



# PARTNERSHIP FOR COLLEGE COMPLETION

*Accelerating action to close the graduation gap*

## **Investors Council Report**

Reporting Period—8/15/2020 to 2/15/2021

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# A MESSAGE FROM PARTNERSHIP LEADERSHIP

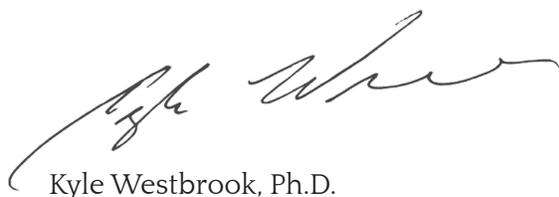
In months that pass like years and in days that may run together, the weariness provoked by the onset of COVID-19 challenges us all to stay focused, give, and accept grace, and more intentionally support those among us -- family, friends, and our students, who need the most support. At the Partnership for College Completion (PCC), we are encouraged by what we see from our colleges and universities, particularly, our ILEA institutions who are moving with urgency and intentionality to address some of the systemic challenges that our students face.

Here is a short summary of what we're seeing and hearing:

- Chicago State University President Z Scott has convened a working group of state leaders to address the systemic challenges faced by our state's black students. This important working group will release a set of recommendations for state and institutional policy in March.
- City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), in spite of significant enrollment declines, continues to invest in debt forgiveness programs for students and build strategic partnerships to address teacher shortages and escalating costs of a four year degree through its partnership with Illinois State University to build a teacher pipeline for CCC students.
- Northern Illinois University (NIU), by changing its policy on student balances carrying forward has seen a significant increase in persistence rates. NIU, like most other colleges and universities, did not allow students to register for classes if they still had an account balance. By eliminating that policy, NIU has taken a major step forward in removing barriers to student progress.

As significant as these steps forward are—and there are many more detailed in our Winter Investors Council Report—we know that as glimmers of hope emerge in public health, the near-term impacts of the pandemic on students and their families are colossal, and likely to get worse before they get better. As several college presidents have conveyed to us, if we thought that the enrollment decline this past fall was bad, we should brace ourselves for further and perhaps even more precipitous declines in the Fall of 2021. It is incumbent upon all of us then to ensure that we are using whatever tools are at our disposal, to ensure that COVID-19 does not become a generational setback for Black and Brown students and students from low-income communities.

We look forward to addressing this challenge at PCC and believe, even more forcefully, that only through partnerships can our will and resources be harnessed to best support our students.



Kyle Westbrook, Ph.D.  
Executive Director



Lisa Castillo Richmond  
Managing Director



## Operations

The Partnership for College Completion (PCC) continues to adjust operations, programming, and focus to the new environment brought about by the onset of COVID-19. Consistent with local, state, and national guidance urging nonessential workers to remain at home, PCC will continue to work from home for the foreseeable future. While working remotely, PCC participated in its annual audit led by accounting firm Desmond and Ahern. The audit report detailed two minor findings but no significant errors or concerns. PCC will continue to prioritize refining its operational processes in order to ensure continued alignment with accounting rules and regulations and an optimal work environment for employees.

### Board of Directors

In October, the PCC Board of Directors approved a revised strategic plan that among other things:

- Revises the PCC mission statement to explicitly focus on racial equity for Black, Latinx, and other racial minority students.
- Creates a vision statement that aligns PCC's work to using higher education as a mechanism for improved economic mobility for priority students.
- Urges PCC to explore new work in the transition to college from high school and the transition from college to the workforce.
- Articulates refined organizational goals
  - Increase impact by supporting institutional change efforts to eliminate racial and socioeconomic disparities in college access and completion
  - Expand reach and influence to raise awareness and promote solutions that eliminate racial and socioeconomic disparities in college access and completion
  - Advocate for bold policies that eliminate racial and socioeconomic disparities in college access and completion
  - Optimize operations by strengthening organizational processes and investing in human capital
  - Ensure sustainability by diversifying and increasing revenue and strengthening organizational and board impact

You will find an overview of the strategic plan in **Appendix B**.

The PCC Board of Directors also recently thanked and celebrated the contributions of founding Board members David Agazzi and Laz Lopez who have stepped down from the Board in order to prioritize other key time commitments. PCC has been significantly and positively impacted

## Operations, cont'd

by the contributions of Dave and Laz and looks forward to ongoing conversations about new Board members.

### Development

During the reporting period, PCC received new grants from the Lumina Foundation, as well as renewals from the CME Group Foundation. As founding investments are nearing the end of their second three-year commitment, PCC's Executive Director and Managing Director will continue to engage existing funders to renew and help sustain the organization's strong foundation of local general operational support.

While it is essential for PCC to maintain its current general operating support and attract new sources in order to fulfill its mission, it continues to maintain a solid base of net assets and positive cashflow. Due to the on-going impact of the pandemic, we anticipate lower programmatic spending in 2021 resulting from decreased meeting costs and lower cost approaches to other programmatic efforts. Assuming our funding base remains stable as expected, this should result in modest contributions to the organization's reserves.

# PROGRAMMING

## Programming

### Public Policy

This reporting period has been the most consequential one for PCC's public policy efforts since the organization's founding. After months-long engagement with leaders of the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus (ILBC), PCC was able to achieve a significant legislative victory with the passage of the Developmental Education Reform Act. Beginning in October 2020, PCC testified in a series of subject matter hearings on equity approaches to higher education reform in Illinois to be included in the ILBC's omnibus education bill HB 2170. Working alongside Women Employed, PCC continued to make the case for why Illinois urgently needs statewide placement measures and legislatively-mandated plans to scale evidence-based approaches to instruction. The DERA thus contains two significant components. First, it requires Illinois community colleges to use multiple measures for placement into college bearing courses instead of traditional high stakes tests that do little to predict success in college level coursework. Second, the legislation requires every public university and community college in Illinois to submit plans to scale co-requisite remediation or other evidence-based approaches for course delivery to the General Assembly by July 1, 2022.

Finally, as a part of HB 2170, PCC supported a revision to the AIM High scholarship program that was led by Chicago State University. The amendment creates a more equitable way to fund the program and ensures that low resourced public universities don't have to return precious scholarship dollars to the state in the event they cannot meet the matching requirement.

HB 2170 passed both houses of the Illinois General Assembly and now awaits signature by Governor Pritzker.

Though PCC and Women Employed were successful, through the leadership of Representative Carol Ammons and Leader Kim Lightford in reforming Illinois developmental education after two years of legislative battles, PCC is committed now to supporting strong implementation of DERA and will continue to collaborate with the Illinois Community College Board and Illinois Board of Higher Education to build and strengthen capacity of Illinois colleges and universities to lead successful reform.

2020  
YEAR IN REVIEW

1

**Bill passed** creating a college emergency grant program that, once funded, will provide additional state funding to students who need financial support.  
(Omnibus bill SB1569)

## Public Policy, cont'd

2020  
YEAR IN REVIEW

**100+**

Hours collaborating with PCC partner policy organizations on potential legislation and advocacy.

While much of PCC's public policy efforts were focused on developmental education reform, PCC also published its latest report *Higher Education Appropriations: A Framework for Equity in Illinois*. The report and subsequent engagement with elected officials about its findings have already [elevating equity as a major principle of funding reform in Illinois](#). In its FY22 budget proposal, the Illinois Board of Higher Education for the first time is recommending a more equity-driven approach to budgeting that is gaining momentum among legislators.

PCC along with other advocates are actively engaged in legislative outreach to advance legislation to create an equitable funding task force to recommend a funding formula for Illinois public four-year universities and community colleges.

