Student-Ready
STRATEGIES

INSTITUTIONAL POLICY
The Foundation for Equitable, Sustainable Transformation

A report by Student-Ready Strategies
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INTRODUCTION

When diverse students arrive on the campuses of colleges and universities, what are the factors that influence whether or not they successfully achieve their educational and career goals? You may immediately think about their previous academic performance, the quality of teaching they receive, the availability of mentors and advisors, and their personal support network.

What you likely did not name was the institution's policy manual - that seemingly innocuous compilation of words on paper that sets forth guidelines and standards for the institution, its professionals, and its students. Institutional policy may not be a highly visible factor in whether an institution achieves equitable student success, but it heavily influences those outcomes. It lays out the options afforded to students, the standards to which they are held, and the actions that are required of them.

Education think tanks, philanthropies, researchers, and postsecondary institutions themselves have long focused on the impact of federal policy on higher education, and rightly so. Federal policy guides the qualifications and amounts for Pell grants, sets the standard for full-time enrollment and expected time to degree, governs the majority of financial aid and student debt, authorizes accrediting agencies, and so much more.

These same organizations have increasingly focused on the states' role in shaping higher education. State postsecondary policy often addresses operational issues within institutions and system redesign for issues like developmental education and transfer pathways. State leaders often use policy to outline their critical decisions about the level of public funding each institution receives and how the state will augment Federal aid with state-run financial aid programs.

Institutions have a critical role to play in implementing these state and federal policies, and often create institutional policy and process to do so. However, institutions put policy to many other uses that have a direct impact on students, and in many of these cases, have a level of autonomy and influence that is largely overlooked by think tanks, researchers, and philanthropies.

As a broader field, we celebrate an increase in the maximum Pell grant, but miss the fact that millions of students are losing access to federal aid because of institutional policies around Satisfactory Academic Progress. We advocate for system-level policies that make admissions test-optional, but ignore that students are required to take math and English placement tests that land them in multiple layers of non-credit-bearing remedial courses. We run state campaigns to encourage full-time enrollment and at the same time ignore that thousands of students are systematically "purged" from their entire course load because they missed a payment deadline. Institutional policy directly impacts student experiences and outcomes, and is just as important as policy and the state and federal levels.

This report is squarely focused on institutional policy - what it is, what it does, and how it either helps or hinders equitable outcomes for students. We draw from our experiences assisting institutions in evaluating and revising their policies to offer not only a framework for understanding institutional policy, but also provide pragmatic recommendations and concrete examples to help institutions see policy in practice and use those learnings in their own policy and process reviews. It is our goal to shine a bright light on the importance of institutional policy and mobilize colleges and universities to make their policies more equitable - institution by institution, toward a Student-Ready world.

the power of policy:
INFLUENCING DECISIONS

Time to Board

Elena has an upcoming flight. Exactly 24 hours and 2 minutes before takeoff, her cell phone alarm goes off. She scrambles to open the airline app to check in the second it opens up. The next day, she arrives at the airport two hours early and heads straight to the gate.

DeShawn also has an upcoming flight. The morning of his flight, he checks in through the airline app on his way to the airport, where he arrives an hour before departure and walks to his gate when his app says that his zone is boarding.

Why do these two airline passengers act so differently? The answer is that they are flying different airlines, and are therefore subject to different boarding and seating policies. Elena is flying Airline A, which has an open seating policy. The sooner Elena checks in, the better boarding position she gets, and if she is not at the gate when it is her turn to board, she's probably going to end up in the dreaded middle seat in the back. DeShawn, on the other hand, is flying Airline B, which has an assigned seating policy. As long as DeShawn gets on the jet bridge before they close the doors, he will sit in his assigned seat.

Each passenger faced trade-offs with price and convenience, but the difference in policy also likely shaped each passenger's airline decision, as well as their behavior leading up to the flight.

Tackling Term Length

Many institutions, by default, use a historical academic calendar that includes a fall and spring semester and accelerated summer sessions. Terms last 16-18 weeks, and students have the same course-load throughout the duration of a term. Increasingly, institutions have been rethinking this structure and seeing benefits from using shorter terms year-round.

Shorter terms means that students:
- Take fewer courses at a time - much less juggling!
- Add credits to their transcript more frequently, building momentum
- Get back in the classroom sooner if (or when) life gets in the way and they have to drop their classes

Institutions have shown that they can dramatically increase graduation rates, particularly for adult learners with complex lives, using this model (Ruf, 2021; Whissemore, 2023). And if faculty question whether learning can occur in a condensed time frame, remind them that we teach that way in summer, so why not year-round?

