



**Advancing Racial
Equity in Illinois
Higher Education**
September 2020




The Need to Address Racial Equity in Higher Education

In recent years there have been several major studies highlighting the racial inequities in Illinois higher education (Advance Illinois, 2019; Dugan Bassett Consulting, 2018; IBHE, 2018; ICCB, 2020; Partnership for College Completion, 2019; Lumina Foundation, 2020). These reports have largely focused on equity gaps for Black and Latino students (as compared to white students) in both enrollment and completion, as well as significant challenges in affordability. Research has generally agreed on three areas of racial equity gaps in Illinois higher education:

- **Enrollment:** Only 2 of 12 public institutions have representative enrollment of Latino students, 4 of 12 for Black students. There is unequal representation of Black and Latino students across different institutional types with particularly low representation at 4-year colleges, and high representation for Black students at for-profit colleges. There has been a steady decline of Black students in higher education over the last decade despite a similar number of high school graduates.
- **Completion:** There is a completion gap between Black and Latino students compared to White students at all higher education institutions, as much as 30 points in some cases. National studies have graded Illinois at Ds and Fs in relation to representative completion (Excelencia in Education, 2019; Harper & Simmons, 2019).
- **Affordability:** Illinois public institutions are among the most expensive for in-state residents, and those that receive most of the state appropriations enroll lower numbers of Black and Latino students. Child care costs are also significant challenges for student parents.



For women who seek to improve their employment opportunities or wages by advancing their skills, the traditional college system can be challenging to navigate, especially for students of color, adult students, student parents, and low-income students. Women Employed (WE) advocates for innovating programs and improving student supports and policies that address barriers to college completion and close racial and gender equity gaps, which then exacerbate longer-term income gaps.



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We are in a unique moment right now in public higher education, not just in Illinois but around the country. The COVID-19 public health crisis has significantly disrupted higher education financially, structurally, and organizationally. Its impact on students, institutions, and agencies will be felt for years to come. While work on this policy brief was done largely before the COVID-19 crisis, this pandemic has raised the profile of existing racial inequities and made the need to

address them more urgent. For example, the closing of on-campus learning has revealed inequities in: (a) access to technology both for individuals as well as under-resourced institutions (e.g., computers, wi-fi, and campus infrastructure); (b) food and housing insecurity; (c) family responsibilities and support structures; and (d) economic safety nets and student loan debt. Thus, any work on racial equity moving forward [must pay attention to the disproportionate impact that this new higher education landscape is having on students of color](#), student parents, and low-income students in particular, such as described in [this guide on Equity and Inclusion During COVID-19 from the University of California system](#). The COVID-19 crisis IS an equity crisis, so this work is even more crucial during this challenging time. Given that [the economic fallout from COVID-19 appears to be discouraging low-income, first-generation college students from attending college](#).

Illinois has become more intentional in addressing higher education issues and state leaders have

undertaken new efforts specifically designed to address racial inequities, including providing publicly accessible data that illustrates racial inequities in Illinois higher education, embarking on a statewide effort to redesign developmental education, and beginning to increase funding for the state need-based financial aid Monetary Award Program (MAP). We are encouraged by these efforts, and Women Employed provides the following recommendations to ensure that our educated workforce better reflects the growing diversity of our state and economy.

The challenge of identifying systemic and sustainable ways to address racial inequities in higher education institutions is substantial. States have struggled with developing comprehensive approaches to address racial inequities that have become more evident as the student population becomes more diverse. Individual higher education institutions in Illinois have efforts underway to address inequities on their campuses, but they could use state support and incentives to maximize the impact of their efforts. Furthermore, institutions newer to this work or that have yet to begin this work may need encouragement and guidance from the state to begin addressing racial equity challenges.

We urge Illinois to step up efforts to close the racial equity gap in higher education to significantly increase the number of low-income women and women of color completing training and education that gives them access to quality jobs with family-sustaining wages.

