IMPLEMENTING EQUITY POLICIES IN ILLINOIS HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The Illinois Equity in Attainment Initiative

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Executive Summary

The Partnership for College Completion (PCC) was founded to "advance equity in higher education" by supporting colleges and universities to improve college completion for Black, Latinx, and Pell-eligible students—those groups that experience persistent disparities in completion. Simultaneously, PCC engages in state policy reform to bring about systems-wide change. Begun in 2018, the Illinois Equity in Attainment Initiative (ILEA) is its flagship initiative, designed to partner with Illinois colleges and universities to assist them in narrowing their college completion gaps.

Promising new research suggests improving equity in college completion requires an explicit focus on race, attention to organizational change, commitment to equity-focused policies and plans, and cross-institutional partnerships to help manifest change. Drawing from this research, ILEA and its partner institutions developed and implemented public-facing equity plans to improve graduation rates for their Black, Latinx, and Pell-eligible students.

This study examines how the ILEA collaborative institutions confronted and negotiated structural barriers inhibiting graduation for these historically marginalized groups.

Program Achievements

The program managed several notable accomplishments, including:

- The ILEA collaborative achieved **remarkable buy-in** from member institutions: 24 out of 25 member schools created public-facing plans.
- Schools **embraced strategic planning and using data to make decisions**. Member schools disaggregated data by race and employed equity data management strategies.
- PCC has served as an **important equity accountability partner**, helping schools create and implement plans through the pandemic.
- **Presidential commitment to equity matters.** Schools with more engaged presidents and leadership teams communicated higher rates of success with their equity policies.
- ILEA-sponsored **networking and professional development opportunities** helped: Schools shared best practices and learned from each other—using the time to adopt, implement, and stay committed to equity goals and troubleshoot problems.

Future Considerations

Those studying equity in college completion in the future should consider the following:

- Schools already on an equity "journey" prior to joining ILEA made more progress on implementing their equity plan.
- Turnover at PCC and in schools hampered implementation.
- ILEA equity plan guidance and coaching was best suited for schools who already had staff with data expertise and training.
- Making comparisons between Black and white students and Latinx and white students was most appropriate for predominantly white institutions.
- PCC's policy arm caused some problems for ILEA member institutions. Schools often disagreed with PCC's state-level policy efforts.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ii

Executive Summary iv

- Program Achievements iv
- Future Considerations iv

Introduction 1

Partnership for College Completion 2

- Illinois Equity in Attainment Initiative 2

Study Overview 5

- Research Questions 5

Finding: PCC's Equity Plan Guidance 6

- The Equity Plan Process 6

Finding: Document Analysis of ILEA Equity Plans 9

- Equity Plan Strengths and Weaknesses 9
- Equity Plan Usefulness 11

Finding: ILEA's Programmatic Strengths and Challenges 13

- Programmatic Strengths 13
- Programmatic Challenges 13
- Benefits of ILEA Membership 14
- Directing Resources Toward Partner Colleges and Universities 14
- Coaching 15
- Peer Support and Knowledge 16

Finding: ILEA as a Facilitator of Change 17

- ILEA Policy Implementation 17
- Summary of ILEA Policy Implementation 25

Discussion: Contributions to Reducing Racial Inequality 26

Conclusion 28

- Bright Spots 28
- Considerations 29

References 30
Appendix A. Policy Definitions 32
Appendix B. List of Participating Schools 33
Appendix C. Reported Equity Plan Policies by Institution 34
Appendix D. Study Methodology 36
Appendix E. Study Timeline 37

List of Tables

Table 1. College and University Equity Plan Compliance with PCC Guidance 9
Table 2. Percentage of Partner Colleges and Universities Reporting Identified Equity Plan Policies 10
Table 3. Number of Interviews Conducted 36

Introduction

Despite decades of efforts, racial equity in higher education remains unrealized. However, **promising new research suggests that improving equity in college completion requires an explicit focus on race, in addition to attention to organizational change, commitment to equity-focused policies and plans, and cross-institutional partnerships that can help manifest change** (Bensimon, 2005; Harris & Bensimon, 2007). This study builds on previous work by investigating the creation and implementation of college and university equity policies and practices and the ways that facilitated collaboratives can foster equitable change.

In a move to push for more racial equity in college completion, the Illinois Equity in Attainment Initiative (ILEA) and its partner colleges and universities boldly took on the work of developing and implementing equity plans designed to improve graduation rates for their Black, Latinx, and Pell-eligible students. This report examines how those institutions, working as part of the collaborative, confronted and negotiated structural barriers inhibiting graduation for these named groups. The study examines September 2021 to May 2023; however, ILEA is an ongoing effort and remains active.

With support from the William T. Grant Foundation, researchers at NORC at the University of Chicago and Fordham University independently examined the ILEA collaboration to learn what organizational factors influenced institutional success for these schools and how a facilitated collaborative supported their success. The lessons learned could impact schools across Illinois and the nation.

The Purpose of This Report

This report presents research findings from a study of the implementation of equity policies across ILEA-member higher education institutions.

The report aims to:

- **Provide** study partners, including the Partnership for College Completion, with program feedback.
- **Inform** readers about equity plan development and implementation, policy, and practice collaboratives.
- **Identify** strengths and growth opportunities about PCC's efforts to bring colleges and universities together to jointly improve college completion for Black, Latinx, and Pell-eligible students.
- **Reflect** on implementation successes and challenges.

Partnership for College Completion

Established in Illinois in 2016, the Partnership for College Completion (PCC) is a relatively young organization with a mission to address disparities in college access and degree completion based on race and income. It has played a pivotal role in initiating essential conversations about higher education equity in the state, bringing attention to data revealing lower degree attainment rates for Black, Latinx, and Pell-eligible students compared to their white and non-Pell-eligible counterparts. This effort involves raising awareness and fostering discussions among higher education institutions, their leadership, and state lawmakers.

Notably, PCC distinguishes itself as one of the few organizations providing support to colleges and universities in their pursuit of equity initiatives while concurrently advocating state-level higher education policies to increase equity.

The establishment of PCC aligns with growing state interest in increasing college graduation rates, providing an opportunity to amplify and expand local efforts focused on improving student persistence and completion rates. The organization is actively involved in developing and promoting regional strategies in line with national, statewide, and local initiatives to enhance college completion rates. Serving as an advocate for college access and completion, PCC takes the lead in initiating, supporting, and disseminating research and best practices that deepen the understanding of regional college completion efforts and workforce trends.

Moreover, PCC actively raises awareness among various stakeholders, including higher education institutions, business leaders, students, and families, encouraging them to prioritize college completion. Additionally, the organization provides incentives, offers support, and celebrates the ambitious efforts of higher education institutions to enhance systems and support mechanisms, ensuring the success of all undergraduate students.

Who Is PCC?

The Partnership for College Completion (PCC) is an independent, Illinois-based not-for-profit dedicated to addressing racial and income-based inequity in higher education in Illinois.

Begun in 2016, PCC advocates for state policy to improve college access, affordability, and completion. PCC also partners with state colleges and universities to improve college-going for Black, Latinx, and Pell-eligible students.

Illinois Equity in Attainment Initiative

PCC established the Illinois Equity in Attainment Initiative (ILEA) in 2018 as the organization's flagship initiative designed to focus efforts to eradicate the disparities in college completion among a coalition of two-year and four-year, public and private nonprofit colleges and universities throughout the state of Illinois.

After traveling around the state and engaging in information sessions to highlight its goals, PCC recruited 25 colleges and universities, encompassing both public and private bachelor's degree–granting institutions and community colleges of various sizes. These institutions collectively enroll 40 percent of all undergraduates in Illinois, with a significant proportion of the overall Latinx (68 percent) and Black (42 percent) undergraduates.

ILEA operates as a facilitated policy and practice collaborative to bolster members' efforts in achieving college completion and increasing student success. Members **commit publicly** to eradicating racial and socioeconomic disparities in college completion and developing plans outlining both policy goals and strategies to accomplish these goals by 2025. Partners commit to setting annual growth targets and providing regular progress reports to PCC, ensuring transparency and accountability in their pursuit of those attainment goals.

What PCC Offers ILEA Member Schools

Dedicated Staff Members. While there have been some changes in personnel, PCC consistently has three staff members dedicated to supporting the ILEA member schools as they continue to implement their equity plans. Each ILEA Equity Program Manager coordinates between eight and nine colleges or universities with whom they communicate regularly. This role serves as a thought partner to institutional leadership and spends time gathering and delivering tailored resources based on each institution's needs and requests.

Coaching, Support, and Opportunities to Gather. PCC offers coaching and support, assisting in the implementation and scaling of effective, evidence-based practices to achieve established targets. School partners are also given several opportunities to attend conferences, workshops, and summits to gain in-depth knowledge about equity issues, best practices, and strategies for implementation. The schools, in turn, agree to engage in active participation in sharing initiatives, such as communities of practice where schools share their findings, challenges, and successes, promoting a collaborative approach to addressing challenges and achieving student success.