PCC expects another productive legislative session this spring that will center on equitable funding as well as advocacy for key legislation that was not considered during the 2020 legislative session due to the coronavirus pandemic.

## Programming

### College and University Partnerships

Last fall, as Illinois colleges and universities prepared for the start of an academic year unlike any other due to the evolving coronavirus pandemic, PCC's College and University Partnerships team supported 22 Illinois Equity in Attainment initiative partners in publicly releasing their [Equity Plans](#). The culmination of a 12-18-month planning process, in which leadership teams came together to disaggregate and analyze campus data and identify strategies for scale, the plans are comprehensive and strategic five-year roadmaps for eliminating racial and socioeconomic student success disparities on institutions' respective campuses. Through the roadmaps outlined in their plans, ILEA partners began implementing various strategies to address equity gaps this fall. Key strategies include first year mentoring programs, new financial supports, programs addressing basic and non-academic need supports, and reforms to developmental education courses and placement. ILEA partners who have released their plans will submit annual reflections about their equity plan implementation and the resulting student outcomes – successes, challenges, and how they plan to adapt their plan in the year ahead based on lessons learned. To the Partnership's knowledge, no other set of institutions have voluntarily developed and published their commitments to equity so clearly and publicly.

2020  
YEAR IN REVIEW

22

**Equity Plans publicly released** on PCC's website detailing data-informed, institution-specific strategies for eliminating racial and socioeconomic achievement disparities on campus.

Thanks to the generous support of Crown Family Philanthropies, the Gorter Foundation, and the Julian Grace Foundation, those ILEA partners that published their equity plans and submitted outcome data to the Postsecondary Data Partnership have been offered an opportunity to each receive \$12,000 to support the strategies included in their equity plans.

The public release and implementation of equity plans centered the 2020 ILEA Fall Summit, that was held virtually due to the public health crisis. Themed "Engaging Faculty Champions in Equity Work," the three-day event was kicked off with a video message from Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot and a keynote address, "Saying Equity Will Not Beget Equity" by the renowned scholar in racial equity in higher education, Dr. Estela Bensimon. Dr. Bensimon is the founder and director of the Center for Urban Education at the USC Rossier School of Education. During the Summit, institutional leaders participated in a special *Equity Speaks*

## College and University Partnerships, cont'd

2020  
YEAR IN REVIEW

600+

Participants engaged during PCC's 2020 ILEA Equity Webinar Series that covered topics including eradicating student poverty barriers, leading equity-minded success for black students, and examining racial climate at Hispanic-Serving Institutions.

session where they discussed key strategies from their equity plans and lessons learned from the equity plan process. For the first- ever legislative panel held at an ILEA summit, three state lawmakers and a small panel of ILEA leaders discussed prioritizing equity in the higher education agenda for Illinois. More than 350 college and university leaders, administrators and faculty from ILEA institutions attended the event. This February, ILEA institutional leaders and core team members have been encouraged to invite student support services staff to join them in attending the first ILE

Spring Equity institute, which will also be virtual, focused on fostering student belonging and scheduled for February 18-19, 2021.

In September 2020, the College and University Partnerships team launched the Fall ILEA Equity Webinar Series as part of its continued work supporting ILEA partners in their equity work. Leading scholars and practitioners led presentations on fostering community for Black and Latinx students; supporting staff of color in diversity, inclusion and, equity roles; and assessing campus climate at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and emerging HSIs. This virtual programming continues this spring.

The PCC/Aspen Equity Academy for Presidents and Cabinets (EAPC), a yearlong collaboration, launched last summer with PCC in partnership with the Aspen Institute. The group of 11 ILEA college presidents and their cabinets convened virtually last July, August, November, and December with meetings focused on the role of executive leadership in equity change and student success, implementing institutional equity plan strategies at scale, and the effective use of data as a tool for institutional change. Participants have heard from Dr. Maria Harper-Marinick, former Chancellor of Maricopa County Community College District; Dr. Hollie Jones, Dean of Academic Affairs at Medgar Evers College (CUNY); Dr. Michele Johnson, Chancellor for Pierce College District; Dr. Debra Gilchrist, VP of Learning and Student Success for Pierce College Fort Steilacoom; and Eddy Conroy, Associate Director of Institutional Transformation at The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University. This spring, the cohort continues to build on its focus on measuring and evaluating equity

## College and University Partnerships, cont'd

across campus and building institutional capacity to support strategies at scale with two meetings each in February and June 2021. The PCC team is currently exploring the continuation and/or expansion of this opportunity.

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Learn about **PCC PROGRAMMING: Public Awareness**  
on page 12

## Programming

### Public Awareness

This past fall, PCC released *Higher Education Appropriations: A Framework for Equity in Illinois*, which connects Illinois' current inequities in higher education, exacerbated by the pandemic, to the past two decades of state disinvestment. The report culminates in a framework that can help legislators equitably support financially vulnerable students and institutions during the current recession. In conjunction with the report's release PCC staff have presented the study's findings and recommendations during special virtual conversations with state lawmakers, local community groups, and local philanthropists. The Framework study comes as part of PCC's broader policy objective to call—with a coalition of advocacy partners—for the development and use of an equitable funding formula for the state's public higher education system. The Framework study can be read [here](#).

When partners of the ILEA initiative were ready to publicly release their equity plans for eliminating racial and economic achievement disparities on their campuses, PCC's communications team was standing by with a multi-channel strategy for raising awareness about this development that was more than a year in the making. Staff developed an interactive landing page specifically designed to showcase the published equity plans and provide insight into the [equity plan process](#).

Posts to PCC's social media channels prior to the release drummed up anticipation for the forthcoming plans and a multi-day Twitter campaign, #EquityDriven, highlighted each institution that published an equity plan. Local media were engaged about the plans with an emphasis on the representation of Illinois college students enrolled in ILEA institutions and the precedent of a cohort of colleges and universities in the state united in their commitment and action to address inequities on their respective campuses.

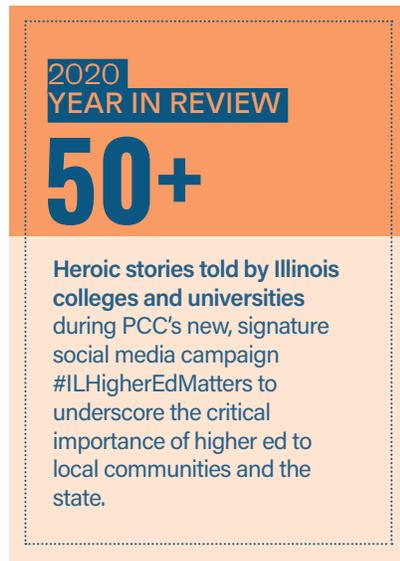
The final quarter of 2020 saw PCC continue to expand on its approaches for sharing its thought leadership and analysis, raising awareness about its policy and practice work, and engaging key stakeholders. With a goal to consistently publish and disseminate analyses and overviews of key topics of focus for the organization, PCC increased its posting of original content by 75%, with Public Policy, College and University Partnerships, and Public Awareness staff penning blogs including on [Hispanic-Serving Institutions](#) and one alumnus' [call for increased servingness](#), analyzing the [second federal stimulus'](#) implications for higher education, new ICCB guidance for measuring [college readiness](#), and the [even more urgent need for equitable funding](#)

2020  
YEAR IN REVIEW

1

**Original new report published calling for more equitable funding of Illinois' public higher education**  
- *Higher Education Appropriations: A Framework for Equity in Illinois.*

