The Role of Institutions in Advancing Racial Equity in Postsecondary Attainment

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). Starting in 2017, the TIE initiative has provided four states – Tennessee, Colorado, Oregon, and Virginia – with 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 spur change nationwide by placing racial equity at the forefront of postsecondary attainment goals.

In 2019, Research for Action (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 <u>carried out by state higher education agencies</u>;
2. Microgrants to <u>institutions</u> to engage campuses in addressing racial equity gaps; and
3. Identification of community leaders and efforts to convene a <u>statewide coalition</u>.

Methodology Box. This report is based on research examining the implementation of the TIE initiative in Tennessee and Colorado. Research conducted for this report occurred between January and November 2019. The second in a series of reports, RFA's analysis draws from data collected at the institution level. RFA completed a thorough review of TIE-related documents from state higher education agencies, conducted interviews with campus administrators across eight institutions, and observed select meetings with institutional campus leads regarding the administration of the TIE grant.

This report focuses on how postsecondary institutions engaged with TIE. Specifically, the report describes how policymakers from Tennessee and Colorado's state higher education agencies awarded subgrants to institutions and takes a closer look at how these institutions responded to the TIE initiative. The report builds upon RFA's first report, [Advancing Racial Equity in Higher Education Attainment](#), which offers a framework to guide the analysis of race-conscious state-level postsecondary policy and explores the factors that affect the capacity of state higher education agencies to advance racial equity. A third report describes how the TIE initiative's role in efforts to convene a statewide coalition.

Overview of the Talent, Innovation, and Equity Initiative in Tennessee and Colorado

In 2017 and 2018, Tennessee and Colorado's state higher education agencies, respectively, launched efforts to close statewide achievement gaps in postsecondary success. As part of each state's strategy, resources were allocated to institutions to support initiatives aimed at increasing

the success of students of color. Just as state agencies of higher education were granted autonomy in defining their approach to increasing attainment, institutions were also granted flexibility in how they allocated state resources. A limited set of parameters established by the Lumina Foundation required grant funding to be spent on the proposed or identified intervention and that resources could not go directly to students. State agencies of higher education had the flexibility to set additional parameters for institutions, such as the identification of completion targets or reporting requirements.

Each state took a markedly different approach to allocating TIE resources. In Tennessee, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) allocated most funding from the TIE initiative to institutions. By intentionally investing in student support services at the campus level, state policymakers believed they could have the most impact on student outcomes. In contrast, the Colorado Department of Higher Education's (CDHE) strategy was broader, allocating resources evenly across state, institution, and coalition-level efforts. As a result, compared to Tennessee, Colorado invested fewer resources to fewer institutions.

Tables 1 and 2 details each state's selection criteria for identifying and awarding institutional grants, the amount awarded to each institution, and the institutional interventions funded in each state.

Table 1. TIE Institutions and Interventions in Tennessee

SELECTION PROCESS	INSTITUTIONS	INTERVENTIONS	INTERVENTION TYPE
Invitation. Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) invited institutions with the largest achievement gaps to participate in a panel interview with Tennessee's TIE Steering Committee. **Selection**. A committee of state leaders in higher education and racial equity reviewed institutional proposals and awarded points based on the following rubric: • Data Analysis • Plan for Intervention • Budget • Team Composition • Sustainability	**Amount**. $80,000 per institution; $400,000 in total. **Awarded Institutions:**		
	• University of Memphis	Black male completion academy	Student-level program
	• Southwest Tennessee Community College	Adult mentorship program	Student-level program
	• University of Tennessee – Chattanooga	Summer Bridge Program	Student-level program
	• Jackson State Community College	Two-way texting software; Textbook Loan Program; Quest Week	Student-level program
	• East Tennessee State University	Summer Bridge Program	Student-level program

