

PARTNERSHIP FOR COLLEGE COMPLETION

Accelerating action to close the graduation gap

To: Illinois House Higher Education Appropriations & Senate Appropriations II Committees

From: Dr. Kyle Westbrook, Executive Director, Partnership for College Completion

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Subject: Higher Education Budget Testimony

COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on the health, financial stability, and well-being of Illinois' students. Across the state many students are struggling with limited access to high speed internet or adequate learning environments, have lost their jobs, or are increasingly facing housing and food insecurity. Student parents are balancing school and work with increased parenting responsibilities. Communities of color are being disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, yet the community members within those communities in the most precarious positions, undocumented students and families, are not receiving federal relief.

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, state appropriations and financial aid for higher education will be critical to support students' access to a postsecondary degree. Specifically, we urge you to make good on the Governor's commitment to a **\$50 million increase in the Monetary Award Program (MAP)** and consider an **equitable approach to institutional funding**. Investing in students and institutions can reinforce higher education as a gateway to financial stability for low-income families and set the stage for a more complete and equitable recovery.

In past recessions and crises, when faced with decreased state revenue, higher education has borne a disproportionate share of the cuts. This disinvestment didn't lower costs, but rather passed them on to students and their families, and low-income students in particular shouldered the costs of tuition increases and MAP suspensions. During the Great Recession, Illinoisans who lost their jobs looked to our state's community colleges in particular to retool, upskill, and reposition themselves for the future economy, with community college enrollment in Illinois increasing by about 37,000 students. However, due to underfunding, a record 169,000 MAP-eligible students were denied an award at the recession's peak, up from just 44,000 prior to the recession. At the same time, Illinois saw retention rates of Black and Latinx students fall. By not prioritizing an increase in MAP funding, Illinois missed an opportunity to develop the workforce for the future from within Illinois' diverse student population.

The state has an opportunity to reimagine the way it appropriates funds to higher education. The most under-resourced colleges and universities are disproportionately serving financially vulnerable students, whose families and communities are most affected by the COVID-19 crisis. By prioritizing equitable, rather than level, appropriations or cuts to each institution in the same way it has over the last two decades, Illinois stands the best chance of retaining low-income students, cultivating local talent, and preparing our state for its future economy. With the future of Illinois' higher education at stake, it is more important than ever that the legislature consider the financial vulnerability of institutions and their students to make equitable, data-informed appropriations, directing public funds to the colleges and students who need it most.