## Public Awareness, cont'd



**2020  
YEAR IN REVIEW**

**50+**

**Heroic stories told by Illinois colleges and universities** during PCC's new, signature social media campaign #ILHigherEdMatters to underscore the critical importance of higher ed to local communities and the state.

in the light of the now failed Fair Tax amendment. The development and sharing of these pieces continues to elevate PCC as a leader in the Illinois higher education ecosystem. This fall, in close collaboration with the College and University Partnerships team and in advance of the 2020 ILEA Virtual Fall Summit, PCC's communications team launched its first-ever Twitter Chat, engaging a group of institutional leaders and experts in an hour-long conversation about the importance of faculty champions in equity work. Over the 2020 fall, PCC's communications team also continued to advance its graphic design capacity, strategically utilize

LinkedIn to alert a broad professional community to ILEA's equity webinar learning opportunities, and employ video production to raise awareness about PCC and its various campaigns. The result has been steady and increased engagement with PCC's online touchpoints - from its website to its social media channels where the Partnership's Twitter following, for example, has risen by more than 100% since February 2020. PCC's stakeholders continued to engage at high rates with the organization's email outreach that has expanded to include post-webinar communications wherein the Partnership continues to add value by providing additional resources to meeting participants.

## MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS

The Partnership continues to establish itself as a leading voice in equity in college completion in Illinois through earned media, including with the *Daily Herald's* coverage of the Equity Plans release this fall; its inclusion in two *Chicago Tribune* articles on the impact of COVID-19 on low-income students and the outlook for higher ed funding following the failure of the Fair Tax amendment; a segment on WTTW Chicago Tonight; reporting by NPR Illinois on the Framework report; a feature in *POLITICO's* Illinois Playbook; and, during its testimonies at Senate subject matter hearings on free college and equitable funding, with coverage by WSIL News 3 in Carterville, Ill. This spring, PCC was also interviewed for the *Stateline Midwest*—a publication of The Council of State Governments, Midwest—discussing the implications of the Developmental Education Reform Act passed as part of the racial justice-centered omnibus HB 2170 introduced by the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus.

# APPENDICES

### The Challenge

A postsecondary education is a requirement to access the middle class and economic opportunity in the US. In fewer than ten years, **65 percent** of all jobs in the American economy will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school.<sup>1</sup> Yet only **58 percent** of college students from Illinois graduate in six years.<sup>2</sup> College completion disparities are significant across racial lines, income levels and college types. For example, only 37 percent of low-income students graduate in six years while 75 percent of wealthier students do.<sup>3</sup> In a state where nearly half of high school graduates are low-income and over 40 percent are Black or Latinx,<sup>4</sup> increasing the college access, persistence and completion rates for low-income, first generation, and students of color is not only a moral imperative, but critical to Illinois’ workforce and economic health.

### Partnership for College Completion

Established in 2016, the Partnership for College Completion (PCC) is a regional nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing college completion rates and eliminating degree attainment disparities for low-income, first generation, and students of color in Illinois—particularly Black and Latinx students. PCC champions policies, systems, and practices that ensure all students in Illinois graduate from college.

### Theory of Change

PCC believes three levers can drive change: (1) increased public awareness and urgency around improving college outcomes; (2) targeted public policy; and (3) support for colleges and universities to deploy and scale evidence-based practices. By focusing on these three areas, PCC can drive system-level reform and institutional change within higher education to improve college graduation rates for low-income, first-generation, and students of color.

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|------------------|--|
| <h3>Vision</h3>  | <p>PCC envisions a state where equitable opportunities to access and complete a college education lead to greater degree attainment, racial equity and socioeconomic mobility for Illinoisans.</p>   |
| <h3>Mission</h3> | <p>The Partnership for College Completion champions policies, practices and systems that increase college completion and eliminate degree completion disparities for low-income, first generation, and students of color in Illinois – particularly Black and Latinx students.</p> |

<sup>1</sup> Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. “Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020.” 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Advance Illinois. “Every Student Counts: The State We’re In 2016–2017. A Report on Public Education in Illinois.” 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, Table 219.32. Public high school graduates, by sex, race/ethnicity, and state or jurisdiction: 2012–13 and 2003–04

## Goals and Strategies

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Goal 1.<br/>Increase<br/>Impact</b></p>            | <p><b>Increase impact</b> by supporting institutional change efforts to eliminate racial and socioeconomic disparities in college access and completion</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provide institutions in the Illinois Equity in Attainment Initiative (ILEA) direct support to identify, expand and scale evidence-based strategies that support student success from college entry to completion</li> <li>2. Develop two-tiered institutional support model to expand reach and technical assistance support in Illinois</li> <li>3. Create opportunities for institutions to cross-collaborate, learn from peers, and deepen relationships</li> <li>4. Assess progress made on institutional change efforts, including effective adoption and scaling of innovative practices</li> </ol> |
| <p><b>Goal 2. Expand<br/>Reach and<br/>Influence</b></p> | <p><b>Expand reach and influence</b> to raise awareness and promote solutions that eliminate racial and socioeconomic disparities in college access and completion</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Conduct and publish actionable research that shines a spotlight on equity and enhances the field’s knowledge about systemic barriers and solutions to support student success</li> <li>2. Disseminate knowledge to inform and support advocacy and innovative strategies and practices</li> <li>3. Serve as a leading voice that raises awareness and promotes solutions to equity and college completion</li> </ol>   |
| <p><b>Goal 3.<br/>Advocate for<br/>Bold Policies</b></p> | <p><b>Advocate for bold policies</b> that eliminate racial and socioeconomic disparities in college access and completion</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Enhance advocacy efforts that support college access and completion at the state and national levels</li> <li>2. Support bold policy that makes equity in college access and completion a priority</li> <li>3. Create opportunities for stakeholders to coalesce around policy priorities that improve attainment and completion rates</li> </ol>   |
| <p><b>Goal 4.<br/>Optimize<br/>Operations</b></p>        | <p><b>Optimize operations</b> by strengthening organizational processes and investing in human capital</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ensure organizational processes and infrastructure are efficient</li> <li>2. Strengthen organizational structure and staffing model</li> <li>3. Invest in human capital to develop leadership and support a culture of excellence</li> </ol>   |
| <p><b>Goal 5. Ensure<br/>Sustainability</b></p>          | <p><b>Ensure sustainability</b> by diversifying and increasing revenue and strengthening organizational and board impact</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Diversify and effectively manage funding</li> <li>2. Increase board impact</li> <li>3. Develop succession plan</li> </ol>  |

## The News-Gazette

### Guest Commentary | From birth to career, Illinois students deserve equitable, adequate education

Robin Steans, April Janney, Mimi Rodman, Kyle Westbrook, and Diana Mendley Rauner / January 31, 2021

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COVID-19 has upended the lives and education of children and young people throughout Illinois. As we enter 2021, we will need new ways of thinking and working to ensure our state's education system emerges from the pandemic able to serve kids better and more equitably.

As a first step, state funding and policies must extend beyond traditional silos — preschool, K-12 and higher education — and instead address our educational system as a single, interconnected journey that provides equitably and adequately for our students at every step.

All children and youth in Illinois deserve a high-quality education regardless of their race/ethnicity, ZIP code or family income. We know quality experiences, from birth through college, make a dramatic difference in one's success in school, career and life. Beyond this, a well-educated citizenry and workforce is vital for Illinois' economy, now more than ever.

