



WHITEPAPER: FALL 2020 CONVENING TAKEAWAYS

FIVE THEMES FOR CENTERING STUDENT EQUITY

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Executive Summary

The MAPS Project, hosted by the Sorenson Impact Center, charts the future of higher education toward a more student-equity-centric future. In Fall 2020, MAPS contributors from across the country, including students, researchers, practitioners, and decision makers, convened to develop key assertions about how to move toward a more equitable future.

The themes that emerged suggest key opportunities for decision makers to consider and include:

1. Student-equity-centric decision-making in higher education requires integrated quantitative and qualitative data that are contextualized with diverse student perspectives, well beyond what currently practiced.
2. Student-equity-centric Institutions employ an assets-based view of students and demonstrate authenticity, transparency, and accountability, especially in times of crisis.
3. Student-equity-centric institutions will design for post-traditional students as the new norm, rather than the exception.
4. Student-equity-centric institutions build cross-institution and cross-industry collaborations, as adaptive or proactive responses, to serve students' dynamic needs.
5. The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored the role of institutions of higher education as anchor institutions that provide critical health, transportation, and economic support, despite uncertainty around public investment in higher education.

Introduction

Throughout 2020, the Sorenson Impact Center engaged a network of experts and emerging voices in higher education and equity as part of its Model, Analyze, Share, and Prototype (MAPS) project, which charts the shifting landscape of higher education. In the fall of 2020, the Center virtually convened a group of more than 40 students, data scientists, industry experts, and institutional leaders to define the most pressing, often overlooked issues facing higher education over the coming year and beyond. This paper outlines key reflections from these stakeholders to inform further work around the future of higher education.

MAPS work is focused on the practice of equitable foresight—using a student-equity-centric lens for modeling futures in higher ed—and the values of cross-sector and cross-hierarchy collaboration. A core vision for the MAPS project is to prepare for the future of higher education by cultivating the perspectives of professionals along with students who possess unique insights due to lived experience. Student perspectives are essential in this work, as they are often not fully represented in even the best figures, data, and averages.

This whitepaper builds upon the additional work streams of the MAPS project to date, including the project's public dashboard and data science models, its national working group of institutional leaders and industry experts, the Student Coalition on Higher Education, and a first-of-its-kind convening on futures in higher ed led by students for students. This whitepaper reflects an understanding of both the pre-existing challenges accelerated by Covid-19 and the newly emerging trends as a result of the pandemic in higher education.

We invite you to consider the key themes presented here and then to partner with us in creating a more equitable and student-centric future in higher education. What are we missing? What resonates with you? Let us know at maps@sorensonimpact.org or through social media using #mappinghighered.

A note: Defining student-equity-centric

This phrase means the practice of centering equitable outcomes for students. We think about equity in terms of an individual student's experience in higher education and society, in terms of an institution's practices and policies, and in terms of equity of access, opportunity, resources, and outcomes across the broader population.

Student-equity-centric captures important distinctions not contained in its separated concepts. For example, "student-centric" may focus energy on serving existing students without attention to who has been excluded from becoming a student at all. "Equity-centric" alone may leave students as stakeholders, but not co-creators and leaders. Student-equity-centric best captures the idea of centering around students as leaders and centering around equitable outcomes. What does a student-equity-centric institution or governing body look like? This is what we hope to define and share as a core effort of the MAPS project.

About MAPS

The MAPS Project is focused on Modeling, Analyzing, Prototyping, and Sharing student-equity-centric data, ideas, and practices in higher education. We believe that more equitable and student-centric futures in higher ed can be accelerated through data science, student perspectives, and cross-sector collaboration. We convene experts, fund research, and build models to demonstrate new ways of integrating student-equity-centric perspectives and foresight practices across higher education.

The Sorenson Impact Center created and manages the MAPS project. Sorenson Impact provides data, modeling, engagement, and spaces to explore ideas and prototype solutions. We are a neutral, non-expert voice and seek to navigate the interface between experts (you), informed audiences, and the general public.

About Sorenson Impact

The [Sorenson Impact Center](#) is an applied academic think-and-do tank focused on solving social problems through the use of data, evidence, and innovation. Housed at the University of Utah David Eccles School of Business, the Center works with public, nonprofit, and private sector stakeholders across the globe to develop and implement outcomes-driven solutions to problems. Our staff of 30 includes experts in data science, finance, policy, investment, storytelling, and social services. These professionals are augmented by the talents of 75 graduate and undergraduate students from diverse disciplines. Together, the Center works with its partners to marshal capital for social good, empower data-driven programs, break down silos across sectors, and equip the next generation of leaders with social purpose.

Convening Takeaways

01

Student-equity-centric decision making in higher education requires integrated quantitative and qualitative data that is contextualized with diverse student perspectives.

