Coalition-Building Efforts and a Race-Conscious Postsecondary Agenda: Lessons from TIE States

Introduction

Lumina's Talent, Innovation, and Equity (TIE) initiative awards multi-year grants and technical assistance to states to promote awareness of racial attainment gaps in postsecondary education and work towards the reduction and elimination of those gaps (Lumina, 2017). Since 2017, the TIE initiative has provided four states – Tennessee, Colorado, Oregon, and Virginia – funding and resources to help increase attainment for students of color, mainly Black, Hispanic/ Latinx, and American Indian students. Through the TIE initiative, the Lumina Foundation hopes to incite change nationwide by placing racial equity at the forefront of postsecondary attainment goals.

In 2019, RFA conducted an evaluation of two TIE states – Tennessee and Colorado. Within the TIE initiative, states had the autonomy to define their approach to closing racial attainment gaps. While Tennessee and Colorado developed their own approach for advancing equity and closing racial attainment gaps, both states adopted three core strategies:
1. Data collection, awareness-building, and agenda-setting carried out by state higher education agencies,
2. Microgrants to institutions to engage campuses in addressing racial equity gaps, and
3. Identification of equity advocates and leaders of communities of color, and efforts to convene a statewide coalition.

Methodology Box. This report is based on research examining the implementation of the TIE initiative in Tennessee and Colorado conducted from date to date. The third in a series of reports, RFA's analysis draws from data collected from equity advocates, community leaders, and other stakeholders that partnered or engaged with state agencies of higher education in coalition-building efforts. RFA completed a thorough review of TIE-related documents from state higher education agencies, conducted interviews with coalition stakeholders, and observed two coalition meetings regarding the administration of the TIE grant.

Purpose of the Report

This report analyzes how state context shaped early coalition efforts carried out by state policymakers in Colorado and Tennessee, specifically the convening of equity leaders and advocates in the context of the TIE grant. In addition, it identifies lessons learned from the implementation of the TIE grant in Colorado and Tennessee, as well as opportunities for states to engage in coalition-building efforts to advance awareness of racial equity gaps, include diverse voices in decision-making, and integrate a racial equity lens in policy and practice. This report builds upon previous RFA reports, which explore the factors that affect the capacity of state higher education agencies to advance racial equity and examine the strategies that postsecondary institutions developed to reduce racial equity gaps in the context of the TIE grant.

- **Call out box to be designed**. New challenges arising from the recent COVID-19 crisis further constrain the ability of students of color to access and be retained in postsecondary education. Equity coalitions are needed now more than ever to work together with policymakers and

institutional leaders to consider the implications of the current crisis on racial equity, including the difficulties of accessing postsecondary education and the digital divide facing students of color. Lessons from this report can inform any current and future efforts.

Framework for Analysis: Race Equity Cycle

The following analysis is organized around three drivers behind efforts to place racial equity at the center of postsecondary policymaking and practice: awareness, inclusion, and integration. The framework is adapted from Equity in the Center's Race Equity Cycle[1] and is informed by Research for Action's examination of the Lumina Foundation's first TIE cohort – Colorado and Tennessee. Figure 1 depicts the Race Equity Cycle, as adapted by RFA.

Figure 1. Race Equity Cycle

The Cycle includes three separate but inter-related drivers:

1. **Awareness**. The awareness driver <u>defines</u> the problem and focuses on understanding the problem and its causes.
2. **Inclusion**. The inclusion driver <u>communicates</u> the problem to a wide range of stakeholders and welcomes them into conversations about <u>how to address the problem</u>.
3. **Integration**. The integration driver provides concrete <u>solutions</u> by incorporating a focus on racial equity in policy and practice.

Statewide coalitions focused on advancing racial equity in postsecondary education can make progress along some or all three drivers. While we analytically differentiate between the three drivers, in practice, they may overlap. Specifically, Colorado and Tennessee convened groups to increase awareness of racial equity gaps, and these groups were comprised of diverse voices. In this

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[1] Equity-in-the-Center (2019). *Woke to Work: Building a Race Equity Culture*. Retrieved from https://www.equityinthecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Equity-in-Center-Awake-Woke-Work-2019-final-1.pdf

way, coalition efforts in the context of the TIE grant had implications for both awareness and inclusion.

