



# AASCU Institutions' Practices for Increasing Social Mobility

June 2023



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## Introduction

America's regional public universities provide the opportunity for upward social mobility, or the generational movement of wealth, education, employment status, social adjustment, democratic participation, and general well-being.<sup>1</sup> A college degree is generally thought of as the ticket to social mobility for individuals, and collectively, higher education contributes to the nation's economic growth.

AASCU institutions play an important role in social mobility as access points to education for low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color—historically underserved populations.<sup>2</sup> This brief identifies institutional practices that appear to facilitate upward social mobility for historically underserved students.

Several measures of mobility were assessed to select eight institutions for inclusion in this study. Each of the mobility measures has an access component, or the extent to which students of color and low-income students of color are represented, and a productivity component, or the rate at which these students graduate, attain degrees in high-mobility majors,<sup>3</sup> or work in high-paying jobs (see the Appendix for the full methodology). Scans were then conducted using institutional and state websites, relevant publications, and policy reports to identify institutional policies and practices that affect social mobility. The scans relied on publicly available information. While this may be seen as a potential limitation, it is important that institutions make information about programs and policies transparent and easy to access. Where possible, follow-up interviews with directors of the identified programs and practices supplemented the scans to provide additional details unavailable through public documentation.



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## Facilitating Mobility: Institutional Practices

Table 1 summarizes the practices identified at AASCU member institutions with the highest mobility. Providing a wide range of wraparound supports for first-generation, low-income, and Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students (historically underserved students) appears to be ingrained in the cultures and structures of high-mobility institutions. These institutions provide numerous personal, academic, and financial supports for students, including the following:

- » Comprehensive and specialized support services, including peer mentoring and living-learning communities
- » Career pathway supports and experiential learning opportunities



- » Social justice centers that provide a safe space and promote a sense of belonging
- » Social mobility emphasized as an institutional priority and point of pride on public-facing documents and websites

Together, these supports help improve student engagement, academic achievement, persistence, and completion, along with increasing the share of historically underserved students who are prepared for high-mobility, high-demand jobs.

**Table 1. Summary of Institutional Mobility Practices at Sample Institutions**

| Size  | Region       | Comprehensive Support | Career Pathways | Social Justice Centers | Social Mobility Emphasis |
|-------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Small | Southeastern | ✓                     |                 |                        |                          |
| Mid   | Northeastern | ✓                     | ✓               | ✓                      | ✓                        |
| Mid   | Northeastern | ✓                     | ✓               | ✓                      | ✓                        |
| Mid   | Western      | ✓                     | ✓               |                        | ✓                        |
| Small | Northwestern | ✓                     | ✓               |                        | ✓                        |
| Large | Southeastern | ✓                     | ✓               | ✓                      | ✓                        |
| Mid   | Midwestern   | ✓                     | ✓               |                        | ✓                        |
| Mid   | Northeastern | ✓                     | ✓               | ✓                      | ✓                        |

