

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Illinois' higher education and workforce systems are failing Black students. Between 2013 and 2018, postsecondary enrollment for Black Illinoisans dropped 29.2%, indicating a crisis for Illinois and its Black students. Additionally, Black students in Illinois who do enroll in college are significantly less likely than their white peers to be retained by institutions and to complete with a degree or credentials.¹

To address racial equity gaps that exist from high school graduation through entry in the workforce, over 40 leaders from across the state representing secondary and postsecondary education, elected officials, government agencies, business, community-based organizations, and philanthropy were convened by Chicago State University President Zaldwaynaka Scott to form the Equity Working Group for Black Student Access and Success in Illinois Higher Education. With the mission to identify actions needed to close equity gaps to enable Black students, families and communities to thrive and survive in Illinois, the Equity Working Group (EWG) was oriented by two key questions: How can we address systemic racism that shows up in our practices and policies and change those practices

and policies to be equitable. How can we collaborate and work jointly to knock down barriers that have prevented our system from serving students and families equitably?

The multi-sector action plan outlined in this report flows from deep examination of these two questions and is oriented by four guiding principles. First, Black students should be treated as experts of their own experience, as well as customers of educational institutions, and should be involved in sustained efforts to evaluate, redesign, and improve the policies, practices, and systems of support. Throughout the report, student voices and perspectives are elevated. Second, data must be collected, analyzed, and shared over time to ensure that equity goals are being met, both within institutions and at the state level. Third, it is not enough for a promising program to exist; investments must be made to allow full access and success for Black Students and programs should be evaluated on their contributions to closing racial equity gaps. Finally, addressing the challenges facing Illinois' Black students requires an examination of, and perhaps thinking differently about, institutional and philanthropic funding priorities. Innovating within current budget constraints and allocating more resources to achieving equity goals both must be prioritized.

Taken together, the framework (see Figure 1) summarizes the solution areas identified by the group. At the most foundational level, closing equity gaps for Black students in Illinois requires honest acknowledgement of the historic and current racial injustices embedded in postsecondary policies and practices in our nation and state. From a commitment to dismantling racial injustices embedded in educational practices flows a commitment to the creation of a higher education funding formula that prioritizes racial equity and that includes clear state-defined metrics to track the impacts of institutional funding on closing existing equity gaps over time. In addition to increasing financial resources for institutions serving large numbers of Black students, institutional leadership must prioritize making college and university campuses safe and supportive environments in which Black students' sense of belonging is prioritized and in which Black students see themselves represented in the faculty and staff that serve them. From this grounding, solutions aimed at dismantling unfair barriers to Black student success must be pursued at each step of the educational journey.

Higher education must be truly accessible and affordable; policies and practices that impact Black students enrollment and persistence in a program of choice must be equitable; a holistic approach to Black student well-being must be prioritized by institutions; and ensuring Black graduates entering the workplace are connected to jobs with family sustaining wages and compensated in the same manner as their white peers must be prioritized across and beyond the learning journey.