As researchers, decision makers, and student leaders, MAPS contributors hold an intimate understanding of the data informing higher education as an industry. Perhaps because of this, they quickly pointed out its insufficiency in a theme that cut across multiple segments of the convenings. They expressed frustration with not seeing more of the “why” behind the numbers and asserted that even a decade of the best data analysis likely wouldn’t reveal enough about students’ needs. Participants pointed out the flaw of how averages often mask the lived experiences of students and called for more investment in qualitative research methods such as student ethnography that might reveal deeper observed insights. Particularly in relation to the emerging data around Covid-19’s impact on equity and student experience in higher education, the group asserted the importance of pairing quantitative and qualitative data and overweighting the insights of historically marginalized groups to design a more student-equity-centric recovery and future.

Key Insights

- Current tools used by decision-makers for gathering student perspectives, such as online surveys and student government spokespersons, are not delivering. For example, student government leaders often possess a level of privilege—time, financial resources, and social capital—that is not reflective of other students’ experiences.
- Researchers and decision-makers must design around the complex life factors and power dynamics that may prevent students from participating and feeling welcome to participate.
- Students want decision-makers to know they are not a monolith—the “historically underrepresented” label often obscures their distinct identities and needs.



STUDENT VOICES

How well is this university doing? Someone’s going to look at a stat. Students are people and we’re more than stats. Not everyone has the same background and so it is important for them to hear what students have to say.”

– [MAPS Film: Student Voices - How We Feel About Higher Education](#)

02

Student-equity-centric institutions employ an assets-based view of students and demonstrate authenticity, transparency, and accountability, especially in times of crisis.

The MAPS project asks what student-equity-centric decision-making processes might look like. Participants responded that these processes start with authenticity, transparency and accountability from institutions. Covid-19 has exposed the fissures in student-leader relationships, straining communication and prompting a new level of scrutiny around the value of education and the obligations of institutions to their students. Participants expressed the desire for decision makers to be transparent in how decisions are made both in times of transition and business as usual. They also expressed a desire to see more accountability from decision makers to students, including clear pathways to see changes done with students in mind and follow up to show suggestions were actually implemented. Participants also noted that authenticity came through when decision makers designed for student input first, not last. They lamented the “check the box” approach many decision makers seem to employ by making a light attempt at student input after a solution has already been selected. Instead, as one student participant put it, students want to be valued as co-architects and designers of the system rather than treated as stakeholders to be surveyed.

Key Insights

- Students want institutions to employ an assets-based perspective toward them, focusing on strengths and opportunities rather than barriers and deficiencies.
- Students have built valuable resiliency and systems-change skills in navigating higher education during Covid-19, skills they hope institutions will recognize and develop.
- Transparency is one of the highest values students want institutions to practice.
- In the current climate, students overall do not feel understood or in partnership with institutions; this must change for a student-equity-centric future.



STUDENT VOICES

“I don’t know if it’s realistic, but my lofty wish is that universities would just be transparent with us.”

– Student town hall participant

“Juggling three part time jobs and getting only a couple hours of sleep, doing whatever it took just to make it happen helped me be really more resilient and diligent. It really helped build my character and shape who I am today.”

– [MAPS Film “Student Voices: How We Feel About Higher Education”](#)

03

Student-equity-centric institutions will design for post-traditional students as the new norm, rather than the exception.

Across sectors, convening participants clearly identified that the college students of today and tomorrow are far more diverse than the “traditional” student of yesterday (a young adult attending college full time for the first time post high school without dependents). Today’s students have complex lives and interact with higher education across a longer, more modular timeline than previous generations. They are caregiving for children or parents, pausing school to work to pay for school, attending multiple institutions on their paths to a degree, returning to school to change careers, and bringing the full spectrum of their identities, cultures, and needs to the classroom (virtual or in person). Higher education is no longer a 4-year stop on the road to a career; it is a lifelong partnership between institutions and the students, families, and communities they serve. Participants shared how institutions that can flex and innovate to the complexity of students’ realities, whether that means asynchronous learning or addressing the social determinants of health and education, are in demand. Institutions have both an opportunity and an obligation to design for the diverse needs of their current and future students.

Key Insights

- MAPS research on the coming enrollment cliff has found that demographic changes will not affect all institutions or students equally and may make student-institution match more difficult, particularly post Covid-19.
- Some institutions focused on post-traditional students’ needs (such as certain community colleges) are facing significant financial distress this year due to the impact of Covid-19 on students and need support.



STUDENT VOICES

“I’m a full time mom, full time employee, and a full time student. Getting all that within traditional hours is near impossible.”

– Carolyn ([Read her story here](#))

“Coming at a later age [to the U.S.], it was really difficult to adapt, especially when learning English and taking higher education courses.”

-Dante ([Read his story here](#))

04

Student-equity-centric institutions build cross-institution and cross-industry collaborations, as adaptive or proactive responses, to serve students' dynamic needs.