# Comprehensive Support

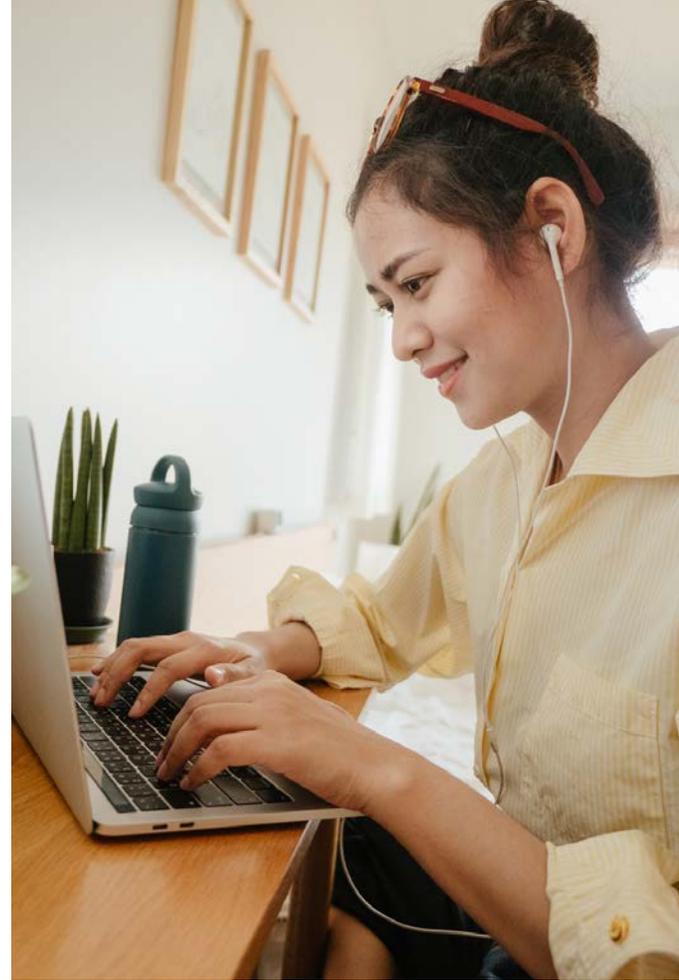
All of the eight identified institutions offer in-depth, evidence-based personal and academic support that target historically underserved populations beyond the standard offerings of yearly academic advising and first-year experience seminars. While those standard offerings are essential to provide the basis for a structured and supportive environment, the following high-impact practices are based on evidenced findings in the literature. It is important that institutions regularly monitor students' academic progress and the impact of support practices, and adjust them as needed to maximize their effectiveness.

## Academic Advising

Advising for historically underserved populations should be deliberately regular, intensive, intrusive, and comprehensive, rather than a simple course approval for registration. Historically underserved students need advisors who help identify their interests and pathways, monitor their progress, identify needs, and provide regular, proactive support.

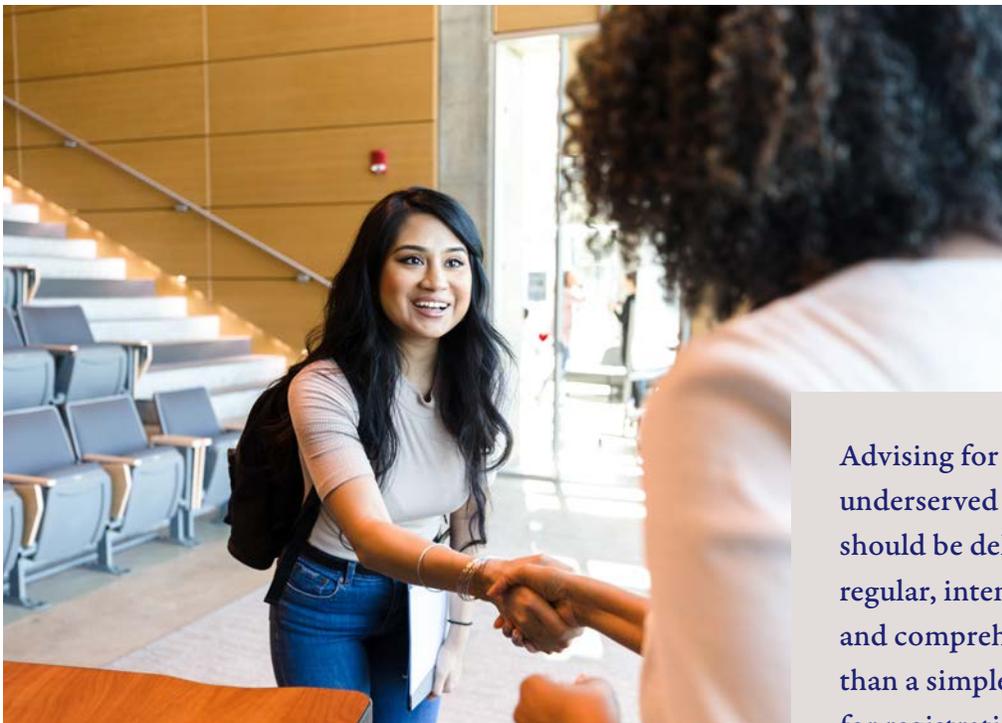
The following examples of advising were identified at high-mobility institutions:<sup>4</sup>

- » **TWO-PRONGED ADVISING.** A small Southeastern institution offers a center for student success and retention, which includes a recently revamped advising model to assign students both a professional advisor and faculty mentor. The professional advisors support the same students throughout their academic career at the institution.
  