TYPES OF INSTITUTIONAL POLICY

TYPES OF INSTITUTIONAL POLICY

Postsecondary institutions use policy to handle a wide variety of situations and issues on campus. And different types of policies impact students in different ways, and to different degrees. To truly begin an in-depth review of institutional policy, we recommend differentiating among them, separating each policy into one of three distinct categories:

① **Administrative**
② **Structural**
③ **Situational**

ADMINISTRATIVE POLICY

Administrative policy primarily affects faculty and staff. These policies put parameters around their relationship with the institution as employees and contributors to the environment of the institution. Most prevalent in this category are policies in the areas of human resources and finance. Human resources policy typically lays out how faculty and staff are recruited and paid, how faculty receive tenure and promotion, how instructors are evaluated, what professional development is available to employees, and how many courses a faculty member is expected to teach each term. Finance policies establish parameters around who can spend money, how much they can spend, and what they can purchase. This type of policy may also establish parameters for grants management, articulate the relationship between the institution and its foundation, and establish how resources are divided among schools or departments.

If these policies impact students, it is generally indirect. That is not to say that these policies do not affect student success, but the impact may be more difficult to describe and quantify. While a comprehensive policy review will include these policies, and consider their indirect impact on students, they should not be the top priority of a student-centered policy review.

POLICY *in action*

Throughout this paper, you will see sections called "policy in action" where we provide anonymous anecdotes about institutions that have revised or created new policy to support student-ready change.

An institution has a policy that all members of search committees must participate in implicit bias training before candidates are interviewed. Research shows that when search committee members engage in the hiring process with greater awareness of their own biases, more women and candidates of color are selected to fill key positions (Jacobs, et al., 2022; Russel, et al., 2019). Over time, this institution's leaders expect that this policy shift will play a part in creating a more welcoming environment for marginalized student populations, as it will ensure faculty and staff are hired who have similar lived experiences to these students.

The students of that institution likely have no knowledge of or interaction with the search committee training policy, but they benefit from increased belonging all the same.

STRUCTURAL POLICY

Structural policy is student-facing, and it impacts the experience of each and every student. Every student who applies to attend will be affected by admissions policy that dictates whether or not they are able to attend, and whether they will face a competitive or open access admissions process. When institutions set their tuition rate and their schedule of fees, they are essentially setting a policy that applies to all students, determining how much they pay out of pocket or how much of their financial aid will be available for books and living expenses. Policy around term structure (e.g., 16-week terms versus 8-week terms) will dictate the pace of learning for all students.

Structural policies will impact all students, but that impact will not necessarily be uniform for all students. Consider an institution-wide policy of mandatory attendance. Students whose primary responsibility is school, especially those who live on campus and are generally healthy, would likely not face barriers as a result of this policy. But other students may have a harder time complying with the policy:

- Student-parents may choose not to attend a class if it conflicts with an important event at their child's school, or may not be able to attend if their child is sick or their babysitter is suddenly unavailable.
- Students with chronic health conditions may need to miss class from time to time because their condition flares up or they need to receive treatment.
- Students who observe religious holidays for which the campus does not close will periodically need to miss class to participate in their religious observances.

Which of these absences will be excused? What burden is placed on each of the above students to provide documentation? Do those requirements differ by the reason for the absence? Is someone tasked with unilaterally making these decisions?

Because structural policies impact all students in one way or another, these policies should be prioritized in a student-centered policy review. Structural policies should be reviewed with a critical eye to ensure that they are equitable and designed to meet the needs of students with complex lives and diverse backgrounds.

POLICY *in action*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, and even before, institutions modified their admissions policies to be "test-optional," meaning that students could still be considered for admissions if they did not take a college entrance exam (ACT or SAT), or if they did not report their score. In the pandemic, this was partly a response to widespread gaps in access to be able to take these exams. However, these policies also proved to be an effective equity and diversity strategy, since marginalized populations may have always had restricted access to the exams, test-prep services, and the ability to take the test multiple times. "Test-optional" leveled the playing field in a new way, leading to a more diverse student population to the benefit of the entire student body (Bennett, 2021; Edelman, 2022; Harper, 2023).

SITUATIONAL POLICY

Situational policy applies only to certain students, in specific situations. These policies are only experienced by a subset of students and may be completely unfamiliar to others. These policies establish how the institution will handle a myriad situations, such as:

- Past-due bursar charges
- Grades below the threshold for satisfactory academic progress
- Failure to participate in mandatory advising
- Unpaid parking tickets or library fines
- Academic dishonesty accusations
- Alleged code of conduct violations

Policies in this category should be viewed as a significant risk factor for student retention and success, and therefore should be made top priority in a policy review process. These are the policies that prevent students from registering for classes, make them ineligible for financial aid, or result in them being permanently dismissed from the institution. They endanger a student's practical ability to continue their education, and have the potential to impact their mindset, motivation, and confidence. These policies are also often riddled with deficit language, describing situations in terms of students' failure or inadequacy, and are often designed with an inherent mistrust of students who find themselves in these particular circumstances. Finally, they are the policies that most often rely on professional discretion - a factor that can exacerbate inequities as explicit and implicit biases come into play.

