It Takes the University to Close the Equity Gap

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Abstract

Measured as the difference in performance outcomes between domestic students of color and domestic white students, the equity gap is rooted in systemic racism and a lack of educational opportunities. The equity gap has ramifications for all stakeholders in higher education, especially for domestic students of color. In this paper, we explore the causes of the equity gap and why it requires a university-wide effort to close it. Potential solutions in closing it are offered based on our experiences at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Keywords: equity gap, opportunity gap, inclusion, supplemental instruction

It Takes the University to Close the Equity Gap

"What is the equity gap, and why should I care about it?" These are questions asked by students, staff, faculty, and administrators in recent times when issues pertaining to diversity, equity, and inclusion have come to the forefront due to increasing racial tensions in American society. The equity gap is measured as the gap in performance outcomes between domestic White students (DWS) and domestic students of color (DSC) (e.g., Yue et al. 2018). As partners in education, it is easy to assume that this has nothing to do with us because stakeholders in education are committed to offering equal educational opportunities to all students. Therefore, we dismiss the suggestion that gaps in performance outcomes between DWS, and DSC have anything to do with us.

The reality is that the equity gap has roots in education as well as in other societal institutions (American Council on Education, 2020). Additionally, the population of undergraduate students who identify as a race other than White has increased from 30% to 45% in just the last 20 years (Espinosa et al., 2019). Therefore, those institutions that can recruit and graduate DSC will likely have more stable enrollments and budgets. Finally, the equity gap is associated with academic, financial, and environmental factors (American Council on Education, 2020). Therefore, it will take all of us as stakeholders in higher education (students, staff, faculty, and administrators) to close the equity gap. Using both the existing literature and our experiences, this paper seeks to define the equity gap and its root causes and then, based on our mistakes and achievements at Minnesota State University, Mankato (MSUM), we offer practical suggestions in closing the gap.

Defining the Equity Gap: Language Matters

The term equity gap has been used synonymously with achievement gap and opportunity

gap in the existing literature. In concrete terms, the gap is represented as the difference in performance outcomes (i.e., course GPA and/or success rate) between DWS and DSC. For example, referred to as the "achievement gap" in their study, Yue et al. (2018) define it as the "gap which exists between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students and their mean final course grade" (Yue et al., 2018, p. 19). Similarly, Anderson et al. (2007) defined it in terms of a difference in test scores between demographic groups. Using the same term, The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) stated that the achievement gap occurs "when one group of students (such as, students grouped by race/ethnicity, gender) outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant." The problem is that these definitions tap into how the gap is **measured** rather than its root causes.

Labels matter. Language matters. Scholars such as Flores (2018) take issue with the term "achievement gap" because it places blame on the student for the difference in performance outcomes and suggests that the cause of lower performance levels is inherent in the students' racial identities. Flores (2018) suggests that "(re)framing the language away from the deficit perspective associated with the use of the term achievement gap can shift educators toward recognizing institutional school cultures and practices that influence disparities" (p. 345). Consider the shift toward root causes of the gap when reframed as an "opportunity gap": "The way that uncontrollable life factors like race, language, economic, and family situations can contribute to lower rates of success in educational achievement, careerprospects, and other life aspirations" (Close The Gap Foundation, 2021)

Redefining the gap as an "equity gap or opportunity gap" rather than an "achievement gap" helps us to examine the root causes for the differences in performance outcomes. "Achievement gap" puts the onus on students because academics become the sole focus, and

stakeholders fail to consider the relevanceof finances and environment.

Roots of the Equity Gap

At MSUM, we discovered the equity gap to be rooted in three distinct components: academic, financial, and environmental. These components are consistent with the literature in which academic, financial, and environmental considerations are explained through less access to quality academic experiences (Frye et al., 2021; Noguera, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2002), internalized stereotypes (Massey et al., 2002; Rath et al., 2007), and hostile campus climates (Bowman et al., 2021; Hurtado et al., 2012).

Less Access to Quality Academic Experiences

Systemic racism within institutional structures has led to financial constraints and therefore low-quality educational experiences for many people of color (Frye et al., 2021; Noguera, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2002). For example, the racial wage gap in Americansociety contributes to lower socioeconomic status for people of color, especially for Black women. In fact, the average Black woman must work 19 months to earn the same amount of money that the average White male makes in 12 months (AAUW, 2019). In some cases, this leads to a trickle effect in which lower income results in housing in lower income areas with lower quality schools. Over time, such intersections of race and class, which result in different educational experiences, lead to a gap in performance outcomes between DSC and DWS.

