

Journal of Diversity in Higher Education

Aspirations of Attainment: A Critical Examination of State Policy Goals and the Disparities in the Latinx Community

Eric R. Felix and Fernando Garcia

Online First Publication, January 12, 2023. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000466>

CITATION

Felix, E. R., & Garcia, F. (2023, January 12). Aspirations of Attainment: A Critical Examination of State Policy Goals and the Disparities in the Latinx Community. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000466>

Aspirations of Attainment: A Critical Examination of State Policy Goals and the Disparities in the Latinx Community

Eric R. Felix¹ and Fernando Garcia²

¹ Department of Administration, Rehabilitation and Postsecondary Education, San Diego State University

² Higher Education and Organizational Change, University of California, Los Angeles

Improving postsecondary educational attainment has been prioritized as a national imperative by policy-makers, foundations, and advocacy groups with the goal of significantly increasing the share of college graduates. To achieve this imperative, individual states have developed college-level attainment policies and plans to reach target milestones by years 2025, 2030, and beyond. Although states have taken on the challenge of college completion, there has been little attention placed on the racial disparities that exist in attainment and the ways they are potentially addressed through these efforts. Of all racial and ethnic groups, the Latinx community faces the lowest attainment rate in 34 of 50 states. Knowing these wide disparities exist, we studied state-level attainment plans and the discourse around addressing Latinx disparities. Using critical policy analysis, we found little evidence that attainment plans acknowledge or address racial disparities in general or the glaring gaps for the Latinx community specifically. Our findings reveal that the primary discourse around improving attainment is an economic one, focused on improving rates to sustain and achieve workforce demands. Across attainment plans, we found three patterns of discourse—deficit-oriented, race-evasive, or race-conscious—that attempt to acknowledge inequities and take action to improve rates for the Latinx community. Our findings suggest that without explicit language in attainment efforts, racial inequities will persist and the goals of improved attainment cannot be achieved.

Keywords: critical policy analysis, state policy, postsecondary attainment, racial disparities, Latinx inequity

Increasing postsecondary attainment, the share of adults with a college credential, has become a central focus for policymakers, foundations, and educational advocacy groups. Spurred by efforts like Obama's American Graduation Initiative (Brandon, 2009), Lumina Foundation's (2010) Goal 2025, and Complete College America (2019), a national agenda emerged to improve the number of people with "high-quality degrees and certificates" to meet future workforce demands (Jones & Berger, 2019). This collective agenda sets target goals to increase the nation's share of adults (ages 25–64) with a certificate, associate's, or bachelor's degree to 60% by 2020 (American Graduation Initiative) or 2025 (Lumina). Within these broader attainment goals, states developed their own policies and plans to improve the share of residents with a college degree. Target goals by state ranged vastly, such as the "Colorado Rises" plan to increase attainment to 66% by 2025, the "Drive to 55," which seeks to get 55% of "Tennesseans equipped with a college degree or certificate by the year 2025," and the more ambitious 70% attainment goals in "Future Ready Iowa" (2025) and Minnesota's "Education for the Future." What stands out among the national attainment rhetoric is the acknowledgment of longstanding disparities faced by racially minoritized communities and the need to take


action for any of these goals to be achieved. Lumina Foundation (2017) shared:

Goal 2025 will remain out of reach unless postsecondary attainment among African-Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians increases significantly. Lumina's metrics focus on increasing both enrollment and completion so that students from these groups earn at least 2.5 million of the credentials needed among traditional-aged students.

This callout of the racial disparities in attainment is much needed, as gaps by race and ethnicity continue to persist despite a decade of concentrated national and state-level efforts to improve the share of adults with certificates and degrees. For example, in 2020, the national attainment rate was just over 40%, but for racially minoritized groups, these rates were much lower (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020, S1501, American Community Survey 5 year). Disaggregating attainment by race and ethnicity, we saw stark inequities faced by communities of color. In the same year, the national attainment rate for the Black community was 30%, American Indian 24%, and Latinx 21.9%. This meant that each of the subgroups faced significant equity gaps in attainment: –11.7 percentage points for Black adults, –17 for American Indians, and –19.8 for Latinx. Of all racial/ethnic subgroups, the Latinx community faced the largest disparities in degree attainment across the United States and experienced the lowest rates of educational success in 34 of 50 states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Given the increased attention at the national and state level on educational attainment for adults 25–64, there is a need to understand how these goals, policies, and initiatives that have developed over the years attend to, if at all, the barriers facing communities of color in postsecondary education. As more states develop attainment plans and goals, it is necessary for policymakers to explicitly include strategies to reduce gaps experienced by communities of color as a

Eric R. Felix  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6116-0214>

Fernando Garcia  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3256-4412>

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Eric R. Felix, Department of Administration, Rehabilitation and Postsecondary Education, San Diego State University, 5550 Campanile Drive, Lamden Hall 229A, San Diego, CA 92182, United States. Email: efelix@sdsu.edu

means to increase the overall state attainment rate. Take the *Colorado Rises* plan which seeks to improve the state's attainment rate to 66% of the population by 2025 and prioritizes "erasing equity gaps" experienced by "Hispanic, African American, and Native American" communities. This state plan recognizes that increasing Colorado's overall attainment rate will never be achieved if the gaps are not addressed, "particularly for the Hispanic/Latino community." They recognize that specific efforts are needed to move the Latinx community's current 29% attainment rate by over 37 percentage points to reach the state goal of 66% by 2025. Not all states took a race-conscious approach to developing their plans, but we recognize the ways state attainment policies can address racialized educational inequity and the opportunity to explicitly improve attainment for the Latinx community. This specific focus on addressing the inequitable attainment rate drives our efforts to investigate how the Latinx community is being addressed in state-level college attainment plans. Our research explores *if* and *how* the disparities faced by the Latinx community were identified, acknowledged, and addressed in state-level plans espousing lofty goals for improved attainment across the country.

Purpose of the Study

Our study interrogated the racialized discourse within state-level attainment plans to understand how these efforts discussed racial disparities and if these plans identified or developed strategies that could explicitly address barriers faced by the Latinx community, given the highlighted attainment gaps. Although these plans articulate a vision for increased educational attainment, there is little evidence that the state policies, goals, and strategies are crafted with a focus on closing racial equity gaps broadly, or the disparities facing the Latinx community specifically. Arguing this similar sentiment, The Education Trust released a report evaluating all available state-level plans and how they considered gaps in attainment by race (Jones & Berger, 2019). They found limited evidence across 43 states of any comprehensive strategies to address racial disparities in attainment. Instead, states were limited in the type of strategies used, such as disaggregating attainment by race and ethnicity, but not including race-specific goals in their plan or developing general strategies to improve attainment without considering the specific context and barriers experienced by communities of color. Additionally, work by Gándara and Hearn (2019) illuminated the process by which states develop attainment policies and the deliberations that occur when setting target goals, focal populations, and strategies to achieve improvement. The authors found that policymakers had an overreliance on local data, allowed business and workforce groups to influence priorities, and minimized the use of research evidence to inform the strategies of Texas' attainment plan. Related to our work, Gándara and Hearn (2019) point out that focusing on "disadvantaged populations" like "Hispanic students" was driven not by a justice imperative, but one that would help the state's changing workforce.

Thus, building on Jones and Berger's (2019) work on *if* states have attainment plans and Gándara and Hearn's (2019) study on the underlying rationale for developing an attainment plan, we focus on interrogating how the Latinx community can specifically benefit from these policy agendas. Our work is a pragmatic reminder of the reality that many state-level attainment plans fail to acknowledge the Latinx population and by doing so may

fail to achieve their ambitious goals of increasing attainment for their state. In analyzing these plans, we find that explicit action must be taken to support the Latinx population to achieve higher rates of attainment. Without a race-conscious design, these state policy goals and attainment plans become mere aspirations, dreams deferred to the next decade, moving from 2020 to 2030 and beyond. Rather than extending goals into the future, states must take into account the barriers faced by specific groups, whether they be based on racial disparities, geographic limitations, or socioeconomic status. Our study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do state attainment plans discuss race, racial disparities, or racial (in)equity in their goals for improving the share of individuals with a postsecondary credential or degree?
 - a. Are state plans used as an opportunity to address racial inequities in college attainment?
2. Do plans explicitly discuss, identify, or address ways to improve Latinx attainment rates in their state?
 - a. Do states with a large Latinx population or greater equity gap in Latinx attainment emphasize them in their attainment efforts?