POLICY in action

A community college was troubled by the number of students who were stopping out after they fell short of the standards for Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP). Digging deeper, it became clear that hundreds of these students had filed a SAP appeal under the institution's policy, but the appeals were designated as "pending" and never approved - or denied.

The reason, the institutional leaders discovered, was a very restrictive policy around the types of circumstances that would be considered valid for a SAP appeal, and a very high burden of proof for each. After updating its SAP policy to allow more circumstances to be considered and give students flexibility with documentation, the institution no longer has any pending SAP appeals.

That said, situational policy does not only address situations in which a student has fallen short of expectations. There are other examples of situational policy that are designed with the goal of lifting students up and helping them succeed, like:

- Credit for Prior Learning
- Accommodations for students with disabilities
- Tuition payment plan policies
- Emergency aid policy

Consider an institutional policy that grants Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) for a wide variety of work, military, and life experiences that represent college-level, credit-worthy learning. This policy will likely not affect all students, particularly if the institution enrolls a significant portion of its population directly from high school. However, for those students who are in the situation of gaining such experience before enrolling, this policy will shorten the time and credits to degree and lower the overall cost for students, also instilling in them the confidence of having a collection of credits already under their belt.

Differentiating institutional policies according to these three categories will help institutions prioritize among policies in a comprehensive review process. It will also help institutions scan for the most common pitfalls with each particular type of policy and make equitable, well-informed decisions about the necessary policy changes.

COMPONENTS OF STRONG POLICY

COMPONENTS OF STRONG POLICY

Institutional leaders are highly trained - in their academic disciplines and how to run effective institutions. However, the art and science of policy development is a specialized skill that is difficult to be widely mastered by all who hold leadership positions. Fortunately, the building blocks of strong policy are straightforward and finite. This section explains each of these core components that should be included in all institutional policies. The three core components are:

① **Purpose statement**
② **Definitions**
③ **Shalls and Mays**

PURPOSE STATEMENT

A purpose statement explicitly articulates what the policy is intended to achieve and the context in which it has been created. Well-constructed purpose statements include: the reasons for which the policy was created, the audiences to whom the policy applies, and the intended outcome(s) of the policy. In our work with institutions, a purpose statement is frequently absent from institutional policies, which can have a profound effect on implementation.

The purpose statement serves as a guidepost for any professionals, present and future, who will make discrete decisions about the policy's implementation. If the intended outcomes are not explicitly stated, feedback received during the policy development process may not be rooted with the appropriate context of the policy's purpose. During implementation, professionals will need to read between the lines, or even outright guess, to understand the desired outcome and make decisions that further those goals. Evaluation of the impact of the policy, and continuous improvement efforts may measure success in a way that does not tie to the ultimate goal, or may modify the process around the policy in unconstructive ways.

For example, many institutions have a policy that drops students from their courses if they have not paid their bursar bill by a certain date. Professionals in charge of administering this policy should be able to easily state what the policy is intended to achieve:

- Is it to protect the bottom line of the institution?
- Is it to retroactively release students from a financial commitment that they seem unlikely to be able to meet, for their own protection?
- Is it to free up room for other students who have cash in hand?
- Is it to reduce the burden on the staff to do collections efforts if students never pay?
- Is it some or all of the above?

SAMPLE *purpose*

Academic Standing Policy

The goal of this policy is to ensure all students benefit from high-quality learning, and that faculty and staff use early identification, meaningful recovery planning, and proactive advising to ensure equitable support for students' academic progress.

Imagine you are the Bursar in the example above. If you know what the policy is intended to do, you will make specific choices about its implementation. For instance, if it is meant to protect students, you might do more proactive communications as the deadline approaches, or adopt a payment plan option. If the goal was instead to reduce the burden of collections efforts, you might take a more risk-averse approach and drop students from courses if they give any sign of financial insecurity. In the first example, the metric used for evaluation might be the number of students with accounts that are more than 6 months delinquent. In the second, success might be measured instead by the hours spent by staff on collections efforts.

DEFINITIONS

Higher education, like many industries, has a lot of specialized jargon and acronyms that hold meaning for people working in the field but are largely inaccessible to students. For this reason, it is critical that terms be defined within the policy in plain, clear, and explicit language, and acronyms should always be spelled out the first time they are used.

Definitions are also helpful for the economy of language and ease of reading. It would be inadequate to include industry jargon without defining it, but it is completely inefficient to describe the term every time it appears in the policy rather than calling it by a defined name. For example, it is much easier to define "gateway math course" in a definitions section and then use that term throughout a developmental education policy, instead of saying "the first credit-bearing mathematics course a student takes that fulfills program requirements for mathematics for their selected program of study" over and over again.