- » **EARLY WARNING.** The midsized Midwestern institution offers an online case management system where faculty recommend students for support based on early warning indicators. Faculty review their rosters for students at risk of failing at least twice each semester. In addition to grades, students may be prompted for advising because of being unprepared for or not attending class. A staff coordinator tracks referrals to advising and student life offices; approximately 75% to 80% of cases are resolved. The institution also tracks grades before and after early warning intervention and has seen an average of 55% to 60% of students increase their grades. The program is customizable, and with the majority of students still attending class remotely during COVID, the institution added prompts for early alert such as the need for internet access or mental health services. These referrals are particularly helpful for students who are too intimidated to seek help themselves.
  
- » **ALTERNATIVE ADMISSIONS POLICIES.** A midsized Northeastern institution<sup>5</sup> offers an alternative admissions program for low-income, first-generation students who lack the calculus course requirements for entry. This cohort-based program includes a first-year seminar, regular academic counseling, and peer mentoring.



**Consider:**

- » Does your institution assign professional advisors, faculty advisors, or both? Has your model been effective? How often are students required to meet with advisors? How productive are the meetings? Have you asked students about their experience with advising?
- » Does your institution use an early warning system? Has it been effective? Are all faculty properly trained to use the system, and are protocols in place delineating actions for the various warnings? How early and often do faculty (or other assigned staff) monitor students' progress? Where are students referred for support? Do students follow up?
- » Does your institution allow for conditional or alternative admissions when students do not meet all academic requirements? If so, are these students required to meet specific conditions during their first year, and what additional courses or support services are they required to attend? Have you tracked the outcomes of students in this program?
- » If you do not offer these practices, do your peer institutions? What can you learn from their implementation, experiences, and outcomes?
- » Has the institution assessed whether advisors are representative of the student population?
- » Has the institution disaggregated outcomes data for students who receive these supports?



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## Holistic Financial Support

Historically underserved students thrive when financial support is coupled with personal and academic support. As with advising, financial support should be targeted and comprehensive.

- » **SUPPORTIVE SCHOLARSHIPS.** A scholarship program for low-income, first-generation students at a midsized Western institution supplements financial aid with academic support. This institution also offers a grant providing housing, food, health, and wellness resources for students in need.
- » **EMERGENCY AID.** The large Southeastern institution offers an emergency financial assistance fund for “students who experience unexpected financial challenges, emergencies, or sudden financial hardships.” This helps ensure that enrolled students stay on track to graduation, as a minor financial setback can be enough to derail low-income students and cause them to stop or drop out.
- » **FINANCIAL INCENTIVES.** The Western institution offers incentives for students to complete 30 credits per year, such as scholarship drawings. Peer ambassadors share information about this campaign on campus as motivation for students to complete their degrees and save money. Students sign up at the beginning of the academic year and make a pledge to themselves to complete the credits; they receive advice about topics such as wellness, study habits, and time management to help them stay on track throughout the year.

### Consider:

- » Do you offer a need-based scholarship? Does the scholarship provide academic and personal support to help historically underserved students acclimate to and succeed on campus?
- » Does your institution offer grants to assist students in need with expenses beyond tuition, such as housing, food, or health? Do you have resources available that could assist students with financial needs in an emergency? Can your institution identify students who need financial assistance beyond tuition?
- » Can your institution offer incentives, monetary or other, for students to graduate within four years? Can you engage peer or near-peer (recent alumni) mentors in a campaign to communicate the benefits of graduating within four years?





## Specialized Support

High-mobility institutions offer comprehensive advising to all students, and specialized support to student populations with unique needs and challenges.

### » **FIRST-GENERATION PROGRAMMING.**

- A small Northwestern institution offers specialized support programs for first-generation students, including a cohort-based scholarship coupled with faculty mentors and a peer mentorship program.
- The large Southeastern institution offers support programs for first-generation and undocumented students, including a cohort-based summer and first-year transition program that offers both financial and academic support, and a first-generation living learning community.