Illinois has made significant strides in recent years in funding education. In K-12, the Evidence-Based Funding for Student Success Act has made Illinois a national leader. The new formula equitably distributes new state dollars each year, prioritizing the state's most underfunded districts. In early-childhood education and care, Gov. J.B. Pritzker's Early Childhood Funding Commission is poised to release

recommendations that promise to illuminate a path to a more coordinated and equitable system of funding and governance.

In higher education, the Illinois Board of Higher Education and advocates are using data to expose barriers to college access and affordability for Illinois students

and are committed to redesigning and implementing an equitable, adequate funding structure going forward. While these gains are encouraging, they depend, in turn, on the state growing its investment in early childhood, public schools and higher education. Our educational investments benefit, in turn, on making access to stable housing, health care and nutrition a priority.

The state's push for equity is critical because the hard truth is Illinois' programs and schools do not provide equal access and quality for all children. Opportunity gaps start early and persist by race/ethnicity, income, home language and geography. Fewer than 1 in 3 kindergartners enters school "ready to learn," and only

35 percent of fourth-graders are proficient in reading.

While 85 percent of students graduate high school, only 53 percent of students go on to college.

continued on next page

## birth to career, cont'd

Despite the fact that the majority of employers need employees with more than a high school diploma, only a little more than half of Illinois residents hold a college degree or postsecondary credential.

Facing lean state budgets in recent years, funding for child care and early-education programs along with higher education has remained far from the levels needed and in some cases has been repeatedly cut or deprioritized.

Chronic underfunding threatens child development and stands in the way of young adults' college and career success. Worse, these actions disproportionately affect our low-income communities and communities of color.

Even before COVID-19, in early childhood, young children across the state lacked access to high-quality and affordable services. Many pockets of the state had and continue to have "child care deserts," and the industry struggles to recruit and retain a workforce that earns near-poverty-level wages.

Illinois' higher-education sector has been underfunded for a decade, leaving institutions no choice but to shut down programs, raise tuition and rely on out-of-state students' tuition. These practices have priced many Illinois students out of the market or decreased the number of opportunities available.

By no means left unscathed, prior to the passage of evidence-based funding in 2017, the K-12 public education system weathered years of deep cuts, as the practice of across-the-board reductions known as "proration" resulted in the largest losses of state funding for the state's highest-need school districts. While evidence-based funding has significantly bolstered K-12 funding, and done so with a strong equity focus, we still have a long way to go.

While the federal government has provided important short-term funding as a stopgap to help weather the current storm, the state has a critical role to play

to ensure children and youth have equitable and adequate funding moving forward. That responsibility will be complicated by serious and ongoing fiscal challenges that have been exacerbated by a devastating health crisis.

As we plan for recovery and work to build a strong and healthy educational ecosystem, we hope and expect that the state will avoid supporting one part of the education continuum by slashing budgets in another part. This practice is misguided on its face, as students cannot develop and thrive without a strong overall system that will see them through from birth to career.

We see a future where all children have access to high-quality opportunities that will propel them through life. To achieve this, children from birth through college need policy makers and education partners to stand together for comprehensive and fair solutions so they can reach their full potential. The brighter their futures, the stronger our families and economy will be.

*Robin Steans is president of Advance Illinois, April Janney is acting president and CEO of Illinois Action for Children, Mimi Rodman is executive director of Stand for Children Illinois, Kyle Westbrook is executive director of Partnership for College Completion and Diana Mendley Rauner, Ph.D., is president of Start Early.*

# NORTHERN PUBLIC RADIO



## Illinois Is Reforming Developmental Education. Here's Why Advocates Say It's A Racial Equity Issue

Peter Medlin / WNJ and WNIU / January 19, 2021

Nearly half of Illinois high school grads who enroll full-time at a community college get placed in a developmental education course. That includes 70% of Black students and, of them, only 8% graduate compared to 26% of white students.

Those classes cost students tuition money and time, but don't count for credit towards a degree. Emily Goldman, with the Partnership for College Completion, helped lawmakers craft the Developmental Education Reform Act to address the issue.

The act is part of the Legislative Black Caucus' education reform bill which passed through the Illinois legislature during the lame duck session.

"We really believe we can't talk about advancing racial equity in Illinois higher education without talking about how we're going to reform our development education system," said Goldman.

She says community colleges over-rely on placement tests. That leads to over-placing Black students in those courses. The new plan allows students to show proficiency in other ways. They can get into college-level courses through high school GPA or transition classes.

"Forty-five community colleges will implement the traditional model at some level, despite its ineffectiveness," said Goldman. "When you hear that,

and you know how it affects the rate of completion of college-level coursework -- I think it's pretty alarming."

Most students are still placed in the traditional model. Goldman says the most promising alternative is placing students in college-level courses with concurrent supports so their graduation isn't delayed.

In the current model, 18% of Black students in developmental math courses completed their first for-credit math class with a "C" or higher within three years. But with the alternative, Goldman says that jumps up to 69%.

The new proposal also requires colleges to submit plans for evidence-based developmental ed reforms, and issue reports on the results of their policy shifts over the next several years.

Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker is expected to sign the plan into law.



## IBHE Announces Members of New Strategic Planning Advisory Committee

Peter Medlin / WNIJ and WNIU / January 19, 2021

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SPRINGFIELD – The Illinois Board of Higher Education is announcing the members of its Strategic Planning Advisory Committee, which will develop a draft plan to fulfill the board’s which will lay out a set of strategies to achieve the board’s vision and priorities. The plan aims to create an equitable, accessible and innovative higher education ecosystem across Illinois that ensures students and communities thrive.

“The members of the advisory committee bring expertise from education, business, policy, community, and philanthropic organizations to shape the blueprint for our students and our higher education ecosystem for the next 10 years,” said IBHE Board Chair John Atkinson. “The members of the advisory committee will identify the highest-impact strategies to increase affordability, close equity gaps, and meet workforce needs. I am thrilled that this group has agreed to help us chart a course for higher education in Illinois.”

The strategic plan is being crafted in cooperation with the Illinois Community College Board and the Illinois Student Assistance Commission. It has garnered widespread public engagement so far, including the input from a survey of 10,000 people, 20 regional focus groups, and written comments. There will be room for more public engagement in each step of the process.

The committee will be co-chaired by:

Zaldwaynaka Scott, President, Chicago State

University

Juan Salgado, Chancellor, City Colleges of Chicago

Illinois Senator Pat McGuire

Betsy Ziegler, CEO, 1871

“At each step in the process, we have invited input on how to ensure Illinois has an equitable, innovative and nimble higher education system. The advisory committee will help chart the path to get us there,” explained IBHE Executive Director Ginger Ostro.

Co-Chair Zaldwaynaka Scott, president of Chicago State University, said, “I want to ensure that our higher education system makes the changes needed to alter the outcomes for students of color, because for too long they have been underserved. IBHE data will clearly tell us whether this new plan will make a difference.”

“This new plan must address the importance of an aligned education system,” said Co-Chair Juan Salgado, chancellor, City Colleges of Chicago. “Higher education needs to better serve the varied needs of our increasingly diverse, life-long learners, whether it be at two-year or four-year colleges and universities, public or private, or credential programs.”

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## committee, cont'd

Co-Chair Sen. Pat McGuire, who chairs the Illinois Senate's Higher Education Committee, explained, "Illinois post-secondary students and institutions have demonstrated their commitment to education throughout the Great Recession, the two-year budget impasse, and the COVID-19 pandemic. It's time we acted with equal determination and laid plans for a higher education system that's fair to all students, all community colleges and universities, and all parts of the state."