As target dates such as 2020, 2025, and 2030 come and go, these questions are critical to answer for stakeholders such as state policymakers, system leaders, institutional administrators, and the communities affected by these inequities. These research questions enable us to explore how states develop college attainment plans, the discourse within the plans, and how, or if, these efforts address glaring racial disparities in educational attainment. As the U.S. population continues to shift and the Latinx population remains among the fastest growing ethnic groups in the country (Pew Research Center, 2016), it is imperative for state policymakers and higher education institutions to implement intentional efforts to increase educational attainment for this group. We are reminded by Patricia Gándara (2015) that, unfortunately, research often operates from assumptions that all minorities are alike and might react similarly to policies and interventions. Along with Gándara, we push for a specific focus on the Latinx population, as we understand the necessity of looking at the needs of this ethnic group instead of trying to develop strategies or interventions that can support all student populations.

The Attainment Agenda, State-Policy Goals, and Philanthropic Influence

A national conversation has coalesced around postsecondary attainment and the ways that individual states can contribute to the increased levels of degree earners among working-aged adults. From political leaders to philanthropic organizations and policy think tanks, each has expressed a critical concern for improving postsecondary attainment rates. In 2009, Obama announced the ambitious goal of having the highest college graduation rate of any nation in the world in the next 10 years. Aligned with Obama's America's Graduation Initiative, philanthropic organizations, like the Lumina Foundation, prioritized the goal of increased attainment and have led the way, noting that "the nation faces an urgent and growing need for talent. To meet that need, many more people

must earn college degrees. By 2025, 60% of Americans must hold a credential beyond high school” (Lumina Foundation, 2017). Similarly, Complete College America was established in 2009 to “dramatically [increase] college completion rates and [close] equity gaps by working with states, systems, institutions, and partners” (About Complete College America, 2022). During this early period, states with active attainment policies and plans grew from only a handful in 2010 to over 30 states in 2018, and then 43 states in 2020. As we examine the landscape of state attainment policies, we discuss the rise of these attainment policies, the ways that philanthropic organizations influence these efforts, and early progress made by individual states to improve.

Rise of State Attainment Policies

Now in 2022, 46 states have identified college attainment as a priority, passed related legislation, and/or established state-level attainment plans to achieve their goals.¹ To quantify whether or not a state had a plan, we utilized Lumina’s criteria for determining if states’ attainment efforts were “quantifiable, challenging, long term, addressed gaps, and are in a statute or a strategic plan” (Lumina Foundation, 2022). Approaches to these policies vary by state, some stem from a governor’s decree (e.g., New Mexico), legislative body (e.g., Rhode Island), or coordinating board (e.g., Illinois Board of Higher Education) that then set the priority for improving attainment (i.e., a strong workforce, civic-mindedness), target goal (i.e., 60%), achievement date (i.e., 2030), and mechanisms (i.e., addressing affordability, improving statewide collaboration) by which states achieve goals of improved outcomes for their residents.

Of these 46 states with attainment initiatives, a majority have adopted the 60% goal to match the national imperative set by Lumina and Obama’s National Archives and Records Administration (2009) including states such as Arizona, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Rhode Island, and Texas. Across all states, the attainment rate goal ranges from 55% up to 70%. For example, Florida and its “Rise to 55” plan was established by the Florida Higher Education Coordinating Council seeking to “reach a statewide educational attainment goal of 55% by 2025.” Connecticut, Iowa, and Minnesota trailblaze the national agenda by setting a goal of 70% attainment for their residents. Future Ready Iowa, established by governor’s executive order, set the priority high given the rationale that “education and training beyond high school is the new minimum. By 2025, 68% of Iowa jobs will require training and education beyond high school” (FAQ, n.d.).

One stark difference between states and their attainment goals is the timeline established to reach their aspirations for improvement. Examining state policies and their attainment plans, it is critical to note how quickly these dates and targets are approaching. The selected years to achieve attainment goals were clustered into three targets: 2020, 2025, and 2030. For instance, Georgia and Illinois, intend to achieve their attainment goal by 2025, whereas Idaho, Kansas, and Massachusetts had established a more aggressive timeline for 2020. While states have similar agendas for achieving a higher rate of attainment, the ways by which they hope to accomplish this vary from state to state. As we explore the importance of these policies and the strategies within them to improve the share of adults with postsecondary degrees, we explore the influence of philanthropic organizations in scaling up these efforts across the United States.

The Influence of Philanthropic Organizations

The attainment agenda that emerged found the Lumina Foundation at the forefront, by establishing an imperative of achieving a “goal of 60% of adults age 25–64 holding degrees or certificates by 2025” (Jones & Berger, 2019, p. 2). Since Lumina has been extremely explicit with its focus on ensuring that attainment disparities between Black, Latinx, and Native populations are eliminated. With philanthropic organizations leading conversations and setting baselines for educational attainment nationwide, it is necessary for us to discuss how these intermediary organizations dictate the pace of progress at the national and state levels (Gándara & Hearn, 2019). When considering the influence and power philanthropic organizations have on the attainment agenda, we considered Lukes (2021) conceptualization of power: dictating direct action or tacit influence. Direct action can be understood as an entity like Lumina having the purview to deny a grant-seeking state higher education agency from accessing its resources because the organization failed to take race and ethnicity into consideration for its proposal. With this example, there is an action that Lumina can specifically take that may influence an entity in having the opportunity to tap into those resources. When interrogating the rise of state attainment plans and the influence of philanthropic organizations, we also see the ways that initiatives like “A Stronger Nation” are more covert and implied, they symbolically signal the path for America’s attainment goal, and states follow. This is evidenced by 22 states having their baseline serve as 60% for their attainment plans/efforts. Tacit influence describes the way that an organization like Lumina was able to garner state legislators, governors, intermediary organizations, and other actors to use that same metric for their own state without the need to resort to a deprivation of resources.

Recent work by Haddad (2021) found that over the last 10 years the priority for philanthropic organizations has changed. Instead of there being a focus on institutional building efforts, which can include investments in capital projects or funding to support the operation of an institution, there has been an increase in efforts that focus more on “reform-oriented investments,” which can include advocating for policy and grants to support completion efforts (p. 909). Taking this one step further, McCambly and Colyvas (2022) found that the varied sociopolitical climates by which we are operating from COVID-19 to the racial uprisings and attention to the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020 have led grantmaking foundations to revisit their commitments to racial equity. Whereas grantmaking institutions would historically prioritize programs that supported initiatives that would support “all students” (p. 25), there was now the catalyst that aided in shifting organizations to evaluate their role in racial and social justice. With a better understanding of how philanthropic organizations utilize their power and influence, we can now move on to the ways that state attainment policies have progressed.

The Progress of State Attainment Policies

Individual states have taken their efforts and published state attainment plans that detail specific initiatives from funding efforts to institutional recommendations for universities, community colleges,

¹ The states who have not established a formal attainment plan or passed legislation yet are California, Nebraska, Nevada, and New York.

and even business partners in some instances. Arizona, for example, utilized support from the “Governor’s Office of Education, Helios Education Foundation, Maricopa County Community College District, and the Arizona Board of Regents” to develop their attainment percentage of 60% and their deadline of 2030 (Achieve60AZ, 2019, p. 4). Texas, in comparison, utilized its already established Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). This board was able to create and disseminate an attainment plan specific to Texas that would increase the attainment rate of the state to their required metrics for economic success. These plans are of utmost importance to this study, as our efforts were to investigate how and if these plans utilize a racialized context for specific populations and if efforts were developed to support minoritized students, specifically, Latinx students. Similar to the Lumina Foundation’s metrics for determining whether a state has an attainment plan, we also found it necessary to disclose how progress is conceptualized in this project.

For this study, we view progress in two ways. The first allows us to interrogate the development of state attainment plans to meet the national imperative. Second, we also investigated the results that states have accomplished thus far in improving attainment and how far they have progressed towards their attainment goal set. Since the inception of these efforts, a decade has passed allowing researchers an opportunity to investigate how and if different populations are specifically acknowledged. As we situate our study within a broader conversation of college attainment, we reviewed recent research to help us understand if and how racially minoritized students benefit from state attainment policies.