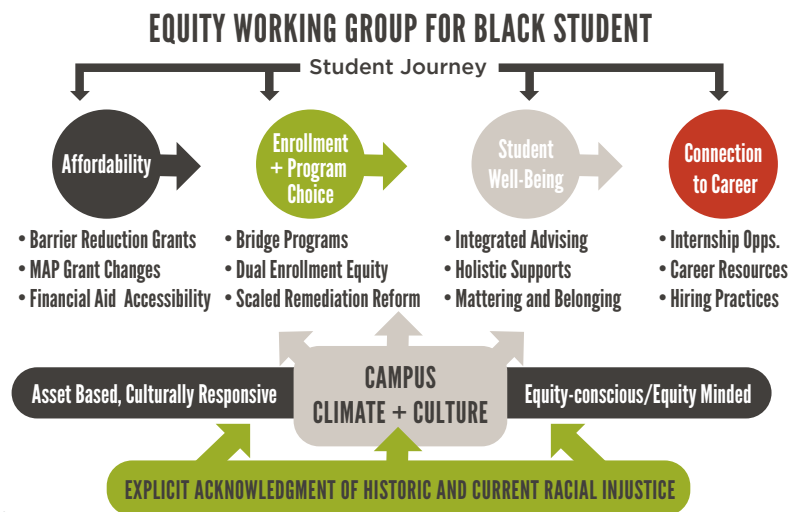


Figure 1

REFERENCES

1 <https://www.ibhe.org/equity.html>

ACCESS & AFFORDABILITY

MAKE HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESSIBLE AND AFFORDABLE FOR ALL ILLINOIS BLACK STUDENTS

All Black students in Illinois should be able to access and afford a high-quality postsecondary education.

College access and affordability presents a significant barrier to Black students' enrollment and success in Illinois higher education. To make higher education accessible and affordable for all Illinois Black students, Illinois must:

DIRECTIVES

- Remove the ability to pay as a barrier for Black students through barrier-reduction grants that provide small amounts of money to cover costs which might otherwise prevent students from persisting in college.
- Increase need-based funding and program flexibility to help low-income Black students overcome cost barriers in their postsecondary education.
- Make college more accessible by strengthening early connections to college-affirming experiences, including asset-based high school counseling and culturally-responsive financial literacy and financial planning support for Black students and their families.

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

- With greater targeted financial aid and barrier-reduction grants, the average net price of college for low-income Black families is at an affordable level, as defined by the Institute for Higher Education Policy or a similar metric adopted by Illinois.
- MAP is fully funded so that all eligible students receive a MAP grant equal to the cost of tuition.
- Racial equity gaps in student loan default rates and amount of debt held after graduation are eliminated.

INSTITUTIONAL PREPAREDNESS & SUPPORT

FOSTER BLACK STUDENTS' ACADEMIC SUCCESS BY PROVIDING ROBUST INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORTS

All Black students should be provided the supports and structures they need to thrive in Illinois higher education.

Illinois' higher education systems need to play an active role in supporting Black students to succeed in college by providing robust supports for academic, basic needs, and individual well-being success at each step in the student journey. Higher education institutions can foster Black students' academic success by doing the following:

DIRECTIVES

- Improve Black students' access to existing dual enrollment and dual credit programs, and expand dual programming offerings to high schools serving predominantly Black students.
- Strengthen bridge and cohort programs for Black first-generation students, Black students from low-income backgrounds, Black transfer students, and Black adult learners to promote seamless transitions and student success.
- Revise admissions criteria to eliminate structurally racist practices and increase targeted outreach to Black high school students.

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

- Racial equity gaps in dual credit enrollments are eliminated.
- Dual credit and dual enrollment programs are available in all communities serving Black students in Illinois.
- Racial equity gaps in retention, transfer, and completion rates are eliminated.
- All Black high school graduates are either employed or enrolled in higher education 12-16 months after graduation.
- College recruitment efforts include strong recruitment of Black students in communities across Illinois.
- Racial equity gaps in undergraduate enrollment are eliminated.

ENROLLMENT & PROGRAM CHOICE

SUPPORT BLACK STUDENTS TO ENROLL & PROGRESS

All Black students in Illinois should have access to the full range of programs of study offered, and receive robust advising and support to help them enroll in higher education and progress towards completion of their degree.

Black students make up a declining share of undergraduate enrollment in Illinois, and many of those who do enroll lack the guidance they need to progress towards completion. In order to support Black students to enroll and persist, Illinois institutions must:

DIRECTIVES

- Scale reform of developmental education to shorten time-to-degree and increase student success.
- Close equity gaps in access to advisors, and provide antiracist academic advising to students that is asset-based, proactive, and sustained to strengthen Black students' sense of purpose and self-efficacy.

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

- High stakes placement tests are no longer used to determine remediation needs, and all remediation is provided in the context of credit bearing courses.
- All students are provided multiple, rigorous math pathways that align to different fields of study and the well-paying careers of today and tomorrow.
- Student : advisor ratios are manageable across the state, ensuring strong, individualized advising for all Black students.

