

PARTNERSHIP FOR COLLEGE COMPLETION

Accelerating action to close the graduation gap

July 16, 2020

Senate Higher Education Committee
Illinois Senate
Capitol Building
Springfield, IL 62706

House Higher Education Committee
Illinois House of Representatives
Stratton Building
Springfield, IL 62706

Dear Higher Education Committee Member:

As you consider veto session legislation that will advance racial equity in Illinois, we urge you to consider race-conscious higher education policy. As advocates seeking to support institutions in eliminating racial equity gaps across Illinois colleges and universities, the Partnership for College Completion stands in solidarity with the Black community and their calls for justice. This unprecedented period shows how deeply ingrained racial injustice is within systems intended to serve the public, demonstrated by continued violence on the Black community at the hands of law enforcement, inequitable lending, and inequitable access to high-quality healthcare. In higher education, inequitable policies perpetuate college access and completion disparities, limiting Black students' higher education opportunities.

The Partnership recommends three critical policy changes that can have an immediate, significant effect on racial equity:

- 1. Develop an equitable and transparent funding model for higher education**
- 2. Scale equity-centered developmental education reforms to advance student success**
- 3. Pass a statewide test-optional admissions policy**

In Illinois, disinvestment in higher education has led to rising costs, and this has disproportionately priced out Black students; 11,100 fewer Black students attended Illinois' public and private-nonprofit colleges and universities in 2017 compared to 2007, despite similar numbers of Black public high school graduates during that time period. Part of the problem is that only four of the state's 12 public universities enroll a Black student population that is representative of the state's population, and they receive just 13% of appropriations.

Making progress against systemic racism and structural inequities in higher education are critical for improving Black students' college outcomes, which lead to stable, well-paying jobs. Disrupting these systems will require a strong commitment from state leaders and support from the General Assembly. We have a long way to go to make sure that institutions are not only representative, but equitable in enrollment and completion -- but it is possible and the time to commit to his work is now.

Equitable Investment in Higher Education

In order to make progress toward closing racial equity gaps in higher education, Illinois must make higher education funding equitable. The truth is that the current funding model perpetuates racial inequities; about \$600 million of our \$1.15 billion budget for institutions of higher education goes to two institutions -- UIUC and UIC -- which enroll only 6% and 8% Black students respectively. This is not close to representative of the state's Black population, and it's not improving; both of these percentages have declined over the last 25 years. Meanwhile, the universities that enroll greater percentages of Black students not only receive less in appropriations, but are more reliant on these funds to operate.

Now is the time to reimagine the way Illinois appropriates funds to institutions. This will require a new level of transparency and an intentional, race-conscious approach. An equitable funding model will hold institutions accountable for serving student populations that reflect Illinois in terms of race and income, and ensure that the institutions disproportionately serving our state's students of color and most financially vulnerable students are better supported.

Scale Equity-Centered Developmental Education Reforms

Placement policies and traditional models of developmental education are failing Illinois' students and exacerbating racial inequities. Of all full-time, first-time degree- or certificate-seeking students attending community college in Illinois, about 50% enroll in a developmental education course in the entering fall term, and Black and Latinx students are over-represented in these courses.

Credit accumulation, transfer rates, and graduation rates are lower for students placed into developmental courses compared to their peers, and especially low for students placed into the traditional model of developmental education. In Illinois, less than 20% of all students placed into a developmental course will graduate, and only 9% of Black students and 17% of Latino students will graduate. To realize equity in college completion, institutions must urgently address developmental education practices and policies that lead to disproportionate representation of racially minoritized students and consequently results in lower retention and graduation rates. With state investment and support, institutions can scale evidence-based reforms that maximize student success and minimize structural inequities.

Support HB 4064: Require Statewide Test-Optional Admissions

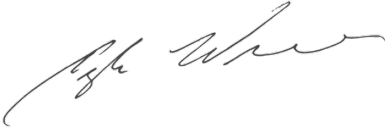
Students from low-income families and students of color are at a disadvantage when preparing for mandatory standardized testing due to differences in time, money, and resources, which result in test scores tracking more closely to wealth than college readiness. While many institutions have recognized the need to go test-optional in light of COVID-19 disruptions, unless *all* institutions make this change for good, students of color will be effectively barred from applying to more selective schools. These are already the schools that typically under-enroll Black students; not going test-optional will further deepen the racial disparities in access to higher education.

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We appreciate your dedication to equity and look forward to your partnership in taking meaningful action to bring equity to higher education in Illinois.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kyle Westbrook', written in a cursive style.

Kyle Westbrook, Ph.D.
Executive Director, Partnership for College Completion