In recent years, scholars have begun to investigate how some state plans attempt to “increase achievement and educational attainment for all along the educational pipeline, especially students of color” (Mansfield & Thachik, 2016, p. 3). Mansfield and Thachik (2016) conducted a critical policy analysis on Texas’ completion plan, “Closing the Gaps 2015,” and found that the attainment plan aimed to increase access and achievement for racially minoritized students on paper, but fell “short of addressing systemic inequities such as enduring segregation and unconstitutional school finance policy” (p. 23). To continue inquiry on Texas’ completion efforts, Gándara and Hearn (2019) interviewed 32 individuals “involved in higher education policymaking to examine the development of college-completion policy in the state” (p. 3). They found a heavy influence of commerce and business driving the adoption of Texas’ college completion policy efforts as well as limited conversation on race and racial disparities in attainment. These pieces highlight the way that attainment policies focus less on individuals and more on the benefits to the state. This focus on improving attainment, in the aggregate, limits the ability to discuss, identify, or address specific barriers facing racial groups. With the Latinx population nearly 40% of the population in Texas, omitting racial disparities in attainment limits the ability of this policy to achieve its stated intent.

Examining how the attainment agenda incorporated racially minoritized students into its discourse, Teranishi and Bezbatchenko (2015) found that most reforms recently enacted lacked any discussion of racial disparities as well as failed to include specific efforts to redress inequities faced by these communities. Their critique of the attainment agenda continues: “without an explicit approach to address these specific barriers, disparities between groups will persist, inhibiting progress for our higher education system as a whole” (Teranishi & Bezbatchenko, 2015, p. 251). Reviewing

recent scholarship (Gándara & Hearn, 2019; Jones & Berger, 2019; Mansfield & Thachik, 2016), there is a clear understanding that state policies seeking to improve attainment need to be further examined to understand how they discuss and address the disparities facing communities of color. As a national concern, we seek to understand the ways these plans discuss and address the barriers specifically facing the Latinx community in attainment. As the largest and fastest growing racial group in the country that also faces stark gaps in college completion, it is necessary to turn our attention to how attainment plans benefit, harm, or omit the Latinx community in their goals to improve statewide and national attainment. Continuing the effort put forth by these researchers, it is of utmost importance to ensure that efforts looking at attainment rates include a “critical lens to examine the distinctive impact” of these policies (Teranishi & Bezbatchenko, 2015, p. 252). Building on this research, we draw on critical policy analysis to guide our exploration of the ways state-level attainment plans identify, discuss, and address attainment for the Latinx community.

Theoretical Framework

We use critical policy analysis (CPA) as our theoretical framework to illuminate the underlying values, ideologies, and logics embedded in the policy text related to improving educational attainment and how these obscure elements differentiate results for minoritized groups. In contrast to traditional approaches, which assume rational-scientific elements that prioritize objectivity, rationality, and ahistoricism (Anderson, 2012), CPA takes as a starting point the idea that policies are inherently biased and value-laden (Bacchi, 2000). CPA foregrounds dimensions such as race or gender and attempts to uncover issues of power, social reproduction, racism, or sexism (Young & Diem, 2017). Research from this perspective seeks to critically examine the policy to illuminate discourse, language, and mandates that may be written in neutral ways seeking to support all students, but in reality, may maintain or exacerbate inequities experienced by minoritized groups (Chase et al., 2012). When utilized within the context of educational policy studies, CPA focuses on five “critical concerns” (Diem et al., 2014, p. 6):

1. Concern is placed on the difference between the policy rhetoric and practiced reality.
2. Concern regarding the policy roots, its formulation, development, and original intent.
3. Concern over the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge, as well as the creation of policy “winners” and “losers.”
4. Concern for the role and relationship of social stratification and ways policies may perpetuate inequities and maintain power within dominant groups.
5. Emphasis on members of nondominant groups such as racially minoritized communities who resist policies of domination and oppression (Gillborn, 2005) and who engage in activism to employ agency (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

In our work, CPA is used to investigate how state policy goals and attainment plans consider, discuss, and address issues of race,

racism, and racial inequities within their reforms. Specifically, this approach serves as our guiding lens to “illuminate and draw attention to the hidden assumptions or policy silences” within efforts to improve postsecondary attainment. Attending to the five critical concerns, it is particularly important to analyze these educational reforms to tease out the differences between the rhetoric of attainment policies and how they are implemented in practice. In this way, we can see how states can identify specific groups experiencing disparities in attainment but not follow through by including explicit strategies to improve those highlighted groups in the plan itself. Additionally, we can better understand the type of discourse that surrounds college attainment plans, the framing of equity gaps, their causes, and the proposed solutions and interventions. Here, we center the third critical concern, which places attention on who benefits from the policy itself and critiques how resources and attention are distributed to improve degree attainment. This approach to policy analysis has been used to study various educational issues from school finance (Alemán, 2007), university diversity initiatives (Byrd, 2019), and stratification in community colleges (Chase et al., 2012). We build on earlier work using CPA to focus on how racial disparities for the Latinx community are discussed and addressed within these policy texts.

Through our theoretical approach, we bring awareness to the growing disparities in postsecondary attainment among Latinx communities and the role states have in addressing these equity gaps. As Dumas and Anyon (2006) remind us, policies are conceptualized, implemented, and practiced “upon a social terrain” that reinforces raced and classed contexts that lead to differential experiences and results (p. 151). Further, they argue that no matter how well-intended a policy might be or the potential for good to come from an educational reform, policies and plans crafted without regard to issues of race, class, and power tend to have “racially curious effects” that lead to a detrimental impact for minoritized communities (p. 155). It is this *racialized difference* that we are interested in, seeking to explore the discourse within state attainment plans to learn *how* racial inequities are discussed, *if* there are specific racial groups identified, and *how* solutions are articulated to mitigate attainment inequities (Felix & Trinidad, 2020). Without explicit discourse and attention placed on racial disparities in attainment, especially for the Latinx community, these plans will fail to achieve any of the goals espoused by policymakers. To this end, we combine our framework with critical discourse analysis, employing a discursive method to examine and gain a deeper understanding of these policy texts.

Methodology

With a focus on the racialized discourse of improving college attainment, we utilized critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1993) to examine the language, rhetoric, and ideology embedded within state-level plans. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) allows us to explore the language used in attainment plans and how race, racism, and racial disparities are highlighted or hidden in what is written and shared within documents related to improving state-level attainment. In particular, CDA helps us make transparent the “structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, and control as manifested in language” (Wodak, 1995, p. 204) used in policy texts. This kind of discursive analysis has been used to examine state-level reforms related to admissions (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2014),

diversity initiatives (Casellas Connors, 2022), college completion (Mansfield & Thachik, 2016), community college equity (Ching et al., 2020; Felix & Trinidad, 2020). Through this discursive method, we collected publicly available state-level attainment documents to better understand the underlying discourse related to improving attainment broadly and specifically for the Latinx community.

Procedures and Sampling Strategy

Currently, 46 states have developed a formal plan to improve postsecondary attainment completion (Lumina Foundation, 2022). Given our focus on illuminating the ways these policy efforts influence improved educational attainment for the Latinx community, the goal was to examine at least 20 of the 46 states with an attainment plan. To narrow the field, we sampled states based on two criteria. The first criterion focused on identifying the 10 states with the largest Latinx population based on U.S. Census data. This decision used an “information-oriented” sampling strategy (Flyvberg, 2006), where we “maximize the utility of information from small samples of cases” (p. 34). We were interested in exploring states with large populations under the assumption that they may provide a greater emphasis on the Latinx community in their attainment efforts given their large demographic size. The second criterion included the 10 states with the largest disparities in college attainment, which was calculated as the difference between the average attainment rate and that of the Latinx community in the state (see Table 1). To calculate these attainment equity gaps, we drew data from the U.S. Census S1501: Educational Attainment data set, specifically, the 2016 American Community Survey 5-year estimates, which provide a more accurate count than 1- or 3-year estimates. Within the S1501 data set, the Latinx data come from the “Hispanic or Latin Origin” category. This second criterion provided critical cases that helped us understand how states may use plans to not only improve attainment rates overall but specifically address known and glaring racial disparities. In total, our study included data from 18 states since two met both the Population and Disparity sampling criteria (Colorado and Illinois). Within those states, only 15 had formally enacted college attainment policies and publicly available information to assess progress on their efforts. California, the state with the largest Latinx population (15 million) did not have an attainment policy or plan, and neither did New York (4th largest Latinx population). Also, Nebraska, the state with the largest calculated Latinx equity gap (–30 percentage points) did not have a policy or plan in place. By examining states with the largest Latinx population as well as the largest Latinx equity gaps, we sought to develop shared characteristics across the sample, knowing that states had varying characteristics such as geographic location, political context, population size, postsecondary governance structures, and participation in attainment reform.