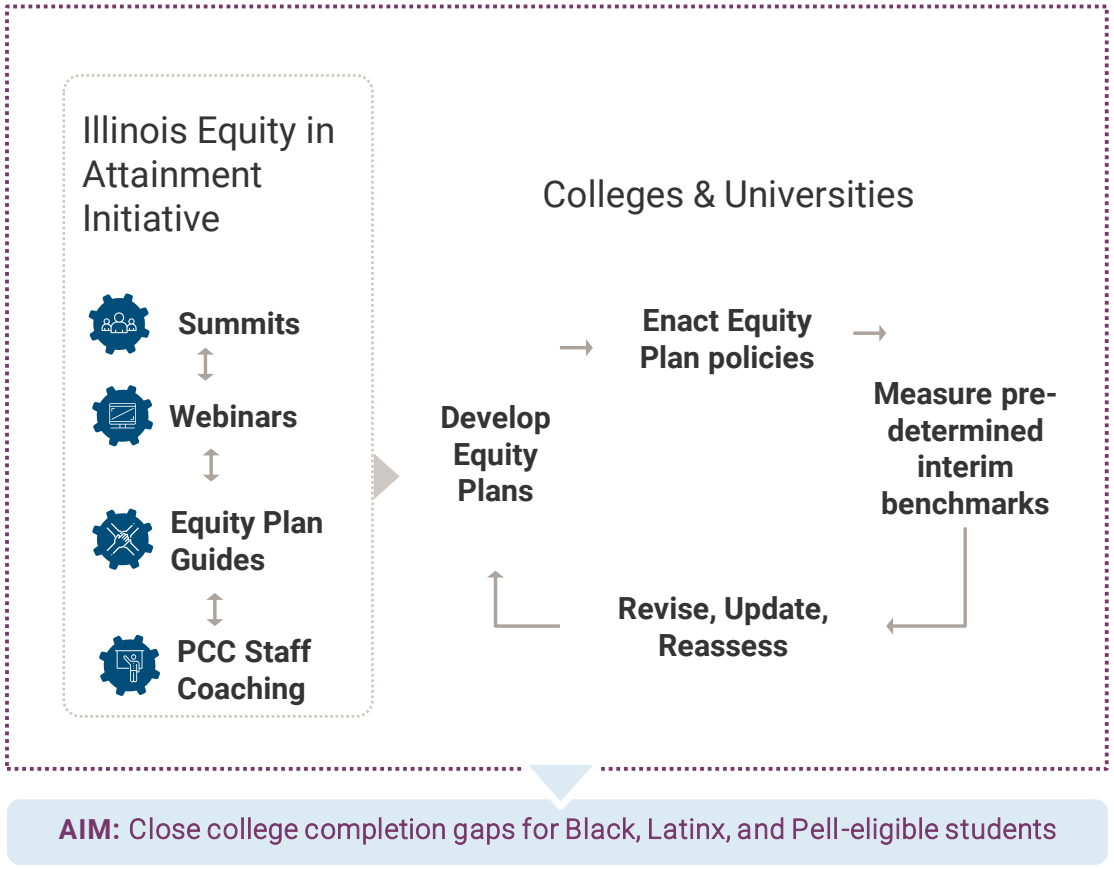
Small Catalyst Grants. PCC also offers its ILEA members opportunities for small catalyst grants of $12,000 to support the implementation of policies identified in their equity plan. To be eligible, ILEA members must have completed a public-facing equity plan, be up to date with data-sharing submissions for the Postsecondary Data Partnership, and complete a short grant application.

ILEA's Theory of Change

ILEA operates from a theory of change that to close gaps in college completion for Black, Latinx, and Pell-eligible students (compared to white, middle-income, and affluent students) institution-level action and responsibility is necessary, rather than placing the burden to change on the affected students (see Appendix E). To craft this theory, PCC relied upon the existing research base that suggested developing and implementing plans to achieve racial parity in college completion would put these institutions on the path to having larger percentages of their students from these named backgrounds completing college.

Figure 1, below, illustrates our vision for how a successful facilitated collaborative like ILEA operates. We view the efforts of ILEA, including professional development summits, webinars, guidance documents, and ongoing school-wide coaching, to encourage schools to engage in a continuous improvement loop whereby they enact changes, review, and then modify their efforts in response to their outcomes.

Figure 1. NORC-Fordham Illustration of ILEA's Theory of Change



Study Overview

Our two-and-a-half-year (September 2021–May 2023) comparative case study design focused on how participation in a partnership resulted in both similar and different actions (e.g., implementation practices, routines, and use of resources).

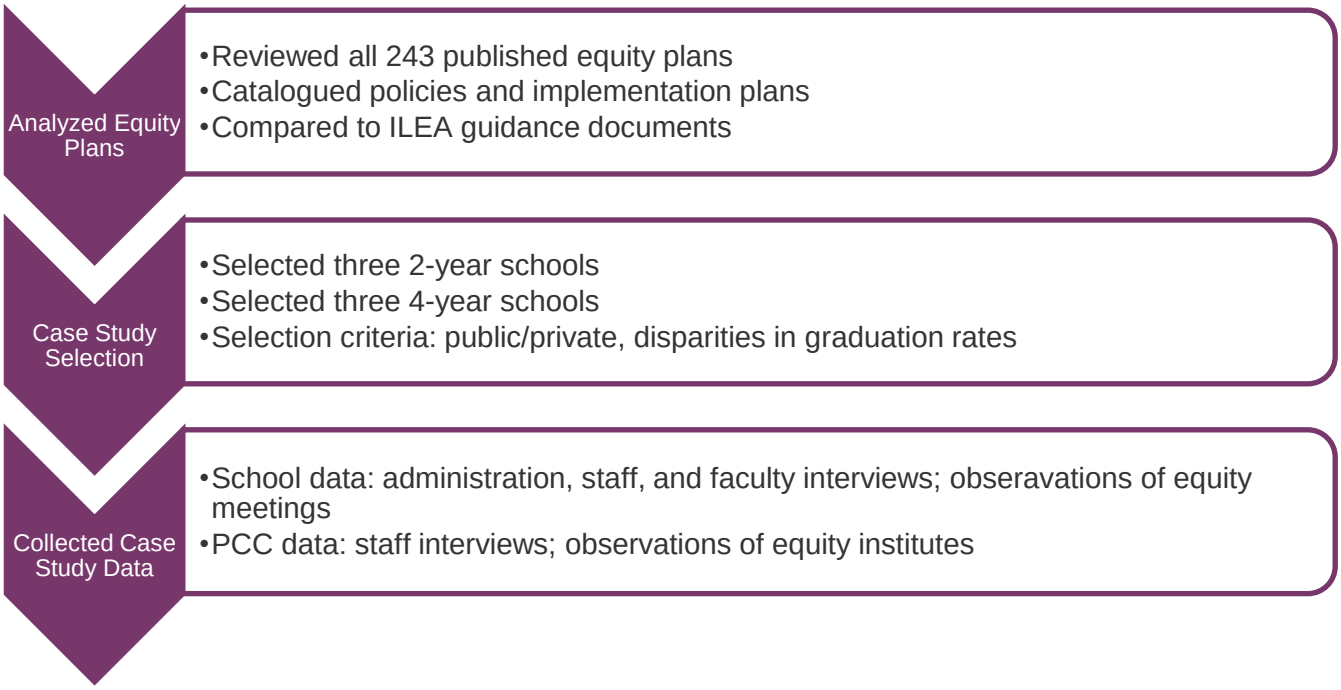
Research Questions

1) How are colleges and universities building racially equitable practices at their institutions?

2) What role does a facilitated collaborative play in fostering racial equity within colleges and universities?

Within these questions, we focused on how PCC engaged with its ILEA-partner institutions and how those institutions responded. Figure 2 shows our data collection and analysis process.

Figure 2. Illustration of Data Collection and Analysis



To investigate, we selected three 2-year and three 4-year schools (see Appendix B for more information about schools). At each selected school, we focused on policy selection, institutional factors that could facilitate or limit the ability to implement the selected policies, and how administrators, faculty, and staff understood equity. We also examined PCC's role in supporting peer-to-peer collaborations and equity policy implementation at these six schools.

We conducted two rounds of interviews: some with people affiliated with ILEA member schools and some with PCC staff members. The first round of interviews sought to understand participants' roles in their schools (or at PCC) and the policies with which they engaged. Second-round interviews asked participants to discuss their rationale for particular equity policies and explain how they accomplish their work.

We also took observational field notes of existing ILEA webinars and ILEA summits. Summits were meant to be in-person, collective learning experiences for all participating institutions. However, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed much of this programming online, where summits were hosted virtually. By fall 2022, summits were once again hosted in person, and we conducted observations of the 2022 and 2023 summits. In addition to summits, we also observed ILEA team meetings with the PCC College and University Partnerships (CUP) staff.

We coded all data, enabling within-school comparisons to provide detail on how different roles within the college or university considered equity policies and racial equity.

Data Sources

- School equity plans (24)
- Interviews with administrators, staff, and faculty (175)
- Interviews with PCC staff (8)
- Observations of school-based equity meetings and PCC-ed equity "summits" (35 hours)

Finding: PCC's Equity Plan Guidance

In the following section, we present findings from analyses of PCC documents and webinars and from interviews with PCC staff members about creating equity plans, describing PCC's vision for ILEA equity plan development.

The Equity Plan Process

PCC wanted equity plans with uniform goals and forms tailored to each school's strengths and history, and its equity plan process was crafted with these goals in mind. Furthermore, PCC was unambiguous and remained consistent with regard to who should be held accountable for college completion—institutions—as well as what groups to focus on (Black, Latinx, and Pell-eligible students) and how schools should close equity gaps by breaking down data, creating a plan, assessing it, and providing funding.

PCC held its inaugural webinar in October 2018 to announce its guidelines for publicly facing equity plans. ILEA members were asked to create five-year plans detailing their strategy to close their college completion gaps. To position colleges and universities—rather than students—as agents of change, PCC urged participating institutions to take responsibility for graduating students by creating policies

that would benefit and increase the college completion rates of their Black, Latinx, and Pell-eligible students. PCC communicated this goal through multiple means, including webinars, an instruction guide, a template, and one-on-one coaching (see Figure 1, above). These objectives and the call for schools to disaggregate data on racial and economic completion gaps were frequently repeated.

Institutional strategies, which form the core of equity plans, explain institutional policy and program initiatives along with the reasoning behind the selected approaches. PCC defined the institutional strategy reform initiative as one that "affects over 50% of the targeted student group that it aims to serve," as opposed to one that supports every student equally.

