



# Policy Agenda

Creating a state policy environment to increase college degree attainment and eliminate equity gaps



July 2018

**PARTNERSHIP FOR  
COLLEGE COMPLETION**  
*Accelerating action to close the graduation gap*

# Letter from the Executive Director

## July 2018



Illinois is mired in a higher education crisis that poses an existential threat to the nation's fifth largest state economy. For more than a decade, through a policy of benign neglect, Illinois has sown the seeds of a human capital and workforce crisis that threatens the state's long-term health. This neglect has had the most profound consequences for low-income students who are disproportionately African-American and Latino.

The Partnership for College Completion is pleased to present the 2018 Public Policy Agenda to advance a set of ideas and proposals to begin to improve how Illinois' institutions of higher education serve low-income students and students of color.

Over half of Illinois' high school graduates are eligible for free and reduced lunch. For these graduates who choose to remain in Illinois to attend college, they are faced with a state public system that, like others nationally, suffers from a retreat from the principle of higher education as a public good. There exists in the United States two very distinct trajectories for undergraduate education: public colleges and universities that are increasingly unaffordable for low-income students or elite private institutions that serve only the highest academic performers and historically admit very few low-income students and students of color, but offer steep tuition discounts and even free tuition for the fortunate few who are admitted. Access to higher education, which was once denied to minority students by police dogs and fire hoses, is now being denied through seemingly race neutral state and federal fiscal policy that undermines a long held American belief of equal opportunity and results in a higher education system that widens existing inequalities in society.

The priorities in the 2018 Public Policy Agenda rest upon three foundational principles:

- (1) investments in our students and our state's public higher education institutions matter;
- (2) reducing time to degree is a financial and life imperative for low-income students;
- (3) traditional approaches to developmental education undermine student agency and motivation and effectively bar capable college students from achieving degrees

The Partnership for College Completion looks forward to working with policy makers to advance policy solutions that will help create the conditions within which low-income students and students of color can graduate at the same rates as other students and where an efficient and affordable degree can be a reality for all students in our state.

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

Kyle Westbrook  
*Executive Director, Partnership for College Completion*

# An Ailing Higher Education System

The Partnership for College Completion (the “Partnership” or “PCC”), a nonprofit organization launched in 2016 to champion systems, practices, and policies, aimed at closing Illinois’ racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps in college degree completion, conducted a meta-analysis of published reports and available data from state agencies and national researchers, shedding light on the complex challenges facing Illinois’ college students. What we found was consistent with the broader national narrative, but alarming in its implications for low-income and first generation to college students, and students of color in our state.

## **Stark disparities in college enrollment and completion rates exist along racial and socioeconomic lines.**

In Illinois, low-income students and students of color are not enrolling in college at the same rates as their wealthier and White peers and are more likely to enroll in community college than a four-year institution. Once enrolled, low-income and first generation students, and students of color graduate at significantly lower rates than their peers. Illinois now ranks 46th in the nation in terms of the size of our Black-White college degree completion gap. Similarly, only 37% of low-income students graduate in six years compared to 75% of high-income students. And there is little sign of progress: nationally, graduation rates for low-income students have risen by only 3% since 1970 compared to 33% for their wealthier peers.

## **A postsecondary education is no longer affordable for many low-income students and their families.**

Rising tuition and declining financial assistance are making out-of-state public universities more attractive to Illinois’ students and for many low-income students, pushing college out of reach. Despite an increased demand for need-based financial aid, the Monetary Award Program (MAP), Illinois’ primary need-based aid program, continues to be underfunded. As recently as 2002, MAP was a national model for need-based state aid, covering nearly 100% of tuition and fees for all eligible students, but now covers just one-third of tuition and fees and for only half of all eligible students. Improving college access and completion rates will require both lowering the real cost of attending college to better align with students’ and families’ ability to pay, and providing accurate information to help plan for the true costs of college.

## **Failure to increase our college success rates and address persistent and often growing gaps in completion threatens the state’s long-term financial stability.**

On-time high school graduation rates have increased in Illinois, leading to increased college access for all students. However, low-income students and students of color are not enrolling in college at the same rates as their wealthier and White peers. Once enrolled, low-income students and students of color are facing additional barriers to success, and in some cases, institutional gaps in college persistence and completion are widening. To drive economic growth for our students and communities and meet the state’s projected workforce demands, Illinois must address achievement gaps head-on.

# The Time for Action is Now

Though enrollment for minority students has been trending upward over the last twenty years, gaps in persistence and degree attainment remain. There is real opportunity in Illinois for policy leaders committed to improving postsecondary success, to champion targeted strategies and innovative models that increase college access and completion, particularly for low-income and first generation students, and students of color.