Data Collection

After identifying our sample, we began to collect data from the 15 states with active policies and plans to improve attainment. We strategically searched and collected all publicly available documents relevant to our study from legislative archives (e.g., Illinois General Assembly); state higher education agencies (e.g., Illinois Board of Higher Education); and coordinating boards, governor’s websites, and related intermediary organizations (e.g., Advance Illinois).

Table 1
Sampling States and Related Attainment Information

State	Sampling criteria	State attainment rate	Latinx attainment rate	Attainment plan	Goal (%)	Goal year	Latinx-state attainment equity gap
Arizona	Population	37.7	19	Yes	60	2030	-18.7
California	Population	41.4	18.3	No	N/A	N/A	-23.1
Colorado*	Both	49.7	22.2	Yes	66	2025	-27.5
Connecticut	Disparity	48.8	23.1	Yes	70	2025	-25.7
Florida	Population	39.9	34.2	Yes	55	2025	-5.7
Georgia	Population	40	20.8	Yes	60	2025	-19.2
Idaho	Disparity	38.6	12.7	Yes	60	2020	-25.9
Illinois*	Both	45	20.4	Yes	60	2025	-24.6
Kansas	Disparity	43.7	18.6	Yes	60	2020	-25.1
Massachusetts	Disparity	53.2	24.6	Yes	60	2020	-28.6
Minnesota	Disparity	50	23	Yes	70	2025	-27
Nebraska	Disparity	45.2	15.2	No	N/A	N/A	-30
New Jersey	Population	48.2	24.4	Yes	65	2025	-23.8
New Mexico	Population	35.6	23.2	Yes	66	2030	-12.4
New York	Population	47.3	26.6	No	N/A	N/A	-20.7
Rhode Island	Disparity	44.8	20	Yes	60	2025	-24.8
Texas	Population	37.2	19.7	Yes	60	2030	-17.5
Utah	Disparity	43.5	18.2	Yes	66	2025	-25.3

Note. States with asterisk meet both sampling criteria. Sources: S1501, U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 (5-year estimates) American Community Survey; 2019 Statistical Portraits, Hispanic Trends Project, Pew Research Center.

Through this process, we prioritized legislative texts that established state-level policies, formal state attainment plans that articulated the goals to improve rates, related press releases, and progress reports that shared updates over time. This study did not require institutional review board approval from our home institution. All documents were collected between fall 2019 and spring 2020. In total, we collected 120 unique documents across the states in the sample, not including websites and other online materials accessed.

We organized our data by state and then by three document types: legislative texts (LT), attainment plans (AP), and press releases and progress reports (PR). For example, the Illinois Board formally adopted their policy known as the “Illinois Public Agenda for College and Career Success” in 2008 (LT), then described their specific attainment plan in 2009 (AP), and since then Illinois has released annual updates known as “Data Points” and a 10-year reflection titled “the State We’re In” (PR). Within this context, we see attainment plans as the focal point since they are standalone documents that outline the priorities, strategies, and processes in which states move forward to achieve their attainment policy goals. Attainment plans provide the opportunity to understand the underlying motivations for increasing the share of adults with a credential as well as understanding the mechanisms that drive improvement in educational attainment.

Analytic Strategy

Our data analysis proceeded in three stages. First, we developed an analytic tool to help us evaluate the state-level attainment documents collected. Recent research (Felix & Castro, 2018; Jones & Berger, 2019) interested in examining language and discourse within policy texts has employed theory-driven analytic protocols to standardize their process. These protocols allow researchers to align their analytic approach with the theoretical perspective grounding the study, keeping a constant spotlight on racialized discourse across hundreds of documents to be reviewed.

Guided by critical policy analysis, our protocol focused on interrogating the racial discourse of attainment plans and the ways that Latinx attainment disparity is framed as a problem of the individual or a responsibility of the state. Specifically, we embedded critical concerns of CPA into our analysis, such as examining the difference between policy rhetoric and practice by interrogating the ambitious goals of attainment and what states actually included as change efforts in their plans. One example protocol question was, “Beyond description of equity gaps, does the plan articulate specific approaches or strategies to address racial disparities in attainment for the Latinx community?” Through it, we noted the ways that states heavily identified and discussed Latinx disparities but did not match this focus when describing mechanisms and strategies to actually improve attainment. To ensure consistency in our approach, we applied the protocol to Kentucky, a state attainment plan not included in our sample. During this process, we debriefed our analysis, discussed discrepancies, and found that our interpretations were sufficiently aligned and informed by our theoretical framework. We used this interrater process to revise categories, improve questions, and developed an improved protocol. Our final protocol focused on four areas: descriptive state-level information, structural elements, racial discourse, and feasibility of plan (see Table 2).

Our second stage focused on examining all the state attainment plans in our sample. With a finalized protocol, together we reviewed the attainment documents for one case. We then memoed our emerging insights, initial reactions, and recorded any other pertinent notes. From there, we examined three cases simultaneously and then shared our individual analyses of the documents. After the second wave of review, we compared our use of the protocol and analytic process. After these steps to ensure standardization between us, we divided the remaining cases and independently examined the states we were assigned. The final stage encompassed a review of all states in the sample, where we examined analytic themes within individual cases and across all cases. This led us to create a “cross-case analysis” table that allowed us to compare the uniqueness and

Table 2
State Attainment Plan Protocol Elements

Focal areas	Example protocol questions
State-level information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the state's attainment goal and achievement year? • Who is the coordinating body responsible for the attainment plan?
Structural elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the imperative for improving educational attainment in the state? • Do they have strategic goals to achieve their plan?
Racial discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beyond description of equity gaps, does the plan articulate specific approaches or strategies to address racial disparities in attainment for the Latinx community? • How does the state discuss its role in mitigating attainment disparities for the Latinx community? For example, does the state seem to take responsibility for the current conditions of their educational attainment?
Plan feasibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on your review of the entire plan, would you say there is an overall, intentional, statewide approach/strategy for improving college completion and mitigating racial disparities? • Are there dashboards or progress reports to see completion progress?

similarities in our sample (see Appendix). From that comparison, we built and refined categories that helped us synthesize our analysis into findings that described how attainment plans address Latinx disparities within their state.

Results

We present three themes that emerged from our analysis process. We begin by describing the way postsecondary attainment initiatives take an “attainment for all” approach with an explicit economic imperative underlying their rationale for improvement. We then highlight the discourse within these plans and how analyzed documents frame inequity in varying ways, the most prevalent being race-evasive discourse. Our final theme emphasizes the *Brown Paradox* (Contreras, 2011), showing how racial disparities for the Latinx community are largely ignored in state attainment plans although their inequities are glaring and persistent.

An Economic Imperative Prompting Attainment for All

As we analyzed documents, it was evident that attainment plans were crafted with a priority on workforce and economic development. Many states began their attainment plans by discussing how these initiatives were a response to the recent recession, slowing economies, and growing (inter)national competition. States developed these plans to make sure that their respective workforce would have the necessary training, skills, and qualifications for the labor market in 2020 and beyond. Governor Ducey described how the state's formal attainment initiative, Achieve60AZ, would be a benefit to the state and its economy:

Achieve60AZ [recognizes] the need for many more Arizonans to be prepared with the knowledge and skills they need to secure fulfilling jobs. Not only will this raise the standard of living for many individuals, it will attract more businesses to our great state and keep companies here thriving (Achieve60AZ, 2019).