Recognizing that the input and support of the business community is critical to this effort, 1871 CEO Betsy Ziegler will join the committee as a co-chair. "Employers know the nature of work is changing rapidly and that partnership with our higher education system is essential. Preparing students for jobs and civic life are critical to our companies and our economy, as is the innovation and research that come from a strong higher education system" she said. "We must work together to make sure we are investing in the needs of our collective future."

To stay up to date on IBHE's strategic planning process, visit the [webpage](#).

The committee members are:

Darryl Arrington, DePaul University

Mara Botman, Circle of Service

Martha Burns, Oakton Community College

Tanya Cabera, University of Illinois Chicago

Brent Clark, Illinois Association of School Administrators

Jim Coleman, Accenture

Marlon Cummings, Governors State University, IBHE Faculty Advisory Committee

Mona Davenport, Illinois Committee on Black Concerns in Higher Education

Julia diLliberti, Illinois Community College Faculty Assoc.

Cherita Ellens, Women Employed

Lisa Freeman, Northern Illinois University

Sameer Gadkaree, The Joyce Foundation

Dave Hanson, EOA Consulting LLC

Lauren Harris, ISU, IBHE Student Advisory Committee

Pranav Kothari, IBHE Board

Jack Lavin, Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce

David Lett, Illinois State Board of Education Member

Daniel Lopez, Illinois Latino Council on Higher Education

Nivine Megahed, National Louis University

Paige Ponder, One Million Degrees

Teresa Ramos, Action for Children

Jim Reed, Illinois Community College Trustees Association

Jonah Rice, Southeastern Illinois College

Amanda Smith, Rock Valley Community College

Audrey Soglin, Illinois Education Association

Samiha Syed, College of DuPage, ICCB Student Advisory Committee

Jose Torres, Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

Charlotte Warren, Lincoln Land Community College

Simón Weffer-Elizondo, Illinois Federation of Teachers

Kyle Westbrook, Partnership for College Completion



## Higher education reform bill unveiled, aims for racial equity through scholarships, program reforms

Peter Hancock / Capitol News Illinois / January 11, 2021

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SPRINGFIELD – A bill aimed at making college education and teacher preparation programs more accessible and affordable for people of color began working its way through the General Assembly on Saturday with the formal introduction of language that lawmakers have been negotiating for months.

The action came on the second day of the General Assembly's lame duck session, which is focused heavily on a racial and social justice agenda developed over the summer and fall by the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus.

Rep. Carol Ammons, D-Urbana, who chairs the House Higher Education Committee, introduced the language in the form of a 268-page amendment to Senate Bill 458. During a hearing Saturday, she said the omnibus bill touches on numerous aspects of higher education, but she focused the hearing on a few key parts: restructuring the AIM HIGH scholarship program; increasing the diversity of the state's teaching workforce; and reforming the way schools place students into non-credit bearing "developmental" or "remedial" classes.

AIM HIGH is a scholarship program that lawmakers first authorized as a pilot program in 2019. It provides up to \$3,000 per year for students who attended an Illinois high school and who meet certain academic and financial qualifications. Currently, the cost of those scholarships is split evenly between the state and the

institution.

But Ammons said that puts some smaller schools that cater to higher-need students at a disadvantage because they often lack the resources to fully fund their share of the cost, which means a portion of the state funding they are allocated goes unused.

The bill would divide public colleges and universities into two tiers. Those in which 49 percent or more of their student body is eligible for Pell grants would have to match only 20 percent of their state allocation, while those with fewer Pell grant-eligible students would be required to match 60 percent.

Chicago State University President Zaldwaynaka Scott, the state's only predominantly-Black four-year university, testified that the current matching requirement forces low-resourced institutions like hers to return money to the state each year.

"By reducing the matching requirement in the AIM HIGH program, as we have presented the design, institutions that serve predominantly minority populations can fully participate in the program, thereby providing much needed financial support for students wishing to attend those institution who might not otherwise be able to afford college," Scott said.

Other Tier 1 schools would include Governors State

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## reform, cont'd

University, Northeastern Illinois University, Northern Illinois University, the University of Illinois at Chicago and Western Illinois University.

Increasing the diversity of the state's K-12 teacher workforce has also been a focus of the Legislative Black Caucus agenda.

One of the ways the state tries to do that is through the Minority Teachers of Illinois scholarship program, which is open to Illinois residents who meet academic qualifications and who are from either Black, Hispanic, Asian American or Native American origin who have expressed an interest in becoming teachers.

But Robin Steans, president of the education advocacy group Advance Illinois, said funding for that program, at less than \$2 million a year, has not kept up with demand or the rising cost of higher education.

"We can do a lot of additional good by adding just a few million dollars, which I know in the scheme of things isn't large, though at the moment that seems very large with the budget pressures," Steans said.

Steans said the proposal also calls for setting aside up to 35 percent of the money that is allocated to the program for Black men, a group that is considered greatly underrepresented in the teaching profession. And it would specifically target high school students who graduate after completing a career pathway in teacher preparation for recruitment into the program.

The proposed bill would also seek to increase the number of minority students who actually complete a college degree. Although there are many barriers to college completion, Kyle Westbrook of the Partnership for College Completion, said one of the biggest is the requirement many face to take "developmental" courses before they can advance to credit-bearing college courses.

"Out of every 100 black community college students in Illinois, 71 will be placed in developmental education, and only six of them will ultimately ever graduate from

college," Westbrook said. "Black and Latinx students are about twice as likely to be placed in developmental education courses compared to their white peers, and less likely to complete than their white peers."

Most schools, Westbrook said, use standardized test scores to determine whether a student must take developmental courses before going on to credit-bearing courses. But he argued that those tests are actually poor predictors of student success and that a better measure would be a student's high school grade point average.

In addition, Westbrook said, while developmental courses don't count for college credit, students still have to pay tuition to enroll in them, which means that many students end up exhausting their Pell grant eligibility and other student financial aid before they can complete their degree.

The bill calls for requiring community colleges to shift from a test-based system of placing students in developmental courses to a system based on a student's high school coursework and grade point average.

Lawmakers are rushing to pass as much legislation as they can in the few days remaining in the lame duck session. The session must wrap up by Tuesday night or early Wednesday morning because a new biennial session of the General Assembly begins at noon Wednesday when all new and re-elected lawmakers are sworn into office.

*Editor's note: This story has been updated to clarify that University of Illinois at Chicago, not University of Chicago, would be a Tier 1 school under the bill's language.*



## COVID-19 and Higher Ed: Students Face Challenges Applying, Paying for College

Erica Gunderson / WTTW News / December 20, 2020

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In any year, applying for college can be a stressful time for high school students. But like so many other things this year, the pandemic has made the application process even more uncertain and difficult.

"The dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism do not change this fact for them — it's just another barrier to overcome, like all of the others they've navigated around and through their entire lives," said Jeffery Beckham Jr., interim CEO of Chicago Scholars Foundation, which helps students from low-income communities.

While colleges grapple with evaluating applicants, financially disadvantaged students are struggling to figure out how to pay for college in a devastated economy. That struggle is reflected in the figures from a recent report showing that undergrad enrollment dropped by 3.6% this year. The downturn is in line with a larger trend, particularly among Black students.

Kyle Westbrook, executive director of the Partnership for College Completion, cites that report from the National Student Clearinghouse.

"Early data ... shows an overall decline in college enrollment of 4% freshmen enrollment in community colleges is down approximately 22%. Freshmen enrollment at public universities and private nonprofit colleges is down 14% and 12%, respectively. Enrollment declines have been steepest among

students identifying as American Indian and Black students, 11% and 8%, respectively."