At MSUM, intersections between race and class and their impact on the gap became prevalent through initial analyses of student data. For example, per demographic data from Institutional Research in 2018, it was discovered that 30% of students with academic, financial, or conduct holds on their transcripts were DSC, despite the fact that DSC represented only 16% of the overall enrollment. Since transcript holds keep students from registering for the

subsequent academic semester, and it became clear that we had restricted access to quality academic experiences to a subpopulation of students with more academic and financial barriers instead of adopting an equity lens.

Internalized Stereotypes

Additionally, students of color may internalize racial stereotypes engrained in society (Massey et al., 2002; Rath et al., 2007). For example, a young Black athlete who attended schools with predominantly White children was told by a classmate that the reason for his athletic success was that "Black people have an extra tendon in their leg." From that point forward, he questioned the source of his athletic ability, perceived himself as having an unfair advantage, and felt apprehensive about doing "too well." Students of color who internalize racial stereotypes (i.e., uneducated, incompetent, lazy, or criminal) may question their true skills and abilities, adversely affecting their performance in school and contributing to the equity gap. For example, underrepresented students in Frye et al. (2021) referenced that they "didn't go to the best schools" or were unable to afford AP courses, which contributed to a sense of "educational inadequacy" (p. 8). One student in the study claimed, "You have this idea in your head everybody knows the information and you are the only one that doesn't know it . . . And there are just a few that constantly participate and do know it and that convince you that just means everybody knows but you. You feel discouraged to even think that you are capable and compare yourself to other students . . . reemphasizes the idea that you don't belong in that class" (p. 8).

The campus climate assessment conducted at MSUM in 2017 reflects that some of our students of color battled both discriminatory attitudes and marginalization because of societal stereotypes. For example, one student stated, "I don't feel welcome at MSU. My experience at the dormitory wasn't a good one. I was told by the white students, "Black aren't wanted here! It's

so sad to have people like that on this campus." Other students felt marginalized because of their racial identity. One person noted, "Minorities are not accepted in the educational programs here; the procedure of selecting people with good grades is not true but is racially biased. All the programs, at most have one black person accepted, and hundreds apply." Another student noticed this lack of representation amongst employees as well: "I would like to see a more diverse staff/faculty. The lack of people who look like me is detrimental to my confidence." These quotes convey the additional burdens DSC must overcome to be successful at a predominantly White institution.

Hostile Campus Climates

Finally, students of color often face hostile campus climates, especially at predominantly White institutions (Hurtado et al., 2012). Such hostility may cause students of color to question their institution's support of them (Bowman et al., 2021) and/or interfere with their ability to learn and succeed in the classroom.

Results of the 2017 campus climate assessment at MSUM showed that while most employees and students rated the University as a welcoming community, the rate was lower for employees and students of color. The study found that employees and students of color appreciated that the university had a Women'scenter, LGBTQ Center, and a Multi-Cultural Center staffed by full-time employees. However, as noted with the testimonials included above, some DSC did not feel at all welcomed or represented on the campus, which has the potential to adversely affect their academic performance.

Solutions to Closing the Gap

This section describes possible solutions for closing the equity gap for faculty and academic support staff as well as by administration.

Faculty & Academic Support Staff Solutions

Reflect on pedagogical practices. Instructors and academic support staff who reflect on their pedagogical practices related to inclusivity create environments within which all students can thrive. Unfortunately, not all instructors or academic support staff engage in such reflection, which may result in the deficit perspective and blaming students for equity gaps. For example, a principal in Flores' (2018) case study engaged in "heated" discussions with her teaching staff in order to reconstruct her teachers' mindset and help them to see beyond a deficitperspective and to their own accountability in the success of their students: "The teachers like to tell war stories about these kids and blame every external factor in the world [for their low achievement], except for the fact that . . . it's our job to teach them" (p. 357). As faculty and academic support staff, it IS our job to teach students. Students cannot learn and flourish in an environment in which they perceive that they do not belong. Closing the equity gap means creating an environment that is inclusive for all students, which indicates a need for instructors and academic support staff to reflect on their pedagogical practices. This starts with an assessment of one's current classroom or educational environment.