This excerpt showcases the prevalent philosophy underlying state-level goals and the strategies included in subsequent attainment plans. Arizona continued this economic imperative by explicitly discussing and visualizing the gains that the state could benefit by increasing attainment: “These gains equate to \$660,000 per college graduate, an excellent return on investment, as most reforms designed to increase attainment will likely cost significantly less” (College Attainment and

the Economy, 2019). The Illinois attainment plan shared a similar economic influence: “It's not an overstatement to say that the economic success of our state, and our citizens, hinges on our progress toward this educational vision.” Arizona and Illinois were two of seven states in the study that developed attainment plans driven by economic concerns.

The other states were characterized as balancing “economic and social” benefits for residents and industry. States that articulated economic and social benefits for improving attainment included Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Texas. Introducing *Colorado Rises*, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (2017) wrote:

If the state is to prepare its students for changing workforce demands while maintaining its high quality of life and vibrant economy, it must invest more in the educational attainment of all of its citizens. Failure to do so will result in entire segments of our population being left behind, increased social costs and reduced fiscal competitiveness.

Attainment plans like the one above included language that centered on residents of the state by emphasizing the “high quality of life” and “social costs” impacted by lacking a degree or credential. Similarly, Massachusetts articulated a balance between social and economic rationales stating, “the Commonwealth's vision is to produce the best-educated citizenry and workforce in the nation; to compete effectively for jobs and sustain our rich civic life and cultural landscape” (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2014). Texas exemplifies this attainment ideology driving economic and social benefits, in the preamble to their “60 × 30” attainment effort they shared that “Higher education improves the lives of Texans” and that increasing attainment was about “education as civic-mindedness and lifelong learning.” They noted that workforce development is “one of many reasons to support expanding access and completion of higher education” (Texas Higher Education Coordination Board [THECB], 2015).

Attainment for All

In addition to the heavy emphasis on economic incentives, most states articulated plans and strategic goals for increasing attainment in the aggregate, for “all residents.” Although each state listed several disparities in attainment based on race, socioeconomic status, and geographic location, there was limited discussion around attainment goals for specific communities needing additional support to access and then complete postsecondary education. For

example, one state shared, “[We] will be stronger by ensuring that many more *individuals* complete a postsecondary degree or credential, and that they graduate with the skills and abilities to be productive, engaged *citizens*.” Another added, “Too few *students* [in the state] are completing their education in a timely manner, if at all. Many are not prepared for college-level work when they arrive and are less likely [to] complete.” In response, state strategies included “ramp[ing] up advising and counseling services” or “recruit[ing] a more diverse teaching force [to] make higher education more inviting to the full range of potential undergraduate students.” These state policy goals, attainment plans, and the strategies within them all dodged explicit language, tending to use terms like “residents,” “students,” or “credential earners” rather than developing strategic goals that address and lift the rates for groups facing the greatest barriers to postsecondary attainment, such as the Latinx community. An “Attainment for All” approach benefits the individual state and the economy but ignores the longstanding gaps in college attainment for racially minoritized communities.

The Discursive Framing of Inequity in College Attainment

We identified unique patterns of discourse related to how state-level plans identified inequity and racial disparities in educational attainment. Across the plans examined, we categorized discourse into three areas: deficit-based, race-evasive, and race-conscious. Each discursive framing used language to describe the causes of racial disparities in attainment as well as the potential interventions to address these inequities.

Deficit-based discourse included blaming specific groups for the inequities faced or comparing high-performing groups with other communities. For example, one state shared:

Ample opportunity to postsecondary education has not produced equal rates of participation. *Low-income students do not go to college* at the same rate as more financially advantaged students, *neither do underrepresented minority students*, students from rural regions, or non-traditional adult students. [emphasis added]

This excerpt shows how a state may place the blame on individual students for the level of achievement, since the state has provided “ample opportunity” for success in higher education, but students—low income, racially minoritized, rural, and adult reentry—have not produced equitable outcomes. The quote also illustrates how states compare “success” between groups and tend to blame low-income or racially minoritized communities for the inequitable rates produced without acknowledging the sociocultural differences in resources and experiences faced by “low-income” and “financially advantaged” students. Other states included a similar deficit-oriented framing when discussing inequities in the rates of postsecondary attainment:

Students from underrepresented groups such as students of color and first-generation students, *may acquire less college knowledge as compared to peers*. Students who belong to communities that *do not historically have a college-going culture or do not have family members or role models* who have graduated from college, often do not gain access to meaningful college planning and preparation. [emphasis added]

Inherent in attainment plans is the improvement of adults with high-quality certificates and degrees in states. What we have identified are ways that some states frame inequities experienced

as a direct result of the communities themselves, their value for education, college-going culture, and role models or lack thereof. Our analysis uncovered both deficit-based language as well as deficit-based ideologies on what causes inequities and the role of the state in increasing college completion for specific communities facing significant gaps in attainment.

Race-evasive discourse was the second framing pattern within state-level attainment plans, in which states used veiled language to discuss and describe the disparities faced by racially minoritized communities. We chose to use the term “race-evasive” to describe the reluctance in state policymaking, and broader society, to discuss issues of race and ways to eradicate racial inequity in attainment. This phrase also moves away from ableist terms such as “mute” or “blind,” which are real disabilities in society (Annamma et al., 2017). Race-evasiveness in the context of state policies is the belief that race (structural racism) does not matter or should not be considered as a factor when thinking of causes of inequity in educational attainment (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). The use of umbrella terms such as “diverse students,” “underrepresented students,” “minorities,” and “those facing equity gaps” perpetuated this race-evasive approach. For example, one state shared, “To make meaningful progress toward the goal, the state must improve completion rates—particularly for historically underserved students—at [State’s] public colleges and universities.” In their plan, they included figures and tables that visualized the racial disparities in educational attainment, but the accompanying language focused on supporting “historically underserved” populations. This was mirrored in another state attainment plan displaying graphs that showed the “gaps” in graduation for “minority students.” Beyond the visualization, there were no words to provide context, additional information, or a description of what “minority” referred to in this context. This second discursive framing points to the erasure of racial disparities and the ways that attainment plans presented data based on race, but evaded discussion around the causes of inequity or the role of the state in closing them.

Race-conscious discourse was the third pattern, but the least observed in our analysis. Only a few states such as Arizona, Colorado, Minnesota, Massachusetts, and Texas used explicit language to describe and discuss racial disparities. These states were also ones to frame inequity using phrases such as “equity gaps” and “racial inequality.” Colorado provided an example of a state that identified racial disparities as well as acknowledged the state’s role in mitigating them:

Almost one-third of Colorado’s adult population lacks education of any type after high school. Moreover, attainment levels are not equal: Only 29 percent of Hispanics, our fastest-growing population, and 39 percent of African Americans have a certificate or degree, as compared to 64 percent for the white majority ... [We] have made erasing these equity gaps a top priority.

Similarly, Minnesota’s attainment plan described its need to “identify, tailor, and implement effective strategies to increase postsecondary enrollment, retention and completion rates for communities of color.” They added: “the next 10 years provides a critical opportunity to address these challenges early, ensuring that Minnesota remains a national education and economic leader” (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, p. 10). Of the states to use race-conscious language in their framing of postsecondary attainment, Colorado stood out as the only state to list “erasing equity gaps”

specifically for the Latinx community as one of their strategic priorities.

Highlighting the type of discourse and language used in attainment plans to discuss racial inequity was important; some states used deficit-language, others evaded the mention of race in trying to improve postsecondary attainment. Our final theme explores how state plans move from just describing racial disparities to creating explicit strategies and interventions to address them.

The Brown Paradox in the Aspirations of Attainment

Our final theme draws attention to the *Brown Paradox* in educational attainment. Contreras (2011) coined the term to highlight the contradiction between the dramatic increase in the Latinx population and the significant gap they experience in educational achievement (p. 2). In our analysis, we found a similar *Brown Paradox*, where state-level policies and attainment plans were crafted to improve attainment without acknowledging the magnitude of the Latinx community, either in population size or disparity gap. This is especially concerning as our study sample included 78% of the entire Latinx population in the United States as well as states with the largest gaps in attainment for this group. As we have described above, most plans sought to improve the share of degree earners for all residents without regard to racial disparities. Although some states did use race-conscious language to highlight glaring gaps in attainment for the Latinx community, which does not necessarily mean that their plans included strategies or interventions to mitigate the disparities described. States developed legislative goals and articulated plans that espouse lofty goals to be achieved in the next few years, with little to no attention placed on the racial disparities that will hinder any progress toward the goals of increased postsecondary attainment. Of the states examined, we interpreted two responses to the *Brown Paradox* within the context of this inquiry: empty rhetoric and promising plans.