SAMPLE *definitions*

CPL Policy

"**Credit for Prior Learning**" refers to credit hour(s) awarded for the demonstration of learning gained through previous work, military service, or other activities that are not college coursework.

"**Employer agreement**" refers to a formal understanding between [Institution name] and an unaffiliated for-profit or non-profit organization through which [Institution name] automatically awards credit hour(s) to students who have completed a training program with that organization.

"**Performance standard**" means a score or measure at or above which a student is considered to have successfully demonstrated learning.

"**Portfolio**" refers to a collection of evidence of a student's prior learning. Such evidence may include, but is not limited to, expanded resumes, essays, and examples of produced work.

"**Standard Examination**" refers to an examination administered by a third party that is accessible to students regardless of their enrollment at [Institution name].

SHALLS + MAYS

The real meat of the policy lies in this section. For a document to qualify as a policy, it must articulate what is required to happen and what is allowed to happen in a given situation.

"Shall" statements set forth requirements. These may also present as "must" or "will" statements within a policy. For example, a placement policy might state that the institution shall notify the student of their mathematics and English placement results within two weeks of administering the exam, or that a student must complete placement testing before enrolling in courses.

"**May" statements authorize people to take particular actions if they so choose.** For example, the same placement policy might state that a student may appeal their placement result to the head of the mathematics department (but they certainly don't have to).

Note that the negative of these statements is also important. When a policy says a person "shall not," "may not," or "shall refrain from" taking a particular action, the result is the same – they can't do it. These statements are important if there are particular actions an institution wishes to explicitly forbid. A code of conduct policy, for example, will be full of these: students shall not consume alcohol on campus, may not sexually harass another student, shall refrain from destroying personal property, etc.

There are two elements of content that belong in the "shall" section, but are often overlooked:

- *Reporting and Evaluation Requirements.* Given that a strong policy has an explicit purpose statement, it follows that it should also have a mechanism to ensure that the policy design and its implementation are achieving the desired results. The "shalls" of a policy should include some basic parameters to drive evaluation and public or internal reporting. This language should not be overly prescriptive or detailed, but instead should set the expectation for periodic reporting and evaluation and establish accountability for completing it. The policy may state which office is responsible and how frequently the evaluation occurs. Other details can be reserved for procedural documentation, as described in the following section.

- *Communications Requirements.* One of the most common reasons that implementation of a policy falls short is inadequate communication. Strong policy will establish minimum communications thresholds: questions that will be answered, when they will be answered, and who will be responsible for answering them. Like the reporting and evaluation requirements, this language should not be overly prescriptive, but rather set an overall expectation that communication will occur.

SAMPLE *shalls + mays*

CPL Policy

Methods.

[Institution name] **shall accept** the following methods of credit for prior learning.

- Standard examinations.
- Portfolios.
- Employer agreements.

Limitations.

Students **may receive** up to 24 credit hours through a combination of the methods listed in the previous section.

Applicability.

Credit for prior learning earned through the methods listed in this policy **shall satisfy** general education and degree requirements in the same manner as equivalent coursework. Credit for prior learning awarded by other accredited postsecondary institutions **shall be accepted** for credit and applied to general education and degree requirements in the same manner as credit for prior learning awarded by [Institution name].

Advising.

[Institution name] **shall advise** students about the opportunity to receive credit for prior learning through multiple channels.

Support.

The Office of Credit for Prior Learning Support **shall support** students with completion of credit for prior learning.

Evaluation.

The Office of Institutional Research **shall annually evaluate** the effectiveness of this policy.

the power of policy:
HIDDEN UPCHARGES

A Room Without a View

Stella loves live music, has a limited budget, and is 4'11" - far shorter than the average height for women in the United States at 5'4", and definitely shorter than the average height for men, which is 5'9". Many of the music venues in her city offer a large "standing room only" area with a few premium seats that have direct stage views. If she does not shell out extra money for one of these premium seats, her experience is far different from her taller peers. Instead of seeing the stage, she sees strangers' backs and shoulders. When she finally finds the *exact right spot* and cranes her head to glimpse the lead singer's face, inevitably someone in front of her moves or starts swaying to the beat.

Another concert-goer, a 6'5" gentleman, will have unobstructed views and go home without a stiff neck and without paying a dollar more than the general admission price. The choice to arrange a concert venue this way and the policy that charges extra for premium seats places a hidden upcharge on shorter attendees to achieve the same experience others enjoy for free.

The Price of Pace

Institutions charge tuition one of two ways: per credit hour, or in a flat-rate band for a certain number of credits (e.g., 12-18). Jordan attends a college that charges a flat, or banded rate. They are determined to graduate with their bachelor's degree in four years, and know from a state campaign that they need to take 15 credits per term to do so. Their tuition bill is the same regardless of whether they take four classes or five, so they pursue the on-time path and pay the same as every other full-time student.