Assess the environment. Inviting an objective "observer" into the classroom or educational environment can help to assess the level of inclusivity. Many colleges and universities have Centers forTeaching and Learning that offer observational services, including student observations (i.e., Students Consulting on Teaching or SCOT). Once an observer is identified, ask him/her to payattention to patterns related to the participation of marginalized groups. Abraham et al. (2021) offer a list of questions that should be answered in the assessment of inclusivity in peer-facilitated academic support sessions. These same questions apply to the classroom: "Were there gender identity or racial patterns of the students called upon? Were there

gender identity or racial patterns of the students who talked? Which students talked during these sessions and how often? Do students sit in small groups of similar gender identity and race? What actions did the facilitator attempt to encourage participation by all students?" (p. 9). Answers to these questions may help to provide a baseline from which an instructor or academic support leader can become aware of any problematic patterns related to inclusivity.

Never assume that "it's easy" or boast about abilities. Content that comes naturally to some students or was reinforced in the educational experiences of some students may not be content that is "easy" for all students.Telling students that a particular course concept is "easy" gives them the message that they should fully understand and have no questions. It shuts down communication because students who don't understand the concept feel isolated and resist seeking help. It also reduces the approachability of the instructor or facilitator. For example, in Frye et al. (2021)'s study of the experience of underrepresented minorities in peer-facilitated workshop groups, one student participant, Joel, expressed feeling discouraged by his condescending peer leader: "The way [the PLTL Workshop leader] was showing the material felt like he was super smart and he was way beyond the material that we were at so it just felt kind of likehe was above us and he was looking down on us, which was kind of discouraging" (p. 13).

In their synthesis of the literature to define antiracist activities and policies for student-led study groups, Abraham et al. (2021) suggest that peer leaders should "avoid words and behaviors that seek to demonstrate their own academic prowess and social capital," including the following: grade they earned in the course they are supporting, their standardized exam scores, their enrollment in AP or college-bound courses, and/or their membership in high school or college honor societies. Students are already aware of the abilities of their peer leader and instructors. A reminder of their academic prowess only increases the distance between

instructor/academic support staff and student rather than fostering a trusting relationship that enables growth. Instead, it is appropriate and encouraged for instructors and academic support staff to share the challenges they faced as students and the strategies that they found worked for them in problem-solving (Abraham et al., 2021; Frye et al., 2021).

Don't compromise rigor. Although instructors and academic support staff should never assume that concepts are "easy" to all students, that does not mean that they should avoid challenging students. Sometimes instructors equate supporting students with "dumbing down standards." The two should not be equated with one another, and in fact, it is important for instructors to hold students to high expectations. A school principal in Flores' (2018) case study describes her experience as a former summer schoolteacher and the expectation to "keep them [Black students] quiet and pass them" (p. 359). Refusing to do so, instead she made the students "work so hard that they are going to hate me so that they would never ever, ever, return to summer school" (p. 359). In other words, she maintained high levels of rigor, and in doing so, offered a counternarrative that challenged the low expectations held by other teachers about Black students. It is appropriate and important for instructors and academic support staff to hold high standards of all of their students and not to single out underrepresented students by expecting less of them. As stated by Kathy Wright in The Public Broadcasting Service (2021) video "Equity in Education", "it's important that we don't love our students to the bottom." Similarly, Wood (2022) claimed that "no one has ever risen to low expectations." In other words, although expectations should be grade-level appropriate and aligned to standards, it is important for instructors to challenge students to the best of their ability and to convey their belief that the students can meet those challenges. Why should students believe in themselves and their abilities if instructors do not believe in them?

Foster collaboration vs. competition. It is best for instructors and academic support staff to offer collaborative opportunities for growth rather than competitive experiences that may inadvertently cause harm. Academic competitiveness is a dominant cultural value that becomes problematic for underrepresented minorities who have not necessarily had access to the same educational opportunities (Abraham et al., 2021; Frye et al., 2021). Competitive activities between individuals highlighted the lack of preparation of some underrepresented students in Frye et al. (2021); this ultimately resulted in fewer help-seeking behaviors [i.e., such students stopped asking questions or requesting clarification for fear of slowing the progress of the group or being the "only student in the group who needed more time"(p. 9)]. Rather than place students into situations which highlight differences in their educational preparation, instructors and academic support staff can implement and encourage team activities in which students work together to produce a final product.