A Written Framework Guided the Way. PCC encouraged schools to make progress from their exclusive starting point and recommended that schools build on their existing achievements to make incremental improvements rather than trying to meet an external preset benchmark. PCC developed a written framework for the equity plan, and they encouraged member schools to use this. This template included the following elements: an introduction; a signature page; a description of the present and future states of student success by subgroup; a list of institutional strategies to improve the current state; an evaluation plan; a budget; and a timeline (see Figure 3, below). The template also included research and lessons learned from other higher education equity plan initiatives. These guiding documents and recommendations demonstrated PCC's emphasis on institutional reform and held institutions accountable for students' college completion.

Figure 3. Summary of ILEA Equity Plan Guidance

Section	Title	Guidance
1	Introduction	Discuss importance of equity on campus Include school's mission statement Include school's definition of equity and equity statement
2	Current State	Disaggregate school-level data by Black/white; Latinx/white; Pell-eligible/non-Pell-eligible
3	Future Vision	Discuss future aims and policy goals Provide interim benchmarks for achieving goals
4	Institutional Strategies	Describe policies, activities, and practices being implemented or to be implemented that will improve campus-based inequities Categorize by race and income with specific strategies for each group
5	Evaluation Plan	Describe how each strategy will be evaluated annually
6	Budget	Name each strategy in a single-page budget chart, how it would be funded, the sustainability of the funding, and if the funds were new or coming from existing budget lines
7	Signatories	Endorse plan with signatures from a "wide range of college and university stakeholders," including board members, the president, administration, faculty leaders, staff, and student leaders

Note. Figure retrieved from Quinn, J. S., Feldman, R. C, & Miller, S. R. (2024). Equity partnerships, equity policies, equity goals. How Illinois colleges and universities engaged in the policy planning process to achieve racially equitable student outcomes. Manuscript in preparation. NORC at the University of Chicago.

All Guidance Reinforced the Goal. PCC's guidance to its member institutions was clear: to improve college completion rates, strategies needed to be tailored to the identified group. PCC provided examples of existing equity plans from institutions like Evergreen State College and Saint Paul College. All focus was on prioritizing Black, Latinx, and Pell-eligible students. This repeated emphasis underscored the importance of articulating targeted strategies to aid in achieving desired outcomes.

PCC Supported Schools in Finding Their Own Strategies. The instruction guide explained, "The Equity Plan can be more effective by calling out strategies specific to our target student populations" (ILEA Instruction Guide, 2019, p. 7). The equity plan template recommended schools include at least one strategy per target group instead of broader strategies to address all groups. It also included a header for each racial category to encourage tailoring the strategy by identified subgroups. However, PCC did not provide a list of suggested strategies. Instead, they offered trainings on various approaches, many supported by research; brought in experts; and gave justifications for why particular approaches, such as lowering the proportion of students enrolled in remedial courses, should be considered.

PCC Included Ways to Build in Broad Support. PCC wanted plans to be signed off on by leaders across the institution. According to the ILEA Instruction Guide (2019, p. 4), the signature page "documents the critical institutional stakeholders that are invested in the development and execution of the Equity Plan." PCC also recommended including signatures from multiple partners, including board members or trustees, the college president, administrators, faculty leaders, frontline staff, and student leaders.

How PCC Monitored Equity Plan Development

While granting schools considerable latitude, PCC also requested that member institutions assess each identified strategy, describe implementation, and complete annual reports documenting progress. To track outcomes across partner institutions, PCC also bought National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) subscriptions for each school. PCC asked campuses to submit evaluation plans, as well as: 1) a budget narrative outlining responsible parties, and 2) a budget chart outlining how funds would be distributed.

National Student Clearinghouse

NSC provides data to the preponderance of higher education institutions in the United States. Initially designed to track individual students for financial aid purposes, it now houses the most robust dataset on individual student college-going behaviors nationwide.

Finding: Document Analysis of ILEA Equity Plans

In this section, we present findings from document analysis of ILEA equity plans and interviews with ILEA equity team members, highlighting how the submitted equity plans aligned with PCC's vision. Previous research has demonstrated that in order for equity plans to move the needle, they must be equity-minded, use asset-based language to talk about students, have strong structural understandings of race, have policies that name Black and Latinx students as policy recipients, have budgets to carry the policies out, and spread policies across the university to involve student services staff and faculty (Bensimon, 2005; Chase et al., 2020; Ching et al., 2020; Felix & Fernandez Castro, 2018).

We asked how colleges and universities aligned their plans with ILEA guidance and with research recommendations and how plans aligned with each other. To answer these questions, we provide analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the 24 submitted equity plans[1] as they compare to ILEA guidance and the recommendations on equity plan best practices (Bensimon, 2005; Chase et al., 2020; Ching et al., 2020; Felix & Fernandez Castro, 2018). We conclude with ILEA members' reflections on whether and how the process of creating equity plans moved their school closer to closing equity gaps.

Equity Plan Strengths and Weaknesses

Schools generally followed PCC guidelines, creating equity plans and completing most of the sections. It was a noteworthy accomplishment that 22 of the 25 ILEA member institutions submitted public-facing equity plans by the soft deadline in 2021, especially considering that plans were being drafted at the same time as the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in March 2020. Furthermore, over 75 percent of schools finished all sections: creating equity statements, describing their current state, and outlining their objectives in measurable ways.

Table 1. College and University Equity Plan Alignment with PCC Guidance

PCC Equity Plan Guidance	Number of Plans Aligned with Guidance
Equity statement	21
Current state	24
Future vision	23
Institutional strategies	24
Budget	22

[1] Twenty-four of the 25 ILEA schools followed the equity plan template and completed equity plans.

Equity Plan Signatories	Number of Plans with Signatories
Existence of a signature page	22
President	21
Administrator(s)	22
Faculty	13
Trustee(s)	7
Student(s)	4
ILEA core team	24

Note: Twenty-five colleges and universities are ILEA members. Of those 25, 22 submitted equity plans by 2021, and 2 submitted their plan in 2023. We include these 24 equity plans in our analysis. Table adapted from Quinn, J. S., Feldman, R. C, & Miller, S. R. (2024). Equity partnerships, equity policies, equity goals: How Illinois colleges and universities engaged in the policy planning process to achieve racially equitable student outcomes. Manuscript in preparation. NORC at the University of Chicago.

While plans of the participating colleges and universities differed from one another, the described institutional strategies tended to focus on a limited number of issues, such as enhancing academic supports and developmental coursework, offering small-scale financial assistance, establishing welcoming and inclusive environments, recruiting personnel focused on equity, or putting in place faculty professional development. Table 2 shows the percentage of ILEA member schools with policies that fit into the 10 broad categories we found to be most prevalent (definitions are in Appendix A). Policies engaged faculty, staff, administrators, and institutional research teams across campus departments.

Table 2. Percentage of Partner Colleges and Universities Reporting Identified Equity Plan Policies

Equity Plan Policies	ILEA Partners	Two-year Partners	Four-year Partners
Academic support programs	96	94	100
Equity data management	58	59	57
Developmental education	58	53	71
Faculty/staff development programs	88	94	71
Human resources staffing	50	59	29
Institutional procedures and operations	75	82	57
Student financial support	74	63	100
Student identity-based programs	63	59	71
Student transition pathways programs	74	81	57
Student wrap-around supports	54	65	29

Note: There are a total of 24 completed equity plans; 17 completed two-year plans and seven completed four-year plans.

Analyses illuminated a few overarching weaknesses. Specifically, findings show that while colleges and universities embraced ILEA guidance—for the most part including each recommended section in their

equity plan, including documenting their current state and planned instructional strategies—they still struggled with communicating how best to support students in racially explicit ways and how to include robust budgets to support their initiatives.

Institutional Strategies Were Not Robust. Overall, we observed that colleges and universities were least likely to follow PCC and best practice guidance in the institutional strategies section. Partner colleges and universities typically crafted policies designed to help all students improve their outcomes, rather than focusing policies directly on the students of interest. For example, many schools opted to improve their developmental education program by following current best practice: either by reducing the number of courses or altering entrance requirements (e.g., Bailey et al., 2016; Barnett et al., 2020). Because students of color and low-income students tend to concentrate in developmental education, the program may very well improve outcomes for those groups, but the policies themselves tend to not name Black, Latinx, or Pell-eligible students as the beneficiaries, even though the policies were motivated by such discrepancies in completion (Felix & Fernandez Castro, 2018).

Budgets Often Included Too Little Detail. Furthermore, although most schools included budgets in line with PCC guidance, budgets tended not to provide details that suggested their policies would have sustained funding. For example, one school had a budget line for each of its four strategies. However, none of the strategies had a dedicated funding stream after year one. The budget stated "additional funding required in Y2 and beyond" for all four proposed strategies. The college's sustainability plan included "target[ing] additional donors" and "target[ing] portion of base operating funding." Therefore, while it was commendable that the university identified the problem early, the budget did not inspire confidence that the proposed strategies would have sufficient resources to continue beyond the first year of implementation.

Signatures Often Did Not Represent Key Constituencies. Finally, all schools included a signature page and made sure key members of the ILEA core team signed off on the equity plan, but few had signatures from board members or students, two key constituencies.

Equity Plan Usefulness

Although compliance with completing equity plans was high, some member colleges and universities in interviews indicated mixed sentiments about the process and creation of equity plans and the support they received from PCC. Most schools found the process enlivening, suggesting it helped build buy-in among faculty, staff, and administration and helped create shared understandings of equity and sustained accountability. For example, one person described working on the equity plan as a "pleasant experience" and said PCC was "very attentive and responsive," and they are "grateful at how thoughtful they are with convening the [ILEA] group." Another spoke highly of the ability to work with different people across campus: "When you bring a group together that's not typically talking to each

Insight

"When you bring a group together that's not typically talking to each other about these issues, it sharpens us. It sharpens our ability to just discuss equity."

–Interviewee

other about these issues, it sharpens us. It sharpens our ability to just discuss equity." For these ILEA members, creating the plan was as important as the document they produced.

