

Time for a New Roadmap

CONFERENCE LEARNINGS AND HIGHLIGHTS

Illinois Center for Education Equity 3rd Annual Conference, November 10, 2025

SUMMARY

On November 10, 2025, education leaders, students, advocates, and practitioners gathered at Chicago State University (CSU) for the Illinois Center for Education Equity's (CEE) third annual convening, Time for a New Roadmap. The conference surfaced urgent challenges, emerging opportunities, and a shared call to action.

Across sessions, three key themes emerged:

Illinois is at a crossroads. Black student postsecondary enrollment has declined 37% over the past decade, while \$136 million in federal funding has been lost or frozen for Illinois public colleges. Despite these challenges, institutions and partners across the state are advancing solutions—from increased MAP and AIM HIGH funding to local initiatives addressing students' basic needs.

Barriers are growing in the current federal landscape. Recent policy shifts, including cuts to financial aid and challenges to equity-focused programs, are limiting access to higher education. While enrollment gains are emerging, progress remains fragile without sustained investment and targeted support.

Data must guide the path forward. As federal datasets face increasing threats, Illinois stakeholders must prioritize collecting, maintaining, and using data to design effective programs. Proven practices—such as dual enrollment, co-requisite remediation, and direct admissions—demonstrate what works. The next step is scaling access and impact.

Together, these themes point to a clear conclusion: Illinois has the knowledge and tools to improve outcomes, but meaningful progress will require coordinated action, sustained investment, and a continued commitment to equity.



INTRODUCTION

On November 10, 2025, education leaders, students, advocates, and practitioners convened at Chicago State University for the Illinois Center for Education Equity's third annual conference, *Time for a New Roadmap*. The day brought forward sobering data, clear-eyed analysis of federal and state policy shifts, and powerful student perspectives.

CSU President Z. Scott opened by grounding the conversation in both history and the present moment. She reflected on growing up during segregation, the NAACP lawsuit that changed the trajectory of her life, and her deep gratitude to the Legal Defense Fund (also represented at the convening). President Scott emphasized the responsibility institutions carry in advancing access and opportunity today.



[From left to right: Sean Moloney – Corporate Community Impact Manager, ComEd; Erin Steva – Vice President of External Affairs & Strategic Initiatives, CSU; Janette Willson – Senior Advisor, RainbowPUSH & PUSH Excel; Karen Freeman-Willson – President & CEO, Chicago Urban League; Z Scott – President, CSU; Myron Hester – Network 17 Chief of Schools, CPS; Megan Hougard – Chief of College and Career Success, CPS; Dr. Fatima Cook – Chief Equity, Engagement, Strategy Officer, CPS]

CONFERENCE THEMES

Throughout the day-long conference discussions, three key themes emerged:

1. INVEST IN BEST PRACTICES

Black student postsecondary enrollment declined 37% over the past decade. In 2025 alone, \$136M in federal funds have been lost or frozen for Illinois public colleges. At CSU, approximately one-quarter of federal grants have been affected, directly impacting research and support for transfer students.

Despite these challenges, institutions and partners across Illinois remain focused on removing barriers to access and success. Recent increases in MAP and AIM HIGH funding, while not fully sufficient, demonstrate how targeted state investment can begin to shift conditions.

Black Student Postsecondary Enrollment

Decline of
37%

over past
10 years



1. INVEST IN BEST PRACTICES (CONTINUED)

Panelists emphasized that advancing an equitable funding formula and releasing additional frozen funds is not simply a budget decision. It is a pathway to increasing degree attainment, strengthening the workforce, and generating long-term economic impact.




At the local level, initiatives such as City Colleges of Chicago's Thrive program are addressing food, housing, and financial insecurity as core components of student success. During the convening, a new collaborative, Elevate 17, was launched to further expand this work on Chicago's South Side.

ELEVATE 17

"We can't afford to lose another generation of talent."

Chicago State University and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Network 17 have launched **Elevate 17**, a groundbreaking, collaborative initiative designed to transform college access and success for students on Chicago's South Side.

Bringing together education, community, city leadership, and trusted civic partners, Elevate 17 will:

-  Expand postsecondary access and options for South Side students
-  Create transparent pathways with measurable outcomes
-  Foster a college-going culture rooted in equity, excellence, and empowerment

Elevate 17 "represents a unified system where every student is seen, supported, and guided toward success," notes CPS Network 17 Chief Myron Hester.