Proactively structure group activity. When instructors assign groupwork, students will often self-segregate—by race, gender,and ability level. This can lead to the marginalization of underrepresented minority students, particularly in predominantly White institutions. Feelings of unease and insecurity can be mitigated when the instructor or peer leader assigns the groups and provides the opportunity to work in smaller groups (i.e., 3-5 students), where students become much more comfortable speaking up and participating (Frye et al., 2021). When the instructor or peer leader assigns the groups, it relieves anxiety for those students who do not know anyone and increases the chance of mixed identity and mixed ability level groups.

Pay attention to nonverbal cues & use emotional intelligence. Paying attention to nonverbal cues can help instructors and academic support staff to recognize when a concept is **not** easy for specific students. An awareness of nonverbal cues indicating confusion can help

instructors and staff to address student needs without singling them out (by providing an additional example), and in Frye et al.'s (2021) study, "led to the students feeling a sense of relief from the anxiety of verbalizing their lack of understanding or asking for a slower pace" (p. 15). Moving on and failing to provide another example "can result in the student having difficulty with solving the problem thus making negative personal judgments about themselves. This may result in not returning to the group and perhaps dropping the class altogether due to their perceived incompetence" (Abraham et al., 2021, p. 15). When instructors and academic support staff recognize the struggles of students without publicly calling attention to them, students feel acknowledged, supported, and even motivated to persist; as stated by Ayesha, a student participant in Frye et al. (2021), "If someone is trying to help you not give up, then you have more reason to stick in there" (p. 15).

Awareness of nonverbal cues is one indication that an instructor or tutor has "emotional intelligence/EI" (Goleman, 2006). Strong EI skills are important in creating inclusive environments. In applying EI, Abraham et al. (2021) suggests an approachable demeanor, the use of empathetic statements when students share personal events, the use of active listening skills, and friendly and engaged body language. It is especially important that instructors and academic support staff avoid expressing surprise when underrepresented students succeed and validate and encourage all students in the same manner (Abraham et al., 2021; Frye et al., 2021).

Cultivate personal relationships. As the saying goes, "students won't care about what you know until they know that you care." Therefore, it is important that instructors and support staff do whatever they can to foster personal relationships—between students and between student and instructor/staff member. This can be done in several ways: knowing and using students' names and preferred pronouns, taking time to get to know students as individuals (with

initial icebreakers and/or informal communication before and after classes), sending personalized emails, and developing and displaying cultural humility (Abraham et al., 2021; Frye et al., 2021). For example, one student participant in Frye et al. (2021), Brianna, discussed a bad experience with a student leader from a peer-facilitated academic support session who did not take the time to connect with the students: "I just want to reiterate the significance of adding value to one-on-one relationships. I think that would have made all the difference. . . it's nice to get personalized email 'cause it feels like the person genuinely, it's like putting in the time and the effort to send something to you directly . . .I think that would have made such a big difference [feeling] like somebody is there to encourage you, somebody is there looking out for you" (p. 20). Wood (2022) calls the use of these sorts of strategies "intrusive practices." Intrusive practices are the sorts of things that instructors and academic support staff do when they genuinely care about helping students to succeed (i.e., providing a textbook to the student who cannot afford one or reaching out and expressing concern to the students who have not shown up for class or have missed deadlines or who otherwise appear unengaged). When used early and often, intrusive practices can help to motivate students and to keep them on track, contributing to closing equity gaps.

Another way to cultivate personal relationships and to help foster a sense of belonging for all students in an environment is to have and display "cultural humility." Cultural humility is a "humble and respectful and celebratory attitude toward individuals of other cultures that pushes them to challenge their own cultural biases, recognizing funds of knowledge, and approach learning about other cultures as a lifelong goal and process" (Abraham et al., 2021, p. 14). Cultural humility is exhibited when an instructor or staff member is humble (by revealing his/her own weaknesses), inclusive (through considering the needs of individual students), and sincere

(in meeting students where they are) [Frye et al., 2021].

