occupied positions of dominance over others—include whites, males,
   heterosexuals, Christians, and the wealthy, among others.[11]*

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[5] Taylor & Francis. (2017). *Funds of Knowledge in Higher Education: Honoring Students' Cultural Experiences and
Resources as Strengths*.
https://www.google.com/books/edition/Funds_of_Knowledge_in_Higher_Education/MRIwDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gb
pv=0.
[6] AVID. (2022). *Cultural Relevance and Responsiveness*. https://www.avid.org/cultural-relevance.
[7] Lumina Foundation. "Lumina Foundation's Equity Imperative, 2017."
https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/equity-imperative-2017-01-25.pdf.
[8] Crenshaw Kimberlé. (2017). *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings*.
https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/books/255
[9] Perlman, Merrill. (2018). *The Origin of the Term 'Intersectionality.'*
https://www.cjr.org/language_corner/intersectionality.php.
[10] Hall JM, Stevens PE, & Meleis AI (1994). *Marginalization: A guiding concept for valuing diversity in nursing
knowledge development*. Advances in Nursing Science, 16(4), 23–41. [PubMed] [Google Scholar].
[11] García, Justin D. (2018). *Privilege (Social Inequality)*. Salem Press Encyclopedia.
https://columbiabasin.libguides.com/c.php?g=1049179&p=7614300.

These special rights, advantages, or immunities may be granted by a state, system, or another authority to a restricted group, either by birth or on a conditional basis.

8. **Race:** As defined by the National Museum of African American History and Culture:

   The dictionary's definition of race is incomplete and misses the complexity of impact on lived experiences. It is important to acknowledge race is a social fabrication, created to classify people on the arbitrary basis of skin color and other physical features. Although race has no genetic or scientific basis, the concept of race is important and consequential. Societies use race to establish and justify systems of power, privilege, disenfranchisement, and oppression.[12]

   Racial or ethnic groups are generally recognized in society and often by the government. When referring to such groups, we often use the terminology *people of color*, *students of color*, or *communities of color* (or name of the specific racial and/or ethnic group), and *white*. Because race is a social construct, we also understand that racial and ethnic categories differ internationally and that race and ethnicity categories and hierarchies differ globally and internationally. We recognize many local communities come from other international communities. In some societies, ethnic, religious, and caste groups are oppressed and racialized. These dynamics can occur even when the oppressed group is numerically in the majority.

9. **Underserved:** We define *underserved* as:

   Any group or individual that has been denied access and/or whom systems have marginalized due to operationalized deficit-based thinking.

   Deficit-based thinking is the focus on a community's needs, deficits, or problems rather than its assets, strengths, or opportunities.[13] Operationalized systemic barriers can create a disproportional representation of certain groups based on identity characteristics.
   see #10 Underrepresented

10. **Underrepresented:** We define *underrepresented* as:

    Any student group that has traditionally held a smaller percentage of the total higher education population. For the purposes of this framework these are student groups who are disproportionately represented in comparison to an equivalent counterpart.

    Including but not limited to students facing economic barriers, students of color, and English Language Learner students are all examples of student groups who historically and presently continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in their higher education pursuits.

    Both underrepresented and marginalized groups are underserved students who face unique challenges in accessing and completing college certificates and/or degrees due to the systemic barriers that exist.

Methodology and Context

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[12] National Museum of African American History and Culture. *Race and Racial Identity, 2020.* https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/race-and-racial-identity.
[13] The University of Memphis. *Comparison Between Asset and Deficit Based Approaches, 2019.* https://www.memphis.edu/ess/module4/page3.php.

Developing a USHE Equity Lens Framework

To increase equitable higher education outcomes, the Utah Board of Higher Education created its own equity lens framework, modeled after the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission's Equity Lens,[14] which was further developed by USHE Chief Diversity Officers and the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education. The USHE Equity Lens employs an anti-racist, equity-minded framework with a driving focus on closing attainment gaps and creating equitable opportunity for each student, staff, and faculty as its cornerstone.

This lens considers the following emergent, fluid, and intersectional identities as part of the Board's efforts to value the perspective and knowledge that each student brings to higher education learning spaces; this list is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive:

- Age
- Gender identity and expression
- Sexual orientation
- Religious affiliation
- Socioeconomic status
- Citizenship status and country of origin
- Ability/disability
- Veteran status
- First-generation student status
- English language learners
- Geographic location (including rural, urban, sheltered, and unsheltered).

The Equity Lens Framework was developed to achieve educational equity when collecting data, allocating resources, developing policies, engaging stakeholders, and implementing strategic initiatives.