"We can't afford to lose another generation of talent," said President Z. Scott, President of Chicago State University. "As Illinois' only four-year Predominantly Black Institution, Chicago State views this work as both our mission and our responsibility. Through Elevate 17, we are building a model for what equity in higher education looks like — starting here, on Chicago's South Side."



2. TODAY'S CHALLENGES ARE NOT ACCIDENTAL; THEY REFLECT A BROADER FEDERAL RETRENCHMENT

Removing barriers and addressing access works. Recent data from the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) shows a 9.7% increase in Black student enrollment across Illinois. However, panelists stressed that this progress is fragile and that efforts must continue.






Federal policy shifts, including cuts to Pell Grants, legal challenges to equity-focused programs, and frozen institutional funding, are creating new barriers. The current federal policy agenda reflects a broader retreat from the idea that higher education should be accessible to all.

Student voices reinforced the importance of financial support. Scholarships and targeted aid often determine whether postsecondary education is possible. At the same time, panelists emphasized that solutions must be tailored—what works for one student may not work for another.

This underscores the importance of sustained investment, targeted support, and a continued commitment to equity.

3. DATA MUST GUIDE ACTION AND MUST BE PROTECTED.

Effective programs depend on strong data. As federal datasets and disaggregated information face increasing threats, an active role in data collection and maintenance must continue until all outcomes are equitable. Conference participants highlighted several examples of data-driven progress, including:

-  New CEE research surveying more than 200 predominantly Black prospective students reveals both opportunity and persistent gaps in students' perception of the value of college.
-  The shift away from traditional development education courses, based on evidence of low success rates, has improved student pathways to completion.
-  Dual enrollment and dual credit programs show strong correlations that front-loading college courses for high school juniors and seniors improves outcomes.
-  The State of Illinois is pioneering a “One-Click Admit” program aimed at reducing state college application barriers and expanding access.
-  Longstanding research confirms that diversity supports diversity. Students who have teachers who look like them are more likely to succeed.



3. DATA MUST GUIDE ACTION AND MUST BE PROTECTED. (CONTINUED)

As programs such as the Minority Teachers of Illinois (now the Teachers of Illinois) are targeted, data-driven decisions are critical. Together, these efforts underscore a shared responsibility: to collect, protect, and act on data that improves outcomes for Black students.

Dr. Sonja Feist-Price, Chicago State University Provost, closed the day with a clear call to action. **Education equity cannot be just a goal on paper; it has to show up in daily practice, budgets, and policies.**

The work ahead is to move from discussion to achievement by challenging failing systems, creating new spaces where every student can see themselves thriving, and “being about the business of making things better for our students” long after the conference ends.

PANEL HIGHLIGHTS AND DATA POINTS

FEDERAL LANDSCAPE FIRESIDE CHAT

Panelists examined the current federal retrenchment in higher education, highlighting **a retreat from the idea of ‘college for everybody.’** Cuts to Pell Grants, diversity initiatives, and other aid programs represent a retraction of opportunity for Black and low-income families.

Karla McKanders, Director of the Thurgood Marshall Institute at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, noted that when we consider education as a foundational aspect of citizenship, the current federal landscape feels like a return to a model in which only the privileged belong.



Moderator: Arne Duncan – Chicago CRED, Managing Director at Emerson Collective

Panelists:

Dr. Joyce Ester – President, Governors State University
President, Governors State University
Karla McKanders – Director, Thurgood Marshall Institute at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund
Sameer Gadkaree – President, The Institute for College Access & Success



FEDERAL LANDSCAPE FIRESIDE CHAT (CONTINUED)

Dr. Joyce Ester, President, Governors State University, described how college presidents must now spend inordinate amounts of time on “noise,” including political attacks on their institutions and compliance requirements, which reduces the time available to serve students who need it most. She noted that her “job now is to block the noise so that the faculty can teach,” which is unsustainable in the long term.

Moderator Arne Duncan, Chicago CRED, Managing Director at Emerson Collective, noted that individual institutions are challenged to fight isolated battles. Panelists emphasized the **need for unified leadership, stronger storytelling, and a renewed effort to clearly communicate the value of higher education.**

“We have been here before – and we have the tools to push back.”