Table 2. TIE Institutions and Interventions in Colorado

SELECTION PROCESS	INSTITUTIONS	INTERVENTIONS	INTERVENTION TYPE
<u>Selection</u>. Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE) identified three institutions for the TIE grant based on the following criteria: • Low and steadily improving completion rates of students of color • Large proportion of students of color • Strong Presidential and leadership commitment to racial equity • Geographic diversity outside of Denver	<u>Amount</u>. $60,000 per institution; $180,000 in total. **(spans INSTITUTIONS, INTERVENTIONS, INTERVENTION TYPE)**		
	<u>Awarded Institutions:</u>		
	• Community College of Aurora	Inclusive teaching and learning training	Institution-wide
	• Pueblo Community College	Director of Student Success Coaches	Institution-wide
	• Colorado State University – Pueblo	Community access & support centers & college completion software	Community-wide

Key findings on campus interventions:

- **All institutions in Tennessee used TIE funding to directly support students.** In Tennessee, TIE grants to institutions were applied towards student-level programs, or interventions that provide supports for targeted student populations on campus. Administered through student service departments, these programs utilized completion data to identify student populations in need of additional supports.

- **Interventions in Colorado institutions focused on changing institution and community culture.** Interventions in all three Colorado institutions sought to enhance the college and completion culture across institutions and communities. Campus administrators described the two institution-wide interventions as efforts to improve the student experience and to centralize student supports to increase retention and completion. Similarly, community access and support centers were designed to change community-wide college-going culture by providing information on how to access and afford college to students and their families.

Whereas Colorado institutions targeted resources to broader-level impact programs, Tennessee directed resources to specific student populations. Interventions also varied in their readiness to adopt race-focused interventions—a topic that we discuss in more detail below.

Contextualizing Institution Subgrants

As noted, funding from the TIE initiative supported campus interventions at eight institutions across Tennessee and Colorado. These institutions varied greatly in size, institution type, mission, leadership priorities, and campus culture. Further, about half are classified as minority-serving institutions. Table 3 summarizes variation in interventions across minority-serving and predominantly white institutions.

Table 3. Characteristics of the institutional subgrantees and campus interventions

INTERVENTIONS	DEFINITION	MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTIONS	PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS
RACE-NEUTRAL:	Intervention <u>without</u> a racialized target population	• Pueblo Community College	• University of Tennessee – Chattanooga
RACE-CONSCIOUS:	Intervention <u>focused on</u> a racialized target population	None	• Jackson State Community College • University of Memphis
RACE-EQUITABLE:	Intervention <u>focused on</u> a racialized target population situated <u>as part of</u> a comprehensive approach to supporting students of color	• Southwest Tennessee Community College • Community College of Aurora • Colorado State University – Pueblo	• East Tennessee State University

Key contextual findings:

- **Of the eight institutions funded under the TIE initiative, half are minority-serving institutions.** All three institutions awarded subgrants under the TIE initiative in Colorado are Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). In Tennessee, only one of the five selected institutions is a Predominantly Black Institution (PBI).
- **Six institutions used TIE funding for race-focused interventions.** Most institutions used the resources from the TIE grant to support initiatives explicitly <u>focused on</u> supports for Black, Latinx, and American Indian students. Two institutions, one in Tennessee and one in Colorado, allocated the TIE grant to support race-neutral interventions, or interventions adopted without a focus on a racialized target population. Campus administrators at these institutions reported that senior leadership resisted a focus on race over income, described below.
- **Two of four predominately white institutions used TIE funding to support race-conscious interventions.** However, these institutions did not prioritize race equity for student attainment across campus. Administrators leading race-conscious interventions at these two campuses reporting feeling siloed in their department.
- **All but one minority-serving institution used the TIE award to support race-equitable interventions.** Race-equitable interventions funded under the TIE grant explicitly target Black, Latinx, and American Indian students and are situated on campuses that prioritize racial equity. Across three of four minority-serving institutions, staff responsible for leading the TIE-funded intervention report a connection between the goals of the TIE initiative and the campus' mission to support students of color. One predominantly white institution also used TIE funding to advance a race-equitable intervention. A campus administrator at this institution highlighted buy-in from the President and senior leadership to the goals of the TIE initiative, a commitment driven by the campus' response to a racist incident, described in more detail below.