Strengths in Illinois' higher education system:

- Diverse demographics: While racial composition varies greatly by region, Illinois has a more racially diverse population than many states, and rapidly growing Latinx and Asian American populations across multiple geographic areas.
- 32 Minority-Serving institutions, including some with nationally recognized programs targeted to serve the unique needs of specific racial groups.
- State higher education leaders who have expressed a commitment to racial equity have the potential for moving equity efforts forward.
- A growing core of education policy advocates centering equity, including Women Employed, Partnership for College Completion, Young Invincibles, and Advance Illinois.
- Support for undocumented students, making them eligible to receive state financial aid.
- A current governor that is supportive of higher education.

Women Employed's recommendations are informed by, and in some instances adopted directly from, partner as well as national organizations' policy reports. A list of references can be found at the end of this document. For information on how other states have approached these efforts, see Women Employed's forthcoming companion brief highlighting examples from other states' efforts on racial equity in higher education to inform Illinois' future work.

Recommendation: Establish a State Leadership Structure for Racial Equity

One of the most significant opportunities that Illinois can take in this moment of new state leadership is to establish a racial equity leadership role or office within state government. While there are nonprofit and policy organizations that have worked to influence policy and legislation, that is not a substitute for government-sanctioned plans or working groups. Improving equity in our higher education systems will require investment from a diverse set of stakeholders—agencies, institutions, policymakers, students, and advocates. We are hopeful that new leadership at the executive, legislative, and administrative levels will lead to a sense of urgency around racial and gender equity, concrete action plans, and increased accountability for all stakeholders. Adding urgency is the COVID-19 public health crisis, which, while extremely challenging to higher education, presents an important crossroads for Illinois to reconsider its priorities for higher education and reimagine a more equitable system.

- Illinois must establish a designated position or office responsible for leadership and oversight of statewide efforts to address racial inequities in higher education access and completion. This position/office should be responsible for developing statewide equity targets, working with institutional leaders in developing appropriate campus-specific plans, and monitoring progress.
- Each higher education state agency must address racial equity in their strategic planning, hiring, and policy implementation.
- Illinois institutions of higher education should each have at least one point person responsible for addressing racial equity efforts on their individual campuses, which would include developing institutional equity targets appropriate to local/regional contexts, monitoring progress towards goals, and alignment with statewide targets. This person would also serve as a liaison to the designated state racial equity leader.



Recommendation: Set State Equity Targets

The Illinois legislature passed SR1647 and HR1017, which charged the P-20 Council in developing equity targets by December 2018. As of this writing (September 2020), targets have yet to be set. Illinois needs a definitive date for when equity targets will be set that has consequences attached if the deadline is not met. Once set, these targets should drive an effort to set and align institutional targets that together allow Illinois to achieve its statewide goal. An accountability system must then be developed around the outcomes sought. These efforts should include:

- Generating more and better disaggregated data by race to track potential differences in educational outcomes, program enrollments and outcomes, trends, financial aid, licensure pass rates, debt repayment, etc. and regularly report on racial equity goals, indicators, and outcomes. Particular attention should be paid to the potential disproportionate impact of COVID-19 closures, policies, and outcomes from online learning.
- Developing a strategy to engage colleges and universities to adopt institutional racial equity targets in order to contribute to meeting the statewide targets. This may include bringing into alignment targets from institutions which may already have existing institution-specific equity plans.
- Designing an accountability system for meeting equity targets. This may include requiring public institutions not making satisfactory progress towards their self-set targets to develop and submit either student recruitment, student support, or academic improvement plans for individual racial/ethnic groups. These plans should include goals, strategies, metrics, and timelines for improvement.
- Providing technical assistance to institutions or regional comprehensive public universities to improve graduation and completion rates among students of color.



