DEI Action Plan

our journey

TOWARD BUILDING A CULTURE ROOTED IN DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION
our definitions for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)

**Diversity:** Human variation. The presence of different types of people (from a wide range of identities and with different perspectives, experiences, etc.).

**Equity:** The process of ensuring equally high outcomes for all and removing the predictability of success or failure that currently correlates with any social or cultural factor.

**Inclusion:** The process of putting diversity into action by creating an environment of involvement, respect and belonging where the richness of ideas, backgrounds, identities and perspectives are harnessed to create value.

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Letter from the President

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

James Baldwin

Across the U.S., individuals and organizations are rethinking how we interact with each other and how we build and define our organizations through a lens of racial and social justice.

That work is challenging each of us to test our unexamined assumptions and take on a heightened sense of responsibility, not just for dismantling barriers to equity and access, but deconstructing our own relationship to (and perpetuation of) systemic oppression, including—but not limited to—white supremacy. For College Possible that means asking ourselves what it means to be a truly equitable and antiracist organization, and how our work as an educational equity organization fits within the context of a larger societal reckoning around race and equity in America.

College Possible’s communities, and thus the work that we do, are affected by intersecting systems of oppression: from racism and white supremacy, to sexism, heterosexism, ableism, xenophobia and more. Balancing our role in a broader movement with the sense of urgency and pragmatism that our mission demands is not easy work. It will challenge us to square our aspirations with the recognition that our day-to-day work to improve educational equity and access (often within deeply flawed institutions and systems) has value and merit. This will be messy, at times. But we must do it together—and it has to start at home.

Just as our communities are currently grappling with a legacy of racism, we must acknowledge the ways in which our own culture and values might undermine our cause and commit to dismantling systemic bias of all kinds from within. This work must move beyond the dated corporate paradigm of increasing diversity and inclusion toward building an organization that is equitable, just, and creates a sense of belonging among its people. We must move beyond creating safe spaces for students to building and modeling brave spaces of belonging for everyone.

This plan represents a revitalized and innovative approach to DEI within College Possible. We recognize that this is currently an area of significant growth for us. As such, appropriate time and resources have been, and will continue to be, allocated to this important work. The DEI strategic framework/action plan has been constructed in a holistic manner, addressing both internal and external stakeholders. We will strengthen how we evaluate leadership and performance, as well as developing and then holding ourselves accountable to new norms of behavior.

As leaders in today’s environment, our role is to actively engage with and confront educational inequity and injustice. College Possible has a unique opportunity to show what working toward true educational equity looks like. We embrace this responsibility and ask all of our community members and partners to join us.

Craig Robinson
President, College Possible
We recognize and affirm the importance of doing the hard work of building College Possible into an educational equity organization that, at every level, reflects our shared values of diversity, equity and inclusion.

We acknowledge the challenges inherent in orienting and defining our work within a context rife with systemic inequity, injustice and exclusion. But we have an abiding belief in the transformative role that College Possible can play by supporting students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education\(^1\) as they pursue college degrees. We seek to see our students thrive beyond college, thus shaping the very communities that they come from and settle in.

This work cannot be done effectively and ethically without humility. We must first acknowledge that we don’t have all the answers and must work collaboratively with others to build an equitable and antiracist organization. We must meaningfully challenge ourselves to grow and operate in a way that promotes, supports, and honors the diversity of the students we serve, our staff, AmeriCorps members, and the board of directors itself.

The board of directors commits to holding ourselves and senior leadership accountable to these efforts, recognizing that they will necessarily evolve as the landscape in which we operate continues to evolve.

The board plays an important role in organizational governance and accountability, and commits both to making appropriate financial resources available to support this work, and to holding ourselves and the leadership of the organization accountable for working toward these commitments. This work is complex, evolving and nuanced, and while we recognize that the path to progress may not always be linear, our commitment to building the most diverse, equitable, and inclusive version of College Possible is unwavering.

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\(^1\)College Possible’s target student populations include:
- Young people from demographic backgrounds that are documentably underrepresented in higher education (e.g. students of color and students from low-income backgrounds)
- First-generation college students and those without a strong college-going support system
Alongside the College Possible leadership team, the board of directors makes the following commitments:

**Diversity**
We commit to increasing the representation and engagement of diverse identities and lived experiences across all levels of the organization. Our commitment centers groups who have been historically and systematically marginalized in education. Reflecting the communities that we serve greatly enhances our ability to support students.

**Equity**
We commit to reviewing existing, and developing new, policies and practices that seek to eliminate disparities where they persist and provide all members of the organization with access to resources and opportunities that enable them to thrive. Our commitment recognizes the importance of addressing systemic barriers and inequities within our organization, as we must model the change we hope to see in our work with students and communities.