These contextual factors influenced the degree to which the TIE grant was perceived as an effective lever in advancing racial equity and closing attainment gaps for students of color. Allocating grant funding to institutions can initiate or expand interventions that support students of color but will have more limited effects on changing campus culture without a broader commitment to racial equity.

Call-out box: Given the small sample size and limited data collection at the institution level, we are unable to determine whether there is a causal relationship between institutional context and the impacts of the TIE grant. Further, it is yet to be seen how effective these interventions will be in moving the needle on racial attainment goals. Findings presented in this brief provide some insights into contextual factors and interventions that are perceived by campus administrations as aligned or misaligned to the goals of the TIE initiative.

Lessons Learned from Campus Interventions

Our analysis of lessons learned is organized around the three elements of the Race Equity Cycle. The Race Equity Cycle was originally designed as a resource for organizations focused on counteracting race inequities.[1] RFA adapted this tool to provide a resource for state higher education agencies and institutions of higher education that are focused on closing racial equity gaps in attainment. The framework is adapted from Equity in the Center's Race Equity Cycle and is informed by Research for Action's examination of the Lumina Foundation's first TIE cohort – Colorado and Tennessee. Figure 1 depicts the three drivers of racial equity: Awareness, Inclusion, and Integration.

Figure 1. Race Equity Cycle: Driving Awareness, Inclusion, and Integration

The Cycle includes three separate but inter-related drivers:

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

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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

Below we summarize lessons learned and recommendations for how institutions can drive awareness, inclusion, and integration of racial equity on their campuses. As with state agencies, institutional response to the TIE initiative was influenced by an institution's unique context prior to the TIE grant.

Previous efforts to address racial equity in postsecondary education positioned some institutions further along the Race Equity Cycle, increasing their capacity and willingness to explicitly focus on Black, Latinx, and American Indian students. Several campus administrators across Tennessee and Colorado institutions described influential moments in their campus histories that helped deepen their commitment to racial equity. A racialized incident at one institution raised *awareness* about issues facing students of color, led campus leadership to *include* students in examining campus culture, and prioritized the *integration* of initiatives to ensure the safety and success of students of color on campus. Performance data at another institution was used to highlight the costs of non-completion and raised *awareness* that Black males comprise the highest proportion of non-completers. Other institutions noted that the presence of Achieving the Dream or the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California made their institution *aware* of disaggregated data on achievement gaps for students of color and drove early efforts to *integrate* policies and practices focused on closing racial equity gaps on campus.

Each of these preconditions moved institutions along the Race Equity Cycle prior to the TIE initiative. Further, these preconditions influenced the degree to which TIE funding was used for race-neutral, race-conscious, or race-equitable interventions on campus. Institutions with critical preconditions were more *aware* of racial equity gaps, described prior efforts to *include* students of color in discussing strategies to address gaps, and discussed the *integration* of multiple campus interventions to support students of color. As a result, several institutions were particularly well positioned to respond to the TIE grant in explicitly supporting Black, Latinx, and American Indian students as part of a comprehensive approach to supporting students of color

A. Driving Awareness

Across both states, TIE funding heightened <u>Awareness</u> of racial inequities in postsecondary attainment. Campus administrators described two ways that TIE grants heightened awareness on campus:

1. **The TIE grant signaled an awareness from state leadership that 1) students of color face unique challenges as they complete a postsecondary credential and 2) resources are needed to address those challenges.** In Tennessee, "equity" is primarily discussed in terms of socioeconomic and geographic equity. The state's 2015-2020 strategic plan for higher education defines adults, low-income students, and academically underprepared students as three historically underserved focus populations, omitting students of color. In the absence of a statewide priority on racial equity, the TIE initiative in Tennessee offered a platform for state leadership to acknowledge <u>racial</u> equity in postsecondary success and drive resources to exemplar institutions supporting the success of students of color.

