

Transforming Access: Strategies & Stories for Black Student Success

CONFERENCE LEARNINGS AND HIGHLIGHTS

Illinois Center for Education Equity Conference Fall 2024

SUMMARY

The Illinois Center for Education Equity hosted a day conference in Fall 2024 focused on transforming access for Black students in Illinois higher education. Convening a wide assortment of attendees, including students, community- and faith-based groups, K-12 practitioners, and policymakers, the conference discussed access gaps in Illinois and uplifting strategies for transforming access to higher education. They heard from expert panelists, including practitioners from Illinois state schools and Chicago Public Schools, digital media employers, current Illinois students, state leaders, community-based groups, and advocacy leaders.

The conference is advancing work started by the Equity Working Group for Black Student Success, which was convened in 2020 to address the education crisis in the state of Illinois. The Equity Working Group, made up of expert practitioners and state leaders, released an Action Plan in 2021 outlining critical steps toward closing education attainment and enrollment gaps. The Illinois Center for Education Equity conference surfaced strategies for many of the Action Plan's recommendations, including panels on the Illinois state school funding formula, dual enrollment and first-year experience programs, advocacy for higher education policy changes, and the importance of workforce connectivity. In conjunction with ongoing efforts highlighted at the conference, the Action Plan provides a roadmap forward with a comprehensive set of action items required to advance.



INTRODUCTION

There is an education crisis in the state of Illinois. Black student college enrollment is down by 37% across the state, and Illinois has one of the largest bachelor's degree attainment gaps in the nation—(15.7%) between White and Black students.¹ In Illinois, the Black share of the college student population has declined every year from 15.3% in 2011 to 12.4% in 2022, even though the percentage of the state population that identifies as Black has remained steady.²

The system struggles to support Black students to remain enrolled in the same institution year after year, and Black students are less likely to be supported for transfer to another college. Enrollment and completion gaps also exist across the state, county by county, between rural and urban areas, and particularly in low-moderate-income (LMI) communities.

“You are disinvesting in your population’s opportunity to be economically viable, if you do not, as a state, invest in your state’s higher education.”

- Ralph Martire, Executive Director of the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability

FIGURE 1: EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN ILLINOIS (AGE 25+) BY RACE/ETHNICITY

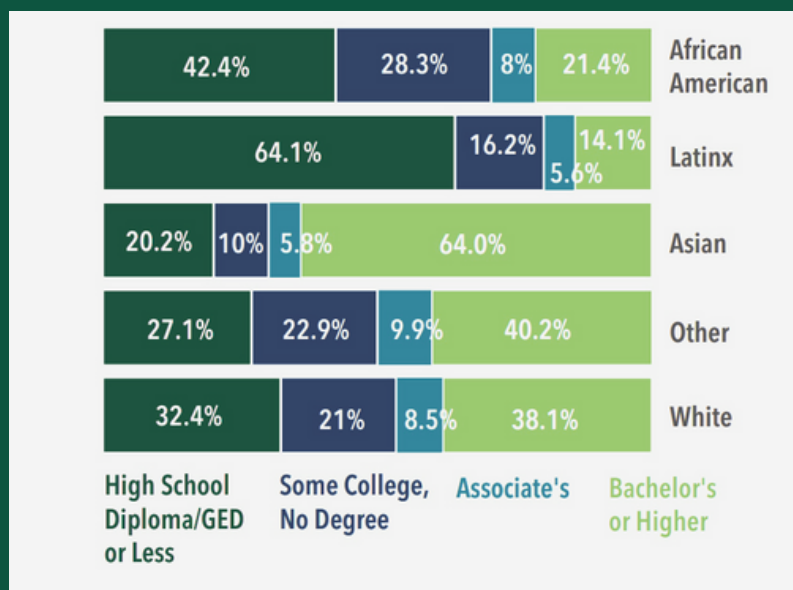


Figure 1
Educational attainment by race/ethnicity in Illinois, 2021.
Note: Adapted from *A Thriving Illinois: Higher Education Paths to Equity, Sustainability, and Growth* by Illinois Board of Higher Education, 2023
(https://ibhestrategicplan.ibhe.org/SP_Data_Analysis.html)

Inclusivity increases the likelihood that more of our students can access, enroll, and succeed in Illinois institutions. But preparing our students and supporting them for success is an issue not only for those in the higher education space to address. This is collective work; it is critical for all Illinois stakeholders to collaborate on solutions—institutions of higher education, community-based organizations, faith-based community groups, K-12 system leaders, and policymakers alike. Experts agree that to close gaps, we must continue to remove system barriers throughout the entire education continuum.



CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS AND DATA POINTS TO CONSIDER

“We need to ensure we are not talking about this still in 10-20 years.”

- Lisa Castillo Richmond

Chicago State University President Z Scott opened the Fall 2024 conference with an introduction to the day’s priorities, noting that this work is all in service of ensuring Black students and families not only survive, but thrive.

In the keynote address, Pranav Kothari, Chair of the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), outlined the priorities and current efforts of IBHE to move forward a statewide inclusive economy in Illinois. IBHE is focused on advancing “A Thriving Illinois” - the state’s strategic plan for higher education - which can become reality through equitable pathways to, and through, post-secondary education. Across Illinois, significant enrollment and completion gaps exist, particularly amongst Black, Latina(o), and low-income students. The state seeks to counter declining enrollment, strengthen first-year persistence, and raise completion by removing barriers and accelerating progress. A new approach to funding formulas, applying the practical standard of spending more on students who need more support, is gaining traction due to the work of the Illinois Commission on Equitable Public University Funding, which released its recommendations in March 2024. While the state is not yet ready for implementation, the need is clear.

Building from the call to action in the keynote address, conference attendees were engaged by five panels throughout the day:

PANEL 1: POLICY LANDSCAPE

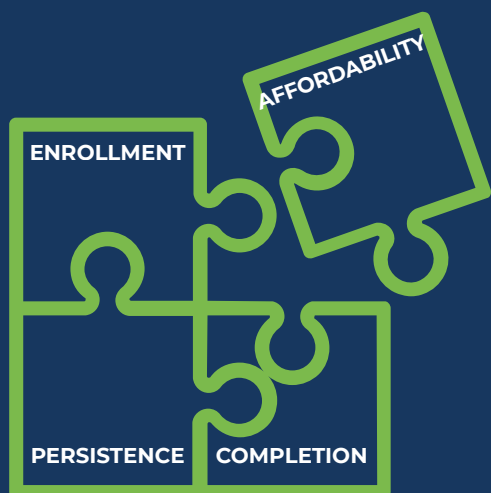
Moderated by Sameer Gadkaree, the first panel convened leading experts on state and national policy issues. Panelists Cherita Ellens, Grace Mukupa, and Dr. Lisa Castillo-Richmond urged rethinking investment in higher education in the state of Illinois, after years of disinvestment pushed costs to students and families.



[From left to right: Moderator: Sameer Gadkaree, President, The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS); Panelists: Cherita Ellens, President & CEO, Women Employed; Grace Mukupa, Policy Director, Complete College America; Dr. Lisa Castillo-Richmond, Executive Director, Partnership for College Completion]



PANEL 1: POLICY LANDSCAPE (CONTINUED)



College affordability is a critical piece of the puzzle to support students' access to post-secondary education, afford it, persist, and complete. In Chicago, 48% of Black male Chicago Public Schools 2023 graduates and 60% of Black females enrolled immediately in two- or four-year college programs, compared to 75% of White males and 81% White Females.³ While the rates have improved over time, this is an unacceptable gap, made even more unacceptable when considering the impact on the Illinois workforce.

Recent research from Georgetown notes that 72% of jobs will require post-secondary education and training, and 42% will require a bachelor's degree.⁴

“What we can do, is *not* run scared.”

- Cherita Ellens, President & CEO, Women Employed

How could the system adequately support students?