In facing system-level enrollment decline, some institutions of higher education have first moved to develop recruitment strategies and competitive advantages that center on exclusivity, student retention, and financial success. The MAPS project suggests instead that student-equity-centric institutions first consider how to elevate student success across institutions and make it easier for students to navigate the system of higher education as a whole. Student convening participants expressed dismay at the idea of institutions competing for students while paradoxically undervaluing current students. Researcher participants also pointed out the negative effects of institutions viewing counterpart schools as competitors rather than collaborators, including conflicts of interest in recruiting students, antagonism to values and stated missions, financial and psychic costs to students, a lack of portable credential infrastructure, and threat of student displacement if closures or other institutional disruptions hit.

Key Insights

- Student-equity-centric institutions recognize that serving historically excluded students is likely the key to institutional transformation and that collaboration, rather than competition, is essential in this effort.
- Decision makers should intelligently assess the system-wide impacts of their individual efforts, particularly in the post Covid-19 era. For example, a school may want to promote graduate degrees to shore up enrollment, but a responsible approach to this would also consider credential inflation.
- Collaboration is a value held by student-equity-centric institutions, their leaders, and students.



STUDENT VOICES

“[It feels like] colleges are worried about the bottom line and student retention, not about the wellbeing of students - at the end of the day it's about the dollar.”

"My university is a large state school that has rapidly increased enrollment of out-of-state students because they pay a much higher tuition - thus, a lot of the out-of-state students are extremely wealthy. But I feel that institutions are still somehow lacking the ability to examine different facets of student identity and student life and realize that building a solution for all out of state students rarely actually addresses all their needs; it just appeases the wealthy students you need to make money off of."

-MAPS Student Town Hall participants

05

The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored the role of institutions of higher education as anchor institutions that provide critical health, transportation, and economic support, despite uncertainty around public investment in higher education.

Participants shared how the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed and exacerbated the social determinants of education: the access to healthy food, high-quality childcare, affordable healthcare, high-speed internet, reliable transportation, quiet study space, safe housing, mental health supports, social and professional networks, and other resources that determine if a student can show up prepared and present in the classroom. Participants pointed again to the importance of partnering with students to understand needs rather than making assumptions, noting the example of providing parking lot wifi hotspots without recognizing the lack of gas money and transportation that kept students from using them. They also lauded exemplars like Dine College who have demonstrated their commitment to student success by proactively providing community resources and quickly adapting to needs exposed by Covid-19. Participants expressed wanting to see institutions take "whole student" and "whole community" approaches.

Key Insights

- To better serve their communities as anchors and meet the diverse needs of students, institutions need appropriate financial support, especially as the pandemic continues and system-level enrollment changes progress.
- Covid19-related state budget cuts will affect some institutions more harshly depending on their sector and revenue streams - for example, a 10% state funding cut could result in a 25% overall loss for a community college vs. a 9% loss for a flagship research institution.
- The overall uncertainty in public education funding represents a challenge that makes it more difficult for institutions to deliver on their increasingly dynamic role as community anchors, especially in a crisis.



STUDENT VOICES

“Institutions of higher education must understand that just because we no longer live on campus, we still are in need of the resources that were offered on campus. More than ever before.”

“Housing is a really big issue. A lot of people are tired of being home. It’s not even being tired of being in the house, it’s ‘my house isn’t safe, my house has no food, my house has no wifi.’”

– MAPS Student Interviews

MAPS Moving Forward

The original intent of the 2020 MAPS expert convening was to define the “what” of higher ed in the next year: the most pressing, often overlooked issues. However, what emerged was a strong consensus to focus more on the “how”; the preconditions, the processes and policies that govern institutions and the system today. We collect data. But we are not truly hearing students. We make decisions. But we are not accounting for the historical inequities keeping students from providing input. We build programs. But we are not building them in deep partnership with students. Even if institutions, leaders, policymakers, and other decision makers appear to make student-equity-centric choices, if the processes of how these decisions were made are not student-equity-centric themselves, they are not enough.

The classroom student makeup of 2030 will look very different than that of 2019. Institutions have the responsibility to support their current and future students in achieving educational success and living fully in their humanity. The unavoidable disruption of 2020 provides an opportunity for institutions to take steps toward being more student-equity-centric, even in difficult circumstances. A focus on student equity may very well be the key to thriving in the future.

This convening and whitepaper serve as a strategic inflection point to inform the focus of MAPS for 2021 and beyond, with a view to equipping collaborators with the knowledge needed to realize a student-equity-centric future. Over the coming months, we hope to elevate the perspectives of students and other uniquely positioned MAPS contributors and suggest models of how decision making processes and outcomes can become more student-equity-centric.

We invite you to join with us. Collaborate with us in our research, data analysis, and modeling. Use our data dashboard and [understand student stories](#). Prototype student-equity-centric decision-making and share with us your discoveries. Partner with us on content and perspectives.

Appendix

CONVENING PARTICIPANTS

Stuart Andreason, Director of Center for Workforce and Economic Opportunity, Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta
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