Administrative Solutions to Closing the Gap

The solution to closing the equity gap is not to "admit better students," but to teach and support the students we have! The primary function of the administration is to hold the university community accountable for closing the gap. Through our experiences at MSUM, we assert that the administration can do so by investing in academic support programs to enhance the success of all students; consistently reviewing policies, practices, and procedures to ensure that all students have equitable access to university resources; and ensuring that its workforce reflects the demographics of the student body.

Offer academic support programs for all students. One way in which both faculty and administrators can contribute to closing equity gaps is to fund academic support programs open to all students. One program that has found success in closing equity gaps at MSUM is a supplemental instruction program, branded at MSUM as MavPASS (Maverick Peer-Facilitated Academic Support System). Started in just five courses in fall 2019, MavPASS has expanded to support 25 courses and thousands of students.

Performance outcome data (i.e., final course grades) collected through the University's Institutional Research division reveal positive changes in closing equity gaps, although changes were more modest in the height of the COVID pandemic. See Figure 1 below for the differences in equity gaps between MavPASS attendees and non-attendees over the course of two years. See Figure 2 for an example of gap differences by course between attendees and non-attendees in spring 2021.

Figure 1. Equity gap of MavPASS attendees & non-attendees.

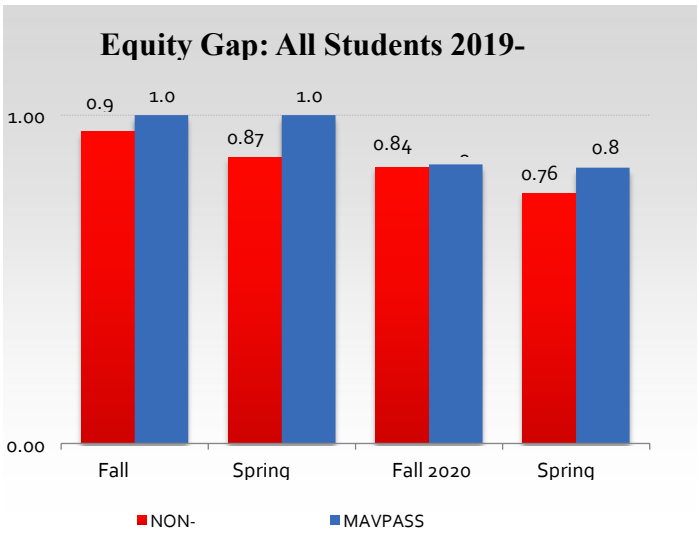
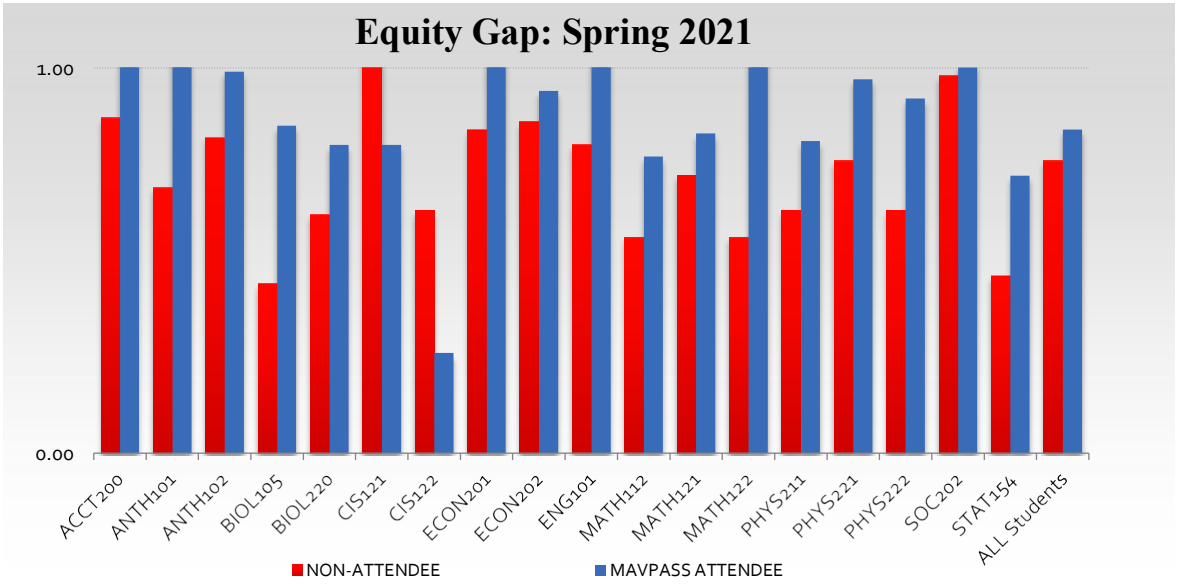


Figure 2. Equity gap of MavPASS attendees & non-attendees by course spring 2021.