- Panelists noted the importance of staying on track and resisting the national chilling effect on diversity efforts impacting the hard work of making change.
- Policy makers must consider the actual implementation of policies and work to ensure consistent understanding and resources follow the policy.
- By way of funding for colleges and universities themselves, Grace noted the important role Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs) play in increasing attainment rates for Black Illinois citizens.
- Panelists agreed that there is a need for accountability mechanisms and data sharing across campuses in the state. **Post-secondary institutions should not be afraid to measure who is serving students well and then collectively review the things that data shows work.**

Historically, PBIs are funded at less than half the rate of Predominantly White Institutions.



PANEL 2: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON FRESHMAN SUCCESS PROGRAMS

Dr. Antwone Cameron moderated a student panel with Carmin Jones from Northern Illinois University, Jaylen Aimiuwu from Governors State University, Milan Taylor from Chicago State University, and Vada Williams from Chicago State University. The students shared their firsthand experiences with freshman year, first-year experience, and bridge programs at their institutions.



[Moderator (middle): Dr. Antwone Cameron, Dean of Students, Chicago State University; Panelists: Jaylen Aimiuwu, Governors State University, Jaguar LEAP Student; Milan Taylor, Chicago State University, Sophomore Academy; Carmin Jones, Northern Illinois University, CHANCE program; Vada Williams, Chicago State University, RISE Academy & Honors Program]

The students saw the programs as supporting them as people, helping them to see themselves on their campus, and providing assistance in career-related preparation. Vada Williams, RISE Academy and Honors Program member at Chicago State University, noted, “Without RISE, I don’t know how far I would have made it into my first semester.” While the students had largely positive experiences with their programs, stakeholders need to provide more support before, during, and after program enrollment. Student panelists spoke to “accidentally” coming across resources on campus, and a lack of dedicated support to help them transition from high school to college.

Data is not necessarily readily available for first-year experience or bridge programs across the state. To build better programs, increase student participation, and improve outcomes for our students, **better data collection and sharing are necessary.**

“Without RISE, I don’t know how far I would have made it into my first semester.”

- Vada Williams, RISE Academy and Honors Program member at Chicago State University

PANEL 3: DUAL ENROLLMENT

Charmel Stoxstell moderated a panel on dual enrollment programs in Illinois. The panelists, Chibuzo Ezeigbo, Megan Hougard, and Pranav Kothari, noted that dual enrollment programs are an effective way to increase enrollment access and close attainment gaps and spoke of program features to scale.



PANEL 3: DUAL ENROLLMENT (CONTINUED)



[From left to right: Moderator: Charmell Stoxstell, Advanced Learning Programs, Illinois State Board of Education; Panelists: Chibuzo Ezeigbo, Program Officer, Joyce Foundation; Megan Hougard, Chief of College and Career Success, Chicago Public Schools; Pranav Kothari, Chair, Illinois Board of Higher Education]

Historically, such programs were considered viable for traditional “top performers” in secondary school, giving them a head start on their (presumed) college goals. According to the Illinois Board of Higher Education, Black, Latina(o) students, and rural students have less access to dual credit early college experiences. As a result, they miss out on the opportunity to earn credits or get exposure to college-level work. Black students made up 15% of the high school graduating class in 2018, but only 9% enrolled in dual credit.

To close equity gaps, the next step is to change the narrative and create meaningful access to all student populations in these programs. **This requires intentionally scaling up and down the chain and removing barriers to access so that traditional top performers are not the only participants.** We should be building the roadmap to scale for everyone in order to significantly impact Illinois, from proof of concept to full scale across state schools.

PANEL 4: EDUCATION - WORKFORCE INNOVATION

Erin Steva moderated a panel on building workforce pipelines through college-employer partnerships. Panelists Derek Dow, E.T. Franklin, Janaé Putman, Renee Martin, and Robyn Petit discussed successful collaborative programs between the Publicis Groupe and CSU that provide students with for-credit courses and sustaining job opportunities.