By removing myriad barriers to degree attainment, we will improve pathways to the middle class for low-income families, we will meet our state's 60 by 25 Goal and we will truly realize the promise of equal educational opportunity.<sup>1</sup>

## *Lead with an Equity Lens*

Low-income and first generation students and students of color are disproportionately impacted by inequities in our education system. In a state where nearly half of high school graduates are low-income and over 40 percent are Black or Latino, prioritizing equity-based policies that improve college persistence and completion rates for low-income and first generation students, and students of color is not only a moral imperative, but critical to meeting Illinois' future workforce demands and improving the state's economic health.

## *Prioritize Student Success*

To significantly increase graduation rates for underserved students groups, we must reorient campus cultures, systems, and practices to prioritize student success for all. Institutions and policymakers should use equity-focused student success measures to ensure all practices and policies advance student success, particularly for low-income and first generation college students, and students of color.

## *Focus on Affordability*

As the cost of a college degree remains a top concern for prospective college students and their families, ensuring an affordable and efficient path for all those who aspire to earn a college degree needs to be a goal for state higher education policy. Increasing state investments in need-based aid and raising awareness of grants and other means of financial assistance will be critical in ensuring access and affordability for low-income students. Similarly, providing adequate and stable funding for institutions to effectively educate all students is important to building a world class system of public higher education in Illinois.

<sup>1</sup> Illinois is one of 41 states that has set a college degree attainment goal. Specifically, Illinois is working to ensure 60% of adults in Illinois will hold a postsecondary degree or credential by 2025.



### *Improve Data Availability and Research*

To improve equity and help Illinois reach its 60 by 25 Goal, data must drive action. However, the state and institutional data, that is essential for researchers, lawmakers, and institutions to make sound program and policy decisions, are not widely available and are not easily accessible. Among other areas of research, greater analysis is needed to understand the factors contributing to the steep decline in African-American student enrollment, the out-migration of college students, the state's institutional achievement gaps, and barriers to entry to two-year and four-year institutions.

### *Champion Practices that have Evidence of Closing Institutional Achievement Gaps*

Illinois is ranked 46th in the nation in terms of the size of our Black-White achievement gap, and gaps for Latino and low-income students are also significant. Policymakers and higher education leaders must expand and lift up the best practices, policies, and programs that exist across the state and replicate national models that have evidence of improving measures of access, persistence, and on-time and low-debt completion rates for low-income and first generation students, and students of color.

# A Thriving Higher Education System

The Partnership is part of a large ecosystem of practitioners, advocates, college and university leaders, foundations, education stakeholders, and students themselves that are driving and supporting policies that aim to improve completion rates and eliminate institutional socioeconomic and racial achievement gaps. The long-term economic viability of the state depends on a thriving higher education system that:

1. Satisfies workforce demands.
2. Educates civic-minded productive citizens.
3. Facilitates the transfer and creation of knowledge.
4. Advances justice and equity.

**The PCC will advance justice and equity in higher education by:**

LEADING policies that:	SUPPORTING policies that:	OPPOSING policies that:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ensure college is <b>affordable</b> for all Illinois students</li> <li>▪ Institutionalize successful approaches to <b>remediation</b></li> <li>▪ Ensure existing <b>transfer</b> systems support equitable outcomes for all students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Continue to improve access to and availability of new and existing student input and outcomes data</li> <li>▪ Move the needle toward an equitable and predictable higher education funding model</li> <li>▪ Improve college success measures for low-income and first generation college students, and students of color</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Rollback student protections from predatory for-profit institutions and debt lenders</li> <li>▪ Create unnecessary barriers to entry to and persistence through college</li> <li>▪ Continue down the path of disinvestment in higher education</li> </ul>

**Policy Priority:**  
**AFFORDABILITY**

**Ensure that college is affordable for all Illinois students**

Even before enrolling in college, the biggest barrier to college access and persistence for low-income and first generation students is affordability. In Illinois, tuition and fee increases have far outpaced the rate of inflation and fewer eligible students are receiving adequate, if any, need-based financial aid. As a result, college costs are increasingly weighing on students' decisions and leaving many economically disadvantaged students with fewer academic options or off the college track altogether, exacerbating educational inequalities.



**To improve equity and economy, and to reach Illinois' 60 by 25 Goal, we must offer a comprehensive solution that addresses the rising cost of tuition, inconsistent and decreased purchasing power of MAP grants, and all barriers to on-time graduation.**

Objective	Policy Recommendations
<p><b>Improve time-to-degree</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Limit most associate and bachelor's degree programs to 60 and 120 credit hours, respectively</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Incentivize full-time students to enroll in 30 credit hours per calendar year</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Improve access to and availability of dual enrollment and dual credit opportunities for low-income students and students of color</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Ensure all earned credits are universally accepted across the P-20 spectrum</b></li> </ul>
<p><b>Provide access to need-based grants for all</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Ensure 100% of MAP-eligible students who apply receive enough MAP funding to offset all tuition and fees not covered by Pell Grants</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Open access to MAP to Illinois' undocumented students</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Encourage institutions to prioritize need-based institutional grants first</b></li> </ul>
<p><b>Ensure all students' basic needs are met</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Increase access to and availability of emergency funds and financial assistance for non-tuition-based costs and fees for low-income students</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Encourage institutions to proactively identify and provide targeted supports to students who are eligible for need-based assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Develop affordable food and housing options for all students, but particularly those facing housing and food insecurity</b></li> </ul>
<p><b>Provide adequate and stable funding to two-year and four-year institutions</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Adopt an equity-driven higher education funding formula to allocate state resources predictably and efficiently</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Support increased investments in higher education</b></li> </ul>