Empty Rhetoric

This subtheme describes the ways that attainment plans identify and highlight the inequities for the Latinx community without addressing any barriers they specifically face when proposing solutions or interventions to improve rates. For example, Massachusetts posed a hypothetical in their plan: “Consider this: If African American and Latino/a adults possessed college degrees at the same rate as white adults (60%), the state would easily meet its need for more college graduates by 2025” (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2014, p. 9). Although the plan clearly identifies racial disparities, the subsequent pages in their plan do not list or discuss any specific mechanisms to improve postsecondary attainment for the Latinx community. Arizona included a heavy discussion of the gaps the Latinx community faces and the potential economic benefits to the state if their rates improved. As a state, Arizona has one of the largest Latinx communities and a sizable gap (–18.7%) between the state average attainment and the Latinx rate. In their documents, they shared, “Unless we enable more Latinos to graduate high school, enroll in postsecondary certificate or degree programs and complete those programs, Arizona will struggle to raise its overall attainment rate to a competitive level” (Achieve60AZ, 2019, p. 3). This plan continues to list “the importance of increasing Latino attainment” for the sake of the prosperity of the state, which will benefit all Arizonans.

As with Massachusetts, Arizona’s Achieve60AZ specifically acknowledges the minoritized populations and the gaps they face in their plan but does not then utilize this knowledge to create any specific strategies for these populations.

A Glimmer of Hope

It is important to note that there were a few examples of states that did discuss and include explicit goals and strategies to address disparities facing Latinx students. The closest approximations of a race-conscious attainment plan where the inequities identified were aligned with the proposed solutions came from Colorado and Texas. For example, Colorado’s statewide attainment rate stands at 49.7%, whereas the Latinx community is at 22%, nearly a 28-percentage point gap between the two (Table 1). In their attainment plan, *Colorado Rises*, they sought to increase attainment rates to 66% for all groups by 2025. One of their four strategic priorities included “eras[ing] equity gaps for the largest and fastest growing ethnic group, Hispanic/Latino,” which also had “the lowest average educational attainment and the lowest college enrollment rate of any ethnic group in the state” (p. 3). Their attainment plan described strategies such as “improv[ing] college outreach to Hispanic communities” or providing more support in 2-year colleges to “address transfer barriers for Latino students” to help move the community from an attainment rate of 29% in 2017 to 60% in 2025 (p. 3). They reaffirmed this priority by stating that the Colorado Commission for Higher Education “have made erasing these equity gaps—including for our fast-growing Hispanic population—a top priority” (Colorado Commission on Higher Education, 2017, p. 16). Texas was the only state to provide “goals and benchmarks” specifically for the Latinx community to help achieve their overall goal of improving attainment to 60% by 2030. They noted that Latinx attainment needed to increase by 138,000 in 2020, 198,000 in 2025, and 285,000 in 2030 and acknowledged that these targets “will help increase parity across completers for groups that have traditionally been underrepresented” in the state (THECB, 2015, p. 19). As noted in their 60 × 30 plan, “Without bold action” that addresses the “Hispanic community, Texas faces a future of diminished incomes, opportunities, and resources” (p. v). These two states displayed bold action by not only identifying inequities for the Latinx community but also using race-conscious language in their discourse and creating specific strategies to improve attainment and reach their target goals.

Discussion and Implications

As policymakers continue to enact state-level attainment policies and plans, we interrogated the language and discourse embedded in these reforms. Using critical policy analysis, we examined the approach of 15 states to identify, address, and improve the postsecondary educational attainment of their residents. In particular, we focused on the ways the Latinx community in these states was discussed and included given their population size and the well-documented disparities faced in attainment. This study advances our understanding of postsecondary attainment policies and the specific ways that plans attempt, if at all, to address racial disparities, especially for the Latinx community. Our findings highlighted three critical aspects to improving postsecondary attainment and the racial disparities within them: the imperative behind improving attainment

(primarily economic), the language used to discuss inequities faced by the Latinx community (primarily race-evasive), and the type of strategies included to improve Latinx rates within these states.

Who Benefits From These State-Level Attainment Plans?

After conducting our analysis, we asked ourselves: who do these attainment plans benefit? Reading through the pages of these plans, the discourse for improved postsecondary credentialing focused squarely on the economic benefits to the state. Our findings highlighted language that described increasing attainment as a lever for strengthening the state workforce and economic growth. Our study aligns with recent work describing how policymakers use educational reform for economic interests (Gándara & Hearn, 2019; Mansfield & Thachik, 2016). We found that most attainment plans were undergirded by an economic imperative; a few included economic and social/individual benefits. This approach tends to think of improving educational attainment in the aggregate, focusing on the aggregate share of adults with additional credentials produced. Recent research (Ching et al., 2020) finds that policies working to increase “success for all” tend to take a “rising tide, lifts all boats” approach and fail to recognize underlying systemic inequities such as unequal school funding, social stratification, or institutional racism (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). We note how most of the strategies to improve postsecondary attainment are race-evasive and will not explicitly address the historic and current inequities experienced by communities of color across the United States.

As we can glean from this study, there has been a shift in the ways states and intermediary organizations prioritize race-conscious strategies in their attainment efforts. Much of this is spurred by the racial strife brought to the forefront since summer 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic ensuing as well as increased calls for racial justice across social institutions. For example, the state of Indiana in its most recent attainment report began with an introduction from the Commissioner of Higher Education that describe the gains for “Black and Latino students” (p. 2). Looking at previous documents, this racial focus or data disaggregation by racial groups was not present. Even with that progress in racial discourse, however, the state report further acknowledges that at this current rate it would still take years to completely reduce the gaps in attainment. What this specific state exemplifies in the larger context is the paradox between being able to identify racial disparities in attainment, but not being able to develop specific mechanisms that are relevant and responsive to Black and Latinx communities. Understanding the divide between developing aspirations of attainment and achieving equitable attainment highlights some of the reasons that these plans have not advanced their efforts as much as they would have liked, and why some plans are still lacking race-conscious approaches.

Lacking Race-Conscious Discourse, Can Attainment Plans Address Racial Disparities?

Taking a critical approach to interpreting the aims and intent of attainment plans, we uncovered the inability of these efforts to discuss race, identify racial disparities, or appropriately propose strategies to improve attainment rates for communities of color. This is especially true for the largely omitted Latinx community, which faces the greatest levels of inequity when it comes to attainment across the nation and within most individual states. Our work finds

that what a plan *aspires* to achieve and the *actual* strategies, resources, and efforts developed are misaligned. As Mansfield and Thachik (2016) described in their work, attainment policies and plans seeking to close “gaps” fail to do so because policymakers “fall short of addressing systemic inequities” (p. 1) that create and perpetuate racial disparities.

Attainment plans hoping to improve the share of residents with postsecondary degrees miss the mark when they do not acknowledge the disparities within communities of color or, when they do discuss disparities, but fall short of taking action on the highlighted inequities in educational attainment. This mirrors recent work by Jones and Berger (2019) highlighting how states take “preliminary steps in acknowledging the existence of racial equity gaps” but are unable to propose concrete goals, benchmarks, or strategies to close the disparities (p. 3). In trying to address disparities based on race, Carter et al. (2017) shared that policymakers “can’t address what they can’t see” and must begin to acknowledge the historical nature of inequity, the role of race and racism, and the need to “talk about and act” on racial disparities (p. 207). Race-evasive attainment initiatives may have detrimental effects when they do not acknowledge sociocultural and historical dynamics that hinder specific communities from accessing and completing postsecondary education (Felix & Trinidad, 2020). As these plans move forward, it is necessary for states to acknowledge racial disparities in attainment and create specific strategies to tackle the barriers faced by specific communities in improving their share of postsecondary degree earners. In this way, policymakers become attuned to some of the concerns underlying critical policy analysis, such as being conscious of policy formulation and its development (Burke & Minassians, 2004), as well as an intentional investigation into the distribution of power, resources, and attention within the attainment initiatives (Anyon, 1980; Levinson et al., 2009) that may benefit some residents with increased rates of postsecondary education but not others like communities of color that faced added barriers to participation and success.