The Pandemic Was a Factor. As most plans were written during Spring 2020, many ILEA members mentioned the pandemic as a factor, with colleges and universities quickly moving to remote work and instruction. We were "just trying to hang on," one person said, explaining that some of what made it into the plan was less a strategic calculation and more of trying to move one more thing off their to-do list. However, in general, there was a strong consensus that planning for equity was essential and that creating equity plans helped schools work toward this shared goal within an accountability framework. On the other hand, there was less consensus on whether the PCC guidance identified the most effective and efficient criteria for doing so for each school's context.

The Regimented Process Constrained Some

Others noted that they felt constrained by the process. For example, one non-predominantly white institution (PWI) indicated its student demographics made them an outlier within ILEA. With a majority Black and Latinx enrollment, they said:

> [For] a lot of our partner institutions, their question of equity is how do we get an equitable representation of the population on campus? How do we increase our underrepresented student population? That's not a problem in [our school]. We're probably overrepresented. Our issues with equity come in with when we talk about retention and completion.

The institution believed that making the preselected comparisons of Black to white, Latinx to white, and Pell to non-Pell would not illuminate dynamics leading to inequity at their institution. ILEA members at this institution believed that PCC's ILEA guidance was best suited to PWIs who were still investing in increasing the population of Black and Latinx students on their campus. "When we got the format," one participant remarked, "it was really formatted for a majority university. If we were to complete it, it wouldn't make any sense." Given that there were only a small (statistically insignificant) percentage of white students at this PWI, disparities in completion rates between Black and white and Latinx and white students were not meaningful.

Another partner institution also found the process limiting, explaining that they had been working on equity issues on their campus for a more extended period and found some of the requirements too rudimentary for their current stage. This institution had two equity plans in play: one for ILEA and another campus-specific one. A participant explained that "the ILEA plan" was essential but "had some restrictiveness compared to what people wanted to see at [their school]." They further explained that they were "writing within the restrictions of ILEA, knowing that there's a broader open equity plan as well." They suggested the ILEA equity plan allowed them to create policies that targeted only the three named groups: Black, Latinx, and Pell-eligible students, while their internal plan freed them to address additional subgroups. While they believed that being part of ILEA and creating an equity plan was necessary, the format provided by PCC did not allow this institution to dive into all the aspects of equity they wanted to tackle.

Finding: ILEA's Programmatic Strengths and Challenges

We asked every respondent at our six focal schools about their relationship with PCC with a goal of assessing how awareness of ILEA had spread throughout the institution. Staff who had participated in the equity planning process were aware of PCC and ILEA, but that knowledge did not extend beyond those people. Many people with whom we spoke are engaged in equity work on their campus but had not heard of ILEA, suggesting that the work may be concentrated within the equity team. That many of these institutions engage in other equity-related collaboratives makes it hard to keep them all straight. As one staff member stated, "I get a little confused between who's with that or who's with ILEA."

To ward off this possible confusion, PCC should consider addressing it preemptively. One respondent suggested that PCC could perhaps send regular "comprehensive" updates that: 1) describe recent successes and initiatives, 2) introduce the staff so school-based personnel know who to turn to, and 3) describe ILEA's key objectives. In addition to clarifying PCC's work, this would also help with those respondents who were unclear about program initiatives.

Focal Schools* (Enrollment; Type)

2-year

Exurban Community College (14,800; HSI)
Illinois Community College (6,100; PBI/HSI)
Suburban Community College (9,400; PWI)

4-year

Illinois Public University (2,300; PBI)
Public State University (14,000; PWI)
Religious Private University (3,000; HSI)

*Pseudonyms; based on 2016 IPEDS

Member colleges and universities identified many ways their institutions were strengthened through partnership with ILEA, as well as some challenges they experienced working with PCC and the other member colleges and universities. Below we outline ILEA programmatic strengths and challenges identified through interviews with focal schools and observations of ILEA meetings and events. **These findings may be particularly relevant to others interested in convening an equity-focused facilitated collaborative of higher education institutions.**

Programmatic Strengths

Cultivated a culture of accountability

Structured opportunities to collaborate, network, and learn from peer institutions

Aggregator of research and best-practices

Programmatic Challenges

Inconsistent coaching

Schools with more resources were also the ones more likely to have the ability to plan strategically

Tension between policy and practice arms

Benefits of ILEA Membership

Institutions joined ILEA for three key reasons:

1) The need to cultivate a culture of accountability—the partnership offered a framework and accountability system for developing and implementing equity plans, aiding institutions in identifying and addressing blind spots in student success and equity work.

2) The opportunity to learn from and collaborate with peers—the partnership provided an unprecedented collaboration between two- and four-year schools, offering the potential to create new, and improve existing, transfer pathways.

3) Participants emphasized the value of joining a partnership that "surveys the wider landscape but then brings it in and personalizes it for your environment."

Directing Resources Toward Partner Colleges and Universities

Meet Schools in Their Reality. Schools appreciated both the ILEA plan guidance and template that helped them craft a plan. For some institutions, this helped "coordinate [the work they were already engaged in] in a thoughtful way," and for other institutions, it pushed them to reflect on institutional practices in new ways. PCC has been thoughtful in working to meet institutions "where they are." For PCC, this meant identifying each school's existing equity policies, capacity to collect, store, and distribute institutional data, and ability to draw staff together to strategically plan. Some institutions had more of these data gathering, sharing, and meeting practices in place prior to ILEA than others. These schools also tended to have higher tax bases. They also tended to be PWIs and schools with a higher percentage of white students and staff.

PCC intentionally set the goal of engaging schools where they are along their equity path, seeking to emphasize growth over a set accountability metric. While this intention was admirable, in practice the ILEA model seemed to favor a certain type of school: those that are better able to use data, meet deadlines, respond to requests, and generally have requisite institutional capacity and data expertise to carry out ILEA tasks.

Insight

While PCC set an intention to engage schools where they are on their equity path, one important finding noted that capacity must also be considered in planning equity work. The ILEA model seemed better positioned to support those schools that are able to:

- Make better use of data.
- Meet deadlines and respond to requests.
- Enjoy requisite institutional capacity and data expertise to carry out ILEA tasks.

Tangible and Intangible Resources Play Important Roles. Resources PCC provides are both tangible, like distributing small grants, and more intangible, like the contacts they can connect with their partner schools through their network. These contacts help further the partners' ILEA work. For

example, at one institution their ILEA coach helped them in securing a consultant to assist with an institutional weakness.

At other institutions, ILEA coaches have been able to provide resources, but maintaining a consistent coaching relationship has proven challenging for PCC. Schools have experienced significant turnover in their ILEA-provided coach, and they note this has made it hard to work with PCC and implement the plan. While they think each coach has been impressive in their own right, the lack of consistency means institutions are constantly bringing their coach up to speed rather than being able to rely on their supports.

Employee Turnover Creates Challenges. The issue with turnover on the PCC side may be one reason for inconsistent communication between ILEA and the partners. One person called ILEA communication “confusing” because emails are delivered to different people at different times. Given the recency of their relationship with PCC, these inconsistencies made it difficult to identify what PCC’s expectations are for participation in ILEA.

Political Advocacy Can Add Confusion About Objectives. In addition to providing coaching and technical support, PCC is also engaged in state-level higher education policymaking around issues of funding, course sequencing, data sharing, and other accountability measures. During the period of study, PCC successfully advocated for legislation that requires Illinois public colleges and universities to submit equity plans to the state and to report how they will ensure that students do not spend undue time in non-credit bearing math and English courses. Schools did not always support PCC’s policy positions and lobbying activities and this sometimes created issues with their trust of PCC coaches and membership in ILEA.

Institutions reported that one of the limitations of working with PCC was a lack of clarity in ILEA’s objectives and goals. While it is clear that equity on college campuses is central, some of the institutions are uncertain if PCC’s agenda and equity goals are in alignment with individual institutions. This came through in the policy agenda PCC advocated for and in a lack of communication.

One president recommended PCC develop a monthly one-pager informing partner institutions about their current aims and actions because while she knew the broad aims of PCC, she was unclear of their ongoing initiatives and felt that socializing the institutions to those efforts would open lines of communication because it would provide status updates.

Coaching

The Level of Engagement Varied. Overall, institutions report appreciating having PCC as a thought partner and having regular coaching sessions. As described in the description of the program, PCC coaches had ongoing relationships with a set of institutions. How often they met with these institutions varied, with cadence dictated by the institution. Institutions benefited from ILEA coaches serving as an initial thought partner, with some feeling they had collaborators, but there were conflicting reports about the level of engagement ILEA staff gave to institutions, and some would have appreciated more continued check-ins and communication.

With significant variation in the frequency of the meetings and topics for discussion, some institutions engaged in both regular and ad hoc meetings to drive their equity agenda forward, while others found it challenging to maintain a regular meeting schedule or know how to prepare for such meetings. An interviewee observed that ILEA served as the "spark" that helped catalyze the process, and while there were check-ins, "it was only for a while and that was it," making them feel left alone in the process. They note, "We could either get flamed on fire or they're going to come back and say, 'Hold on, you went the wrong way.' So that kind of feedback would've been helpful for moving forward to see where we're at with it."

A Relaxed Approach Brought Mixed Reactions. Institutions report having positive interactions with PCC and ILEA. Describing it as "relaxed" compared to other coaching experiences where they have more explicit demands. Instead, institutions think of PCC as a thought partner. Institutions had different opinions of this. Some wanted PCC to be more driving, including more "evidence-based practice talk" in their coaching sessions. But they also recognized that as a no-fee enterprise, they were in no position to make demands. Others, perhaps those further along in the process, thought that engaging with PCC helped them remain accountable to their plan. The following quotes from different schools illustrate this point.