» **TRIO.** Three high-mobility institutions offer federally funded TRIO Student Support Services programs to support historically underserved students through scholarships and academic and personal support. Note: TRIO programs are [competitive grants that institutions must apply for](#).

### » **OFF-CAMPUS SUPPORT.**

- The large Southeastern institution offers resources for its large population of off-campus students, including students who are parents and veterans. These resources include off-campus peer mentors, events, an advisory board, and a designated student lounge.
- The Midwestern institution offers specialized support for nontraditional college-age women and students who are parents, including faculty and staff mentoring, cohort building, events, and referrals to on-campus and external resources.

## Consider:

- » Which populations or demographics of students need the most support? Have you disaggregated retention and graduation rates by gender, race/ethnicity, first-generation status, income, age, and military/veteran status? Can you offer targeted support using evidence-based practices to these populations in need?

## Peer Support

Peer mentoring programs and learning communities support students in a variety of ways, including increasing a sense of belonging; providing emotional and academic support; providing assistance for navigating the institution's systems, structures, and policies; and increasing opportunities to become involved in campus activities and interact with faculty, staff, and other students. In fact, students participating in such programs have been evidenced to achieve higher grades, have higher engagement levels, and report greater satisfaction with their collegiate experience.<sup>6, 7, 8, 9</sup>

- » **PEER MENTORS.** A peer mentor program at the large Southeastern institution pairs sophomores and transfer students with junior- or senior-level mentors. Mentors and mentees are required to meet for 30 minutes biweekly throughout the year, and mentors provide academic and personal support and referrals to different campus services, including mental health counseling, financial support, and learning services. Mentors also provide study skills support and help students identify productive study environments on campus. When possible, mentors connect mentees with campus employment to try to reduce their off-campus work hours. Mentors also help students become more engaged by connecting them with student clubs and organizations. Mentors are paid and participate in two trainings each year and weekly staff meetings. Each mentor is assigned 8 to 15 mentees. Mentors are also available to upper-division students facing probation. Freshmen are supported separately by professional success coaches, who encourage their students to register for the peer mentoring program the following year.
  
- » **LIVING-LEARNING COMMUNITIES.** A midsized Northeastern institution offers extensive living-learning communities (LLCs), a collaboration between academic affairs and residential life that groups students by academic and career interests. Each LLC houses students in one floor of a residence hall together, who take a first-year seminar with discussion sections, taught by a faculty mentor who also shares weekly meals with their students to provide an additional opportunity to connect. The institution offers 16 to 22 LLCs each year, supporting 375 to 450 freshmen. Some LLCs are organized around theme or interest such as writing, career discovery, theater, social justice, or laws, ethics, and philosophy, and clusters of LLCs hold social events and community service opportunities. LLCs also employ upper-division students as paid community assistants, ambassadors, and interns. The institution reports a 15% higher graduation rate for LLC participants compared with nonparticipants, and a statistically significant higher freshman GPA, 3.05 compared with 2.9 for nonparticipants.

### Consider:

- » Does your institution offer a peer mentor program? How often do mentors and mentees meet? How structured are the meetings? Are mentors trained or provided with a curriculum or resources to help students identify their interests and stay on track to graduation? Do they have contact information readily available to refer students for additional support, if needed?
  
- » Has your institution explored the possibility of offering living-learning communities? How can you identify students with similar interests and/or characteristics who would benefit from the peer support of a cohort model? What resources would this require? What sorts of supports or programming could your institution provide?



## Career Pathways

In addition to investing in resources that help students complete their degrees, high-mobility institutions invest in efforts to prepare historically underserved students for successful careers in high-wage, high-demand fields.

### Minority STEM Supports

Most of the career pathway programming targeting historically underserved student populations are in STEM fields.

» **PIPELINE.** The Northwestern institution offers several minority STEM programs beginning in middle school to build the pipeline of potential graduates. A federally funded grant program recruits underserved high school seniors to study a STEM field at the institution, and it continues to support them at the institution through mentoring, a living-learning community, research experiences, and a two-year scholarship. (Note: Institutions are required to apply for competitive federal grants.)