   In Colorado, the TIE grant complemented a suite of policies aimed at closing racial equity gaps in higher education attainment. Prior to the TIE initiative, in 2017, CDHE updated its statewide strategic plan for higher education and made the erasure of equity gaps in postsecondary attainment one of its four strategic goals. TIE grants to Colorado institutions served to reinforce CDHE's goals, communicating the state's priorities and supplementing those priorities with targeted resources. A campus administrator in Colorado highlighted the role of the TIE initiative

in bringing awareness to the state's commitment and importance of advancing racial equity in attainment:

Because this conversation and this effort is coming from the state level, I have heard of colleagues around the state that are surprised that the state is pushing for this. And surprised, I think, in a good way. So, institutions that would not normally be talking about equity and outcomes, racial equity and outcomes, are beginning to have that conversation. – Colorado campus administrator

2. **The TIE grant helped expand data awareness to a broader set of individuals at institutions to inform decision-making.** All institutions awarded TIE grants were asked to examine outcomes for students of color. While some campus leaders were already familiar with their student data, campus administrators highlighted the usefulness of disaggregating data and sharing those results with a broader set of individuals across leadership, administration, and faculty positions. Through the development or expanded use of dashboards or presentations, campus administrators reported that data was increasingly transparent and available, and used in decision-making. As one campus administrator from Tennessee said:

I think with this grant, it made me look at the numbers in a different way... it made us look at each [student] group separately. This grant and this initiative made us look at the data differently, and made us more data informed, so we can make sure that we are doing everything possible to help students be more successful. – Tennessee campus administrator

In short, the TIE initiative was used in both states to increase awareness of, and importance of, closing racial equity gaps at the institution-level. This increase in awareness extended beyond the President and institutional research officer to Cabinet members and faculty members as well.

B. Driving Inclusion

The Inclusion driver builds on awareness by inviting a wide range of diverse stakeholders into conversations about how to address racial equity gaps. On campuses, leadership was influential in communicating the need to address racial equity gaps. However, many institutions failed to include the stakeholders most impacted by the TIE initiative--students of color—in these conversations.

Leadership support for increasing attainment for students of color broadened and strengthened efforts to increase racial equity. Campus administrators highlighted the importance of leadership buy-in to the TIE initiative. Leadership support of the TIE initiative led to heightened discussion of racial equity gaps and greater visibility of interventions addressing those gaps across campus through promotional materials and requests for presentations among senior administrators. Campus administrators also said that programs supported by the TIE grant received additional resources such as philanthropic support, additional staffing, space and food donations, as well as other in-kind gifts when institutional leadership was bought in to the initiative. As one campus administrator noted:

It comes from the top. Our president was supportive from day one. And so, I think having his support, having the Provost's support, having the VP's support, having the Dean's support--I think that holds value. – Tennessee campus administrator

When institutional leaders were unaware or less engaged with campus efforts to increase attainment for students of color, administrators described feeling frustrated and alone. Some reported that while they help students "one-by-one," they feel challenged by the lack of awareness of racial inequities across the campus. These administrators characterized TIE-related efforts as a

"band-aid" rather than as a driver of more systemic changes. Two campus administrators described their experience implementing TIE-related efforts without institutional leadership support in this way:

> *Everything feels very siloed... I don't think that's the fault of this grant, that's our culture.* – Tennessee campus administrator

> *The negative part of it, from what I see, is we're not really looking at any of this work truly through an equity lens. We're talking about retention overall. Administration has flat out said they don't believe it has anything to do with race, that this is a socioeconomic issue.* --Colorado campus administrator

A lack of student voice in the design and implementation of TIE efforts limited the depth of the intervention. Because students of color are those most affected by racial inequities on campus, it is crucial to involve them in discussions and plans to address those inequities. Black, Latinx, and American Indian students can make substantial contributions to identifying strategies for integrating racial equity in institutional policies and practice. The Inclusion driver should involve students of color in campus-based racial equity initiatives. Campus administrators highlighted the absence of students in conversations regarding the TIE grant. The importance of including student voice was described in hindsight by one administrator:

> *One thing I would say is ask institutions to identify students who can be a part of these committees so that decisions can be made with students, and not for students... I would say involving the folks that you also want to do the work or do the work for.* – Colorado campus administrator

TIE institutions were largely successful in garnering the involvement of institutional leadership in discussing and developing racial equity initiatives. But inclusion of diverse stakeholders, particularly students of color, was uncommon.

