

# PARTNERSHIP FOR COLLEGE COMPLETION

*Accelerating action to close the graduation gap*

## Legislative Action to Support Illinois' College Students in Response to COVID-19

### Executive Summary

In order to support a full-scale recovery for higher education, the state must fill the gap between student needs and federal assistance and design state policy that considers the disproportionate impact this crisis will have on our state's most vulnerable college students and the institutions that serve them.

The Partnership for College Completion urges state elected officials to support students in response to the COVID-19 crisis by:

1. Distributing federal aid to under-resourced colleges and universities.
2. Filling the gap between federal emergency grant funds and current student needs.
3. Funding HB5262 in the FY2021 budget to bolster college and university emergency grant programs for the year ahead.
4. Taking an equitable approach to the allocation of state emergency aid and higher education appropriations.
5. Relaxing the 135-hour credit limit for Monetary Award Program (MAP) eligibility.

### Why State-Level Action is Needed

Two out of every three City Colleges of Chicago students identify as either homeless or housing insecure, between 35% and 50% of all students face food insecurity, and approximately 20% of undergraduate students balance school and parenting.<sup>1</sup> In the last week, COVID-19 brought to light the precarious financial situations many college students are living in and heightened the urgency to address basic needs.

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<sup>1</sup>Ballesteros, Carlos. "Majority of Community College Students in Chicago Homeless, Hungry: Report." Chicago Sun-Times, June 20, 2019. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2019/6/20/18691804/chicago-city-colleges-food-insecurity-housing-homeless-food-pantry-full-time-students-parents>. Morris, Loran, Sylvia Smith, Jeremy Davis, and Dawn Null. "The Prevalence of Food Security and Insecurity Among Illinois University Students." *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 48 (April 22, 2016). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2016.03.013>; Cruse, Lindsey Reichlin, Tessa Holtzman, Barbara Gault, David Croom, and Portia Polk. "Parents in College By the Numbers." Institute for Women's Policy Research, April 11, 2019. <https://iwpr.org/publications/parents-college-numbers/>.

Stories abound of students seeking resources for basic needs during this crisis and not being able to fully meet them, including that of a student attending Wright College who has only three days of groceries available to feed her family of four and limited resources to continue to support her family if the crisis extends into April. What is more, in the face of COVID-19, students already facing barriers to earning college degrees due to their family income, race, wealth, and first generation college-going status are being disproportionately impacted.

In response to these urgent needs, the federal government passed a stimulus package that includes relief for college students and institutions of higher education. It creates the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund to appropriate \$12.8 billion to institutions serving populations of students significantly impacted by COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> Institutions must use at least 50% of the aid they are appropriated to fund student emergency grant programs. Additionally, the stimulus package includes protections for students who have to drop out of school or fail courses as a result of COVID-19, six months of interest-free student loan deferment, and funds for institutions serving significantly impacted students.

While this package will aid many college students, the needs of Illinois' students and institutions will likely surpass available federal resources. The following are the Partnership's recommendations for creating policy that will most effectively and equitably restore the state's higher education sector after this crisis.

## **Recommendations**

### **1. Distribute Federal Stimulus Education Aid to Under-Resourced Colleges**

The federal stimulus package allocates about \$3 billion to governors to provide emergency support for educational institutions, including higher education institutions serving students that have been affected by coronavirus. As all institutions struggle to fundamentally change how they serve students and provide support to those directly affected by this crisis, community colleges and less-resourced universities, which serve larger numbers of student groups most impacted by COVID-19, should be prioritized. **The Partnership encourages Governor Pritzker to allocate a portion of the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund to institutions serving the state's most financially vulnerable students.**

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<sup>2</sup> McConnell, Mitch. Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, Pub. L. No. S.3548, § Division B - Emergency Appropriations for Coronavirus Health Response and Agency Operations (2020). [https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/DIVB\\_EMSU.pdf](https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/DIVB_EMSU.pdf).

## **2. Fill the Gap between Federal Emergency Aid and Current Students' Needs**

The latest federal stimulus package provides \$6.4 billion in federal funding to be allocated to college emergency grant programs. Emergency grant programs provide students just-in-time aid for unexpected expenses, and even before the current pandemic, were gaining momentum as a way of providing targeted support to help students persist in and complete college.<sup>3</sup> With a heightened lack of access to basic needs such as food, housing, and healthcare, changing technology needs, and new or increased family responsibilities as a result of coronavirus, students need flexible financial support now more than ever before.