What Can Be Learned From This Analysis to Mitigate Racial Gaps in Attainment?

The call for increased attainment has been set to 60% across all adults in the United States. For some racial groups, White and Asian,² the drive for improvement may not be too unrealistic. For communities of color that face greater barriers, the goal of 60% is unattainable without addressing systemic issues facing these communities. State policymakers and system leaders must include a specific and targeted focus on communities of color. As Gándara and Hearn (2019) note, there is limited “systemic research evidence” on attainment policies and their ability to improve rates in the aggregate and even less knowledge on the impact on racial/ethnic communities (p. 27). While states continue to enact and implement policy initiatives, it is necessary to discuss what seems to work and might be effective in improving attainment.

Some states, such as Colorado, Texas, and Massachusetts, provide some promising practices to support racially minoritized

² U.S. Census data used by Lumina, Ed Trust, and other national organizations do not include disaggregated data for the Asian category, so groups such as South East Asian or Pacific Islander who experiences greater barriers to educational attainment are grouped into this higher rate.

groups within their attainment initiatives. Colorado's attainment plan was the only one to craft a strategic priority that focused on erasing equity gaps in the state. The document explicitly outlined the need to address the Latinx population, as they are the largest group in the state and face the lowest attainment rate. Texas acknowledged the need to address the number of Latinx student completers in the state and clearly outlined the number of additional certificates and degrees required by 2020, 2025, and 2030 to achieve their attainment goal. Similarly, Massachusetts used race-conscious language throughout their attainment plan to describe the urgency and priority of supporting Black and Latinx adults in achieving a college degree. Without attention to racial disparities and the mechanisms that can mitigate them, these attainment plans will not achieve their intent of improving attainment.

Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Research

Findings from our work revealed the lack of discussion around racial disparities, the inability to identify the glaring gaps facing communities of color, and the ways that most strategies seeking to improve attainment focus on all students, rendering the barriers and needs of racial groups invisible. As attainment target dates near and pass for many of these state-level plans, we draw recommendations from our work to help shift existing policies and strategies to be more intentional and explicit in addressing racial disparities with the Latinx community in mind. Therefore, the following recommendations are provided to aid state-level policymakers who develop legislation as well as those overseeing the implementation of attainment plans to include concrete initiatives that can reduce Latinx attainment gaps.

Explicitly Name Racial Equity Gaps in Attainment and Discuss the State- and System-Level Barriers That Maintain These Disparities

The attainment plans that were reviewed for this project highlight a confusing narrative that describes the lack of attainment by specific racial groups but is not explicit in how state-specific efforts, and even systemic-level barriers, impact students within their educational systems. States like Minnesota started this necessary work by acknowledging "the populations growing the fastest have historically not been adequately served within Minnesota's educational system" (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2016, p. 2). We recommend that states like Minnesota continue this acknowledgment and also further the discussion of how the state and system have been complicit in arriving at the reality today, in which not all students are adequately served.

Develop Attainment Priorities That Identify Racial/Ethnic Communities and Propose Interventions That Are Race-Specific and Not Generalized

While the development of state attainment plans encourages expanding college success, there needs to be a motivated effort to identify racial equity gaps and propose solutions that are specific to race instead of generalizing the educational experience. Colorado is one such state that is attempting to do this. Its plan acknowledged that attainment for the Latinx community is at 22% and then described specific efforts such as "improving outreach to Hispanic

communities" and providing more support at the community college level to "address transfer barriers for Hispanic/Latino students" (Colorado Commission on Higher Education, 2017). The intentional acknowledgment of the specific rate for Latinx students supported by measurable metrics is something that we hope is seen emulated by more state policymakers.

Clear Goal Setting With Targets and Milestones That Track and Highlight Attainment Progress for Racial/Ethnic Groups

Third, states must be explicit in their efforts to highlight specific goals for different populations that will further aid in achieving the proposed attainment rate. In Texas' 60 × 30 plan, they included "goals and benchmarks" specifically for Latinx students. This plan noted that Texas needs to increase the number of Latinx students completing their education by 138,000 in 2020, 198,000 in 2025, and 285,000 by 2030. Adoption of similar metrics will be instrumental in plans being able to reach their goals for attainment.

Establish Accountability and Reporting Mechanisms to Keep the Public Informed of the State-Level Progress in Attainment

Fourth, we ask that actors tasked with creating these plans make conscious decisions around accountability and reporting mechanisms to share plan progress and keep the public informed of the changes in postsecondary attainment rates. This study and these recommendations can be instrumental for the individuals who are tasked with creating daunting state attainment plans to impact not only entire systems but all of the individuals within the state. As these efforts continue being developed and implemented by states, we hope to see these recommendations utilized to create specific, meaningful, and tangible plans that truly change the experience for students in the United States.

Conduct Qualitative Research With State Leaders Involved in the Development of Attainment Plans

Last, state agencies have started to prioritize racial equity in their attainment efforts, but it would be helpful for future research to interview individual leaders who have been at the helm of these attainment efforts across different states to see how their specific state agenda has evolved over time as a result of racial equity being more palatable post-2020 racial reckoning (McCambly & Colyvas, 2022). Utilizing qualitative approaches would provide a perspective into the everyday realities of state-level leaders trying to advance these more equitable agendas for improved attainment. The opportunity to share strengths and struggles from the ground may provide insight into how to better navigate these important efforts.

Conclusion

Examining over a third of the nation's efforts to improve postsecondary attainment rates, this study provides insight into the state-level discourse of policies and plans attempting to increase the share of working adults with a degree. In particular, this study looked at how the Latinx population is acknowledged and addressed in these state policy goals for increasing postsecondary attainment. We find a lack of race-consciousness, where states fail to acknowledge

prevalent racial disparities as well as offer strategies that seek to increase attainment rates overall, without the inclusion of interventions that can close gaps for racial/ethnic groups. As policymakers, postsecondary systems, and institutional leaders move forward with improving attainment it is necessary to acknowledge racial disparities and take action through explicit strategies, if any aspirations of attainment are to be realized. These attainment policies become empty words when they fail to recognize the historic and current barriers that racially minoritized students face in postsecondary education, especially within the Latinx community.

