

2022

PCC POLICY AGENDA

Advocating for bold policies that improve college success in Illinois by eliminating racial and socioeconomic disparities in college access, persistence, and completion.

Equitable Access

Affordability

Accountability

This document was authored by the 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 not have 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 the young people of Illinois and their futures.

The Partnership for College Completion (PCC) 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.

We envision a state where equitable opportunities to access and complete a college education lead to greater degree attainment, racial equity, and socioeconomic mobility for Illinoisans.

OUR AREAS OF WORK

Public Policy

We advocate for bold equity-centered policies that improve college access and affordability and address structural barriers to persistence and completion.

College and University Partnerships

We partner with Illinois colleges and universities to provide support as they develop and deploy campus-based, equity-centered strategies.

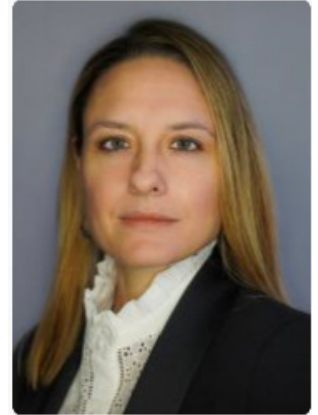
Research and Data

We use data and research to advance both transformational equity change on college and universities campuses and through state policy efforts in Illinois.

Winter 2022

Today there is much greater awareness of the structural inequities across our higher education system in Illinois than there was a decade ago, or even when the Partnership for College Completion (PCC) began its work in 2016. Over the last five years, PCC has addressed the urgency of reforming these systems through our two most powerful levers for change: evidence-based policy action and institutional-level reform led by faculty, staff, and administrators on our college and university campuses.

As awareness has moved into action, colleges and universities have developed equity plans as part of PCC's Illinois Equity in Attainment Initiative (ILEA), publicly committing to eliminate racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps and aggressively prioritizing increasing completion rates for Black and Latinx students. Meanwhile, state leaders have advanced equity-centered public policy like the Developmental Education Reform Act (DERA) in the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus' Education and Workforce Equity Act and Senate Bill 815, which created the Commission on Equitable Public University Funding.



With the promising efforts happening across dozens of college and university campuses through ILEA, the Illinois Board of Higher Education's new strategic plan centered on equity, and recent legislation that prioritizes removing structural barriers for student success, Illinois has an opportunity to move closer toward transformative change in higher education that will drive college enrollment and improve equity in access, opportunity, persistence, and completion. The work that remains presents multiple promising opportunities for PCC to continue its pursuit to address longstanding inequities in Illinois' higher education system.

To help guide the future of our policy work, the Partnership is proud to present the 2022 Policy Agenda which sets forth a framework for addressing systemic barriers to equity and prioritizes policies that ensure:

- Students of all races, economic backgrounds, and geographic locations have access to high-quality higher education;
- Illinois' public colleges and universities are debt-free for students from low-income households and affordable for all Illinoisans; and
- Institutions of higher education are held accountable to equitably serving Illinois students.

Our many deeply committed partners within colleges and universities, the state legislature, state agencies, and other nonprofit and advocacy organizations are showing what is possible when we collectively prioritize action that advances equity in higher education. We look forward to continuing this work with you to ensure that more Illinois students—irrespective of race, geography, first generation status, or household income—have equitable access to pathways that will enable them to obtain an excellent education and earn an affordable college degree here in our home state.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lisa Castillo Richmond', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Lisa Castillo Richmond
Executive Director
Partnership for College Completion

The landscape of higher education in Illinois has shifted dramatically over the Partnership's short history, during which we have been a leading voice, advocating for bold, evidence-based policy to realize a better future for Illinois' students.

Since 2016, the Partnership has prioritized action that acts as a catalyst for institutional and systems-level change. We have pushed the state to commit to not just increasing college completion rates overall, but to do so with equity as a first principle. As a result, Illinois is in the final stages of adopting a new set of statewide degree attainment and completion goals that prioritize racial equity and strategies to achieve parity among all student groups. Additionally, in 2021, the Developmental Education Reform Act (DERA) passed as part of the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus-led Education and Workforce Equity Act. By requiring institutions to improve course placement and developmental education delivery models, DERA will help more students, particularly Black, Latinx, and students from low-income households, access and complete college-level coursework in mathematics and English and stay on track to on-time degree completion. Now, through a grant-funded initiative, PCC is working with the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) to support colleges and universities in developing institutional-level plans for DERA-aligned developmental education reform.

Despite these promising steps forward, inequities across our higher education system remain and have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic disproportionately affected the health, financial well-being, and college enrollment of students from low-income families and students of color. At the same time, the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many others showed how deeply ingrained racial injustice is within systems intended to serve the public, including higher education.