- Karla McKanders, Director, Thurgood Marshall Institute at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund



Presenter: Pranav Kothari – Chair, Illinois Board of Higher Education

ILLINOIS DATA OVERVIEW: PROGRESS TOWARDS A THRIVING ILLINOIS

Pranav Kothari, Chair, Illinois Board of Higher Education, presented updated data on the State of Illinois higher education and components of the Thriving Illinois statewide plan, which aims to ensure demographics no longer predict outcomes and focuses on equity plans and programs at public universities to improve retention and completion rates.

Updated data highlighted persistent equity gaps, including:

Retention

Black Students

26.1%

White Students

72%

A sizeable advancement rate gap persists, and the rate of new first-time full-time White students is increasing faster than that of all other demographics.



ILLINOIS DATA OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

Degree Completion

Black students continue to complete degrees at Illinois public institutions at a much lower rate .

Black Students

39.7%

White Students

73%

Kothari emphasized that **small, targeted interventions**, such as access to dining programs or summer school programs, can have a measurable impact on attaining sophomore status and degree completion.

Additionally, structural interventions are required to address what might be perceived as mental health challenges. **Financial, housing, and food insecurity can often present as mental health issues, but these complex structural problems require targeted interventions to best support students.**

VALUE OF COLLEGE DATA PRESENTATION AND PANEL

New research from the Center for Education Equity explored how prospective Black students perceive the value and accessibility of higher education, as well as the factors that influence their decisions to enroll in college.

The study engaged more than 200 predominantly Black prospective college students in Chicago, aged 16-24, through surveys and focus groups. Findings include:

- Career and income/wealth potential strongly influence post-secondary decision-making
- 11% of first-generation students reported no exposure to college guidance
- Common reasons for not pursuing college include a lack of interest and unclear pathways



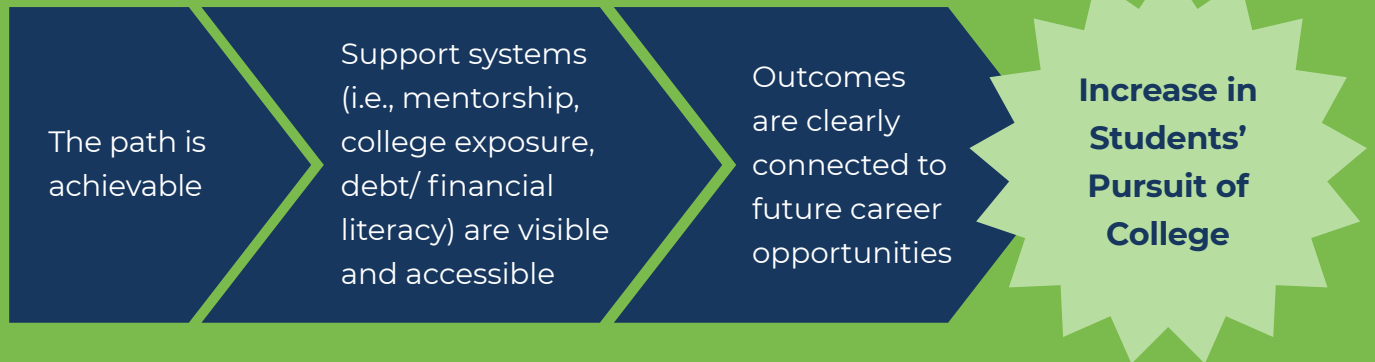
Presenters:

Erin Steva – Vice President, External Affairs & Strategic Initiatives, Chicago State University
Meghan McShan – Research Assistant, Illinois Center for Education Equity



VALUE OF COLLEGE DATA PRESENTATION AND PANEL (CONTINUED)

The new findings, with additional qualitative feedback and recommendations, highlight that more work is still needed. Panelists emphasized that students are more likely to pursue college when:



“We often spent time addressing critical issues that did not show up in the original strategies because we had to re-orient students to ask for help.”

- Dr. Janice Jackson, Executive Director, Aspen Institute Education & Society Program

Panelists emphasized that most students begin with high aspirations, but confidence can fade as financial barriers and unclear pathways emerge. Critically, the panel noted that the idea of seeking help is often more readily encouraged in privileged groups, which low-income and Black students may perceive negatively.