**Inclusion**
We commit to not only increasing representation and engagement, but working to foster a sense of belonging. We commit to creating a culture where everyone is valued, respected, and can participate within teams and across the organization. Our commitment emphasizes the importance of providing spaces for open and honest dialogue that is responsive to the diverse needs and feedback of our community. Our engagement with students and each other is enhanced when our perspectives are honored and reflected in our shared vision for College Possible.
Organizational Statement: Education and Equity

It is our core belief at College Possible that a college education is truly transformational. We recognize the enormous potential our students hold, and we know that earning a college degree is one of the most proven pathways toward harnessing that potential.

Higher education is an enabler not just of economic mobility, but of holistic well-being and civic engagement. College success opens doors to economic resilience and social capital that sustains families and communities, especially during tough times. Our recent alumni survey shows that College Possible’s students are reaping these benefits five to 10 years after graduation. For students who have personally experienced systemic injustice and have both the insight and drive to push for social change, a college degree offers unparalleled access to power and leadership through which they can make their voices heard and advance the cause of equity.

College Possible exists to create equitable outcomes in our American educational ecosystem where college admission and completion rates not only reflect but also magnify pervasive inequities in our K-12 schools, and in society. We believe that by empowering students to access and thrive in higher education despite the broader systemic challenges we can truly change the world.

PUTTING OUR MISSION IN CONTEXT: AN EDUCATIONAL EQUITY ORGANIZATION

As an educational equity organization serving predominantly Black and brown students, we sit at the intersection of social justice and education. As one of the country’s largest and most effective college access and success organizations, we believe that we can have the greatest impact by focusing our efforts on increasing college enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates for students from low-income backgrounds. The students we serve reflect a wide range of intersecting identities, including race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, socioeconomic status, disability and more. We acknowledge these intersections, and are working to develop and grow in how we support students with multiple marginalized identities.

As participants in a broader social justice movement, our responsibility extends both to empowering the students we serve and supporting those individuals and Institutions who seek to improve the systems that influence our students’ success. Advancing social justice requires a variety of approaches; we have chosen to focus our energies in pursuit of educational equity, and specifically fostering new generations of college graduates. Although we spend the majority of our time and efforts working within existing systems, we recognize that systemic barriers are at the heart of many obstacles our students face. We are therefore committed to advocating for, and collaborating with, others who are tackling issues that support and reinforce our mission.²

² An example list of organizations addressing social justice issues that intersect with educational equity: http://www.startguide.org/orgs/orgs06.html

“College Possible has played a tremendous role in making my college graduation a reality. I will forever be thankful for [my coaches] who supported me throughout my journey...”
— Kaitlyn Tran, BSN, RN
CRITICAL SELF-EXAMINATION

Though we have not intentionally embedded systemic oppression into the way we operate, we know that good intentions are not enough. We recognize that some of our systems and ways of conducting business have unintentionally contributed to perpetuating the very inequities we are committed to overcoming. Therefore, we are committed to ending injustice in all its forms, and aspire to be an equitable and antiracist organization.

In order to achieve this goal, we have begun the process of critically examining how oppressive assumptions show up in our values, practices and operating norms. We will analyze who makes decisions about policies and procedures; how power and information is shared; who is missing from conversations; and how our organizational decisions impact staff, Corps and students of different races, identities and backgrounds. We will individually and collectively work to eliminate practices that perpetuate oppressive norms, and replace them with equitable ones.

With the current nationwide reckoning around anti-Blackness and white supremacy, we are especially conscious of the need to form antiracist policies and embed antiracist practices in everything we do. Like our broader efforts to become more diverse, equitable and inclusive, we know that antiracism must be reflected throughout our organization, and it must be an ideal against which we measure every aspect of our work. While becoming antiracist is a journey that is ongoing, and will inevitably include challenges and missteps, it is a journey that we must take if we are to uphold our mission with integrity.

ORGANIZATIONAL STATEMENT

Before making a public statement, senior leadership should consider the following:

- Does the issue have a direct, or disproportionate impact on our students;
- Does it have a direct connection to our mission; and
- Is it a topic on which we can credibly claim expertise?

Past examples include: issuing statements or engaging in public campaigns related to FAFSA revisions and reform of the Common app, the Every Student Succeeds Act, advocating for the BRIDGE Act, Pell funding and, of course, AmeriCorps.

Many other issues in the spotlight may impact our students and their families and we care deeply about them, as they resonate strongly with our belief in social justice. These include issues related to race, immigration, gender identity, and political appointments (cabinet and/or SCOTUS), among others.