Good How It Is	Could Be Improved
Respondent: Even though I think that we were already doing a lot of things, this really helped us focus ... the work, and help us to be able to figure out how to be more evaluative of the work.... That whole notion of being accountable and us being receptive to being accountable for the work I think has really helped us. *Interviewer*: So institutionalizing or making visible some of the things that you were already doing as an institution? *Respondent*: Absolutely.	I felt like if it had been structured in a way for us to think about doing some planning and before we hang up from this call, we've got next steps like, this is what we are going to walk away with, and this is what we are going to do. And then there's some accountability because when we reconvene, we have to report out on what's been done. I feel like there could have been some accountability built in that would've helped us to not use it as an opportunity to check email, because we knew that we needed to really pay attention so that we could stay on track.

Peer Support and Knowledge

Sharing Physical Space Fostered Collaboration. Partner institutions spoke highly of the ILEA equity summits, appreciating the time for cross collaboration, both at the institutional and cross-institutional levels. One respondent from a two-year institution recognized that these summits were a time when the institution's staff had time together in a room. While it was not time for them have internal planning meetings it "was an opportunity for us all to hear some of the same things, which I think was helpful for the broader change."

The aim of the summits shifted over time as institutions developed and then implemented their equity plan. Initially, speakers included well-known names from the field; later presentations moved toward institutional "how-to" presentations where colleagues from other partner institutions shared how they worked toward improving a strategy area. What remained constant was the summits serving (when they were in-person) as a source for cross-institutional connections. That there were both two-year and

four-year institutions present also mattered, particularly for the two-year institutions who were able to strengthen ties to their four-year transition partners. As one interviewee from a two-year institution said,

> So the opportunity to be engaged in equity conversations with four-year partners in Illinois, who might also be committed to this work and could create seamless transfer pathways perhaps for some of our students. So, I thought that there was potential benefit there and it's additional, more local connections and resources, so there's strength in numbers, and it aligned with the work that we were already doing.

A Local Network Advanced Equity Goals. Another respondent believed that cross-institutional networking allowed their institution to be more strategic in terms of equity plan implementation because it's a "network of other colleges that you have access to." This respondent capitalized on the conference setting to "network with other colleges that were further along with their DEI or diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts ... because we're along a continuum. ... So, I think having that access to that network helps me to kind of be more targeted and be more strategic in how we approach our DEI work." Similarly, another respondent from a different institution used the summit to learn what implementation strategies other institutions were trying and to identify ways they could implement such strategies at their institution.

Institutions recognized the importance of the equity summits and appreciated that ILEA brought big-name speakers to the events. One respondent noted that having these speakers come locally enabled them to bring more people and spread the teachings further, whereas their participation in national organizations meant it was cost and logistically prohibitive to bring many people.

Finding: ILEA as a Facilitator of Change

ILEA Policy Implementation

Following discussions with members of the campus community and a thorough review of school equity plans, the 10 distinct policy "buckets" we pinpointed in Table 2 encapsulate the various dimensions of school equity programs and strategies (see Appendix B for details). The subsequent sections provide an overview of each policy bucket, elucidating the components it encompasses and offering insights into the progress of the equity initiatives across our six focal schools.

Human Resources/Staffing

In examining the human resources/staffing policy bucket, we find that schools are taking measures to increase support for their equity efforts, primarily by working to hire additional personnel. **Schools have**

taken steps to develop task forces or hiring committees designed to hire faculty and staff that reflect their diverse student bodies. Further, many schools are embracing new practices aimed at ensuring equitable hiring and promotion procedures for faculty and staff of color (e.g., removing bias from hiring, instituting shared governance for hiring, developing new standards for evaluations). Most often, schools have dedicated efforts to hiring (or have hired) DEI specialists or officers tasked with guiding school-wide equity efforts and providing direction for the initiatives.

Hiring for diverse representation also inspires positive emotion. Individuals see the current lack of diversity and recognize the necessity. One staff member summed it up this way: “If I have students of color, Black and Brown students, but then my staff and my faculty are not representative of that group, we are broken. So, we need to address some of those issues.”

However, as other scholars have noted (see for example Ahmed, 2012; Dobbin et al., 2011; Hirshfield and Joseph, 2012; Thomas, 2018), numerous stumbling blocks impede progress in this area. The ongoing trend of staff and faculty resignations and turnover poses a hurdle, adding to difficulties in recruitment. Schools are grappling with the departure of faculty and staff of color at higher rates, citing issues such as lack of diversity and the overworking of individuals of color engaged in equity efforts. For example, one respondent noted,

> Even if we’re looking for a female Black person to be on the committee to satisfy two requirements, there’s only a limited number on the campus, and they get overworked as a result of trying to get that diversity in the committees, those people that burn out or don’t want to do it. Then we don’t get that representation.

In some instances, resistance to change in hiring practices is evident, with participants expressing frustration about systemic issues that hinder equitable hiring. One staff member expressed this concern stating, “I know our hiring process is a problem.... It’s a systematic kind of thing. I have to just do what I can to try to make it as equitable as possible, but they’re not gonna change the system.” Exhaustion at trying to revamp hiring practices in the face of resistance was widespread. The appointment of a DEI officer, though seemingly straightforward, encountered challenges in getting the wider community to comprehend the imperative for such a role. At some schools, protests have occurred over a school’s decision to hire a DEI officer.

Equity Data Management

Participants across schools recognize equity data management as a cornerstone for implementing and succeeding in various equity endeavors. “I don’t think you can really implement anything until you understand your data and start sharing data with other people,” a participant explained. Across each institution, participants articulate the pivotal role that data plays in shaping an institution’s approach to equity work.

A fundamental ILEA practice embraced by schools is the disaggregation of data by race, income, gender, and other identifying characteristics. Many view this process as crucial for making gaps visible and enhancing the goal-oriented nature of equity work. While some schools are at the initial stages of disaggregating data, others have already incorporated this practice. Additionally, there are concerted efforts across schools to expand data-sharing practices, ensuring accessibility for faculty and staff, thus

making equity gaps even more visible to the wider campus community. In some instances, this may include monthly school-wide meetings for data review, while others develop data dashboards and provide training to faculty and staff on data interpretation.

Participants widely acknowledge the explanatory power of data, utilizing it to inform decision-making. Consequently, schools have implemented strategies to track the outcomes of each of their equity programs and policies, evaluating successes and challenges to guide future initiatives. Alongside disaggregating data, schools typically examine data related to enrollment, re-enrollment, persistence, course success rates, orientation scheduling, stop-outs from nonpayment, and more. Further, many schools leverage surveys and other data sources, such as campus climate surveys, first-year surveys, and Institutional Effectiveness, Planning and Research (IEPR) reports, to assess the school's current position and inform future endeavors.

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Despite cited progress in data management and sharing, challenges persist. Many study participants have pointed out that a portion of campus members are encountering difficulties in accepting or interpreting data, prompting a call for increased professional development in this area. There is an ongoing emphasis on the need to make data more digestible for individuals across campus. Another challenge highlighted is the potential overemphasis on program evaluation, with concerns that this approach may reduce the understanding of a program as a holistic entity. There is a risk of reducing programs and students merely to numerical outcomes focused on completion or course success rates, potentially overlooking students' broader needs and experiences.

One participant highlighted the need to continually think of students as more than numbers on a page, stating:

> There can be pressure put on us to provide data that speaks to how we do our work. Now, I understand that pressure because I think that in many ways in student affairs, but particularly in student life programs and in student engagement, we've always relied on anecdotal information to tell our story. [...] That one student came to me, and they cried, and we cried together. But that doesn't really tell the story, right? That's more qualitative. There's value in that, and that's real because those experiences are very real.

Student Financial Supports

Student financial supports encompasses a variety of measures implemented across schools to ensure equitable access to higher education and facilitate student success. Receipt of financial aid has been tied to improved persistence rates (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). One significant aspect is the adoption of more

holistic scholarship evaluation practices, aiming to consider a broader range of factors beyond standardized test scores.

Schools have also recognized that traditional practices of eliminating financial aid because of a low grade point average are outdated and inequitable. In response, some schools have reassessed financial aid policies, and efforts are underway to revise practices that might hinder access to financial aid too quickly. Additionally, financial aid support is provided by advisers, who not only assist students in navigating the complex process of filing the FAFSA but also offer guidance on various financial aid opportunities like emergency funds, scholarships, or other financial supports. Furthermore, schools are implementing changes to nonpayment processes to proactively prevent stop-outs, ensuring that financial considerations do not become a barrier to a student's academic journey.

Student Wrap-Around Support Programs

In examining the student wrap-around support programs, we found that schools have been working to implement or improve upon programs and strategies that address various facets of a student's wellbeing beyond academic needs. These basic needs encompass a range of services aimed at supporting students holistically and ensuring their success in both academic and nonacademic aspects of their college experience.

Across schools, student wrap-around support programs commonly include support for childcare and food insecurity. Many student wrap-around services and programs receive support from community organizations and partnerships. Some schools have already established dedicated childcare centers, while others are actively working on implementing such support systems.

Despite strides in acknowledging the need for support for basic needs, some institutions have found it challenging to integrate such initiatives due to logistical or resource constraints, thus the sustainability of some of these services are in question. Further, there is a widespread acknowledgment of the pressing need for more robust mental health services, especially for students of color (see Duffy et al., 2019; Lipson et al., 2019, 2022 for other studies on growing mental health needs among students of color in higher education).

Academic Support Programs

Institutions are employing various academic support strategies to enhance their students' academic success, often aiming to influence persistence rates, course success rates, and DFW rates. These initiatives encompass expanding tutoring services, syllabus redesigns for inclusivity, academic advising enhancements, the formation of learning communities or cohorts, the establishment of dedicated academic support centers, implementing new teaching methods/inclusive teaching pedagogy, and developing technology to track academic progress, recording academic advising reports, and so on.

Academic support programs are often perceived as being the "most effective" of equity policies, as they reach more students and are more "high impact." There are fewer points of contention with implementing these sorts of programs and strategies because "everybody believes in that." This explains why almost all schools implement some form of academic support strategy, policy, or program.