» **RESEARCH.**

– A mid-sized Northeastern institution offers a summer research opportunity and fellowships for students of color in a prominent scientific research center. The goal of this program is to increase the diversity of the graduate student and faculty pipeline.

– Another mid-sized Northeastern institution offers a regional undergraduate STEM research program. The program provides a small stipend and gives preference to historically underserved students.

» **STIPENDS.** The Western and Southeastern institutions offer statewide, federally funded grants to increase diversity in STEM. The grants provide funding for research, travel to meetings, and graduate school application, test preparation, and test fees for historically underserved students in STEM fields who face socioeconomic barriers.

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### Minority Nursing Program

A midsized Northeastern institution offers a diversity program for undergraduate students in the nursing school to diversify the pipeline and better reflect the population of patients served. The program is open to historically underserved students, and includes academic coaching, group study skills classes, facilitated study groups, peer and faculty mentors, professional events, scholarship opportunities, and financial aid guidance..

#### Consider:

- » Is your institution building the pipeline for underserved students in high-wage, high-demand fields? When do you begin outreach to potential applicants? What scholarship offerings do you have in place to enroll underserved students in these fields?
- » Do students have the opportunity to participate in research projects and other forms of active learning to engage them in the content?
- » Do students have opportunities to travel to professional conferences and build relationships with faculty mentors?

### Community Partnerships

A Western institution offers a comprehensive career preparation program for historically underserved students. In addition to advising, the institution partners with the community to offer professional mentors and job opportunities through a local workforce agency and local employers.

#### Consider:

- » Does your career center and/or academic departments have partnerships with local employers and agencies to offer students internships and job opportunities?



## Experiential Learning

Experiential learning can take several different forms but typically applies course content to professional projects both on and off campus including research, service learning, and internships. Two in-depth examples of comprehensive and innovative experiential learning opportunities at high-mobility institutions follow.

- » **Applied course content.** At a mid-sized Northeastern institution, experiential learning is built into the institution's strategic plan and is integrated in the campus culture. A center for experiential education determines which of the institution's courses meet the definition of experiential education based on best practice criteria and high impact for students. The center is pushing for faculty development to expand course-based experiences, particularly since many low-income and first-generation students work and cannot afford to participate in internships or study abroad.
  - *Virtual project partnerships.* The institution invested in a platform that facilitates a project-based learning network by connecting faculty with external partners to embed experiential components in courses. This model has worked particularly well in the online environment during the pandemic, as students are able to participate in online projects based anywhere in the country, even internationally.
  - *Cross-disciplinary collaborations.* A "common problem project" brings together faculty and their students from two different disciplines to work on societal problems from those two different perspectives. In some cases, classes are paired with a community-based organization to provide hands-on experience. For example, an undergraduate history class paired with a graduate public health class collaborated on an environmental justice project in a local low-income neighborhood.

» **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.** The Midwestern institution connects library staff with career services and faculty to provide research-based curricula and work experiences. The library, serving as a “home base” for students at this commuter institution, is open seven days per week until midnight and provides classroom support and a literacy center to develop a variety of skills, including professional development. Most students at this institution work at least 20 hours per week, and one goal of this partnership is to help students find employment on campus.

- *Workforce skill workshops.* Professional development workshops aim to improve student collaboration and critical thinking skills and provide professional feedback to help students become workforce ready. One recent workshop, “How to Be a Digital Storyteller,” trained students for job interviews and developing personal statements, particularly important skills for first-generation students who are often hesitant to share their personal experiences.
- *Paid technology tutors.* One initiative of this library/career services partnership is training students to be paid technology tutors. This has been especially helpful for both faculty and students struggling with remote learning instruction platforms during COVID. The ten technology tutors provide workshops and are available for drop-in hours for faculty, staff, and students. The tutors initiated and developed a knowledge base with common software problems and solutions for faculty to share with their students.
- *Research experience.* The institution also offers a small, paid undergraduate summer research experience that connects students with faculty mentors and provides professional development workshops, activities, and networking. Using CARES funding, the library/career services partnership will fund 30 research projects in the summer of 2021.

**Consider:**

- » What are some ways that students can learn about careers while enrolled? Do students have the opportunity to participate in on- and off-campus projects that apply content from their disciplines to real-life situations?