Val has also heard the state messaging around the importance of 15 credits and wants to graduate on time, but her institution charges by the credit hour, which means that she has to pay extra for the fifth class that will keep her on that pace. She isn't receiving financial aid, so the full cost of that comes out of pocket. The on-time pace is a hidden upcharge in the short term (even though the long-term expense of delayed graduation is even greater!).

Entities providing financial aid also have two structures: They either give a flat dollar amount, regardless of course load, or they pay the full tuition bill, meaning students taking more courses in per-credit tuition structures get more aid. If Val were receiving financial aid, the structure of that aid could either eliminate her upcharge, by covering the full tuition bill, or retain it, if Val only receives a fixed amount based on 12 credits.

POLICY VS. PROCEDURE

POLICY VS. PROCEDURE

Policy can be very difficult to change. Ironically, most institutions have a detailed policy about how to change policy. This process typically has multiple required steps - reviews, sign-offs, and committee votes. Because policy is so critical to student outcomes, it is appropriate that institutions undergo any changes thoughtfully and with multiple layers of accountability.

The "stickiness" of institutional policy also makes it an important sustainability tool. Institutional policy frequently outlasts institutional leadership changes, education trends, and swings in political dynamics at the state and federal level. Ensuring that student-focused reforms are enshrined in policy, therefore, works to sustain the approach.

However, there are many aspects of policy implementation that need to be much more agile than this process allows. Professionals responsible for the day-to-day implementation of a policy should be encouraged to innovate and to watch for unintended consequences and opportunities for greater efficiency or effectiveness. If too many details are baked into the policy language itself, it can stifle the student-ready practice of continuous improvement. Institutions must be intentional about what should be in the policy, and what can exist in a process manual or procedural guide.

Policy answers Who, What, When, and Why. It establishes a purpose and articulates the intended outcomes of the policy. It specifies to whom the policy applies and who is responsible for its administration. It contains effective dates and deadlines. And ultimately, it describes what is required of students, faculty, and staff.

Procedure answers How. It provides guidance on the staff processes, templates, agreements with other entities, communications collateral, evaluation methodology, and other details that are needed to implement the policy, but inappropriate for inclusion within it.

SAMPLE *policy*

Admissions Policy

- **Who**: Applicants, Admissions professionals
- **What**: Required application materials, minimum thresholds for admissions
- **When**: Priority deadline, final application deadline, decision deadline
- **Why**: Ensure the composition of the student body fuels the institution's mission of diversity, academic excellence, and economic mobility

SAMPLE *procedure*

Admissions Procedure

- Content of the admissions page on the institution's website
- Information that must be submitted on the application
- Data validation process with outside groups (high schools, College Board and ACT, etc.)
- Rubric for grading essays
- Text and formatting of the acceptance letter and denial letters

By separating policy and procedure, institutions can ensure that the overall purpose of the policy is safeguarded with integrity and sustained, while allowing for innovation, efficiency, continuous improvement, and a relentless focus on students and their experiences.

Additional examples are offered in the following table:

Policy Language The WHO, WHAT, WHEN, + WHY	Procedure Document Content The HOW
The office of institutional research shall annually report the number of students passing gateway math and English courses, with disaggregations by race.	• Data field names • Cohort definitions • Reporting format/template • Race categories used
Every student shall be advised of the opportunity to participate in guided self-placement.	• Who is responsible for the outreach • Email/text language used • Advising protocols
Students with a high school grade point average of less than 2.6 shall co-enroll in a support course while enrolled in the gateway course.	• Process for obtaining high school transcript • Where high school GPA is stored • Means for those doing placement to obtain high school GPAs

the power of policy:
MISALIGNED MOTIVATIONS

On Thin Ice

Roberto loves figure skating, and routinely tunes in to watch international competitions. Sometimes, he sees scores that don't seem quite right - how could another country's skater score higher than the American, when she fell on one of her jumps and the American made no mistakes? Roberto acknowledges that as an American, he may have some bias toward the athletes from his country. But he also questions whether judges have some bias of their own. In fact, data lend evidence to Roberto's suspicions. Dartmouth economics professor Eric Zitzewitz analyzed 15 years of scoring data and found consistent nationalist bias from all countries, advantaging their own country's athletes by as much as four-tenths of a point (Pilon, et al., 2018).

So if it has been proven that a nationalist scoring differential exists, why has it not been addressed and resolved? In part, it is due to policy that does not protect against it. Judges are not prohibited from scoring competitors from their own country. The judges are also selected by their own country, rather than the International Skating Union, and many of those judges hold leadership positions in their own country's skating organizations. Scoring scandals are undeniably part of the sport's history, but until there is a substantial change to the policy of judging, Roberto will likely just have to deal with some puzzling scores.

A Family Affair

Higher education has a practice that is unique to colleges and universities but commonplace within: the practice of "spousal appointments." Since so many academics find themselves partnered with other academics, and changing jobs often means changing cities, institutions sweeten the pot for selected candidates by promising their spouse a position as well.