Further, academic support programs oftentimes overlap with other policy buckets (i.e., transitions support, identity-based programming, developmental education).

However, academic support programs face several challenges that impact their implementation and effectiveness. Firstly, academic advising caseloads are often excessively high, making it challenging for advisers to provide adequate time and support, especially for students with last-minute inquiries. There are consistent calls for more resources to manage caseloads more effectively, emphasizing the need for increased staffing to ensure quality advising (see Bahr, 2008; Soria et al. 2023 for more information on advisor overloads).

Additionally, faculty members, who play a crucial role in implementing academic support strategies, may face challenges, particularly if they are part-time adjunct lecturers who teach at multiple schools or faculty who feel overworked and responsible for teaching multiple large course sections (Bailey et al., 2005). Faculty workload, as other scholars have noted (see for example Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Sabagh et al., 2018), can hinder their ability to fully engage with and implement these support programs effectively.

Another challenge for many schools is the fact that **many academic supports are most often directed toward all students at the college/university and are rarely targeted toward the school's Black and Latinx students**, with many schools behaving like "a rising tide lifts all boats."

Additionally, a prevalent challenge across various policies is the stigma associated with seeking help. "In some cases, or from what I understand from some of the data that I've seen at our own campus," one person explained, "even when some of these services are available, there is some stigma around it, and students do not access them or they are not aware of these services."

Student Transitions/Pathway Programs

Student transition and pathways program initiatives are designed to facilitate transitions between different educational and professional stages and to provide comprehensive support to students navigating those transitions. The spectrum of activities in this policy bucket encompasses several transition points, including from high school to college and from a two-year to a four-year institution.

In the high school-to-college transition phase, a range of support programs is offered, including first-year experience initiatives, student onboarding activities, pre-college programs, early start initiatives, and summer bridge programs. Some schools also incorporate programs and pathways to assist students in their transition from two-year to four-year institutions. In addition, career transition support offers guidance programs to help students identify career goals and define the necessary steps to achieve them. Career preparation supports also include activities such as resume assistance, mock interviews, and other career services. Other transitions and pathways programs facilitate re-entry for those students with gap years between high school and college.

When working at their best, transition programs help acclimate students. One staff member explained it best, saying,

> You come in, college is new to you, you may be first gen, you may be coming from high school or somewhere where you don't know anybody on campus. It's a great time to meet people, you are having a shared experience, you're going through first experiences together, so you're getting a chance to bond with people. That's going to be critical for your sense of belonging and culture building here, which ultimately, we know is super important to long-term student success toward graduation.

Participants at our case study schools have noted that the transitions and pathways programs have contributed to higher retention rates by addressing the challenges students often face during critical transitions. They help build a sense of belonging, increase preparedness, and help students develop clear career goals, reducing the likelihood of dropouts and increasing the overall success rates of students in their academic pursuits.

One school described the effect conclusively: "Looking at our institutional-level data, particularly around retention and course credit completion, we see that [transition program] students do exponentially better than students who do not participate in the [transition] program."

Student Identity-Based Programs

Within the realm of student identity-based programs, such as Black Student Success and Latinx student success initiatives, participants generally express positive attitudes toward these programs while acknowledging challenges. While some find these programs comparatively easier to implement, there is a widespread understanding that their direct influence on outcomes is nuanced and may not align with traditional success assessment metrics. Despite this, participants recognize their substantial impact, which manifests in unique ways not easily quantifiable through conventional measures.

Further, ILEA members emphasized that attendance in these identity-based programs does not guarantee immediate improvements in success and completion rates. Rather, these programs are often valued for providing a sense of belonging and serving as platforms for communication about resources that might otherwise remain unseen by students.

Recruiting higher numbers of students to participate in these programs, particularly in community colleges, poses a notable challenge. The realities of commuter and working students in community colleges make it difficult to encourage participation unless these programs are integral, required components of the college experience. Further, many participants feel these programs are relatively easy to implement but harder to institutionalize and integrate. And without programs' institutionalization, participants say they do not reach as many students as they potentially could. They also cited the challenge of how much student identity-based programming is under-resourced in terms of funding and personnel.

Faculty/Staff Development Programs

When it comes to faculty and staff development programs, various initiatives are underway to enhance staff members' knowledge and skills as it relates to equity work. These include training sessions on new policies, such as adapting to changes in data sharing, developmental education, or financial aid

policies, and targeted equity-minded sessions on cultural competency, inclusive pedagogy, decolonizing the syllabus, removing bias from evaluation. Schools have offered specialized training certificates, professional development days/weeks, increases in professional development dollars, physical spaces such as a Center for Learning and Teaching, and other strategies to bolster professional development and learning within the community. Additionally, schools have developed strategic partnerships with external organizations, such as Association of College and University Educators (ACUE), Achieving the Dream (ATD), Education Advisory Board (EAB), and others, which offer various professional development opportunities for faculty and staff.

However, despite these efforts**, faculty still balk at participating in training initiatives, particularly among those entrenched in traditional teaching methods**. Resistance to change poses a significant obstacle (Brownell & Tanner, 2012; Dana et al., 2021) as do institutional practices that constrain faculty pedogeological innovation (Drake et al., 2019; Van Horne & Murniati, 2016). Even when attendance is mandatory, achieving change or compliance remains elusive, reflecting the challenge of instilling belief and commitment among faculty members. The sentiment prevails that while institutions can invest in training, they have little recourse to alter the technical core of their institution; they cannot compel faculty to fully embrace and internalize these changes.

Some schools have worked to implement incentives for faculty to ameliorate this challenge. As one participant stated:

> Typically you have a few faculty [...] they don't want to hear it, they don't want to learn it, they don't want to be bothered, and their contract says that they don't have to be. [...] And so typically what I've seen is that you have a large majority of faculty who are white, and a lot of them do not want to hear anything about equity and inclusion. And as long as their contract says they have the autonomy to be a part of professional development, like that or not, it is just not going to happen in a great way, in an impactful way.

Institutional Procedures and Operations

Schools frequently incorporate strategies into their equity plans that focus on the general implementation of more equity-minded institutional procedures or operations. These strategies often involve creating equity committees or teams, establishing equity meetings, or redesigning institutional procedures to promote equity in day-to-day operations.

One school articulated a strategy to establish a "cross-disciplinary taskforce of faculty and staff" tasked with evaluating and leveraging the findings of campus-wide student surveys. Other schools have implemented comparable approaches, such as forming equity teams, committees, or task forces to facilitate equity discussions and review current institutional policies and procedures for inequities, eventually leading to recommendations for equitable solutions. Many feel that the establishment of such strategies creates a more dedicated focus to equity on campus and serve as a mechanism for accountability and oversight, signaling the institutional commitment to addressing equity. Another school outlined a general strategy to "create a barrier-free environment by reviewing systems and removing instances of power, privilege, and inequity in policies, procedures, and processes." The

strategy's objective is to focus on reviewing and redesigning inequitable policies and procedures so that "institutionalized causes of student inequities are eliminated."

In contrast, some participants have voiced that too many equity committees/teams have been developed, leaving some institutional equity work siloed. Other participants have expressed that, despite the establishment of such committees, there are challenges "operationalizing some of the conversations."

Another participant at a different school explained:

> We're not gonna take any deeper look at what we talked about, what might be going on there, what might we do to address it, how could maybe the institution support this project in a way that is different than it's doing right now to address some of the things that we're seeing, none of that ever happens. None of it ever. It's all very perfunctory, right? Let's just give the report and let's move on.... It is frustrating because the name of the committee [is the committee] for student success and if that group's meetings are a waste of time, what does that say about our commitment to student success?

Developmental Education

Changes in state policy dominated conversations around developmental education. As the primary strategy for addressing unequal preparation and gaps in knowledge, developmental education programs place students in remedial coursework designed to meet students where they are. Placement into developmental education programs occurs almost immediately after students register. Such tests have come under scrutiny by PCC and the state as a growing body of evidence suggests that they overenroll students into remedial courses (Kopko et al., 2023; Valentine et al., 2017). Additionally, developmental education curriculum has not been found to improve students' subject knowledge nor to improve future opportunities for participating students (Douglas et al., 2020; Logue et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2020).

Yet one obstacle to improvement is that many instructors, faculty, and registration systems adhere to existing developmental education practices. We found many schools and participants voiced support for the changes while others voiced concerns for how the changes will affect students.

Various strategies are being implemented to adapt to these policy shifts. For most, the beginning stages of navigating the new state policy changes and goals requires examining data—identifying the students enrolled in these courses, the reasons behind their enrollment, and the success rates within these developmental education programs (and beyond). Co-requisites and co-curricular redesigns are being explored to create a more integrated and supportive learning environment. Some institutions are establishing math emporiums, redesigning prerequisites, supplementing instruction, and eliminating non-credit-bearing classes as part of their developmental education initiatives. Some schools have hired faculty developmental education coordinators to guide and support developmental education efforts. Further, some institutions have revamped their placement assessment practices, using different tools and standards of evaluation for college course placement, such as GPA (instead of standardized tests), multiple measures tools, or online assessments with learning modules. For one school, redesigning placement practices has helped "us to better align students with the proper courses or

proper level of courses that [students] should be in so that we're starting them off at a level that not only challenges them but that foundationally they can certainly be successful in."

Another obstacle in this domain arises from faculty resistance to altering their teaching practices. Participants complain about this resistance occurring in mathematics departments, where faculty reject the idea that they need to alter their pedagogies to encourage course completion. It also occurs within developmental education faculty and instructors who believe that eliminating their courses will worsen the outcomes of their students. Faculty members teaching developmental education are deeply dedicated to their roles, expressing concerns about the implications of state changes for both their students and job security. Several faculty members express concerns for students if developmental education courses are eliminated too quickly. For example, one participant shared their concern about students losing out on needed support:

> Not just that race of trying to shorten the time that people are in Dev Ed. I know that that is a big issue. We don't want people in Dev Ed any longer than they need to be, but if they need to be in Dev Ed, we want them getting what they need to the way they need to have.