To help aspiring college students manage the flood of information, Westbrook says the PCC developed a website aggregating data on how Illinois colleges and universities are addressing the pandemic. It's called Illinois Colleges Forward.

The pandemic accelerated a move to "test-blind admissions" — admission decisions not based on standardized test scores — at some colleges. Prior to the pandemic, Northern Illinois University and Southern Illinois University Carbondale had adopted test-blind admissions. Since the pandemic started, all Illinois public universities have adopted the same policy.

Beckham sees potential for a silver lining in these sorts of policy changes.

"Colleges have had to respond to the fact that many students weren't even able to sit for the SAT or ACT by the time they submitted their applications ... this year has also drastically opened-up access to resources in the college process with everything moving online," Beckham said. "Virtual campus tours are now becoming the norm instead of in-person visits reserved only for those who have the means

continued on next page

## paying, cont'd

to fund them. In general, colleges have had to make more information more accessible this year, at the same time as they have been forced to change how they reach and recruit students. The typical high school visit is out the window, so more organic means of school-student interaction like social media have gained a lot of traction."

But in the coronavirus-devastated economy, the problem of how to pay for college has worsened, especially for those already at a financial disadvantage.

"There is always a worry that students who are economically vulnerable will be forced, due to job demands and pressure to support family members who themselves have lost jobs, to drop out of college," said Westbrook.

For those students, says Beckham, taking a year off before applying for college to wait out the pandemic can further disadvantage them.

"A gap year means different things to different students. And unfortunately, it's one of those options that reinforces the racial and wealth divide," Beckham said. "A student from an affluent family may see a gap year as an opportunity to take on a virtual internship with a company connected to a parent; a low-income student might see it as working more shifts at the local grocery store to save money and help out their family in this uncertain time."



Illinois

91.9 UIS

## COVID-19 and Higher Ed: Students Face Challenges Applying, Paying for College

Peter Medlin / NPR Illinois | 91.9 UIS / December 2, 2020

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A new report reflects on the long-term cost of cutting education funding during past recessions and how Illinois can learn from those mistakes during the COVID recession.

The Partnership for College Completion argues that recessions are a rare opportunity to make college access and cost more equitable.

Mike Abrahamson is the Partnership's policy manager. He believes the future of Illinois' economy depends on how Illinois devotes funding to education now, when dollars are scarce and there could be budget cuts for schools around the corner.

"It's crucial that we respond to this not by cutting across the board, if we do need to make cuts, but in a way that recognizes the institutions and the students that they serve."

The report calls for the state to adopt a funding formula for higher-ed -- similar to K-12's Evidence-Based Funding -- that prioritizes schools who rely more on state appropriations and often enroll a higher percent of low-income and students of color.

Up to 10% funding cuts could be on the horizon for higher-ed in Illinois. He said it's important to remember schools and students won't be hit equally.

"At some universities, it might mean increasing tuition by a few hundred dollars at others in order to make up that gap it would be over \$1,000," he said. "And those students have far less ability to pay because our most financially vulnerable institutions also enroll our most financially vulnerable students."

That also means directing more money the Monetary Award Program or MAP need-based grants. Abrahamson says Illinois' FAFSA completion gap grew because of the pandemic -- with completion dropping 4% at lower-income high schools and increasing by nearly 5% at more affluent schools.

He said it's vital Illinois invest in education during the COVID-induced recession. The report states that disinvestment during previous economic downturns directly led to enrollment declines over the past decade.

Along with equity-focused funding for the next few years, the report also asks the state to establish a transparent equity task force to plan a long-term funding formula for higher-ed.



## Work, classes, financial aid – and now COVID-19: Life as a poor college student has only gotten tougher during the pandemic

Elyssa Cherney / Chicago Tribune / November 28, 2020

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When Ximena Castillo needs to focus on her college coursework, she walks down the hall from her basement apartment in Chicago's Gage Park neighborhood and settles into her new study spot: the laundry room.

No one bothers her there. It's quiet and the temperature is comfortable — until, that is, one of her neighbors needs to wash or dry a load.

But Castillo, a junior at Dominican University in River Forest, still prefers working there than in the small unit she shares with her parents, which is full of distractions. She used to live on campus, but she moved home after the coronavirus pandemic erupted and doesn't have her own bedroom anymore.

"I don't feel comfortable going to a cafe or anything currently," said Castillo, 20, who worries she could expose her relatives to COVID-19. The laundry room is "not the best, but not the worst. I would prefer to be outside with my dogs because I like sitting in nature, but it's way too cold for that right now."

Finding a setting conducive to schoolwork is just one of the myriad challenges low-income college students face as they try to continue their education despite pandemic-related setbacks.

Some students have withdrawn from school because of changing economic circumstances, problems

with online learning or difficulty connecting to virtual student services.

According to U.S. census data from August, nearly 7 million people said they canceled college plans for the fall because their income had changed during the pandemic and they could no longer pay.

Overall undergraduate enrollment at U.S. colleges is down about 4.4%, with the greatest declines seen in community colleges and among first-year students, according to the latest data from the National Student Clearinghouse. While the NSC does not break the numbers down by socioeconomic status, nontraditional and low-income students typically favor community colleges.

In Illinois, fewer students have applied for federal and state financial aid since schools closed down in March compared with the same time last year, according to the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, which administers need-based grants to college students. That's a sign low-income students might be abandoning college plans altogether instead of seeking help with tuition.

"For our low-income students, they are obviously struggling with their education and helping out with their families," said Jacqueline Moreno, an executive

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## COVID-19, cont'd

staff member at ISAC. "It's not entirely different from what low-income students face when they are first-generation college students in any year — it's just exacerbated right now, and people are paying more attention.

Unlike in families where going to university is expected, Moreno said, low-income and first-generation college students often feel guilt for pursuing higher education and not immediately entering the workforce to help with household bills.

Castillo, a graphic design major, is trying her best to stay on track. She's refinanced her student loans, received help from her school's COVID-19 relief fund and taken on extra jobs to put toward her tuition.

Her mom, who works at a Little Caesars, and her father, a construction worker on medical leave prior to the pandemic, don't make enough to cover the cost but have always encouraged her to pursue higher education, though they didn't go to college.

But between picking up shifts as a hostess at a University Village restaurant and trying to complete her coursework, Castillo is often exhausted. She's still more than \$2,000 behind on school payments and can't register for spring classes until she puts forward more money, she said.

At the same time, her shifts at the restaurant have dried up as business slows due to the pandemic and the ban on indoor dining. Castillo used to work up to five days a week at Bar Louie but is now lucky if she gets scheduled for one.

"It's a lot on my plate," said Castillo, who went to George Westinghouse College Prep in East Garfield Park, part of Chicago Public Schools. "I feel like either my work suffers or my school suffers, and it's so hard.

"For a while I was juggling two jobs on top of school, and I felt like I was drowning. No sleep. Constantly on energy drinks and coffee just to get by. And it was so unsatisfying because I would do my best at everything

and get half done."

### 'It went downhill this semester'

Taking time off from college was not part of Jony Estrada's plan. Though he was nervous about starting classes this fall at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Estrada had been eager to study economics and wanted to minor in finance.

The 21-year-old, however, began to feel overwhelmed with virtual learning and the amount of coursework. The large class sizes didn't help — Estrada said he grew anxious waiting for professors to reply to emailed questions — and he struggled to connect with UIC tutors when he tried to reach them by phone.

"I never considered taking a gap year until this year, when this whole pandemic started," said Estrada, who lives in the West Elsdon neighborhood, near Midway Airport, with his parents. "It went downhill this semester. I don't know if it's because I'm a new student and I'm not familiar with how things work around here or just because of the work."