Throughout these crises, PCC continued to advocate for comprehensive change in higher education. While PCC's College and University Partnerships team convened colleges to build institutional capacity to develop and implement campus equity plans, the Policy Team advocated for an equitable distribution of COVID-relief funds, supported the adoption of system-wide test-optional admissions policies to help level the admissions playing field, and most recently, worked with members of the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus to create a Commission on Equitable Public University Funding. Ultimately, the Commission will research and recommend specific criteria and approaches for an equity-based higher education funding model for public universities, as Illinois did for its K-12 public school system when it created the Evidence-Based Funding model in 2017.

While there have been heartening successes over the last five years and more that are underway, there is still significant work to be done to turn around enrollment declines, improve college affordability, and eliminate the stark disparities in degree completion in Illinois by race and income. Systems and mindsets that disadvantage black and brown students, and students from low-income households have taken generations to build and will take time to dismantle. As a result, PCC's work will continue to urgently hold our leaders and institutions accountable for reimagining a postsecondary system in which all of our students have real opportunities to achieve their educational aspirations.



Illinois must improve access to college, decrease the cost of a degree, expand opportunities for success for all Illinoisans, and eliminate racial and socioeconomic disparities that exist across each of these areas.

To realize our state's degree attainment goals, equitably increase enrollment at our public institutions, and drive economic mobility, state leaders must intentionally and strategically align goals, policies, investments, and actions. Through an inclusive process, state leaders and elected officials should articulate their commitment to students through bold investments in higher education and by establishing enlightened policies like those described in the pages that follow. The objectives must be to improve access to college, decrease the cost of a degree, expand opportunities for success for all Illinoisans, and eliminate racial and socioeconomic disparities that exist across all of these areas. The future prosperity of our state and our residents depends on taking these urgent, equity-centered actions.

This PCC 2022 Policy Agenda outlines three principles of action that spark and accelerate the pace of transformative change within Illinois' higher education system. The policies associated with each can work in concert to not only increase equitable access, affordability, and accountability, but also focus Illinois' higher education system on serving the evolving needs of its students.

PCC POLICY PRIORITIES

Equitable Access

Every Illinois students regardless of race, place, or income deserves access to high-quality postsecondary education that is aligned with their educational and career aspirations.

Affordability

Illinois' public colleges and universities should be debt-free for students from low-income households and affordable for all Illinoisans.

Accountability

Accountability mechanisms must be strengthened to provide Illinois students with affordable and equitable access to high-quality postsecondary degrees and credentials.





Every Illinois student regardless of race, place, or income deserves access to high-quality postsecondary education that is aligned with their educational and career aspirations.

In Illinois, access to higher education is stratified by race and income, as we continue to see unequal representation by college sector (i.e., Black students being underrepresented in public universities and overrepresented in for-profit colleges) and within each sector, where public and private colleges with higher completion rates, transfer rates, and post-graduation incomes tend to enroll lower percentages of Black, Latinx, and low-income students. Equitable access to higher education extends beyond getting into college, as even within institutions, students often have different opportunities and experiences depending on race and income.

The first step in expanding higher education’s potential for socioeconomic mobility is to eliminate barriers to college access for students historically underserved by our institutions.

To provide more equitable access to a postsecondary education, institutions must implement more inclusive admissions and transfer processes. For example, Illinois community colleges can be a key access point to higher education, but Black, Latinx, and low-income students are not transferring to four-year institutions to continue their education at the same rate as their White and wealthier peers. Higher education stakeholders must identify barriers to transfer for historically marginalized students and aggressively pursue policy and system changes that will create more seamless and affordable pathways between and within our 2- and 4-year sectors.

Beyond admissions, the state must hold institutions accountable to scaling effective models of developmental education, such as corequisite support. Currently, the most-widely used model in Illinois—traditional non-credit bearing stand-alone courses—acts as a barrier to access to college-level coursework, decreases a student’s likelihood of college completion, and at best, delays time to degree, particularly for underrepresented and underserved student groups.

Finally, ensuring equitable access will require changes to Illinois’ higher education funding systems to add clear accountability mechanisms and incentives for serving a student body representative of the demographics of the state. It will also require adequate funding for the institutions that currently serve Illinois’ students from low-income households and other underrepresented student groups. Doing so will help ensure that educational opportunities and successful student outcomes are not dependent upon which public college or university a student attends.



STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE EQUITY IN COLLEGE ACCESS

Redesign College Admissions Processes for Greater Equity

Implement Comprehensive Developmental Education Reforms

Advance Equitable Institutional Funding

Ensure Equity in Transfer Systems





Illinois’ public colleges and universities should be debt-free for students from low-income households and affordable for all Illinoisans.