One institution discovered that the presence of spouses working at the same institution created uncomfortable situations for students facing academic dishonesty charges because of the roles each one filled. The policy stated that the Dean or the Chair of a department adjudicated appeals. In numerous cases, this individual was the spouse of someone teaching in the same department. As a result, an instructor could flag a student for academic dishonesty, and the student would have to appeal that decision to their instructor's spouse. Who is that Dean likely to believe? Their life partner, or a student they haven't met?

ROUTINES OF A MODEL INSTITUTION

ROUTINES OF A MODEL INSTITUTION

This report has so far focused on the technical components of policy: different types, components of strong policy, and the difference between policy and procedure. This section, by contrast, focuses on behavior as it relates to policy - in three stages, from policy development through enactment and into future years. What do institutions do to cultivate an equitable policy environment for its students?

These eight routines represent excellent institutional capacity in the area of policy.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK
Research best practice, understand your own students' outcomes, and set evidence-based goals.

SOLICIT DIVERSE FEEDBACK
Don't make policy in a vacuum. Proactively reach out to people with an interest in the policy - including those who will implement it and the students affected by it.

COMMUNICATE COMPREHENSIVELY
Ensure that actionable information about a policy change is communicated to a variety of stakeholders through a variety of channels.

SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION
Map out implementation steps, ask implementers what support they need, and trust what they say. Dedicate the resources necessary to implement the policy with fidelity.

PRACTICE EQUITABLE ENFORCEMENT
Determine how to equitably enforce all institutional policy and continue to monitor its impact.

EVALUATE IMPACT
Revisit goals with disaggregated student outcomes data, complemented by surveys and interviews to understand true impact.

REFRESH YOUR KNOWLEDGE BASE
Continue to analyze the policy against the most up-to-date research, current institutional outcome data, and case studies from peer institutions.

CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVE
Make it clear that regular updates to the process around the policy are not only allowed, they are expected.

During Policy Development

DO YOUR HOMEWORK
Higher education leaders benefit from a wealth of research about what strategies and curricular designs increase students' likelihood of success. Before creating or revising a policy, a model institution with excellent policy capacity will:

- Conduct a thorough review of the available data and research relevant to the policy under development - and not automatically dismiss a study if it comes from a different institution size or type, or a different region of the country.
- Work with their institutional research office to query and analyze their own data, disaggregated in myriad ways, related to the outcome the policy seeks to address.
- Sets ambitious goals for the impact of the policy on the desired outcomes.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK, CONTINUED

The data used throughout these processes may be narrowly focused, impacted directly by the policy, or may be more global. Global metrics are influenced by more factors than just the policy, but would be expected to improve if the policy works as intended.

Here are two examples of these differing types of metrics related to policy:

Example: Developmental Education Reform
- **Discrete goal:** Increase percentage of students placed in a college-level course
- **Global goal:** Increase fall-to-spring retention

Example: Satisfactory Academic Progress
- **Discrete goal:** Increase percentage of students meeting SAP requirements
- **Global goal:** Decrease average unmet need

Armed with the most relevant and up-to-date postsecondary research along with contextual data from the institution itself, model institutions craft evidence-based, data-informed policy that has a stronger chance of making it through the policymaking process and achieving the institution's goals.

SOLICIT DIVERSE FEEDBACK

Too often, policy is written in a vacuum. A small committee, or sometimes even a single individual, creates a new policy and only vets it with the few people who can stand in the way of its adoption. When this occurs, it represents several missed opportunities:

- The chance to make the policy stronger by incorporating diverse perspectives, including students.
- The opportunity to adjust policy based on expertise of those who will administer it day-to-day, avoiding unintended consequences.
- An early opportunity to broadly communicate about the policy, so that stakeholders understand its goals and are not caught flat-footed when it's implementation time.

Model institutions avoid these pitfalls by soliciting diverse feedback as part of the policymaking process. Specifically, these institutions:

- Reach out to campus professionals with a wide variety of roles, including student-facing, front-line staff.
- Incorporate the voices of students, especially those impacted by the policy. That likely means going beyond the SGA office to find affected students - those who have been placed in developmental courses, flagged for academic dishonesty, started an admissions application but never completed it, etc.
- Ensure that the feedback process is representative of the demographics of the student population, specifically seeking out the voices of marginalized students whose lived experience is crucial to the creation of good policy.
- Provide a safe space for people to share their perspectives, with facilitators who actively listen and assume good intentions.
- Commit to and follow through on making adjustments to the policy based on feedback.

SOLICIT DIVERSE FEEDBACK, CONTINUED
This routine requires intentionality to ensure that those who are providing feedback represent diverse, intersectional identities. Marginalized populations, in particular, may view policy very differently than those who share privileged identities with the policy's author(s).