Estrada earned his associate degree from Loyola University Chicago over the summer and participates in a program through the nonprofit Bottom Line, which helps low-income and first-generation students reach college and obtain a degree.

While Estrada hoped to continue making progress this semester, he felt staying in school would negatively affect his mental health, so he dropped his four classes just before midterms.

Chris Broughton, executive director of Bottom Line's Chicago operations, said most of the 1,500 students in his programs are sticking with school even though they don't like online classes.

"About 85% or more of our students are staying enrolled in college and trying to persist and navigate this new remote learning environment, even though

## COVID-19, cont'd

it's been a challenge," he said. "Students are generally feeling dissatisfied and not enjoying that experience in the way they envisioned."

For now, Estrada hopes to get an internship in a business-related field as he decides whether to return to UIC in the spring. He's not sure if he should wait until next year, when there might be a better chance for in-person learning to resume.

"I will graduate because that's my goal also — to get a diploma, to get a bachelor's degree — but I think right now I need a little break," he said. "I just don't think I'm ready for this semester."

### Deepening inequities

While anecdotes of students delaying college abound, the Illinois Board of Higher Education is trying to prevent students from pausing their studies.

As part of a new campaign called "Stay the Course," IBHE is publicizing data that shows "a significant percentage" of students who take gap years never complete college. The trend is especially prevalent for low-income students, rural students and students of color, the campaign says.

"Almost all of the new jobs created since the 2008 recession require some kind of credential beyond high school," the IBHE campaign says in social media posts and online messages.

According to one NSC study, only 10.5% of roughly the 1.6 million students who had dropped out of Illinois colleges returned to school between 2013 and 2018. Across all states, only 13% returned, and fewer graduated.

But today, as the pandemic enters its ninth month and a new wave of infections triggers statewide restrictions, some of the obstacles can seem insurmountable.

Jermaine Lash, who attended City Colleges of Chicago, is also taking this semester off because of

problems with his financial aid.

Lash, 21, of Englewood, said he is seven credits away from earning an associate degree in business administration from Richard J. Daley College, one of the community college network's campuses. But complications with his Federal Pell Grant, assistance that goes to undergraduates with exceptional financial need, have prevented him from enrolling in fall classes.

Lash's advisers at One Million Degrees, an organization that helps Illinois community college students, said his predicament is especially difficult because he must deal with virtual student services at CCC during the arduous process of verifying his financial records.

Part of the holdup: Lash's mother recently died from health issues unrelated to the pandemic, and he can't access her tax documents, Lash said.

"I feel like it would be 10 times better if I could just talk to them in person," Lash said. "Then they'll get a better understanding and help guide me to the right path on figuring out a solution."

Until then, Lash is working in the deli at a Jewel-Osco close to downtown. He hopes the paperwork will be sorted out in time for spring classes but worries he might need to skip next semester too.

"I just want to finish this. I like college," he said. "I went ever since I got out of high school. ... Ever since then, I've never taken a break or anything. So now this is something new to me. ... It doesn't really feel right."

As a whole, Illinois community colleges are enduring a major hit from the pandemic, with enrollment plunging nearly 14% this fall, according to data from the Illinois Community College Board.

While IBHE hasn't released fall enrollment figures for the state's public universities, the NSC estimates overall college enrollment in Illinois dropped by 6.4%.

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## COVID-19, cont'd

The gap indicates how the pandemic is disproportionately affecting low-income communities of color, said Lisa Castillo Richmond, managing director of the Partnership for College Completion, a Chicago nonprofit. She's concerned the pandemic will further deepen inequities in higher education.

"Our community colleges serve our most vulnerable students," she said. "They serve much greater proportions of low-income students, first-generation students, African American students and Latinx students."

The number of students seeking financial aid through state and federal grants has also dropped off since the pandemic closed schools in March, a sign that college may seem out of reach for some.

As of mid-November, the state's need-based Monetary Award Program had received 8% fewer applications from eligible students compared with the same point last year, according to ISAC.

For the 2021-22 school year, applications from MAP-eligible students have dropped by 9%, though it's still early in the cycle. Submissions only opened Oct. 1.

### **'Students will work their tails off'**

During the pandemic, Dominican University has seen a "dramatic increase" in financial aid appeals, which students can file when there's a change in their economic situation.

For many, that's due to a family member losing a job, health care costs and other unforeseen expenses, said Victoria Spivak, assistant vice president of student enrollment services and director of financial aid.

"Dominican serves a very high-needs population," she said. "We are over 50% Pell eligible. ... We also serve a significant number of undocumented students."

In response to financial aid appeals, Dominican provided additional institutional aid and also distributed money made available to students through

the federal coronavirus relief program. Students can use those grants to pay for pandemic-related expenses including food, housing and technology. So far, Dominican had awarded nearly \$1.5 million in such grants, a spokeswoman said.

Broughton, of Bottom Line, said his organization also doled out more than \$160,000 to help students with groceries and other emergency expenses over the last 10 months through a new fund.

But for students like Castillo, the struggle continues. Her mom lost two weeks of wages, she said, after someone at Little Caesars contracted COVID-19 and she had to quarantine due to the exposure.

Castillo has more time to study since her shifts at Bar Louie have been reduced, but she's anxious she won't have enough money to pay down her balance in time for spring classes.

Students can't register for courses if they owe \$1,000 or more in unpaid fees, said Mark Carbonara, Dominican's director of academic advising and first-year experience, who's been helping Castillo look for more scholarships.

"Our students will work their tails off — second and third shift — in order to pay for college," but those jobs are disappearing because of COVID-19, he said.

While it's nerve-wracking to wait, Castillo said she remains hopeful she'll come up with money to attend next semester. She said the adversity will make her a stronger person in the end.

"I just remind myself how lucky I am to even have the opportunity to go to school," she said. "I know a lot of people in my neighborhood who didn't have the same opportunities as I did."



## Without graduated income tax, Illinois state universities brace for 'almost inevitable' budget cuts 'because there's just nothing left'

Elyssa Cherney / Chicago Tribune / November 12, 2020

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In Gov. J.B. Pritzker's first remarks after voters rejected his administration's signature proposal for a graduated-rate income tax in Illinois, the first-term Democrat singled out higher education as one of the many state-supported areas that could lose funding as lawmakers try to balance the next budget.

With no new sources of revenue and an expected drop in gains from sales tax during the coronavirus pandemic, Pritzker warned that he is left with few favorable options.

Reducing discretionary funding for the state's 12 public universities and community colleges could make it harder for students to afford college if schools raise tuition to offset the losses, some experts said. And there could be less money to support a grant program for low-income college students who qualify for state assistance in a time when more applicants are expected to seek aid.

While Illinois universities are not expecting any budget changes for this fiscal year, which began July 1, some advocates and policy experts said the long-term implications for Illinois higher education could be severe if new sources of funding aren't found.

"Without new revenue, our fear is that we will continue to see the same trajectory that the state has been on in terms of lower enrollment, especially for Black

students," said Kyle Westbrook, executive director of the Partnership for College Completion, a Chicago-based nonprofit.

Over the past two decades, Westbrook said, state appropriations for public universities have remained relatively flat but haven't kept pace with inflation, and a greater share of the funding is being directed to pensions for public university and community college employees.

On top of that, some schools are still reeling from the state's two-year budget impasse under former Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner, Westbrook said. Universities that rely more heavily on state dollars and serve a higher number of lower-income students were disproportionately affected by the funding delays.