Between 2002 and 2018, Illinois experienced a period of significant disinvestment in higher education, with funding for Illinois public universities cut over 50% and community colleges experiencing similar disinvestment. To make up for this funding loss, state colleges and universities were left with no choice but to raise tuition and fees. Ultimately this shifted costs to students, many of whom were effectively priced out of the state’s universities—students from low-income households and students of color most of all. No other state lost more public university students than Illinois during this time. This disinvestment could also explain why Illinois is now first in the nation in the percentage of undergraduates who choose to attend lower-cost community college—a critical higher education access point— and why record numbers of students are choosing to not attend college at all.

Increasing college affordability is essential to improving college enrollment and persistence and creating opportunities for Illinois students to pursue their college and career goals in the state.

While not easy or inexpensive, the path toward affordable higher education is clear. With equitable reinvestment in Illinois’ institutions of higher education, a commitment to fully fund the Monetary Award Program (MAP), targeted supports to re-engage the over 1.7 million adults in Illinois with some college and no degree, and by providing financial support to students that go beyond tuition and fees, institutions could reverse downward enrollment spirals and diminish students’ inclination to pursue out-of-state post-secondary options. Further, when combined with student-centered supports, persistence and graduation rates could rise, particularly for students from low-income families, preparing a more qualified and diverse cohort of graduates for entry into Illinois’ workforce every year.



STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY

Increase Investment in Students through MAP

Reinvest in Colleges and Universities

Expand Access to Basic Needs Support for Students

Target Financial Support to Re-engage Adult Learners





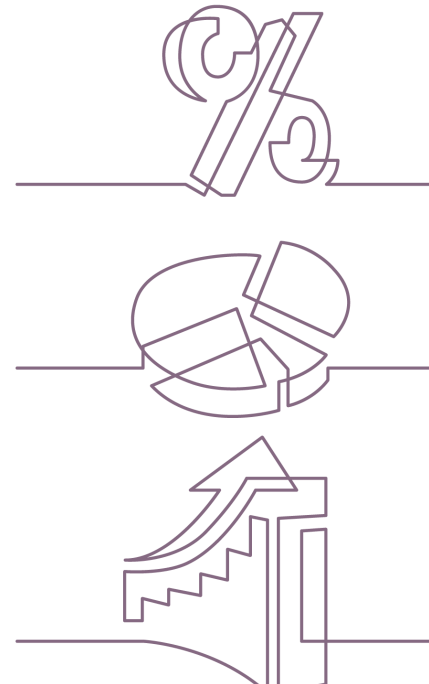
Accountability mechanisms must be strengthened to provide Illinois students with affordable and equitable access to high-quality postsecondary degrees and credentials.

Accountability for access and outcomes is essential to achieving equity in postsecondary outcomes. Institutional priorities and state investments should be aligned with state and system-level goals, ensuring progress by transparently tracking and reporting college and career data. With adequate support, an equitable funding model for higher education should ensure that all institutions are held accountable to enroll student populations that reflect the diversity of the state and providing the support students need to persist and complete college.

While all institutions should be held accountable for advancing student success, that doesn't mean all sectors and actors should be blindly regulated as one. Though for-profit colleges claim to increase college access, they are driven by profit motives, which if left unchecked can burden students with unmanageable debt. This is because for-profit colleges tend to take advantage of inequitable access to four-year institutions, leading them to target students who often have the least ability to afford higher education. This is particularly problematic because on average, for-profit colleges cost more than their public or private nonprofit counterparts despite little evidence of increasing earnings and employment prospects for graduates and sometimes evidence to the contrary.

The state must hold agencies and institutions accountable for equitably serving students, while protecting Illinoisans from companies that are using the promise of higher education to saddle students with unmanageable bills and debt.

Accountability starts with thorough, public, longitudinal data reporting. The state must use this data to track progress on state goals and hold institutions accountable for advancing equitable student access and success. The state should also leverage data to boldly protect students at the points where they are in danger of being exploited by profit-seeking companies. Protecting students might mean informing students about the college, debt, and career outcomes that they can expect from specific institutions, requiring teach-out plans in case of school closure, removing state subsidies from for-profit institutions, and/or using state levers to regulate for-profit colleges. Accountability measures not only help protect students, they instill faith in the state's higher education systems, driving more students to enroll in Illinois colleges and universities.



STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ACCOUNTABILITY

Improve Data Transparency and Reporting

Strengthen Accountability Mechanisms

Regulate For-Profit Sector to Protect Students

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COLLEGE COMPLETION**
Advancing Equity in Higher Education