The following sections describe lessons learned from Colorado and Tennessee's approaches to coalition-building within the TIE grant and analyzes these strategies in relation to how they drove awareness, inclusion and integration of racial equity in policy and practice.

Lessons Learned from Coalition-Building Approaches

TIE grants required the participation and engagement of equity leaders and advocates. However, states agencies of higher education had latitude in how to organize that engagement. Sustained efforts by key stakeholders outside of state government are critically important in maintaining focus on a racial equity agenda as contextual factors and political will shift. While the emergence of coalitions around K-12 issues is a common phenomenon, there are limited examples of sustained coalitions in postsecondary education. Given the lack of existing equity coalitions in the postsecondary space, state higher education agencies were tasked with identifying equity leaders and advocates and determining the degree to which they would align their efforts with broader, statewide policies and programs aimed at closing racial equity gaps.

Coalition-building is defined here as relationship-building efforts between the state agency of higher education and advocacy partners focused on identifying and overcoming barriers to racial equity in postsecondary attainment. Advocacy partners convened by TIE states include representatives of an American Indian Commission, leaders from Latino Chambers of Commerce, foundations awarding scholarships to students of color, the NAACP, as well as Black, Latinx, and American Indian leaders and advocates in higher education, K-12, and the nonprofit sectors. By gathering input and data from an array of advocacy partners, state agencies increased their awareness of barriers to racial equity and expanding their understanding of the experiences of students of color in higher education.

Colorado's and Tennessee's approaches to coalition-building were shaped by the policy context of each state. Colorado has a history of placing racial equity in the center of its postsecondary strategy, as evidenced by the presence of goals and strategies for closing racial attainment gaps in its strategic plan, and also by the long-held commitment to racial equity among their state higher education leadership. As a result, the TIE grant accelerated existing efforts to close these gaps. Leading up to the TIE grant, Colorado's higher education agency conducted several stakeholders convenings focused on racial equity, and facilitated targeted discussions with Black, Latinx, and American Indian community leaders. As a result, many of the equity leaders and advocates convened by Colorado's Department of Higher Education (CDHE) to participate in TIE-related efforts had previously engaged with the state's racial equity agenda. Tennessee's Higher Education Commission (THEC), on the other hand, had not identified racial equity as a state priority in its strategic plan. Convenings of stakeholders began with the implementation of the TIE grant, rather than with a pre-existing statewide agenda for postsecondary equity.

As a result of these different starting points, coalition-building efforts in Colorado and Tennessee varied in the degree to which they addressed the three drivers of the Race Equity Cycle: awareness, inclusion, and integration. In Colorado, the TIE grant touched on all three drivers of the Race Equity Cycle. In contrast, Tennessee's TIE efforts focused on awareness-building of racial equity gaps and starting a statewide conversation with stakeholders about potential solutions (i.e., inclusion).

Tables 1 and 2 describe the array of coalition-building efforts[2] in each state, their respective purposes, and the extent to which efforts moved the state along the Race Equity Cycle.

Table 1. Colorado's Racial Equity Coalition-Building Efforts

Effort	Participants	Purpose	Drove:
Black, Latinx, and Native American Roundtables	• System office policymakers • Native American advocacy leaders from institutions of higher education and community-based organizations	• To gather information and build awareness among system-office staff about unique challenges facing Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and Native American students in accessing and completing postsecondary education. • To identify the most respected members of each group to be invited to participate in the Equity Champions Coalition	Awareness
Equity Champions Coalition	• Equity leaders in government, education, and business.	• To raise awareness of CDHE's racial equity agenda within communities and to discuss barriers and solutions for addressing racial equity gaps • To sustain a racial equity agenda through changes in administration.	Awareness and inclusion
Steering Committee	• Leaders from TIE subgrantee institutions under • Equity officers at higher education institutions • Leaders of other equity initiatives	• To build an equity toolkit on inclusive teaching and learning for Colorado's higher education faculty and to serve as a space for TIE institutional subgrantees to learn from each other	Awareness, inclusion, and integration of racial equity-focus in policy & practice