When collecting this feedback, model institutions provide a safe space for people to share their opinions. They listen actively. They assume that skeptics have good intentions and that their concerns are legitimate and should be addressed. Finally, they make adjustments. Nothing conveys that "you were heard" more than when someone takes your advice - and those who are heard and who help shape the policy are typically more invested in its adoption and success.

After Policy Enactment

COMMUNICATE COMPREHENSIVELY
There are many campus stakeholders who will need to do something different once a policy change takes effect - advisors, administrative offices, faculty, and students. They don't need a detailed account of the full policymaking process, but they do need to know a few key things. For students, this is simply what it means for them and what they need to do in response. For campus professionals, the key information includes:

- What is the "why" behind the change?
- How do I need to do my job differently?
- How do I talk about this with students?

The answers to these questions will be different for different types of professionals. That is why model institutions:

- Differentiate their audiences for the purposes of communicating policy changes.
- Provide action-oriented professional development and training, when needed. (*Read more on this in the next section.*)
- Work with the communications professionals on campus to develop asset-based, key talking points for student interactions and other student-facing communications.

> **Creating different messages for different audiences allows communications to have brevity and specificity at the same time - which everyone with an overflowing inbox appreciates. When they don't have that, the best-laid implementation plans fall apart in practice, because the extended implementation team does not have the information it needs to make it succeed.**

Without parameters, campus stakeholders may develop their own messaging which is counterproductive to the real reason for the policy. This is especially true if social media messaging will be used as a messaging tool.

Intentional focus on communications is a key component to ensuring implementation of policy with fidelity and best equipping campus professionals to make the policy work for students.

☑ SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION

Within postsecondary institutions, changing the status quo in response to a new policy can be quite a heavy lift. Faculty and staff may need professional development. Web content and other student-facing material may need to be updated. Facilities may need to be reoriented. Teaching assignments and course schedules may need to be adjusted. And all of this requires resources.

To ensure their plans lead to sustainable action, model institutions:

- Map out implementation steps for all who are involved or need to be informed.
- Solicit and trust the professional opinions of the implementers when determining the resources needed to enact the prescribed changes.
- Provide the appropriate resources to all relevant professionals and departments to ensure success.

> **POLICY** *in action*
>
> An institution was seeking to increase inclusion and belonging, and as part of that effort, adopted a policy that set a high standard of DEI commitment for vendors, including restaurants in the cafeteria. Some of the existing providers did not meet those standards, so the implementation of the policy included phasing those vendors out, seeking bids for replacement vendors, evaluating those bids, selecting new vendors, and facilitating the move-out and move-in processes. Passing the policy was one thing - bringing it to life was a totally different ball game, and required substantial time and effort from the implementation team.

Just like lapses in communication, lack of support for implementation has the potential to undermine the intent of a policy and frustrate those charged with its administration. Listening to professionals about their needs and providing at least basic levels of support goes a long way toward a policy's success.

☑ PRACTICE EQUITABLE ENFORCEMENT

It is only worth establishing policy if there are assurances that the policy will be followed - and equitably enforced when it is not. Higher education professionals are apt to enforce policies that have a process associated with it, such as the code of conduct or Satisfactory Academic Progress. However, enforcement of policies can - and often does - break down in two ways:

- The institution may fail to establish an enforcement mechanism. Outside of higher education, this might look like airline safety regulations without a TSA screening station.
- The individuals that operate the enforcement mechanism may not do so equitably. An analogy would be a criminal judge that is routinely more lenient with defendants charged with "white-collar" crimes.

Higher education leaders operate in a complex environment with shared governance, departmental autonomy, and administrative siloes, and as a result, can overlook the necessary functions of enforcement of policy and accountability for those enforcing it.

Model institutions, however, do not shy away from this challenge. They:
- Commit to consistent enforcement of all institutional policies.
- Ensure there are position/role(s) named in each policy that are ultimately responsible for its implementation and enforcement.
- Pressure-test the policy's enforcement to ensure it is equitable for students and other stakeholders. *(See the section of evaluation on the next page).*

Strong institutional policy will lay out the "why," "who," "what," and "when." It will also specify the professional (by position, not name) who is ultimately responsible for achieving the "why" of the policy - and by extension, holding accountable all who work on its implementation. Model institutions combine this structural component with the practice of accountability to achieve the highest levels of equity and student success.

In Future Years

✓ EVALUATE POLICY'S IMPACT

Institutions collect and store a lot of data. However, the collection of focused data to track policy outcomes is fairly uncommon. Institutions likely have records - files from academic dishonesty cases, copies of successful and unsuccessful admissions applications, printouts of students' scores on exams that grant credit for prior learning, etc. However, an institution having records does not mean that it has usable data. Most institutions cannot easily answer questions about the impact of a specific policy, and especially cannot quantify disparities based on race, age, income, and other demographics. Notable exceptions are in the area of admissions, and financial aid policies that stem from federal regulations and require federal reporting.