Recommendation: Develop Equitable Institutional Funding

Another key recommendation for addressing racial equity is to ensure that higher education funding is allocated using an equity lens and targeting that funding for institutions that serve a high percentage of students of color. These institutions are often under-resourced, yet may need to provide additional services to appropriately serve diverse populations. Illinois should:

- Adopt an equitable funding formula for public universities.
- Better fund all public higher education institutions.
- Provide incentives for programs that improve completion for underrepresented students and financial rewards for institutions that close equity gaps.



- Financially support Illinois' federally-designated [Minority Serving Institutions](#).
- Prioritize MAP at non-profit institutions.
- Develop equitable strategies for distributing federal COVID-19 relief funding across institutions where possible.
- Fill gaps in federal COVID-19 relief funding for institutions that serve more low-income students, students of color, part-time, undocumented, and immigrant students.

Recommendation: Re-Envision Academic Pathways

Equity in higher education starts at admissions in facilitating who has access to a college education. Once admitted, K-12 academic preparation, placement testing, and transfer policies may become barriers to academic progress which disproportionately affect students of color. These barriers can be reduced if Illinois takes the following actions:

Develop Equity-Oriented Outreach, Recruitment, and Admissions

[Outreach, recruitment, and admissions is the entry point for access](#) to higher education: where and how institutions decide to recruit affects which prospective students apply. Thus, Illinois should:

- Encourage and provide support for institutions to develop equity-minded outreach and recruitment plans to target high schools and community centers in racially diverse and/or underserved neighborhoods.
- Make affordability and completion data available and accessible so prospective students can make more informed decisions, which includes informing students and families of existing college planning resources and how to use them.
- Evaluate alternative strategies, methods, and temporary policy changes during the COVID-19 pandemic to identify opportunities to introduce equity advantages:
 - Limited internet access in certain communities.
 - Reduced transportation and other geographical barriers to campuses and classrooms.
 - Flexible scheduling of online class options for remote education.
 - Test-optional admissions that do not jeopardize student access to scholarship and other financial aid opportunities.



Reform Developmental Education

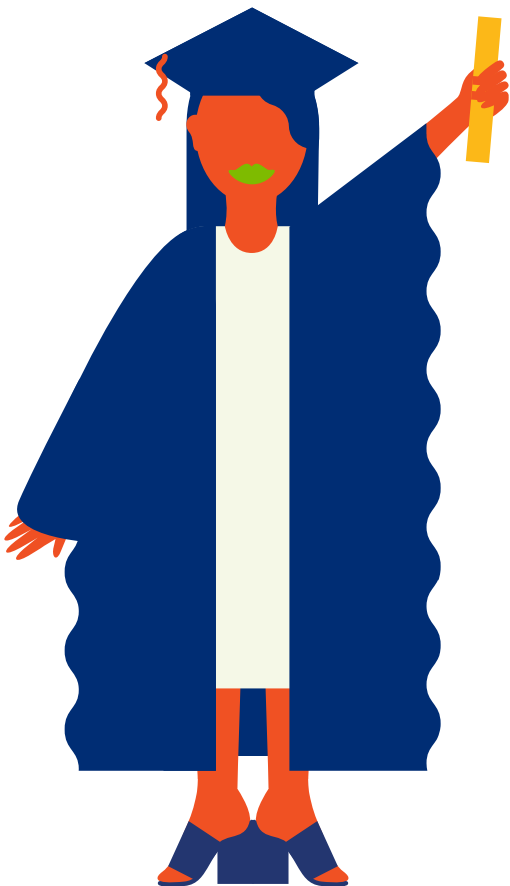
Developmental education disproportionately affects Black and Latino students in their pursuit of college degree. There are a number of measures Illinois can take to reform developmental education including:

- Approve the multiple measures approach developed by the Illinois Community College Board and require adoption throughout the state.
- Require institutions to create implementation and scaling plans and incentivize innovative practices to accelerate the movement of students through developmental education and into post-secondary and Career and Technical Education classes.
- Sustain academic supports during the 2020 public health crisis while both courses and support services are being offered online.