While many colleges have emergency grant funds, even with federal support, existing programs will likely be insufficient to address the emerging needs of students displaced as a result of COVID-19.<sup>4</sup> To provide every MAP-eligible public college and university student just one emergency grant at \$440, the average amount that surveyed Illinois colleges distributed pre COVID-19, the state would need \$68.3 million total; to include support for low-income students at private non-profit colleges, the state would need \$88.7 million total.<sup>5</sup> **PCC strongly urges the state to allocate emergency state aid to fill the gap between student needs and federal assistance, without regard to students' citizenship, satisfactory academic progress, financial or academic holds, or completion of state or federal income taxes.**

## **3. Fund HB5262 to Support Students' Long-Term Success**

Even in the best-case scenario, the impacts of COVID-19 on the state's most financially vulnerable students will be long-lasting. For first generation college students and low-income students, continued enrollment after this crisis will depend on their trust in their institution and the state to support them in the future. Having access to emergency grants can assure students that the state will be prepared to support them if unexpected challenges arise that could jeopardize the successful completion of their degrees. **The Partnership urges the state to fund HB5262 in the FY2021 state budget and annually appropriate a minimum of \$15 million for college and university emergency grant programs moving forward.**

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<sup>3</sup> Goldrick-Rab, Sara. "Student Aid Perspectives: The Case for Expanding Emergency Aid." NASFAA, March 13, 2017. [https://www.nasfaa.org/news-item/11506/Student\\_Aid\\_Perspectives\\_The\\_Case\\_for\\_Expanding\\_Emergency\\_Aid](https://www.nasfaa.org/news-item/11506/Student_Aid_Perspectives_The_Case_for_Expanding_Emergency_Aid).

<sup>4</sup> It appears that about \$6.4 billion of the federal bill will be allocated for emergency grants. However, this will be distributed across institutions of all types throughout the country.

<sup>5</sup> There are 155,900 public university and community college students in the state who either received MAP grants or were suspended, meaning they were eligible and applied but the state had insufficient funding to cover them. There are an additional 46,700 private non-profit students who received MAP or were MAP-suspended. A PCC analysis of an ICCB survey found that current emergency grant programs average \$438 per grant. Note: this estimate is likely conservative because many of these programs are underfunded, and are therefore limiting the amount of aid per grant to serve as many students as possible.

#### **4. Distribute State Emergency Funds and Appropriations Equitably**

This year saw college applications on the rise, increases in institutional aid, and increases in state-based financial aid. That progress is not only threatened in the short-term by this crisis, but the future of the state depends on how it responds to COVID-19's long-term ramifications. Tuition freezes are a start, as all students will be less able to afford college than in previous years, and Illinois has among the thinnest margins to increase tuition in the nation.<sup>6</sup>

To recover from this crisis, the state must reconsider its higher education appropriations funding model -- otherwise, precious resources will flow to the universities that need them least and tend to enroll students less vulnerable to the impact of crises such as this. Data and research on student finances show that many Illinois students attending lower-resourced institutions have less wealth they can draw on in this crisis, are being hit harder by it, and will emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic in a continued state of financial crisis.<sup>7</sup> **The Partnership urges the legislature to prioritize state appropriations to colleges serving students with the greatest need.**

#### **5. Relax the 135-hour Credit Cap for Monetary Award Program (MAP) Eligibility**

As part of the federal stimulus package, Congress relaxed the lifetime Pell limit for students who drop out of school as a result of COVID-19. Similarly, **to protect students in Illinois impacted by this unprecedented crisis, legislators should relax the credit-hour cap for MAP grants.** Currently, Illinois' MAP-eligible students may receive the equivalent of 135 semester credit hours of MAP benefits, which will in most cases, allow students sufficient MAP coverage to complete a bachelor's degree. However, current students near the credit hour cap may experience a disruption in their learning as a result of COVID-19, which could put them at risk of MAP ineligibility in future semesters.

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<sup>6</sup> The tuition premium in part measures this, as the ability to charge out-of-state students more than in-state students could represent a possible price increase. However, Illinois already has one of the smallest tuition premiums in the nation. The College Board. "2019-20 Tuition and Fees at Public Four-Year Institutions by State and Five-Year Percentage Change in In-State Tuition and Fees." Accessed March 25, 2020. <https://research.collegeboard.org/trends/college-pricing/figures-tables/published-state-tuition-and-fees-public-four-year-institutions-state>.

<sup>7</sup> Bubola, Emma, and Max Fisher. "As Coronavirus Deepens Inequality, Inequality Worsens Its Spread." *The New York Times*, March 16, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/15/world/europe/coronavirus-inequality.html>.