References

- About Complete College America. (2022). *Building a new higher education system*. Retrieved December 12, 2022, from <https://completecollege.org/about-us/>
- Achieve60AZ. (2019). *State of attainment report*. <https://achieve60az.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Achieve60AZ-State-of-Attainment-Report-2019.pdf>
- Alemán, E., Jr. (2007). Situating Texas school finance policy in a CRT framework: How “substantially equal” yields racial inequity. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(5), 525–558. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X07303276>
- Anderson, G. M. (2012). Equity and critical policy analysis in higher education: A bridge still too far. *The Review of Higher Education*, 36(1), 133–142. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2012.0051>
- Annamma, S. A., Jackson, D. D., & Morrison, D. (2017). Conceptualizing color-evasiveness: Using dis/ability critical race theory to expand a color-blind racial ideology in education and society. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 20(2), 147–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2016.1248837>
- Anyon, J. (1980). Social class and the hidden curriculum of work. *Journal of Education*, 162(1), 67–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002205748016200106>
- Bacchi, C. (2000). Policy as discourse: What does it mean? Where does it get us? *Discourse*, 21(1), 45–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300050005493>
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2009). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Brandon, K. (2009). *Investing in education: The American graduation initiative*. Retrieved March 21, 2019, from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/07/14/investing-education-american-graduation-initiative>
- Burke, J. C., & Minassians, H. P. (2004). Implications of state performance indicators for community college assessment. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2004(126), 53–64. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.154>
- Byrd, D. (2019). The diversity distraction: A critical comparative analysis of discourse in higher education scholarship. *The Review of Higher Education*, 42(5), 135–172. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2019.0048>
- Carter, P. L., Skiba, R., Arredondo, M. I., & Pollock, M. (2017). You can't fix what you don't look at. *Urban Education*, 52(2), 207–235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916660350>
- Casellas Connors, I. C. (2022). Examining racial discourse in equity reports: Florida's public Hispanic serving institutions. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 30(29). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.30.5955>
- Chase, M. M., Dowd, A. C., Pazich, L. B., & Bensimon, E. M. (2012). Transfer equity for “minoritized” students: A critical policy analysis of seven states. *Educational Policy*, 28(5), 669–717. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904812468227>
- Ching, C. D., Felix, E. R., Fernandez Castro, M., & Trinidad, A. (2020). Achieving racial equity from the bottom-up? The student equity policy in the California community colleges. *Educational Policy*, 34(6), 1–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904818802092>
- College Attainment and the Economy. (2019). *Doubling arizona's economic growth. The potential fiscal and social gains from increasing postsecondary attainment*. College Success Arizona. <https://educationforwaridarizona.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Doubling-Arizonas-Economic-Growth-No-Large-Photos.pdf>
- Colorado Commission on Higher Education. (2017). *Colorado rises advancing education and talent development*. Retrieved March 2019, from <https://highered.colorado.gov/Publications/CDHE-Master-Plan-2017.pdf>
- Complete College America. (2019). *About*. Retrieved September 20, 2019, from <https://completecollege.org/about/>
- Contreras, F. (2011). *Achieving equity for Latino students: Expanding the pathway to higher education through public policy (Multicultural education series)*. Teachers College Press.
- Diem, S., Young, M. D., Welton, A. D., Mansfield, K. C., & Lee, P. (2014). The intellectual landscape of Critical Policy Analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(9), 1068–1090. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.916007>
- Dowd, A. C., & Bensimon, E. M. (2015). *Engaging the race question: Accountability and equity in U.S. higher education*. Teachers College Press.
- Dumas, M. J., & Anyon, J. (2006). Toward a critical approach to education policy implementation. In M. I. Honig (Ed.), *New directions in education policy implementation: Confronting complexity* (pp. 149–186). State University of New York Press.
- Duncan-Andrade, J., & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: The promises of moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. Peter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.3726/b12771>
- Fairclough, N. (1993). Critical discourse analysis and the marketization of public discourse: The universities. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 133–168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002002>
- Felix, E. R., & Castro, M. F. (2018). Planning as strategy for improving Black and Latinx student equity: Lessons from nine community colleges. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 26(56), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.26.3223>
- Felix, E. R., & Trinidad, A. (2020). The decentralization of race: Tracing the dilution of racial equity in educational policy. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 33(4), 465–490. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1681538>
- Flyvberg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>
- Future Ready Iowa. (n.d.). *FAQ*. Retrieved October 2019, from <https://www.futurereadyiowa.gov/faq>
- Gándara, D., & Hearn, C. J. (2019). College completion, the Texas way: An examination of the development of college completion policy in a distinctive political culture. *Teachers College Record*, 121(1), 1–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811912100104>
- Gándara, P. (2015). With the future on the line: Why studying Latino education is so urgent. *American Journal of Education*, 121(3), 451–463. <https://doi.org/10.1086/680411>
- Gillborn, D. (2005). Education policy as an act of white supremacy: Whiteness, critical race theory and education reform. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(4), 485–505. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930500132346>
- Haddad, N. (2021). Philanthropic foundations and higher education: The politics of intermediary organizations. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 92(6), 897–926. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2021.1888635>
- Jones, T., & Berger, K. (2019). *Aiming for equity*. Retrieved March 21, 2019, from <https://edtrust.org/resource/aiming-for-equity/>
- Levinson, B. A. U., Sutton, M., & Winstead, T. (2009). Education policy as a practice of power: Theoretical tools, ethnographic methods, democratic options. *Educational Policy*, 23(6), 767–795. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904808320676>
- Lukes, S. (2021). *Power: A radical view*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Lumina Foundation. (2010). *A stronger nation through higher education: How and why Americans must meet a big goal for college attainment*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED512538.pdf>

Lumina Foundation. (2017). *Lumina foundation strategic plan for 2017–2020*. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/strategic-plan-2017-to-2020-apr17.pdf>

Lumina Foundation. (2022). *A stronger nation: learning beyond high school builds American talent*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=source%3A%22lumina%22&ff1=subEducational+Attainment&id=ED598334>

Mansfield, K. C., & Thachik, S. L. (2016). A critical policy analysis of Texas' Closing the Gaps 2015. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 24(3), 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.24.1991>

Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. (2014). *Degrees of urgency: Why Massachusetts needs more college graduates*. Retrieved March 2019, from <https://www.mass.edu/visionproject/degreesofurgency.asp>

McCambly, H., & Colyvas, J. A. (2022). Dismantling or disguising racialization?: Defining racialized change work in postsecondary education. *Proceedings-Academy of Management*, 2022(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMBPP.2022.17659abstract>

Minnesota Office of Higher Education. (2016, May) *Educating for the future baseline Estimates of Minnesota's educational attainment*. Retrieved February 2019, from <https://www.ohe.state.mn.us/pdf/EducatingForTheFuture.pdf>

National Archives and Records Administration. (2009). *Investing in education: The American graduation initiative*. Retrieved December 12, 2022, from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/07/14/investing-education-american-graduation-initiative>

Pew Research Center. (2016). *U.S. Latino population growth and dispersion has slowed since the onset of the great recession*. <https://www.pewhispanic.org/2016/09/08/latino-population-growth-and-dispersion-has-slowed-since-the-onset-of-the-great-recession/>

Teranishi, R. T., & Bezbatchenko, W. B. (2015). A critical examination of the college completion agenda: Advancing equity in higher education. In A. M. Martinez, B. Pusser, & E. M. Bensimon (Ed.), *Critical approaches to the study of higher education: A practical introduction* (pp. 241–256). Johns Hopkins University Press Texas Higher Education Coordination Board. <http://reportcenter.theccb.state.tx.us/agency-publication/miscellaneous/60x30tx-strategic-plan-for-higher-education/>

Texas Higher Education Coordination Board. (2015). *60x30*. Retrieved 2019, from <http://reportcenter.theccb.state.tx.us/agency-publication/miscellaneous/60x30tx-strategic-plan-for-higher-education/>

U.S. Census Bureau. (2019). *2017 American Community Survey 5-year estimates*. <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/searchresults.xhtml?refresh=t>

U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). *Quick facts: Texas*. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/TX>

Winkle-Wagner, R., Sule, V. T., & Maramba, D. C. (2014). When race disappears: College admissions policy discourse in the state of Texas. *Educational Policy*, 28(4), 516–546. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904812465114>

Wodak, R. (1995). Critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis. In J. Zienkowski, J. Östman, & J. Verschueren (Eds.), *Handbook of pragmatics* (pp. 204–210). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Young, M. D., & Diem, S. (2017). *Critical approaches to education policy analysis: Moving beyond tradition*. International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-39643-9>

Appendix

Cross-Case Analysis of State-Level Attainment Plans

State	Structural elements			Racial discourse			Feasibility		
	Completion imperative	Strategic goals included?	Status of plan since adoption	Does their plan include racial discourse?	Do strategies and goals include racial discourse?	Is the Latinx community prioritized?	Is the plan feasible to achieve?	Can the plan address racial disparities?	Can attainment goal progress be tracked?
Arizona	Primarily economic	Yes	Living	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
California*									
Colorado	Economic and social	Yes	Living	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Connecticut	Economic and social	Yes	Static	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Florida	Primarily economic	No	Static	No	No	No	No	No	No
Georgia	Primarily economic	No	Static	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Idaho	Economic and social	Yes	Static	No	No	No	No	No	No
Illinois	Primarily economic	Yes	Living	No	No	No	Yes	Unclear	No
Kansas	Economic and social	Yes	Living	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Massachusetts	Primarily economic	Yes	Living	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Minnesota	Economic and social	Yes	Living	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	No
Nebraska*									
New Jersey	Economic and social	Yes	Living	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Unclear	No
New Mexico	Primarily economic	No	Static	No	No	No	No	No	No
New York*									
Rhode Island	Primarily economic	Yes	Living	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Texas	Economic and social	Yes	Living	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes
Utah	Economic and social	Yes	Living	Yes	No	No	No	No	No

Note. States with asterisk do not have an existing college attainment policy or plan.

Received October 29, 2021
 Revision received August 19, 2022
 Accepted November 18, 2022 ■

This document is copyrighted by the American Psychological Association or one of its allied publishers. This article is intended solely for the personal use of the individual user and is not to be disseminated broadly.