## Social Justice

High-mobility institutions not only offer support to help students stay on track, but also provide safe and welcoming environments that promote a sense of belonging. In addition to diversity, equity, and inclusion offices, four of the institutions also house social justice centers that offer cultural events and speakers for historically underserved populations. One specifically promotes healing in a safe space through discussions about racist incidents and topics such as implicit and explicit biases.

In some cases, faculty are dedicated to researching issues related to equality and social justice. For example, one institution is known for its health sciences research center and recently received federal funding for a fellowship program in this department. Institutions dedicated to social justice are also offering new related academic programs. A mid-sized Northeastern institution, for example, recently began offering an undergraduate justice program focusing on issues of social justice and equity. This signifies that the institution is in tune with current issues of interest to students and looking for ways to engage them in meaningful coursework.

## Social Mobility Emphasis

High-mobility institutions are aware of the importance of social mobility and of their own ability to act as a lever for historically underserved students. They pay attention to, take pride in, and strive to improve on indicators of social mobility—perhaps even above and beyond indicators that reflect prestige or selectivity. All eight high-mobility institutions have garnered national recognition for their performance in social mobility, and nearly all (seven of the eight) advertise these mobility rankings as points of pride on their websites.

### Consider:

- » Do you know how well your institution performs on mobility measures? Do you feature social mobility as a point of pride at the institution—on public-facing documents and the institution's website? Is social mobility a priority at the institution? How could your institution improve its performance on mobility measures?



## COVID-19 Effects on Student Mobility

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced a new set of challenges to students and institutions. Institutional engagement is more difficult when students are learning remotely and do not have opportunities to build relationships and interact with other students, staff, and faculty on campus. This alone may have caused students to stop or drop out. In addition, COVID resulted in many students facing additional financial, health, and personal challenges that impacted their academic persistence. Historically underserved students were hit particularly hard by the pandemic due to family losses and financial hardships.<sup>10</sup> Many did not have access to the internet for remote learning. Some students are still feeling the residual effects of COVID and as a result of increased student needs, student affairs staff have experienced burnout and high rates of turnover, which may negatively impact much-needed supports for students.<sup>11</sup>

Institutions have used Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF)—the CARES, CRRSAA, and ARP Acts—resources to combat some of these challenges. One-half of the HEERF funds were earmarked for emergency grants for students; the institution's portion of the funds were restricted to specific expenditures and only those related to the pandemic to defray expenses associated with the pandemic, including "lost revenue, reimbursement for expenses already incurred, technology costs associated with a transition to distance education, faculty and staff trainings, and payroll."<sup>12</sup> Institutions could also use their portion of the funds for additional emergency grants to students. Many institutions purchased computers and hotspots for students, or installed parking lot Wi-Fi. Some expanded medical worker personnel or implemented means to provide services in a hybrid fashion, both in person and remotely for students who did not want to come to campus. Some institutions reconfigured or added classroom space, or offered additional sections to allow for smaller class sizes and social distancing.<sup>13</sup>

The majority of students have now returned to campus, which is needed to truly engage and maintain their connections with the institutions. High-mobility institutions are flexible and adjusted their services in response to student needs. For example, the midsized Midwestern institution found that students were not utilizing individualized remote counseling; they instead offered group workshops and found the recordings to be popular and well-viewed. They now have 70 prerecorded online workshops available on topics such as wellness and maintaining relationships. The institution also had success with peer-run virtual support groups. Students provide feedback on these services through a student advisory board.

# Looking Forward

Environmental and contextual factors external to the institution can influence student outcomes and success and have implications for social mobility. Economic and demographic fluctuations can result in the changing composition of an institution's students, their academic and social backgrounds, financial situations, and support needs. For example, tightening economies can force more students to work off campus and enroll part time, thereby negatively impacting their chances of graduating in four years. Offering need-based grants to alleviate the need to work off campus will enable full-time attendance and help facilitate student success and mobility. Further, changing admissions policies can lead to variation in K–12 academic preparation levels of incoming students, reinforcing the need for tailored supports to help historically underserved students adjust to college life and thrive academically.