Trusted relationships, mentorship, and clear communication remain critical drivers of student decision-making.

Research information can be found at www.csu.edu/provost/ICEE/publications.htm.



Moderator: Karen Freeman-Wilson – President, Chicago Urban League

Panelists:

Dr. Janice Jackson – Executive Director, Aspen Institute Education & Society Program

Jeffrey Beckham – CEO, Chicago Scholars



STUDENT PANEL: PERSPECTIVES ON COLLEGE

Three current high school students and one returning student participated in a powerful discussion about their personal experiences successfully pursuing college or trade pathways, their perceptions of those journeys, and the support they received along the way. While each student brought a distinct perspective and experience, a consistent theme emerged: **belonging must be intentionally created and cannot be left to chance.**

Students emphasized the powerful role of relationships and environment in shaping their paths. Support from teachers, peers, and family members helped create what several described as a “culture of success.” At the same time, they discussed that the absence of those examples, particularly for first-generation students, can act as a barrier. These experiences reinforce the **need for systems that actively build connection and support, rather than relying on students to find their way independently. Belonging must be designed through consistent messaging, visible pathways, and individualized guidance.**

Students also highlighted that **early exposure to college coursework (such as dual enrollment) and career options does more than prepare them academically; it also builds confidence and creates a sense of place in postsecondary life.** Exposure creates familiarity, and familiarity builds momentum.



Moderator: Myron Hester – Chief of Network 17, Chicago Public Schools

Panelists:

Ali Muhammad, Kenwood Academy High School
Javon Hill, North Lawndale Employment Network
Kirsten Powell, Butler Prep

The student panelists demonstrated impressive examples of success and motivation, including a student who returned to education after dropping out of high school to pursue skilled trade training. While we often enjoy hearing such success stories about triumph over adversity, our work should be tied to a clear end goal so that no student HAS TO trumpet their story as an impressive outlier. The full system must be addressed to scale what we know works, so every Black student in Illinois has an opportunity.



STUDENT PANEL: PERSPECTIVES ON COLLEGE (CONTINUED)

Financial realities remain a defining factor in student decision-making. Across varied experiences, all students identified scholarships as essential to making postsecondary education and training attainable. One student described not wanting to place additional financial strain on a single parent, while others emphasized the importance of accessing available scholarship opportunities. These perspectives underscore a critical point: **financial stability and affordability must be treated as core components of academic success—not as secondary considerations.** Systems must proactively connect students to resources rather than expecting them to navigate complex processes alone.

Above all, students stressed the importance of being seen, heard, and supported as individuals. Their insights point to a broader imperative: institutions must design programs that engage students as active partners in their success. Effective systems do not position students as passive recipients; they create space for agency, voice, and belonging.

“We don’t have an education issue. We have a systems issue.”

- Dr. Kimberly Hollingsworth, President, Olive Harvey College

PROVEN PRACTICES: BEST PRACTICES ELIMINATING THE STUDENT SUCCESS DIVIDE

Panelists highlighted evidence-based programs and strategies that are actively reducing equity gaps.

Dr. Kimberly Hollingsworth, President of Olive Harvey College, described how the Olive Harvey Thrive Initiative reframes food, housing, and financial stability as essential components of an academic strategy. In its first year, the program, which provides food markets, hot meals, housing partnerships, and emergency aid, has already measurably improved retention, especially for Black men. Dr. Hollingsworth noted, “This is not a program, it’s a promise.”



Moderator: Mike Abrahamson – Director of Policy & Research, Partnership for College Completion

Panelists:

Aimée Eubanks-Davis – Founder & CEO, Braven

Dr. Kyle Westbrook – Executive Director, Education Systems

Dr. Kimberly Hollingsworth – President, Olive Harvey College

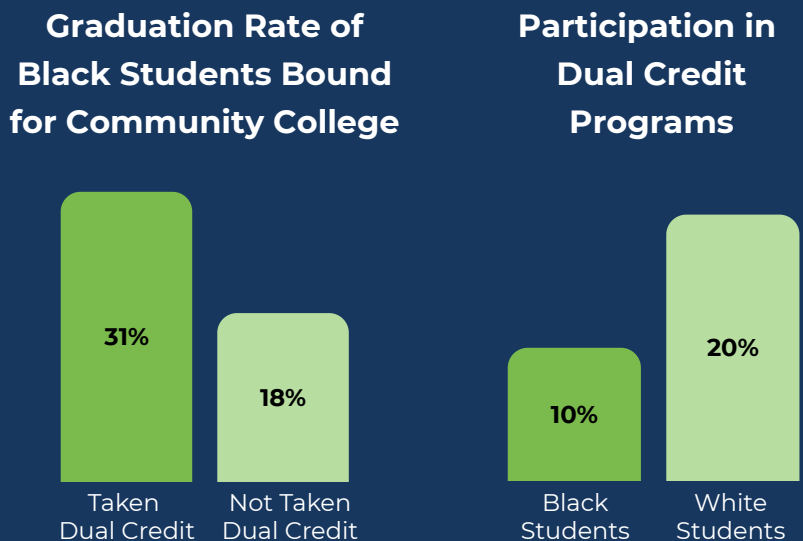


**PROVEN PRACTICES: BEST PRACTICES
ELIMINATING THE STUDENT SUCCESS DIVIDE (CONTINUED)**

Similarly, Aime Eubanks-Davis, Founder & CEO at Braven, emphasized that students from less-resourced institutions can do everything right academically and still face a “network gap.” Their Braven model addresses this gap by connecting students to mentors and paid internships, ensuring they can realize the full economic value of their degrees.

Panelists also pointed to coursework interventions with strong, consistent outcomes. Dr. Kyle Westbrook, Executive Director of Education Systems, identified dual credit and dual enrollment as among the most effective strategies for improving completion rates.

Data shows that Black students bound for Community College who participate in dual credit programs have higher graduation rates. While this gap demonstrates meaningful progress, panelists stressed that overall completion rates remain too low—and access remains unequal.



Additionally, Mike Abrahamson, Director of Policy and Research at the Partnership for College Completion, reinforced the importance of structural reform in developmental education. Historically, traditional development education courses have produced poor outcomes for Black students, with only 1 in 10 reaching degree completion. Illinois has since transitioned to co-requisite remediation, embedding additional academic support directly into college-level coursework—a shift grounded in data and proven to improve outcomes.

To scale these practices, panelists emphasized the need for stronger alignment across systems. Institutions can expand dual credit pathways with feeder high schools, activate employer and alumni networks, and coordinate communication across the full student journey (from early education to postsecondary attainment). A cohesive, aligned system ensures that students experience clear, supported pathways that start early and reflect their lived experiences.

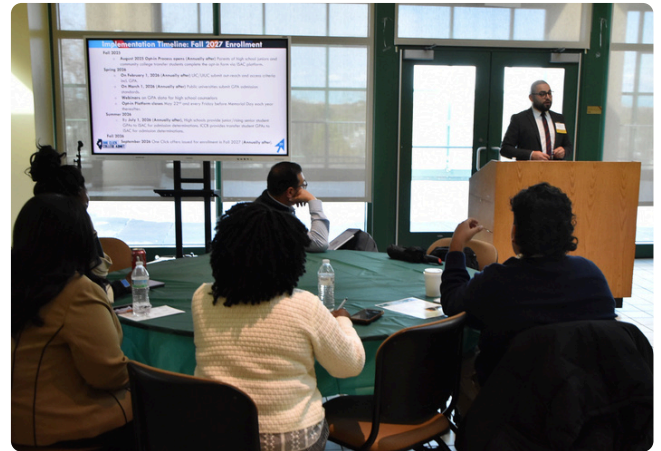


PROGRAMS WITH POTENTIAL: DIRECT ADMISSIONS - “ONE-CLICK ADMIT”

The Illinois Board of Higher Education introduced a newly launched direct admissions initiative designed to remove application barriers and keep students in state: **One-Click Admit**.

Presenter Jose Garcia, Director of Strategic Communications at the Illinois Board of Higher Education, outlined how the program simplifies the college application process by removing application fees, eliminating the need for letters of recommendation, and not requiring U.S. citizenship. Students need only to reside in Illinois and meet a qualifying GPA based on their high school transcript to receive a direct admission offer.

By reducing both cost and complexity, One-Click Admit aims to increase application completion, strengthen student motivation, and accelerate enrollment decisions.