Table 2. Tennessee's Racial Equity Coalition-Building Efforts

Efforts	Participants	Purpose	Drove:
Black and Latinx Roundtables	• System office policymakers • Leaders of African American and Latinx communities	• To gather information and build awareness among system-office staff about unique challenges facing Black and Latinx students in accessing and completing postsecondary education	Awareness
Equity Summit	• Faculty and staff engaged in equity and diversity initiatives	• To build awareness among higher education institutions and state/ system-office staff	Awareness

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[2] These efforts include all the activities carried about by TIE states with the purpose of engaging stakeholders external to the government in conversations around racial equity gaps.

		about racial equity gaps at their respective institutions.	
Steering committee	• Equity leaders who previously engaged with THEC on other initiatives	• To gather information on institutional interventions for students of color and review subgrantee proposals from institutions	Inclusion

Below we describe the strategies states employed for driving awareness, inclusion, and integration of a racial equity agenda from coalition-building experiences in Tennessee and Colorado. We conclude with barriers to sustaining a statewide racial equity coalition.

Strategies for Coalition-Building to Drive Awareness

Driving <u>awareness</u> of racial equity gaps in postsecondary attainment requires both recognizing the problem and understanding its causes. During TIE's two-year grant cycle, most coalition-building efforts in both states focused on increasing awareness.

Statewide convenings increased awareness of postsecondary racial equity gaps, causes and barriers across state and institution stakeholders. The following describes how coalition efforts increased awareness of racialized inequities in higher education among state policymakers and institution administrators.

• <u>State Policymakers</u>. Roundtables with communities of color raised awareness among state policymakers in both states about the unique challenges faced by Black, Latinx, and Native American students. As a result, policymakers developed a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by these students as they work to access and progress through postsecondary education. As described by one policymaker:

> *We often talk about White versus non-White students, but not all non-White students are alike. In the Hispanic round table, we heard a lot about how students would like to have a sense of community and a family that they adopt on campus. That was not something that came up in the African American roundtable. It is interesting to see some of those differences for the different groups of students.*

In Colorado, coalition-building efforts also communicated the importance of closing racial equity gaps in postsecondary attainment to legislators, the Governor's office, and state policymakers outside of higher education. Organized by Colorado's Equity Champions Coalition, Equity Day at the Capitol highlighted the importance of sustaining a racial equity agenda in higher education to a newly elected administration. Further, Champions were invited to testify and lobby for equity-focused bills and speak at press conferences about the importance of an equity-focused policy agenda. As part of these efforts, coalition members helped sustain an equity-focused policy agenda that includes concurrent enrollment, financial aid for undocumented students, and remedial education reforms.

- Institutional Administrators. During a statewide equity summit in Tennessee, the state agency for higher education provided institutional leaders with student outcomes data disaggregated by race. Institutional leaders also learned about interventions at five TIE-funded institutions for increasing the success of students of color. A policymaker noted the importance of the equity summit, saying:

    > *I don't think that in our state we have ever so explicitly talked about equity gaps in terms of race and ethnicity. Sort of beat around the bush and talk about academic preparation and socioeconomic status. But the explicit focus on race and ethnicity, I think was really a new perspective for a lot of our attendees (...) That may actually, now that I think about it, be the highlight of the statewide work. We were able to convene 200 plus people to talk about these issues and to sort of give them the opportunity to think about what they can do on their campuses and how they can share best practices to close these equity gaps.*

In short, the efforts described above helped raise awareness of equity gaps in higher education attainment across a range of stakeholders.

Strategies for Coalition-Building to Drive Inclusion

Driving inclusion entails engaging stakeholders with diverse backgrounds to discuss issues related to racial equity gaps and welcoming them into conversations about how to address the problem. To be inclusive, stakeholders should include representation of Black, Latinx, and American Indian communities and provide diversity of geography, income, practice, and sectors. The TIE initiative was used to create spaces for racial equity conversations that included discussions with a wide range of stakeholders on how best to address racial equity gaps in higher education attainment. Colorado and Tennessee used different approaches to increase inclusion.