Despite strides in adapting to developmental education changes, the progress made in this area varies by institution, with some schools further along in the implementation process than others.

Summary of ILEA Policy Implementation

Among our six school cases, common trends emerge. Schools across the board prioritize equity data management strategies and place significant emphasis on program assessment, particularly across metrics that can "answer" whether an equity plan strategy is "working," such as through completion rates, persistence rates, and course success rates. While these intermediary metrics cannot capture college completion, the hope is that moving in the positive direction on these metrics will lead to such outcomes. Indeed, data management strategies serve as a driving force behind much of the equity work at these schools, providing justification for equity initiatives and shedding light on equity gaps to the broader campus community, thereby enhancing campus alignment and buy-in to equity efforts and programs.

Additionally, many schools have established committees and task forces comprising members from various levels of the campus community, including staff, faculty, senior leadership, and sometimes students. The formation of these groups facilitates the advancement of equity programs and policies, addressing challenges and identifying avenues for improvement. More regular meetings and collaborative efforts have been established to bolster the efficacy of, and help institutionalize, some equity programs.

However, despite progress in this area, many committees and meetings primarily support programs perceived as the most successful or "high touch," such as academic support programs (typically targeted for *all* students rather than targeted toward Black and Latinx students). It appears that a prevailing strategy across schools is focused on optimizing and institutionalizing programs deemed "most successful" in terms of tangible outcomes improvement (e.g., increased completion, persistence,

course success), rather than prioritizing addressing challenges and working toward institutionalizing programs like student identity-based programming.

Furthermore, many participants have articulated challenges in shifting culture and removing biases at their schools. Several have stated that despite efforts to address equity gaps through the above-mentioned policy buckets, some institutions do not have the personnel or capacity to create change, while in others the institutional culture remains resistant to change. Indeed, some have acknowledged that individuals across campuses have the autonomy and freedom to choose whether to adopt the desired shift in culture toward diversity, equity, and inclusion, despite institutional efforts to enhance faculty and staff professional development in this area.

Discussion: Contributions to Reducing Racial Inequality

It is difficult to eliminate racial disparities in college completion, especially amid an ongoing pandemic and in light of federal rollbacks to affirmative action and recent attacks on DEI throughout the country. There is widespread enthusiasm among ILEA institutions for improving the completion results for all students, and PCC has proven itself to be a thoughtful statewide leader, convener, and policy shaper for efforts to improve racial equity in higher education.

Twenty-five colleges and universities continue to invest in the ILEA Initiative, and to date, 24 have completed publicly facing equity plans outlining historical wrongs and proposing steps to improve outcomes for their Black, Latinx, and Pell-recipient students—a remarkable achievement. Member colleges and universities thoughtfully listened to equity plan guidance and created equity plans that conform to PCC's templates. The process of creating the plans proved to be a space that brought people to the table to talk about race and develop shared understandings of equity. Yet, despite best practice recommendations and PCC's insistence that schools tailor strategies to Black and Latinx students, many member institutions struggled to do so, instead tending to create strategies aimed at improving outcomes for all students (Felix & Fernandez Castro, 2018; Felix & Trinidad, 2020). They created plans with strong buy-in from high-level institutional leaders but did not always build student voices directly into their plans or include detailed budgets demonstrating the sustainability of their initiatives (Ching et al., 2020; Felix & Fernandez Castro, 2018).

Institutions joined ILEA to cultivate a culture of accountability, learn from their peers, improve transfer partnerships, and have extant equity research translated and personalized for their institution. Outside of the institutions' ILEA equity teams, however, most interviewees were not familiar with their institution's equity plan or ILEA. Nevertheless, active ILEA members enjoyed working with PCC coaches and getting to think strategically about equity. And ILEA has served as a positive facilitator of change. In contrast to previous state level equity plan efforts, ILEA members created strategies tied to disaggregated data that were strategic and measurable (Ching et al., 2020). Additionally, approximately

three-quarters of schools created strategies to provide more money and financial relief to students in small dollar awards. Nearly all schools dedicated efforts to greater direct academic support to students.

Moreover, ILEA summits and other peer-to-peer convenings and networking opportunities provided by PCC are well attended. ILEA member colleges and universities talk in glowing terms about what they learn from speakers and from one another, and the joy of connecting with like-minded colleagues in ways that solidify professional networks (Niehaus & O'Meara, 2015). Member colleges and universities embrace PCC's call to use data to make decisions, aligning with recommendations from previous equity plan research (Bensimon, 2005; Bensimon & Malcom, 2012; Chase et al., 2020).

Members prioritize equity data management strategies and place significant emphasis on program assessment, particularly concerning completion rates, persistence rates, and course success rates. They appreciate the opportunities to receive and use catalyst grants toward their equity initiatives. Many member colleges would like even more engagement, support, and coaching from PCC, as well a consistent PCC contact. The rapid growth and turnover at PCC have given some members pause, but most report appreciating the partnership. Being part of the ILEA network allows members to learn from local colleagues in similar positions and share best practices so that Illinois can grow as a state.

However, there remain some tensions that ILEA may want to reflect on collectively. Even as member institutions sought to increase the diversity of their workforce, they experienced high turnover of staff and faculty of color, something that has been well documented in higher education (Turner et al., 2008). Staff and faculty of color also report being called on frequently and overtaxed with the responsibility of carrying out equity work (Evans & Moore, 2015; Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012; Moore, 2017; Thomas, 2018). Growing mental health needs of students (Lipson et al., 2022), high advisor and staff workloads (Sabah et al., 2018), and faculty resistance to change (Brownell & Tanner, 2012) were also listed as tensions.

PCC strategically built the equity plan template to be a "base model" whereby each institution would complete each section but could build upon any section to suit their institution's individual needs. Yet, some schools believed the format was more geared toward PWIs, and some found it restrictive for their institution's equity goals. How can equity plans and the process of equity plan creation de-center whiteness? This tension merits more significant discussion and conversation.

In addition, some member institutions have longer histories of engaging in practices to transform their institutions to be more "equity-minded," while others are just starting that journey. Similarly, some member institutions have higher tax bases and more financial resources than others. Some institutions are simply able to be more responsive by email and phone than others. PCC has indicated to member institutions that the goal for each school is progress rather than a fixed, standardized outcome. In practice, however, there is some tendency for PCC staff members to view schools that meet deadlines as those doing the best "equity work."

One of ILEA's challenges moving forward is to untangle what it means to do equity work well and what successful growth may look like, given each school's unique starting point, data capacity, and financial reserves.

ILEA has had success in bringing Illinois college and university presidents together and helping to make racial equity a top priority for the member schools. As Illinois considers equity-based funding in higher education as well as promoting more widespread adoption of equity plans, understanding how colleges and universities are responding to guidance provides insights into how policies, regulations, and supports should be crafted alongside ensuring that the beneficiaries—Black and Latinx students—actually benefit.

Conclusion

Bright Spots

ILEA has many strengths and demonstrates the importance of cross-institutional collaboration for advancing racial equity in higher education. Below we list aspects of ILEA that are working particularly well.

- **Equity planning has created shared understandings.** Equity plans and the planning process are an effective way of creating shared understandings of equity, clearly outlining proposed strategies, addressing equity disparities, establishing clear goals, objectives, rationales, and benchmarks for progress, allowing schools to monitor their efforts and hold themselves accountable. Most ILEA members created publicly available equity plans that also included mechanisms to evaluate and sustain their strategies.

- **Data disaggregation and using data to make decisions provides clear insights.** ILEA members institutions have embraced data disaggregation and have included disaggregated data in their equity plans. They also support using data to make policy and practice decisions.

- **Presidential and leadership support is vital.** Engagement of leadership seems crucial for campus alignment and institutionalizing equity work. Presidents and leadership teams who were more engaged with ILEA were at the same institutions that were communicating higher rates of success with their equity policies.

- **ILEA-sponsored networking and professional development opportunities (e.g., summits, equity circles for change, equity academies, birds of a feather sessions) enable common learning.** These meetings provide a space for schools to learn from leaders and experts in the field, share best practices, address school-specific challenges, gain insights from peer institutions, and grow cross-school partnerships for transitions and wrap-around support services. These opportunities help foster presidential-level collaboration, transfer of ideas across similar-level institutions as well as cross-level exchanges between two and four-year institutions.

- **PCC-provided grants have a direct impact.** The catalyst grants PCC provided to institutions were used to directly further equity efforts.
- **PCC-provided individualized coaching and support provide important supports.** ILEA member institutions appreciate PCC-provided coaching and individualized support for their schools. Members believe that PCC provides an important thought partner and a source of accountability and that they benefit when support is tailored to their specific context.

Considerations

ILEA has played an outsized role in shifting the equity conversations on partner institutions' campuses. As PCC and others think about their ongoing relationships with schools and future facilitated collaboratives, we offer a set of considerations based on feedback from the partners.

- **Lack of staff continuity creates challenges.** Some of the challenges PCC and institutions have faced is in the lack of staff continuity in key positions. Institutions, particularly those starting their equity journey, relied upon their PCC coach, and when this person changed, it altered their relationship and stalled some of their progress, particularly when they were at the planning stages. Institutions also had internal challenges with turnover in key planning positions. Some schools experienced changes throughout administrative levels, meaning that both knowledge and direction had to be reconceived while engaging in the equity planning process. Continuity in staffing is key.
- **Strategies should address targeted students.** At the plan level, many institutional strategies addressed all students rather than articulating specific strategies for helping Black, Latinx, or Pell-eligible students. This behavior was consistent across most strategies in most equity plans and does not align with ILEA or best practice guidance.
- **PCC's dual role as a policy advocate and institutional coach creates tensions for some schools.** For some, the policies PCC advocated for did not align with their vision or capacity, putting them at odds with the same people with whom they were partnering. For others, they wanted updates on PCC's policy initiatives in ways that allowed for their involvement.
- **Schools further along in their formalized equity planning corresponded to the schools with whiter student bodies and more fiscal resources.** Schools need financial and technical support in order to fully engage in planning.
- **Alignment between equity plans and strategic plans is a must.** Many schools spoke about the need to align their equity plan with their strategic plan because the strategic plan was the vehicle for change. ILEA messaging iterated the same thing. Yet, for many schools, it was unclear how the equity plan would be aligned with the institution's strategic plan.