Nearly half of full-time freshman who enroll in an Illinois community college are placed in a remedial education course in at least one subject and a high proportion are low-income, Black, and Hispanic.<sup>2</sup> These courses cost thousands of dollars in tuition and fees but don't count as credit toward a degree. Few remedial students will ever enroll in, let alone complete, their introductory (gateway) courses in Math and English, and in Illinois, only 17% will graduate.<sup>3</sup> To keep students on track to on-time completion, we must scale remedial reform efforts, such as statewide implementation of co-requisite models, and ensure remedial placement measures accurately measure college readiness.



**Effective remediation reform efforts use multiple measures to gauge postsecondary readiness, assess students early, deliver interventions in high school and in the summer prior to matriculation, employ accelerated and co-requisite models of developmental education, remove high stakes exit exams, and offer targeted services to students in need of extra support.**

Objective	Policy Recommendations
<p><b>Implement and expand co-requisite models and other evidence-based developmental education approaches</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Set a target date for statewide scale of co-requisite models</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Establish statewide definitions related to developmental and remedial education to ensure accurate measures of enrollment and student outcomes</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Incentivize accelerated developmental education pathways</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Offer comprehensive support programs for students who need additional supports</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Eliminate high stakes exit exams</b></li> </ul>
<p><b>Reduce the need for remediation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Support statewide implementation of Postsecondary Workforce Readiness (PWR) Act's transitional math pathways</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Implement a uniform statewide process to evaluate remedial course placement using multiple measures of readiness</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Incentivize postsecondary and high school partnerships that improve access to dual enrollment and dual credit opportunities for low-income students and students of color</b></li> </ul>

2 Illinois State Board of Education, *Nearly Half of Illinois High School Graduates Enrolled in State Community Colleges Require Remediation*, December 17, 2015, available at <https://www.isbe.net/Lists/News/NewsDisplay.aspx?ID=20>.

3 Complete College America, *Spanning the Divide*, available at <http://completecollege.org/spanningthedivide>.

**Policy Priority:**  
**TRANSFER**

# Ensure that transfer practices and systems support equitable outcomes for all students

While Illinois has made progress improving transfer between two-year and four-year institutions, transfer students, particularly low-income students and students of color face barriers to completion, in addition to increased time to degree. Illinois ranks second in the nation for completion rates at four-year institutions among all community college students, yet only 11% of low-income bachelor’s degree-seeking students who start at an Illinois community college earn a bachelor’s degree in six years.<sup>4</sup> By dedicating resources to improve and expand existing transfer systems and supports, we can help our students graduate on time and without excess credits.



**Effective transfer pathways reduce excess credits, include targeted advising, increase the overall number of transfer students that have also earned an associate degree, keep students on track to on-time degree completion, and ensure all students who indicate a desire to earn a bachelor’s degree reach their postsecondary goals.**

Objective	Policy Recommendations
<p><b>Create an environment to maximize student success</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Provide support to students to choose a major or field of study by the time they reach 30 credit hours</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Encourage community college students to enroll in math prerequisites in their first year and complete their associate degree prior to transfer</b></li> </ul>
<p><b>Institute a statewide reverse transfer system</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Require all institutions of higher education to participate in the creation and implementation of a statewide reverse transfer system</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Create a process to identify, notify, and request consent from eligible transfer students who are nearing the completion of associate degree requirements</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Create a process for transcript review and degree conferral for eligible students</b></li> </ul>
<p><b>Ensure students have the information and resources they need to succeed</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Provide clearly mapped transfer pathways between two-year and four-year institutions for all degree programs</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Implement and scale dual advising partnerships between two-year and four-year institutions</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Ensure financial aid programs and packages advance transfer student success</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Ensure stable funding for the expansion of the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI) and MyCreditsTransfer tool</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Incentivize institutions to admit and provide targeted supports for transfer students</b></li> </ul>

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*This document was authored by Partnership for College Completion (PCC) with additional comments and suggestions from the PCC Policy Committee, who have helped shape the questions raised in this report and their implications for the future of our work.*

*This document would have not been possible without the guidance and support of all of our partners and stakeholders, whose contributions to the Partnership's growth exemplifies their deep commitment to our young people and their futures.*

# PARTNERSHIP FOR COLLEGE COMPLETION

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