The presence of a race-conscious state agenda connected postsecondary equity efforts to other equity-focused initiatives. In particular, the agenda enabled state leadership to intentionally convene racial equity-focused meetings and to connect with existing equity efforts in the state. For example, Colorado's state agency for higher education strategically invited equity leaders from other equity-focused initiatives or organizations, such as the Denver Education Attainment Network-DEAN (Lumina Foundation Talent Hub), Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Incentive (COSI) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education Native-Serving Institutions Network, to participate on the TIE Steering Committee and on the Equity Champions Coalition. The inclusion of equity-focused leaders and organizations already working towards increasing postsecondary attainment with a race-conscious approach amplified and connected coalition-building to pre-existing efforts. This strategy in the context of coalition-building is described below:

    > *We used the Steering Committee to try to braid Lumina and other funding across the state ... it was our way of trying to mobilize and leverage all the resources to try to do the work (Colorado state policymaker)*

In Tennessee, equity advocates described the work of the TIE grant as siloed, rather than coordinated with pre-existing efforts to close racial equity gaps. For example, community leaders noted the absence of the Nashville Talent Hub, an initiative that addresses racial equity gaps, on the TIE Steering Committee and a lack of alignment in TIE efforts with existing coalitions focused on

equity in K12. This lack of engagement was perceived by advocates as a missed opportunity to connect TIE efforts to other initiatives aimed at closing racial equity gaps across the state.

A strong foundation of racial equity policy and engagement sets the stage for deeper inclusion. Colorado's coalition-building efforts benefited from race-focused equity leaders who had engaged with the Colorado Department of Higher Education in the past. Colorado also built on the statewide racial equity agenda included in its strategic plan. This allowed state policymakers to build upon existing relationships and expand its network of equity advocates by filling gaps in engagement across communities or sectors.

Strategies for Coalition-Building to Drive Integration

The integration driver entails the implementation of concrete solutions that incorporate a focus on racial equity in policy and practice. Given the paucity of racial equity coalitions in the postsecondary arena, newly-formed coalitions may need several years to effect systemic reform in state- or system-level postsecondary policy. In the short-term, coalitions can advance the integration of racial equity by developing and implementing race-conscious policies and programs that can lead to wider, more sustained statewide reforms.

Coalitions that advance racial equity are more likely to impact policy and practice when their efforts align to a state's strategic plan for higher education. Colorado provides two examples of how racial equity coalitions were able to take interim steps in closing racial equity gaps through changes in policy and practice:

1. **Racial equity advocates in Colorado contributed to the development of a statewide toolkit for inclusive teaching.** Informed by members of Colorado's Steering Committee, the toolkit is an online repository of best practices and resources for faculty in Colorado on inclusive teaching. The toolkit is available to all faculty members and postsecondary institutions and is designed to support the state's racial equity goal, as defined by Colorado Department of Higher Education's current strategic plan, by "equipping educators to erase equity gaps". The statewide toolkit is an expansion of a professional development training developed by a Colorado institution where institutional leaders highlighted positive experiences across staff and faculty in using the toolkit's materials.

2. **Colorado's Coalition of Equity Champions engaged leaders across the state committed to closing racial equity gaps in higher education.** To date, Equity Champions have supported and led a range of positive equity-focused outcomes, including an increase in state funding for higher education and the expansion of state financial aid to include undocumented students. Leaders engaged in the Coalition of Equity Champions are influential in informing and encouraging the state's response to the priorities in strategic plan, specifically the policies and programs Colorado will leverage to increase the attainment of Black, Hispanic/ Latinx, and Native American populations to 66% by 2025. Most recently, Equity Champions were invited to participate in guided conversation with CDHE to inform and guide the work of the Educational Equity Council, a Governor-appointed Council to lead Colorado's statewide focused effort on erasing educational equity gaps that exist across race, ethnicity, and income. This strategy shows how this coalition was sustained beyond the TIE grant and continues to inform equity-focused policy solutions at the state level.

These strategies describe how coalition-related activities moved state and system policymakers, institution and community-based leaders, and equity advocates along a continuum of change.

However, increasing awareness, inclusion, and integration of racial equity into postsecondary policy and practice must be on ongoing. Systematic barriers, along with a lack of institutional capacity, competing priorities, and the absence of best practices and examples to guide efforts, can hinder the development and sustainability of a statewide racial equity coalition. The following section identifies barriers to sustaining a racial equity coalition in postsecondary education.