The success of MavPASS in closing equity gaps can be attributed to efforts in hiring a diverse workforce, collaborative work with other service divisions on campus, and attempts made to create and maintain inclusive academic support environments. First, representation is important. Students (especially marginalized groups of students) are far less inclined to seek

academic help if they do not see themselves represented in any of these spaces (Abraham et al., 2021; Frye et al., 2021). Therefore, the MavPASS staff made consistent efforts to hire a diverse workforce by nationality and race—a workforce that is at least representative of the student body it serves. In the first semester of the program, 82% of MavPASS Leaders hired were white (along with 12% students of color, 6% international students). Hiring efforts in subsequent semesters have been fruitful since the MavPASS Leaders have been far more representative of the student body (which is 18% students of color and 9% international students)—with 19-23% students of color and 13-14% international students hired each semester.

Another reason for the success of MavPASS in closing equity gaps is the collaboration with other service divisions on the campus. The MavPASS team worked closely not only with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the Global Education department, but also with university advising, the Maverick Success program, and the athletic department. Such collaborations allowed for unique advising opportunities for underrepresented groups in particular; this led to higher levels of participation by students of color (25-40%) and international students (26-46%) than white students (20-31%) in every semester from fall 2019 through spring 2021.

Finally, the MavPASS staff attempted not just to offer academic support but to foster sense of belonging in inclusive spaces. This included welcoming all students to MavPASS sessions to remove any stigma associated with seeking academic help and training leaders to use many of the strategies defined above as pedagogical practices for instructors and academic support staff. Although there is still work to do—in drawing more students to seek support through MavPASS and in creating inclusive spaces where all students feel welcome, the program has offered one promising path to closing equity gaps on the campus.

Replace problematic policies. Following analysis of university data, several changes

were made to policies, practices, and procedures to address problematic equity gaps. First, we adjusted financial holds so that students were allowed to register for the subsequent semester if they owed the University less than $1,000 (decreased from $100) and committed to work with advisors to develop a repayment plan. Additionally, we changed a policy in place so that students with suspended financial aid would be eligible for tuition waivers for up to one academic year. To reduce the potential for food insecurity of students, we removed unnecessary barriers in place so that students were no longer suspended from the university food plan in the middle of the semester. We also created emergency enrollment grants to help students stay enrolled. Finally, we aligned our academic suspension policy with the other Minnesota State Universities and changed how we offer developmental courses to avoid the delay of graduation and reduce financial impact upon students.

Hire a diverse workforce. At MSUM, we understand the importance of having a diverse workforce to help create a more welcoming community. Therefore, our goal is to hire a workforce that reflects the student demographics. To this end, MSUM created an administrative workgroup to look at current employment policies, practices, and procedures that could be hindering the goal of diversifying its workforce. The group examines both recruitment and retention activities. The goal is to have more diverse applicants in the pool, invited for on-campus interviews, and ultimately employed.Based on the recommendations of the workgroup, the University has changed the language in job announcements to reflect the importance of diversity at MSUM and requires a written diversity statement and responses to standardized diversity interview questions from all applicants. Finally, and the most importantly, additional training of hiring officials been implemented to help them better understand their role in diversifying the workforce.

Conclusion

The equity gap contributes to lower success rates for domestic students of color, increases the overall cost of higher education, and in the larger scheme, continues to exacerbate social justice concerns. The equity gap was created from academic, financial, and environmental inequities, and it must be closed with actions that consider such barriers. Therefore, a university-wide effort is crucial. Faculty and support staff can consider their educational environments and adapt their pedagogical strategies to be inclusive of all students. Administrators can invest in resources that serve the needs of all students academically, examine and adjust inequitable policies and practices, and diversify their workforce. It is the responsibility of all of us as stakeholders in higher education to do what we can to close the equity gap and contribute to the success of all students.

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