## Conclusion

This research indicates that intrusive, wraparound supports—those meeting both academic and nonacademic needs—appear to be related to a higher level of social mobility for historically underserved students. However, through this review and analysis of publicly available documents, it is difficult to assess the exact environments, implementation, intensity, and scope of the support services cited. Knowing your students, understanding what their individual needs are, and the environment in which your institution operates are key to developing an effective set of practices to support students.

The following elements are common among high-mobility AASCU institutions and should be considered for increasing social mobility of historically underserved students at your institution:

- » Offer a safe, welcoming space. An institutional culture focusing on diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice, and taking pride in social mobility, promotes a sense of belonging for historically underserved students.
- » Know your students. Actively ask students about their experiences, what is working and not working for them, and what they need in order to succeed.
- » Identify gaps. While developing wraparound supports, examine the entire student pathway to identify the needs of historically underserved students, both in and outside the classroom.

Finally, institutions should continually track the outcomes of historically underserved students and the use and effectiveness of various support programs, not only through quantitative measures but also by capturing the student voice. This will yield valuable information about what specific components or service deliveries make practices effective, and where institutional resources will be best served. It is imperative that regional public universities serve their surrounding communities by providing opportunities for historically underserved students to better their lives for their families and for future generations.

*This is the final brief in this series focusing on affordability, accessibility, and mobility.*

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# Appendix: Methodology

Institutions were identified as high mobility based on three mobility indices created for this study. Each of the three indices includes an access component and a productivity component; the product of the two components results in the index. The first component, access, is the extent to which low-income or Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students are represented. The second component, productivity, is the rate at which low-income or Black, Latinx, and Native American students graduate, attain degrees in high-mobility majors, or work in high-paying jobs. Details follow.

**OPPORTUNITY INSIGHT'S (OI) MOBILITY INDEX.**<sup>14</sup> This widely used index is the product of:

- » Access: The institution's share of students that come from the lowest-income families.
- » Productivity: The institution's share of students from the lowest-income families that have the highest earnings after college graduation.

**INCOME MOBILITY INDEX.** This index makes use of publicly available U.S. Department of Education data and includes:

- » Access: The institution's share of students that are Pell recipients.
- » Productivity: the institutions Pell recipient six-year graduation rate (150% of normal time).

**MAJOR FIELD MOBILITY INDEX.** This index also makes use of publicly available U.S. Department of Education data. The index is based on bachelor's degrees awarded to Hispanic, Native American, and Black men and women. This index includes:

- » Access: The institution's share of bachelor's degrees awarded to Hispanic, Native American, and Black students; men and women are assessed separately.
- » Productivity. The institution's share of bachelor's degrees that are in high-mobility majors for the six student groups—Black, Hispanic, and Native American men and women. High-mobility majors are those that lead to high-demand jobs in high-paying fields: science, technology, engineering, math, business, and health.<sup>15</sup>

Eight institutions were selected as high-mobility institutions. Scans of publicly available documentation were conducted to identify common and promising practices that facilitate mobility for low-income students and Black, Latinx, and Native American students. Also, follow-up interviews with institutions' program directors were conducted when programmatic details were not available on institutions' websites.

The 8 institutions are geographically diverse, represent 8 states, and include two Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and one Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Notably, a large number of California and New York institutions, that are largely HSIs, have high-mobility indices.

## Endnotes

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3. High-mobility majors are those that lead to high-demand jobs in high-paying fields: science, technology, engineering, math, business, and health.
4. Institutions were identified as high mobility based on an analysis across several dimensions—a widely used mobility index, an income mobility index, and a major field mobility index (see the Appendix).
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This AASCU Issue Brief was prepared by Abby Miller and Sue Clery, founding partner of ASA Research, in collaboration with AASCU. ASA is driven by the belief that research—particularly in the fields of higher education and workforce—is essential for expanding opportunity, improving economic mobility, and contributing to personal and social well-being. ASA is pleased to partner with AASCU in support of student success and to provide strategic data consulting and assistance to AASCU.

*For questions about this issue brief, please contact Prateek Basavaraj, AASCU's senior research analyst at [basavarajp@aacu.org](mailto:basavarajp@aacu.org)*

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