If we cannot claim expertise on an issue, however, we believe it is our responsibility to serve the broader social justice movement by allowing the voices of the experts be loudest, whether that’s the ACLU, the International Rescue Committee, the Human Rights Campaign or others.

Even when we elect not to make a public statement about a particular issue, we must recognize the impact it will have for our students, and how our coaches approach their work with students. We may identify opportunities to serve alongside experts, mobilize our people and resources. We must continue to strive to do whatever it takes to support our students.
ORGANIZATIONAL STATEMENT

KEY MESSAGES ON EDUCATIONAL EQUITY
It is our core belief at College Possible that a college education is truly transformational. It opens doors of opportunity that can lead to a longer and more fulfilling life.

When students from low-income and underrepresented communities earn college degrees, their presence in the workforce, and in the ranks of leadership in our country, will fundamentally advance social justice and equity.

If we play our role well, we can truly change the world.

WHAT WE DO
At its core, College Possible is and always has been, about the intersection of social justice, equity and education: educational equity. Because of our standing as one of the country’s largest college access and success organizations, we recognize that our greatest leverage is in the fields of college coaching, higher education and educational equity. This is where we feel we have the best chance of moving the needle, and where we will be focusing our efforts in the coming weeks and months.

We provide a results-driven program that helps students from low-income backgrounds get into college and persist through graduation. This programming is supported by recruiting, training and motivating recent college graduates who serve through AmeriCorps as near-peer coaches.

Our work focuses on serving students from low-income backgrounds. This demographic intersects with many identities, including race, LGBTQIA communities, new immigrants, first-generation students, those who are undocumented, and many other underrepresented populations. We acknowledge this intersectionality while also explicitly focusing our expertise on serving students from low-income backgrounds who face barriers to college enrollment and graduation.

WHERE WE EXCEL
We believe that closing the degree divide will help us achieve our vision of a day when the future of America’s children is determined solely by their talent, motivation and effort.

This vision is realized through a comprehensive approach that provides the immediate tools, supports, and strategies that students need to be successful, while also partnering with and empowering colleges, advocacy groups, and local and national leaders to identify and remove institutional barriers.

WHERE OUR VOICE MATTERS MOST
Our work exists within a broader social justice movement, and our responsibility extends to both the individuals we serve — and the systems that influence our collective behavior.

While we believe that student support must be holistic, we have chosen to focus on educational equity. According to the Social Justice Resource Center:

• A student living in poverty is 13 times less likely to graduate on time.
• Of student dropouts, nearly 60% will go to prison at some point.

Advancing social justice requires a variety of approaches, and we have chosen to focus primarily on strategies that have a proven track record of success in fostering new generations of college graduates. Although we spend the majority of our time and efforts working within existing systems, we recognize that systemic barriers are at the heart of many obstacles our students face, and we fully support individual efforts to tackle these barriers.

RESOURCES AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS
We are committed to amplifying and supporting others who are tackling issues outside of our direct purview. Here’s a website that shares a few examples of organizations working to address the many systemic issues that affect our students and communities.
In 2018, College Possible released its Diversity and Inclusion Plan. This plan was our first attempt at an external-facing document which defined our organizational values, behaviors, and planned actions toward a diverse, equitable and inclusive future.

The plan was created by senior leadership and rolled out to the rest of the team, along with the formation of a “Treatment of Others” working group, which was developed to collaboratively design internal guidance around behavioral norms. The 2018 Diversity and Inclusion Plan provided some important actions to be taken but lacked specificity and did not have as positive an impact as intended. In 2019, the senior leadership of the organization publicly considered the plan a “false start,” so they took a different, more collaborative approach.

In 2019, several key actions were taken:

- Craig Robinson, a leader with a deep passion for and commitment to DEI, was appointed as the new President and first leader to enter into this newly designed senior role. This hire marked the beginning of a strategic reframing that built upon the previous iterations of the work.
- A DEI Task Force was established, which laid the foundation for ongoing work toward the development of a strategic plan. The DEI Task Force consisted of staff from across all sites and was convened by the chief operating officer, along with Dr. Amina Jaafar, an external DEI consultant. Collectively, the Task Force established the DEI commitments and definitions (see below).
- A DEI Committee of the board of directors was established to demonstrate commitment to DEI, provide strategic support to the Board and staff of the organization, and to ensure adequate resourcing of DEI initiatives across the organization. In service of this charter, the Board crafted a statement outlining their commitment to DEI at College Possible (see above).