STUDENT WELL-BEING

PRIORITIZE BLACK STUDENTS' HOLISTIC WELL-BEING

All Black students in Illinois should be provided with a safe environment and access to holistic, culturally competent supports and mental health services on campus.

The quality of advising and supports provided to Black students has an enormous impact on their sense of belonging, which in turn is positively correlated with persistence and completion. To level the playing field for Black students and attend to the impacts of structural racism on their experiences and outcomes, Illinois institutions must:

DIRECTIVES

- Provide holistic student supports including trauma-informed, antiracist mental health services for Black students on campus that attend to the lived experiences of Black of students and their families.
- Examine campus policies and hiring practices and strengthen professional development for all campus employees to improve Black student safety, belonging, and inclusion on campus.

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

- Student support structures have been redesigned at scale to provide an advising experience for students that is sustained, integrated, proactive, and personalized.
- Black students have ready access to high quality, antiracist mental health services on campus.
- All faculty, staff, and student support professionals are trained in cultural competency.
- Campus climate and culture assessments are being administered frequently and are being used to inform campus policy changes aimed at strengthening Black students' safety and well-being.

CONNECTION TO CAREER

BUILD STRONG BRIDGES INTO THE WORKPLACE FOR BLACK STUDENTS AND GRADUATES

All Black students in Illinois should be able to get a good job in their field of choice after graduation, earn the same wages as non-Black peers, and have the same opportunities for advancement in careers and at the next level of education.

Even after Black students graduate from postsecondary education, equity gaps persist in job placement and in the workplace through inequitable hiring practices, unequal pay, and a lack of guidance and mentorship for Black students as they navigate career paths for the first time. To build strong bridges into the workplace for Black students and graduates, Illinois must:

DIRECTIVES

- Build a stronger bridge between college and careers for Black students by promoting early career exploration and improving career connections throughout their time in college and beyond.
- Hiring practices and other internal company policies should prioritize closing equity gaps in the workforce.

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

- Racial equity gaps in labor force participation and unemployment rates are eliminated.
- Black graduates are being employed at the same rate as their peers at each institution.
- Large numbers of paid internships and apprenticeships are being held by Black students across Illinois.
- Racial equity gaps in entry-level salaries are eliminated.

HIGH-LEVEL OVERVIEW OF ACTIONS BY SECTOR

Each of the solution areas identifies actions that should be taken by leaders across sectors to improve equity in access and outcomes for students. A high-level summary of action ideas is provided here.

High Schools: Boosting college attendance by providing early college experiences, asset-based advising, and financial literacy that result in greater academic preparedness, a sense of belonging, and greater financial access to a postsecondary education.

- **Connecting College to Careers:** Equip teachers and counselors to promote Black students' sense of belonging in college and academic purpose through early and often career exploration conversations.
- **Early College Exposure & Coursework:** Expand Black student access to dual enrollment and dual credit programs, and lower barriers to Black student participation in these opportunities.

- **Access to Financial Aid:** Provide robust financial literacy and financial planning counseling for Black students and families.

Colleges & Universities: Promoting persistence by providing equitable access to programs of study aligned to careers, holistic advising, and a culturally responsive and safe campus climate.

- **Increasing Equitable Access:** Implement test-blind or test-optional policies to address structural racism in admissions practices.
- **Redesigning Remediation at Scale:** Discontinue the use of high-stakes placement tests to determine remediation needs and provide all remediation in the context of credit-bearing courses or free of charge to students prior to matriculation.
- **Connecting College to Careers:** Ensure that Black students have access to early and ongoing career exploration and co-curricular, work-based learning opportunities embedded in programs of study.
- **Improving Campus Climate & Culture:** Provide anti-racist training and professional development for all employees grounded in an asset-based view of Black students, and regularly conduct and campus climate surveys to inform ongoing improvements.
- **Supporting Student Persistence:** Provide culturally responsive advising and holistic student supports that attends to the academic and non-academic needs of Black students.
- **Reforming Administrative Policies:** Eliminate administrative holds that prevent students from registering for courses or obtaining transcripts because of small dollar debt.