Establishing a Set of Shared Beliefs

The Board recognizes the biases and barriers to accessing higher education that have existed throughout the state's history that have led to systemic disparities. Higher education in Utah was initially developed to serve a narrow slice of the state's population, namely white men of privilege, on the ancestral homelands of native peoples.[15] As the state has progressed, education systems have been slow to change from this original framework. To eliminate these disparities, the framework must change.

Equity, as defined within this *new* framework, ***re-examines*** systemic barriers with an intentional commitment to empowerment and educational justice.

In the newly combined System, made up of all public technical and degree-granting colleges and universities in Utah,[16] the Board has the opportunity to reimagine spaces of higher learning that foster success, create pathways for economic mobility and a high quality of life for students and their communities. It is through this recognition and commitment that the shared beliefs included in the Equity Lens Framework were developed in collaboration with USHE's Chief Diversity Officers.

Knowledge, Data Collection, & Measuring Progress

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[14] Higher Education Coordinating Commission. *Oregon Equity Lens, 2017.* https://www.oregon.gov/highered/about/Documents/State-Goals/HECC-Equity-Lens-2017-reformat.pdf.
[15] Newell, Jackson, and Takeyuki Ueyama. (2020). *Higher Education in Utah." Utah History Encyclopedia.* https://www.uen.org/utah_history_encyclopedia/e/EDUCATION_HIGHER.shtml.
[16] Utah System of Higher Education. *The New Utah System of Higher Education, 2020.* https://ushe.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/reports/issue_brief/2020/2020_New_Combined_System.pdf.

Both qualitative and quantitative data are needed for the Board and System to have a holistic view, and understanding of, equity disparities. These data inform how stakeholders are educated about the individuals, groups, communities, and institutions served by Utah's higher education System.

Currently, Utah has one of the lowest estimated college participation rates for students from low-income families in the nation at just 20%. Only Oklahoma, Wyoming and Alaska have lower rates.[17]

The Education Trust calls for leaders to "Disaggregate by race and income on all IPEDS and NSLDS data on critical measures of student success, like enrollment, persistence, retention, transfer, and completion, as well as post-enrollment outcomes, such as earnings and employment (….) This matters because available higher education data does not paint a complete picture about which students have what opportunities, experiences, and outcomes."[18]

The questions within the Equity Lens will determine the need for qualitative data to guide the development of new strategies, initiatives, and policies, and to measure progress made.

The Board will work with the USHE Chief Diversity Officers and institutional research departments to develop a practical plan to collect System and institutional demographic and sociocultural data in the following categories:
1. Race and ethnicity
2. Gender identity and expression
3. Sexual orientation
4. Socioeconomic status
5. First-generation status
6. Language proficiency
7. Citizenship and residency status

By collecting this data, we can impact intersectional populations through our strategies, initiatives, and policies. We will incorporate these key metrics into our strategic plan.

Further Reading

1. Kezar, Adrianna, Elizabeth Holcombe, Darsella Vigil, and Jude Paul Mathias Dizon. (2021). *Shared Equity Leadership: Making Equity Everyone's Work. Washington,* DC: American Council on Education; Los Angeles: University of Southern California, Pullias Center for Higher Education. https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Shared-Equity-Leadership-Work.pdf.
2. McNair, T. B., Bensimon, E. M., & Malcom-Piqueux, L. (2020). *From equity talk to equity walk: Expanding practitioner knowledge for racial justice in higher education*. John Wiley & Sons.
3. Holcombe, Elizabeth, Adrianna Kezar, Jude Paul Matias Dizon, Darsella Vigil, and Natsumi Ueda. (2022). *Organizing Shared Equity Leadership: Four Approaches to Structuring the Work*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education; Los Angeles: University of Southern California, Pullias Center for Higher Education. https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Shared-Equity-Leadership-Structures.pdf.
4. Kendi, Ibram X., *How to Be an Antiracist*. New York: One World, 2019. https://adams.marmot.org/Record/.b59796005#:~:text=2019.

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[17] Mortenson, T. (2022). *College Participation Rates for Students from Low-income Families by State: 1993 to 2020.* Washington, DC: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. http://www.pellinstitute.org/peo.shtml.
[18] Kayla C. Elliott and Tiffany Jones. (2019) *Creating Accountability for College Access and Success: Recommendations for the Higher Education Act and Beyond*. Education Trust. https://edtrust.org/resource/creating-accountability-for-college-access-and-success-recommendations-for-the-higher-education-act-and-beyond/.

5. Brandley, A.T. (2022). *Utah's Economically Disadvantaged Students and Higher Education*. Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute. https://gardner.utah.edu/wp-content/uploads/DisadStudents-PB-Jun2022.pdf?x71849.

6. The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. (2022). *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States, 2022 Historical Trend Report*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED620557.pdf