In 2020, we hired Dr. Chris Brooks as Director of Diversity and Organizational Development. We also began an eight-month engagement with Promise54, an organization that supports education-related organizations to understand their current state around diversity, inclusion and equity and to drive forward progress. College Possible was accepted into the 2020 DEI Accelerator cohort, along with a number of similar organizations across the country who were at various stages in their own DEI journeys. Through the engagement, College Possible was paired with a DEI coach who met regularly with staff members, participated in multiple (virtual) convenings, and conducted a climate survey to help inform the strategy moving forward. All of these data points and inform the DEI Action Plan.
REASSESSING OUR VALUES AND CULTURE

College Possible strives for inclusion, though there is ample room for growth. Our culture is one of continuous, data-informed improvement, and we are applying that approach here. This will require developing and executing on a comprehensive, action-oriented plan through which we will promote diverse leadership, equitable opportunity, and an environment of belonging throughout all levels of the organization.

One of our first steps toward this goal is to re-examine the language we use to articulate our values. Historically, we have used “Idealistic Leadership Traits” (ILT) as a proxy for our values statement; however, as our organization has grown and evolved, the ILT no longer fully captures the spirit of our work. One of our first commitments for the first quarter of FY21 is to develop a new organizational values statement that better reflects our aspirations for a truly equitable culture.

We recognize the need to shift away from a deficit-based framing for our work. Our students’ backgrounds and experiences inform, but do not define them. Therefore, we are currently socializing an intentional shift toward person-first language, such as “students from low-income backgrounds” rather than “low-income students.” And while being realistic about the systemic challenges our students and families face, we are moving toward an asset-based framing that celebrates the great strengths inherent in our communities.

Our pending five-year planning process also presents an opportunity to re-evaluate our core messaging language, such as our mission, vision and commitment statements. While honoring our 20-year legacy guided by this language, we recognize that these statements must evolve just as our organization has evolved, a process which will take time and care. We are building a review and revision process for these statements into our 2025 planning timeline.

We commit to creating a culture that is just, and where everyone is valued, respected, and can participate within teams and across the organization. Our commitment emphasizes the importance of providing spaces for open and honest dialogue that is responsive to the diverse needs and feedback of our community. Our engagement with students and each other is enhanced when our perspectives are honored and reflected in our shared vision for College Possible.

DATA THAT INFORMED OUR WORK

The process that informed this action plan included inputs from multiple stakeholders from all levels of the organization—from the Board to the Corps. There was also external input from partners and multiple consultants. All of this feedback was analyzed and integrated. The consequences of all of this has led us to the following plan.

3 OUR CURRENT ORGANIZATIONAL MISSION, VISION, AND COMMITMENT:

Mission — College Possible is making college admission and success possible for students from low-income backgrounds through an intensive curriculum of coaching and support.

Vision — We envision a day when a student’s future is determined solely by their talent, motivation and effort.

Commitment — We are committed to providing the tools, strategies and support that students from low-income backgrounds need to navigate and overcome systemic barriers to college graduation.
Objective

Ground our Work in DEI: Embed the values of diversity, equity and inclusion into our DNA, so that our decision-making and results reflect a truly diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace.

Key Results

- Develop DEI strategic framework and action plans including goals, objectives/outcomes and timelines.
- Conduct Current State Analysis including HR data and internal surveys.
- Conduct Cultural Assessment (Audit) including in-depth review of internal policies, practices and procedures.
- Develop Workforce Profiles (NAT, Regional Sites) — 3-year view for trend analysis.
- Determine relevant DEI related learning and professional development curriculum (all College Possible staff).
- Align Action Plans to key stakeholders including NAT, Regional Sites, AmeriCorps and others.

Resources It Will Take*

- Cultural audit (external vendor)
- Ongoing surveys (external and internal)
- DEI learning & development (external vendor)
  - Leadership
  - Manager/supervisor
  - General Employee (NAT, Site)
  - AmeriCorps (TBD what services offered and to whom)

* Additional resources will be identified through the current state analysis.
Embedding DEI in our DNA

This chart highlights the highest-priority areas for design, development, and implementation of a comprehensive DEI framework.
This plan represents the beginning of our work toward building a culture rooted in the values of diversity, equity and inclusion. As a working document, it will continue to grow and deepen over the coming weeks and months. And we know that the work does not stop once a comprehensive plan is in place; the execution will be just as crucial as the planning.

This DEI plan is part of a larger complement of strategic resources as we move into the five-year planning process. This document, and the work behind it, will inform the plans we are developing for people and culture, shared services and much more. We are moving forward with both urgency and humility, mindful of the great task ahead and excited by the possibilities that will emerge along the way.

This plan is the culmination of many years of small DEI steps within College Possible combined with over a year of formal discussions and strategic planning. There have been significant touchpoints throughout the organization including the DEI Task Force, DEI Board Committee, and various team members across the organization—both staff and AmeriCorps members. Special thanks to all who lent their voice and thought leadership to the process! The best is yet to come.