Policymakers: Strengthening access and improving outcomes by aligning resources, setting priorities, reforming policies, enabling robust data use, and supporting seamless transitions.

- **Ensuring Equitable Funding:** Reform the funding formula to ensure equitable resources for institutions serving large numbers of Black students, and provide robust funding of student aid
- **Interrogating Policies:** Conduct an equity audit of all education and workforce development policies with an eye toward impact on Black student postsecondary attainment
- **Promoting Effective Data Use:** Collect, share, and utilize robust data on the impacts of state programs on Black student retention and completion.
- **Supporting Student Transitions:** Pursue and refine evidence-based policies that lead to equitable dual-credit/dual-enrollment programs, scaled reform of remediation, and seamless applicability of transfer credits.

Community-Based Organizations: Advancing a culture of college-going and improving student persistence and completion through aligned efforts increase access to resources and culturally responsive student supports.

- **Promoting Culturally Responsive Financial Literacy & Planning:** Lead partnerships to provide more culturally competent financial literacy and financial planning education for Black students and families across the state beginning when students are in middle school.
- **Strengthening a Culture of College-Going:** Strengthen trust in and knowledge of the value of postsecondary attainment and available financial aid resources by partnering on efforts to embed college conversations in community venues and increase the number of Black students completing the FAFSA.
- **Increasing Access to Emergency Aid:** Participate partnerships to expand access to emergency aid for Black students and to develop effective systems to connect students in need to barrier-reduction grants.
- **Connecting College to Careers:** Partner with educational providers and employers to strengthen career exploration opportunities and career readiness programs for Black students.

Philanthropy: Improving outcomes by seeding innovation, investing in promising practices and data infrastructure, and fostering high-impact cross-sector partnerships.

- **Aligning Investments:** Fund organizations that are leading advocacy efforts aligned to the Equity Working Group's recommendations.
- **Promoting Effective Data Use:** Support cross-sector partnerships that track and regularly publish finely disaggregated data on progress toward equity goals
- **Supporting Infrastructure for Improvement:** Provide funding for institutions to build out high-quality systems of predictive analytics aimed at supporting Black student persistence and completion.
- **Scaling Evidence-Based Innovation:** Provide resources for institutions, systems, and cross-sector partnerships to scale evidence-based innovations in supporting the persistence and completion of Black students.
- **Connecting College to Careers:** Invest in large-scale efforts to connect Black students with career opportunities and create matching programs to expand hiring opportunities for Black students in well-paying fields.

Business Community & Employers:

Promoting strong outcomes by increasing collaborations that connect college to careers and by ensuring hiring and retention practices are grounded in a commitment to equity.

- **Connecting College to Careers:** Expand high-quality work-based learning programs for Black students
- **Engaging Higher Education Institutions:** Expand employer presence and engagement with career centers at colleges and universities that serve large numbers of Black students.
- **Supporting Professional Development of Faculty & Staff:** Engage with college faculty and advisors to improve early and ongoing career exploration conversations with Black students
- **Improving Hiring and Employee Retention Practices:** Evaluate internal practices around internships, recruitment, salaries, promotions, and performance evaluation to prioritize equity.

The challenges facing Illinois' Black students, perpetuated by systemic racism, can only be addressed through the collaboration of these various sectors working together to remove barriers, address deeply inequitable policies and transform the system. Proposed solutions, promising practices, and a snapshot of the current state and road ahead are detailed in the full report. The members of the Equity Working Group for Black Student Access and Success in Illinois Higher Education are committed to the long-term work entailed in achieving equity in access and outcomes for Black students in our state. We invite you to join us in this work.



NOTE

This icon highlights recommendations that are based directly on student input, gathered from the Equity Working Group's student panel and focus groups