Model institutions that champion evaluation and continuous improvement routinely:

- Create basic databases that track policy outcomes (*more on this to follow*).
- Spend time and effort to understand the ongoing impact of each policy and report those results to institutional leaders.
- Use data to hold themselves accountable for each policy's "why."

What should be included in a basic database? Every student who interacted with the policy should have a record in the basic database that includes what happened to them at key points in the process. (These data should be disaggregated by key student characteristics.) A database like this makes it easy to run statistics and answer questions about the true impact of the policy. This is particularly important for the situational policies that tend to rely more on professional discretion.

Example: Registration "Purge"

The institution has a policy that students who have outstanding bursar balances after the second week of classes are dropped from their courses and only able to re-register once their balance is settled.

The Basic Database for a Registration "Purge" Policy Review

Record ID	Outstanding Balance as of "Purge" Date	Balance resolved (Y/N)	If yes, date	Re-registered (Y/N)	If yes, date	Number of course changes required	Race	DOB	Pell (Y/N)

This database answers these questions:

- What is the average balance of students who are dropped from their classes?
- How long, on average, does it take students to resolve their balance after being dropped from their courses?
- What percentage of students are resolving their balances in time to re-register?
- Of those, what percentage actually do re-register?
- Are students generally able to get the same courses when they re-register or are they having to find alternate courses?
- Do any of these answers differ based on race? Age? Pell status?

Tracking this level of data will inevitably take time and effort. However, it is the only way for institutions to ensure that their policies are achieving the intended outcomes, and that they are resolving inequity, rather than contributing to it.

✓ REFRESH YOUR KNOWLEDGE BASE

During policy creation, model institutions rely on published research and institutional data, as previously discussed. But they do not stop there. Researchers and practitioners at these institutions continue to uncover more insights and strategies that help institutions achieve more equitable outcomes.

Model institutions ensure their policy is perpetually based on up-to-date knowledge, because they intentionally:

- Stay abreast of the latest research and ensure it continues to inform their policy efforts.
- Routinely review the language used in the policy to maintain culturally sensitive terminology.
- Compare their policy outcomes with other institutions that have focused on achieving similar outcome improvements.

Example: Developmental Education Reform

In the early days of developmental policy reform efforts, a number of models were tested through pilot programs. These included technology-based emporium models, consolidating sequential developmental courses into one semester or year, and the corequisite model that places students directly in a gateway course with aligned support in the same term. Fifteen years later, these models have been sufficiently tested and the evidence base has evolved, and it is now clear that the corequisite model outperforms the other models that emerged in those early experiments (Keadle, 2022; Vandal, 2019). An institution that amended its developmental education policy in the early 2000s would likely make changes to it, based on the research base that exists in 2023.

☑ CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVE PROCEDURES

In the previous section, we discussed the importance of keeping procedures separate from policy so that they can be routinely updated. It was implied in that section, but we will state directly now, that it is critically important to do so. Campus professionals learn from experience. They benefit from the fresh eyes of new team members. They see what resonates with students and what doesn't. They identify common missteps that modified procedures could address.

To operate as a learning organization that continuously improves, model institutions:

- Create a structure and a cadence for making continual procedure updates.
- Make it clear to those involved that updates are not simply allowed, they are expected to be made whenever there is room for improvement.

Procedures shouldn't be changed for the sake of changing, but a culture of continuous improvement will naturally lead to adjustments over time, as institutions strive to be student-centered and relentlessly focused on equitable outcomes.

DIGGING DEEPER

Policy in the Classroom
Even with the most equitable, exemplary institutional policies in place, academic freedom ensures that course instructors and department chairs are policymakers in their own right. A course syllabus is essentially a policy document, laying out expectations and requirements for students along with consequences for not meeting them. Departments might require a departmental exam for foundational courses and have the ability to establish required courses and acceptable electives. Institutions that engage in policy review should also encourage faculty, department chairs, and deans to apply the principles and recommendations in this paper to their own policymaking, particularly for those structural and situational policies that directly impact students and their likelihood of success. Or, for an even more systematic approach, the institution could create standards for classroom policy, to the extent that it does not interfere with academic freedom.

CONCLUSION

Policy is power. It can establish expectations and compel action. It guides how campus professionals do their work, the choices afforded to students, and the actions required of them. It can either resolve inequities based on race, income, age, and other factors, or it can exacerbate them. It can be the difference between students completing their educational program or stopping short, between having a glide path or a series of struggles.

Institutions have an opportunity and an obligation to improve their capacity to enact, implement, and continuously improve their policies. When they consider the different types of policy, incorporate all the necessary components, separate policy from procedure, and employ the routines of a model institution, they will undoubtedly become more equitable, inclusive, and transformed institutions.

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