C. Driving Integration

The Integration of racial equity into institutional policy and practice can be challenged by a range of factors. Campus administrators identified the misalignment of the TIE initiative to institution, community, and state priorities as a significant barrier in efforts to integrate, scale, and sustain efforts aimed at closing racial equity gaps in postsecondary success.

Institutional response was limited when institutional priorities were not aligned to the TIE grant. Campuses with priorities for closing racial equity gaps, often established by critical preconditions, used the grant funding to expand or scale existing initiatives explicitly focused on supporting Black, Latinx, and Indian American students. In contrast, when campus priorities were misaligned, campus administrators noted a tension in allocating funding for race-conscious programs. While the intent of Lumina's TIE initiative is to increase attainment for students of color, some institutional efforts applied broader definitions of equity to include first generation and low-income students. At these institutions, administrators discussed a discomfort across campus leadership to "target" specific students of color and noted that institutional leaders frequently positioned socioeconomic equity as the primary disadvantage for students.

A lack of community and state buy-in can threaten the sustainability of institutional efforts to close racial equity gaps. The degree of commitment to closing racial equity gaps at the community and state levels also influenced the integration of TIE efforts on campus. In Colorado, while state leadership advocated for racial equity, local communities challenged this agenda. As a

result, institutions were buffeted by competing visions. A state policymaker in Colorado described the tension between campus efforts and their broader communities:

> *[Institutional] Leadership is ready to adopt a lot of the principles and policies that we need all our institutions adopting in order to really move the needle. Whereas their community is just farther behind.* – Colorado state policymaker

Similarly, the lack of a statewide agenda for closing racial equity gaps in Tennessee challenged the lasting effects of the TIE initiative at the institutional level. A community leader in Tennessee described the necessity of broader state and community support to systematically advance racial equity in postsecondary institutions in this way:

> *It's not solely on the presidents and the institutions to close equity gaps. It's also for the county mayors, the employers, and the policymakers locally and at the state-level to be supportive of it as well.* – Tennessee community leader

Further, community leaders, state policymakers, and campus administrators alike worried that TIE efforts would stall after funding ends. Particularly in a state without an explicit priority to close racial equity gaps, the sustainability of campus interventions was cited as a barrier for integrating racial equity. As a community leader said:

> *I think at this point what I'm worried about the most is, is there a still a table to even have a conversation?* – Tennessee stakeholder

Conclusion

Colleges and universities in Colorado and Tennessee offer insights into how institutions functioning in varied state and institutional contexts can drive efforts to close racial equity gaps in postsecondary attainment. Across both states, the TIE initiative played an instrumental role in building *awareness* of racial inequities in higher education at the institution-level. Efforts to drive *inclusion* and *integration* were more limited. This was due in part to the fact that institutions varied in their position along the three drivers of the Race Equity Cycle at the advent of the TIE grant. Institutions' use of disaggregated data, their convenings of students of color, and strong campus leadership buy-in amplified the TIE initiative's ability to advance efforts to close racial equity gaps on campuses. Yet when institutional, community, and state goals were not aligned to those of TIE, efforts to integrate and sustain TIE activities beyond the grant cycle were impeded.

Reducing and ultimately closing racial equity gaps demands a sustained commitment to driving awareness, inclusion, and integration of racial equity into policy and practice. This document describes opportunities and barriers for institutions of higher education in advancing racial equity agendas and highlights the need for institutions and state-level stakeholders to reinforce and sustain a racial equity agenda beyond the TIE initiative. Our third and final product will detail coalition-building as a component to help sustain this work alongside state-level efforts and institutions.