Barriers to Coalition-Building for Racial Equity in Higher Education

As we noted in [Driving Awareness, Inclusion, and Integration for Racial Equity in Postsecondary Education](#), these three elements of a racial equity agenda are mutually reinforcing. Racial equity is best advanced when states make progress along all three drivers together. In other words, states can increase awareness of the need to address racial equity gaps by including diverse groups in the process to integrate racial equity goals into postsecondary policy and practice.

The finding below illustrates how the integration driver is informed by efforts that increase awareness and broaden inclusion to define solutions that best address racial equity gaps in postsecondary education. When awareness and inclusion are limited, stakeholders are less equipped to design and implement policies and practices that seek to close racial equity gaps.

Efforts to expand integration were hampered by inconsistent engagement in racial equity work at the state level. Equity advocates and community leaders in Tennessee perceived their efforts around coalition-building as too narrow. Several felt that Tennessee's higher education agency could have leveraged the TIE initiative in more meaningful ways. For example, equity advocates invited to participate on the Steering Committee expected the TIE initiative to help develop a racial equity agenda in higher education for the state. Instead, TIE-related efforts were limited to awarding subgrants to select institutions and broad awareness-building around racial equity issues among state policymakers. One advocate in Tennessee reflected on the need for a statewide agenda as a catalyst for local and institutional efforts advancing racial equity:

> *Once the state shines that light up top… once that becomes a standing priority, people who are already doing that work or thinking about it have more imperative to do so. The others that are either just not aware of the issue or resistant to it, it disarms them a little bit or leans them in a little bit more to be supportive of the work.*

In addition to systemic barriers, system office staff and coalition members from both states reported other barriers to coalition-building efforts. These barriers are summarized below:

Changes in Administration and Shifting Agendas
- Policymakers and equity advocates cautioned that changes to state and local leadership may shift priorities and that opportunities for racial equity discussions may not be sustained overtime.

Lack of Capacity
State higher education agencies lacked capacity, such as staff and resources, to:
- Convene leaders and sustain coalition efforts,
- Create a comprehensive coalition-building strategy where different committees/groups, and members within committees/groups have more clarity on their respective roles and purpose,
- Ensure comprehensive community representation at the coalition-level,
- Engage and include student leaders or student organizations in coalitions, and

- Work on comprehensive asset mapping to connect and align efforts with other racial equity initiatives.

Competing Priorities
- Committee members had to weigh coalition engagement against other important work, and
- Over the two-year grant period, state agencies witnessed a decline in coalition membership, often attributed to competing priorities.

Lack of Previous Examples of Postsecondary Coalitions to Guide Efforts
- Among community members, advocates, and equity champions asked by state agencies to raise awareness about racial equity gaps in postsecondary attainment in their respective communities, stakeholders external to higher education (e.g. business community or community organizations) felt they did not have clear guidelines, adequate resources, or best practices to effectively communicate the importance of closing racial equity gaps.

Conclusion

Coalition-building efforts in Colorado and Tennessee offer insights into how state agencies can engage community leaders and equity advocates in closing racial equity gaps in postsecondary attainment. Colorado and Tennessee provide examples of coalition-building strategies that can be of utility to other states with postsecondary equity agendas. Across both states, the TIE initiative played an instrumental role in creating spaces for conversations around racial equity to take place and building *awareness* of racial inequities across institutional leaders and state policymakers. Overall, efforts to drive *inclusion* (e.g. participation of equity leaders in providing solutions) and *integration* of a racial equity lens in policy and practice were more limited. States may consider aligning postsecondary racial equity work with similar efforts in other areas (e.g. K12 or broader equity-focused councils and coalitions) to build upon and broaden their capacity to convene equity-minded individuals and groups and advance racial equity agendas.

Reducing and ultimately closing racial equity gaps demands a sustained commitment to driving awareness, inclusion, and integration of racial equity into policy and practice. Equity coalitions can play a key role in holding states accountable for the progress made towards closing racial equity gaps in postsecondary attainment. This document describes opportunities and barriers for higher education state policymakers and racial equity advocates in advancing racial equity agendas and highlights the need for state policymakers, institutions, and advocacy stakeholders to create and sustain a racial equity agenda beyond the TIE initiative.