Presenter: Jose Garcia - Director of Strategic Communications, Illinois Board of Higher Education

Panelists noted that the program is still in its early stages and was implemented rapidly without dedicated funding. Additional institutions are expected to join over time (UIC and UIUC are not in the system), and further work is needed to define data collection and evaluation measures to assess long-term impact. As the program evolves, its success will depend on both expansion and consistent measurement of outcomes.

STATE POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

The final session of the day focused on Illinois’ opportunities to strengthen higher education through policy and investment.

Panelists acknowledged the significant challenges facing institutions nationwide but emphasized that Illinois has a strong policy foundation to build upon. Existing policy frameworks, such as need-based MAP funding and a proposed equitable funding formula, provide a starting point for advancing access and equity. Eric Zarnikow, Executive Director of the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, highlighted ongoing efforts by state agencies to reach students across all regions of Illinois.



STATE POLICY OPPORTUNITIES (CONTINUED)

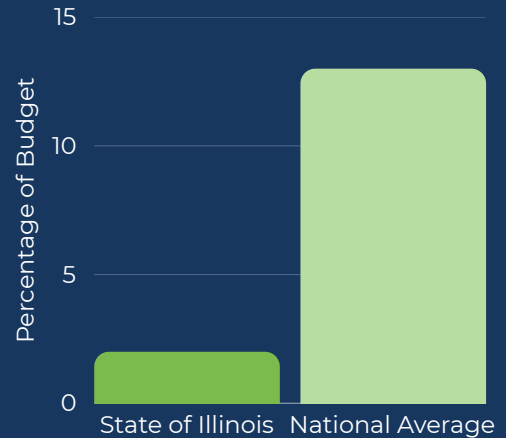
However, panelists were clear that underinvestment continues to limit the impact of these strong policies. Robin Steans, President of Advance Illinois, noted that Illinois allocates just 2% of its state budget to higher education, compared to the national average of 12-14%. This gap has long-term consequences for institutional capacity and student outcomes.

At the same time, federal retrenchment is compounding these challenges. Reductions in federal funding, estimated at \$330 billion nationally, are eliminating key datasets, reducing Pell Grant support, and limiting resources for Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). Within Illinois, some institutions currently operate with as little as 45% of the funding required to meet student needs.

Panelists emphasized that these conditions directly affect students. At Chicago State University, for example, 61% of students experience basic needs insecurity. Dr. Jennifer Juarez, Director of Higher Education Policy for the Latino Policy Forum, highlighted the disproportionate impact on Latino transfer students, underscoring the need to strengthen transfer pathways and targeted supports.

In the absence of increased federal support, **Illinois must take a leading role in sustaining postsecondary access and affordability** for Black students, low-income students, undocumented students, and first-generation students.

Budget Allocated to Higher Education



Moderator: Erin Steva – Vice President, External Affairs & Strategic Initiatives, Chicago State University

Panelists:

Eric Zarnikow – Executive Director, Illinois Student Assistance Commission

Dr. Jennifer Juarez – Director of Higher Education Policy, Latino Policy Forum

Dr. Kyle Southern – Executive Director, Partnership for College Completion

Robin Steans – President, Advance Illinois



STATE POLICY OPPORTUNITIES (CONTINUED)

Panelists framed this not only as a moral imperative, but as an economic one. Investment in higher education, particularly through an equitable funding formula, has the potential to generate significant returns, including an extra \$700M in tax revenue per year and \$300M in local taxes.

The session concluded with a call to advocacy: parents, communities, and institutions all have a role in advocating for investment and accountability. Clear, accessible communication will be essential to help families understand how policy decisions impact their students and communities. Without sustained funding, even the most effective programs and policies cannot deliver on Illinois' goals for equity and opportunity.

“No one is coming to save us from D.C. We will have to rely on our own investments.”

- Kyle Southern, Executive Director, Partnership for College Completion

THANK YOU AND ABOUT THE CENTER

This conference would not have been possible without the generous donation of time and expertise from our panelists. Thank you .

The Illinois Center for Education Equity will address the state's crisis in connecting Black communities to a college degree through research, policy, and practice driven by diverse stakeholders. The statewide initiative will convene employers, the secondary and postsecondary education systems, faculty, students, legislators, philanthropy, and community-based institutions to collect data and release research that tracks Illinois' progress with supporting Black students and to identify policies and practices that diverse stakeholders must deploy to eliminate the equity gap for Illinois' Black students.