"You could argue the situation was dire even before the budget impasse, but that created a crisis in the system as a whole," said Westbrook, who led education policy in former Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel's administration. "The failure of the (tax amendment) to pass is so catastrophic for higher ed in the state."

Adam Schuster, senior director of budget and tax research at the right-leaning Illinois Policy Institute, agreed that inflation-adjusted spending on higher

continued on next page

## budget, cont'd

education is significantly down. Funding has dropped by nearly 20% since 2010, when accounting for inflation, while spending on pensions has skyrocketed, he said.

But Schuster called for reform to the state pension system, a politically divisive issue, as opposed to changing Illinois' flat income tax rate of 4.95%.

"Estimated progressive income tax revenues were not earmarked for any particular purpose and would have failed to close the state's structural deficit," he said in an email. "Cuts to state spending on higher education stem from the unsustainable growth in contributions to the state pension systems."

Public universities contacted by the Tribune had little to say about the failed constitutional amendment. A spokesman for Illinois State University said the school "will have to wait and see what next year's budget cycle looks like." Meanwhile, a spokesman for the University of Illinois System did not offer comment beyond confirming that no changes to state appropriations were planned for this year.

"It would be premature for us to comment on the current budget cycle or future appropriations until the governor's office and the General Assembly share their plans," said Mike Hines, a spokesman for Northeastern Illinois University.

On Thursday, the University of Illinois Board of Trustees approved a request for an 8.3% increase in state funding next year as officials projected \$270 million in costs related to the pandemic. The request is sent to the state Board of Higher Education, the governor and the legislature for consideration.

But Jennifer Delaney, associate professor of higher education at U. of I.'s Urbana-Champaign campus, painted a darker picture. Because higher education spending is the largest discretionary portion of Illinois' budget, it is often the most vulnerable when cuts are required, Delaney said.

Delaney, who also serves on the Illinois Board of Higher Education, said her research shows that higher education funding is more volatile than other spending categories and closely tied to economic conditions. She said the pandemic-related recession exacerbates the situation this year.

"It's almost inevitable that higher ed will be cut because there's just nothing left," Delaney said. "The hope of the (tax amendment) is that it would have brought new or additional revenues in, and without those, it's just not at all clear where the money will come from."

Pritzker's graduated-rate income tax proposal might have provided some relief, but it fell short of the thresholds needed to pass on Election Day. The administration estimated the measure would have generated \$1.2 billion in the budget year that ends June 30 and \$3.4 billion in future years.

The state remains on shaky financial footing, with the administration projecting a combined loss of \$6.5 billion in revenue this year and next year. Pritzker also asked state departments to propose cuts of 5% this year and 10% next year and previously warned there could be a 15% cut to discretionary spending without the constitutional amendment.

In addition to potential cuts, Pritzker said he is considering raising income taxes by 1 percentage point across the board. The General Assembly would have to approve the rate hike.

Melissa Hahn, a spokeswoman for the Illinois Board of Higher Education, released a statement saying "we're still in the budget development process," but did not provide further comment.

During a spring session that was truncated because of the pandemic, the General Assembly passed a \$43 billion state budget that held funding relatively steady for education. That was a disappointment for universities, which were hoping to receive a 5% bump

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## budget, cont'd

in funding before the pandemic hit.

The Illinois Student Assistance Commission, a state entity that manages need-based grants for college students, was also in line to receive an additional \$50 million but instead saw its funding frozen at last year's level.

Eric Zarnikow, ISAC's executive director, said he understands that budget challenges were created by the pandemic but hopes lawmakers will continue to prioritize his agency's grants, which are distributed through the Monetary Award Program. MAP saw funding increases in 2018 and 2020, bringing it to a historic high of approximately \$451 million.

Zarnikow said he thinks budget constraints might be a long-term issue and that it would help if lawmakers in Washington stepped in.

"In Illinois, as well as across the country, education and particularly higher education has been really impacted by COVID-19," he said. "We think support from the federal government is really going to be important to meet the needs of the education community."

*Chicago Tribune's Dan Petrella contributed.*



## Experts discuss possible solutions to college affordability in Illinois

Mike Miletich / WSILtv.com / October 21, 2020

SPRINGFIELD (ILLINOIS CAPITOL BUREAU) – State lawmakers hope to craft a plan to make college more affordable, especially for many in low-income communities.

Experts say tuition rates continue to soar compared to the average income for those going to college or tech schools. They also told lawmakers community colleges haven't been exempt from the rise in costs due to inflation. Some feel financial aid is critical to providing access to higher education for students in low-income communities.

"We have families that are priced out not just from college attendance in general at four year institutions, but also public two year institutions," said Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher.

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign professor noted dips in attendance align with a lack of diversity in funding models. Zamani-Gallaher feels the state needs more incentives and opportunities to attract students to continue their education.

Currently, five community colleges in Illinois offer promise programs to help high school graduates with full scholarships.

"When combined with Pell and MAP grants, many community college students that benefit from promise programs can attend college without any out-of-

pocket costs in terms of tuition and fees," said Brian Durham, Executive Director of the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB).

However, the promise programs fall under a category of "last dollar" programs. Durham explained students have to take advantage of all other options of aid before they access funding from promise programs.

### Importance of financial aid

The Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) also feels financial aid is critical to providing higher education to students in low-income communities.

Executive Director Eric Zarnikow says 54% of MAP recipients are first-generation college students or have no financial resources for college.

"MAP is supporting about 60% of Black undergraduates and well over half of Latino/Latina undergrads attending public universities," Zarnikow said.

He also highlighted work with Gov. JB Pritzker's office to identify a plan to improve grant aid. Zarnikow said combining a \$50 million increase in MAP funding with an effort to put 15% of those funds towards community college students could cover tuition and fees for most MAP-eligible community college students.

continued on next page

## affordability, cont'd

"He aimed to make community college tuition-free for MAP eligible students whose families make under \$45,000 a year. That was essentially free community college program for families making under that amount," Zarnikow added.

### Strong free college programs

Meanwhile, the Partnership for College Completion argues Illinois has the framework for a free four-year college program through MAP grants.

"We frankly believe very strongly in the mission of MAP to serve our lowest income students and our neediest students in our state and prioritizing our public resources to do that," Executive Director Kyle Westbrook said.

Sarah Labadie, Associate Director of Policy for Women Employed, feels the idea of free college is attractive to many people. While some community colleges function tuition-free, Labadie noted the state doesn't market it that way.

"If designed really well, a free college program or even remarketing our current program could really ensure that we're able to attract more students to higher education who otherwise think it's out of reach," Labadie explained.

She told lawmakers strong free college programs ensure students leave college without debt. Labadie said successful programs allow anyone to take advantage of the assistance and cover costs for four years of education.

### Planning for the future

Many hope the state could explore an equity-based funding model for college similar to the K-12 evidence-based model.

"Even if we gave more money to this system, it is not going to bring equity and justice when it comes to communities of color. It is not designed that way and we have to accept that, find the flaw in it, and fix the

design," added Rep. Carol Ammons (D-Urbana).

The Illinois Board of Higher Education hosted focus groups and created a survey for people to share solutions. Executive Director Ginger Ostro hopes to adopt their strategic plan by late March with support from the ICCB and ISAC. Still, Ostro said that would only be the start of the process.

"We will have the need for a series of policy changes, state-level practice changes, as well as institutional-level changes," Ostro explained. "As we go over the next couple of months, there's really an opportunity here for all of us to come together and decide what direction we want to go. How are we going to address these inequities that we've seen in the higher education system? How are we going to meet workforce needs, and how are we going to drive the state's economy?"

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