[Moderator: Erin Steva, Vice President of External Affairs & Strategic Initiatives, Chicago State University; Panelists: E.T. Franklin, Global Chief Strategy and Cultural Fluency Officer, Spark Foundry; Renee Martin, Senior Vice President & Group Creative Director, Arc Worldwide; Derek Dow, Senior Lecturer, Communications, Media Arts & Theatre Department, Chicago State University; Janaé Putman, Associate Producer, PXP Studios; Robyn Petit, Associate Director of Planning and Instructor for Digital Media, Spark Foundry]



PANEL 4: EDUCATION - WORKFORCE INNOVATION (CONTINUED)

At Chicago State University, for example, Arc Worldwide and Spark Foundry work together to provide opportunities for students. Several of the conference panelists teach for-credit courses on campus that create a direct pipeline to employment at the firms.

Noting the real business needs for developing a workforce pipeline, panelists highlighted the fast-growing industry of digital media. The employers reported that by supporting students in collaboration with a post-secondary institution, they are ensured a higher quality applicant. Panelists also noted the importance of diverse creative perspectives for employers to be successful in the market. The workforce must be connected to what's happening in culture, media, and ads; the industry needs to reflect the composition of its audience (i.e., younger and multicultural).

Going forward, panelists agreed that collaborative partnerships with employers fulfill a great need to provide students with the confidence and experience needed to succeed in the workforce. This, in turn, creates a strong pipeline for Illinois's workforce. **Building the capacity of institutions such as Chicago State University to partner with employers and community organizations must be a priority.**

“Diverse creative perspectives make for a better creative product.”

- E.T. Franklin, Chief Strategy and Cultural Fluency Officer at Spark Foundry

PANEL 5: EQUITABLE FUNDING

Moderator Karen Freeman-Wilson led the day's final panel with Dr. Lisa Freeman, Ralph Martire, and Robin Steans to discuss the state's funding formula for public universities.

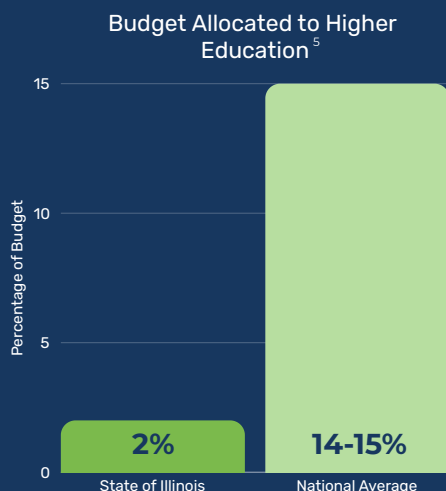
Simply put, Illinois is falling behind. With only 2% of the state's budget going to higher education, it significantly lags the national average of 14-15%.⁵ Higher education funding in Illinois is 41% lower than it was in 2000, in real terms adjusted for inflation.



[From left to right: Moderator: Honorable Karen Freeman-Wilson, President & CEO, Chicago Urban League; Panelists: State Representative Carol Ammons, 103rd District of Illinois; Dr. Lisa Freeman, President, Northern Illinois University; Robin Steans, President, Advance Illinois; Ralph Martire, Executive Director, Center for Tax and Budget Accountability]



PANEL 5: EQUITABLE FUNDING (CONTINUED)



The current approach to funding state schools in Illinois has not historically reflected student population needs, and as a result, the years of disinvestment have affected different populations unequally. Universities have increased tuition, which disadvantages low-income populations generally, and Black and Latina(o) individuals specifically. The average in-state cost of attendance consumes 19% median income of White households, and a 35% median income of Black households.⁶

Panelists made the powerful statement that if you have inadequate capacity on the front end, you get inadequate outcomes on the back end; there were no significant improvements for K-12 educational outcomes until the funding formula was changed.

Panelists throughout the day also noted the importance of supporting students' and families' basic needs, such as increasing the capacity of institutions to support mental health and providing families with transparent information on the cost of college. Student success does not

merely stem from the ability to pay tuition and enter a campus. Once students are there, institutions must consider supporting needs, such as addressing food insecurity, the need for peer tutors, mental health support, and enabling a trained and culturally aware faculty. These needs are highlighted in the [Action Plan](#) as well. This work also includes removing barriers through, for example, the use of the Common App and direct admission programs.