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Appendix A. Policy Definitions

Below we provide the definitions we used to categorize the strategies outlined in member equity plans.

Academic support programs: Any institutional program, policy, or strategy that creates, expands, supports, or promotes student learning. This includes academic advising, peer mentoring, tutoring, etc.

Developmental education: Any program, policy, or strategy that creates, expands, supports, or promotes corequisite coursework or redesign of remedial education/developmental math and English.

Equity data management: Any program, policy, or strategy that is focused on disaggregating institutional data by subgroups or expanding equity data-sharing practices.

Faculty/staff development programs: Any program, policy, partnership, or initiative that creates, expands, supports, or promotes professional development for faculty or staff members regarding equity. This includes targeted programs for employees such as collective learning activities, opportunities for training in culturally responsive teaching, redesigning syllabi, and creating accessible lessons.

Human resources staffing: Any program, policy, or strategy focused on hiring and/or firing practices in relation to equity and diversity.

Institutional procedures and operations: Any policy or strategy focused on implementing institutional procedures or redesigning operations, including establishing equity meeting schedules and agendas, creating equity committees or teams, or, more generally, redesigning institutional procedures to eliminate inequity and become more equitable in day-to-day operations.

Student financial supports: Any program, policy, partnership, or initiative that is focused on alleviating the cost of attending college. This includes financial aid packages; scholarship programs; student debt forgiveness or relief; assistance with filling out financial aid paperwork or accessing financial literacy workshops, classes, training, or counseling.

Student identity-based programs: Any program, policy, partnership, or initiative that creates, expands, supports, or promotes identity-specific programming.

Student transition pathways programs: Any program, policy, or strategy that creates, expands, or supports academic and career pathways for student transitions (from high school to higher education, from two-year to four-year programs, or from higher education to career). This includes onboarding procedures, first-year experience programming, partnerships with other colleges or high schools, transitions within schools, transitions between schools, and transitions from college to the workforce (including career development supports, interview training, and job placement guidance).

Student wrap-around supports: Any program, policy, partnership, or initiative that creates, expands, supports, or promotes nonacademic services that address student needs. This includes programs such as childcare, food pantry, access to mental health and wellness services, textbook vouchers, housing subsidies, and transportation.

Appendix B. List of Participating Schools

Institution	Level	Control	Type
Blackburn College	4	Private	PWI
Chicago State University	4	Public	PBI
City Colleges of Chicago-Harold Washington College	2	Public	HSI
City Colleges of Chicago-Harry S Truman College	2	Public	HSI
City Colleges of Chicago-Kennedy-King College	2	Public	PBI
City Colleges of Chicago-Malcolm X College	2	Public	PBI
City Colleges of Chicago-Olive-Harvey College	2	Public	PBI
City Colleges of Chicago-Richard J Daley College	2	Public	HSI
City Colleges of Chicago-Wilbur Wright College	2	Public	HSI
College of DuPage	2	Public	PWI
College of Lake County	2	Public	PWI
Elgin Community College	2	Public	HSI
Governors State University	4	Public	MSI
Harper College	2	Public	PWI
Joliet Junior College	2	Public	PWI
Kishwaukee College	2	Public	PWI
Moraine Valley Community College	2	Public	PWI
Morton College	2	Public	HSI
National Louis University	4	Public	HSI
Northern Illinois University	4	Public	PWI
Oakton Community College	2	Public	PWI
Roosevelt University	4	Private	MSI
Saint Xavier University	4	Private	HSI
Waubonsee Community College	2	Public	HSI

Note. Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI): at least 25% Hispanic, Minority Serving Institution (MSI): majority of students are non-white, Predominately Black Institution (PBI): at least 40% Black/African American, Predominately White Institution (PWI): at least 50% White.

Appendix C. Reported Equity Plan Policies by Institution

Equity Plan Policies	BBC	CLC	COD	CSU	ECC	GSU	HPC	HTC	HWC	JJC	KKC
Academic support programs	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Equity data management	√	√	√			√	√	√	√	√	
Developmental education	√	√		√					√		
Faculty/staff development programs		√	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Human resources staffing		√	√				√	√		√	
Institutional procedures and operations		√	√			√	√	√	√	√	√
Student financial support	√			√	√	√	√		√		√
Student identity-based programs			√		√	√		√			√
Student transition pathways programs		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		√
Student wrap-around support programs		√		√	√		√	√			√

Appendix C (continued): Reported Equity Plan Policies by Institution

Equity Plan Policies	KC	MVC	MC	MXC	NIU	NLU	OAK	OHC	RDC	ROU	SXU	WWC	WCC
Academic support programs		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Equity data management		√						√		√	√	√	√
Developmental education	√		√	√	√		√		√	√	√	√	√
Faculty/staff development programs	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Human resources staffing	√		√			√			√	√		√	√
Institutional procedures and operations	√	√	√	√		√			√	√	√	√	√
Student financial support	√		√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Student identity-based programs	√			√	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
Student transition pathways programs	√	√		√	√		√		√		√	√	
Student wrap-around support programs	√	√		√		√		√				√	√

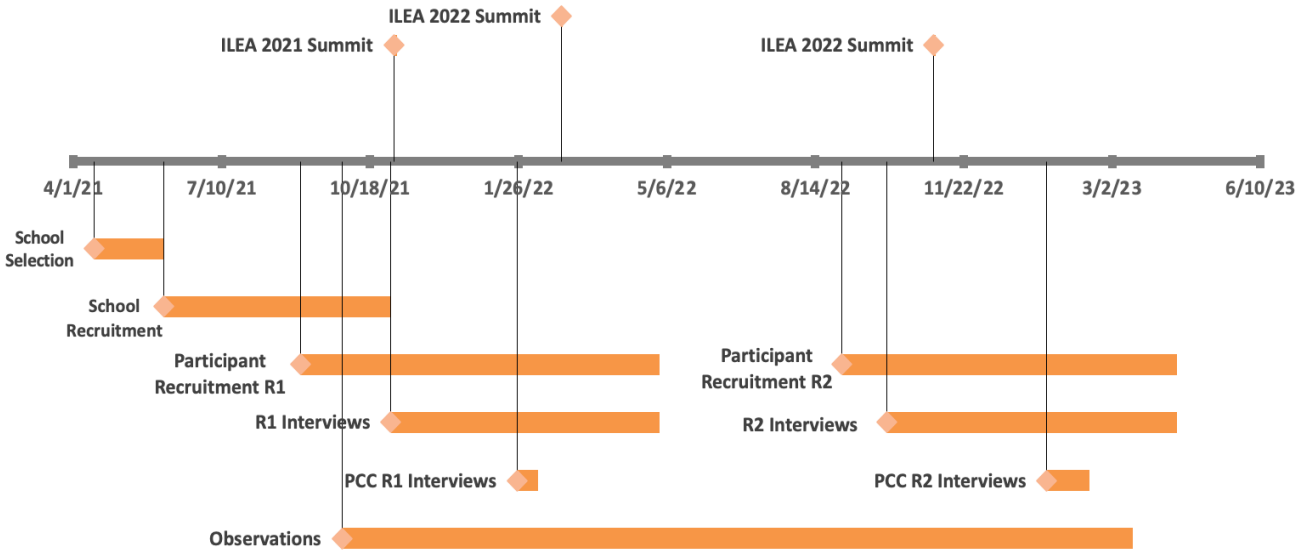
Appendix D. Study Methodology

To study ILEA, the research team conducted a document review and a set of qualitative case studies. The document review focused on all partner institutions equity plans and PCCs equity plan guidance. We examined plans for how the colleges and universities described the problems facing their institutions and how they proposed addressing those issues. We compared mission statements to their proposed work, examined and classified what strategies they used and their explanations for each strategy's inclusion, and studied the budgets. We studied the language used to speak about students and about race and class, focusing on asset and deficit-based framings. We also compared institution's approach to planning with the guidance offered by PCC to learn the extent to which institutions took up PCC's approach and recommendations.

We selected six of the 24 partner colleges and universities for in-depth study. To identify these cases, we first classified the partner institutions by level, control, size, and racial demographic breakdown. We identified our top candidates and in collaboration with PCC determined a final list of schools. Within each school, the research team conducted interviews, observations, and reviewed documents. Data collection occurred across the 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 academic years. Interviews were conducted with the president and other institutional administrators, staff in departments such as financial aid and student services, and faculty—particularly those in English and mathematics. Participants were selected based upon their participation in the ILEA equity plan planning process or engagement in a strategy named in their equity plan. Participants were interviewed up to three times (most were interviewed twice) about their work, how they conduct their work, their participation in the equity planning process, their understanding of equity, and their opinions about generalized ILEA strategies.

Data was coded based on pre-identified, deductive codes, supplemented with inductive codes provided by the three coders. The coders engaged in coding alignment to ensure methods of coding were standardized across coders. Analyses occurred in stages: first coding round one interviews, then coding round two interviews. Coders maintained a coding journal to discuss any discrepancies and questions, then wrote memos at regular intervals to capture comparisons across interviews. In total, the study conducted 183 interviews and over 35 hours of observations, including at PCC summits.

Table 3. Number of Interviews Conducted

	Round 1	Round 2	Total
Number of PCC interviews	4	4	8
Number of school interviews	87	88	175
Total number of interviews	91	92	183

Appendix E. Study Timeline