Of course, finding resources is a key piece. As the inequitable impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic became apparent, and the outcry following the murder of George Floyd flowed through the country, the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus introduced House Bill 2170 to provide equitable funding to meet the needs of students and institutions where they live.

“We know what a society values by what they invest in.”

- Karen Freeman-Wilson, President, Chicago Urban League

The Funding Commission on Public Universities found that Illinois universities are underfunded by \$1.4B, and Illinois must double spending from current levels to close the gap over a decade. This may seem monumental, but panelists were clear that **we need to equip institutions to support all students; otherwise, our students will not enroll in Illinois schools or enter the workforce, and our state's economic growth will be hurt.**



A CALL TO ACTION TO TRANSFORM ACCESS & SUCCESS

“Nelson Mandela said, ‘Education is the most important tool we can use to change the world.’ If students are left out of this, they are left out of the fight to change communities.”

- Dr. Sonja Feist-Price, Chicago State University Provost

What can we do? Stakeholders across the state can collaborate on the following:

Collect robust data and use it to make decisions and design programs:



We need system-wide accountability, which requires measuring the right thing and then using data to drive improvement.

Scale proven practices: We have solid proof of concepts—it’s time to scale what we know works. This requires investment and funding.

“How much more time do we need?”
- Sharita, Women Employed

Set high expectations and provide high support:

Let’s change the narrative and assume college is a given for Illinois students, no matter their background. In the education continuum, consistent interpretation, implementation of policies, and intentional support are essential.

“Let’s stop saying not every student wants to go to college. Let’s say all students should be ready, and then help them figure out what is best for them - how can they be prepared for family wealth building and sustaining wage and career?”

- Megan Hougard, Chief of College and Career Success at Chicago Public Schools

Create clear messaging on the value proposition for the state of Illinois:

Economic success and higher education go hand-in-hand. This issue is not just a matter of equity for equity’s sake—it is good business to invest in our students, and necessary for the future of Illinois.

To create a prepared workforce and support the economic health of the state, we need to work together to ensure there is a pipeline to fill workforce needs, and everyone needs to know this.

We can all play a role. Post-secondary institutions should engage faculty, who are often the first to know student challenges and can help keep students on track. Institutions should be familiar with their own data and share it with peers, enabling everyone to make informed decisions. Alumni and community members should advocate for the issues and spread the word about the importance of higher education.

As noted by Chicago State University Provost Dr. Sonja Feist-Price, “we’ve heard the call to action to do something, to walk out of this room to work for the good of Black and Latina(o) students.”

It will take all of us. Let’s get to work.



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 addresses the state's crisis in connecting Black communities to a college degree through research, policy, and practice driven by diverse stakeholders. The statewide initiative convenes 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.

Note on the Timing of the Research: The conference was held in October 2024, prior to significant shifts in the 2025 federal policy and higher education grant funding landscape. However, the issues and the desired impacts for the state of Illinois and our students are still clear. Future research will reflect the impact of the changing federal policy landscape.

REFERENCES

1. Chicago State University, *Equity in Illinois Higher Education: An Action Plan for Black Students* (Office of the Provost, 2023).
2. Illinois Board of Higher Education, *A Thriving Illinois: Higher Education Paths to Equity, Sustainability, and Growth* (2023), <https://ibhestrategicplan.ibhe.org/>.
3. University of Chicago Urban Education Institute, *College Enrollment [To & Through Project CPS High School Milestone Tool]* (2023), accessed July 21, 2025, <https://toandthrough.uchicago.edu/tool/cps/hs/2023/details/#/college-enrollment>.
4. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, *After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031* (2023), <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Projections2031-National-Report.pdf>.
5. Sarah Waski, Ralph Martire, and Allison Flanagan, *Why Illinois Should Enhance Its Investment in Higher Education* (Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, March 28, 2023), https://www.ctbaonline.org/file/710/download?token=8_lkknv8.
6. Waski, Martire, and Flanagan, *Why Illinois Should Enhance Its Investment*.