Improve Transfer Pathways

Many students of color begin their higher education at community colleges. In a COVID-19 educational landscape, students may “reverse transfer” to community colleges after attending four-year institutions to attend college closer to home or to have a more affordable option. Recent research showed that Black and Latino students in Illinois are more successful as transfer students than as freshmen in completing college degrees at 4-year institutions. Thus, Illinois must continue to build on previous success by:

- Reducing challenges to seamless transfer pathways.
- Expanding articulation agreements.
- Allowing the temporary adoption of policies accepting Spring 2020 pass/fail courses for transfer credit due to COVID-19 disruptions.



Recommendation: Increase Need-Based Financial Aid

Many years ago, Illinois was a national leader in focusing need-based financial aid on low-income students, many of whom are students of color. At one time, Illinois fully funded the Monetary Award Program (MAP) and made it available to less than half-time students. Years of state disinvestment in higher education resulted in tens of thousands of eligible students denied aid each year. A new administration in the state has begun to turn this trend around and has begun to restore investments. However, it is important to note that [income is not a proxy for race](#) in addressing a wide range of higher education inequities and should be one of multiple strategies. Additionally, it is crucial to address the impact of COVID-19 educational disruptions on low-income students (e.g., loss of work-study and on-campus jobs, room and board, housing) as students may need to work extra hours to make up for lost income or increased expenses. WE recommends the following policies be put in place to continue this progress:

- Increase investment in state need-based financial aid through the Monetary Award Program (MAP), paying attention to the needs of part-time students as well as finding ways to make MAP available to students who register late because of personal financial constraints.
- Prioritize need-based aid to focus limited resources on low-income students of color.
- Offer emergency and completion grants for students near graduation but in danger of dropping out due to unexpected costs.
- Develop and fund services with costs that students of color in particular face after tuition and fees (e.g., childcare, transportation).
- Protect student loan borrowers (including servicing and repayment), supporting repayment approaches that reflect borrowers' realities given [\(a\) the racial wealth gap; and \(b\) that student debt disproportionately affects women and students of color.](#)
- Provide accessible information and education on the many options available to them to pay for higher education and avoid student loan debt.



Recommendation: Develop a System of WrapAround Supports

The most successful programs which improve college completion for students of color are holistic, providing wraparound supports in both academic and student services to help students succeed. These include a combination of financial aid, academic advising, faculty and peer mentoring, identity-based programs, mental health, and other social-emotional supports. Culturally competent faculty and staff as well as an inclusive campus climate are also key factors in supporting students of color toward college completion. While many of these programs exist at the institutional level, we encourage the state to build on existing initiatives and scale up programs which have proven successful in retaining and graduating students of color. Illinois must:

- Improve Academic and Career Advising Practices to help keep students on track and make the most informed decisions for either degree progress or transfer. This should include enhancement of online/virtual advising options to ensure access during on-campus closures and for those with challenging commuting schedules.
- Provide widely available tutoring, particularly in conjunction with developmental education. Consider both opportunities and challenges with tutoring in virtual learning environments during COVID-19, particularly for those with disabilities or English language learners.
- Support race-conscious programs: Research and best practices show that holistic, culturally-relevant programs and services are particularly effective in supporting students of color throughout their college experience. Examples include mentoring programs, peer counseling, cultural centers, and culturally relevant curriculum.
- [Fund mental health services](#), including tele-health services, particularly crucial during this challenging COVID-19 time causing additional stress, depression, and anxiety.
- Improve technology infrastructure for institutions to support more online instruction and support and to ensure students have access to support while learning from their homes (e.g., laptops, internet service).
- Provide support for student parents, including additional financial aid for child care expenses, and on-campus child care availability at low cost for students. Consider the impact of COVID-19 on school and daycare closures which may be additional stressors for student parents.

Recommendation: Improve Campus Climate

In addition to institutional funding, academic policies, and financial aid, campus climate is a major factor in college retention and graduation for students of color. A variety of research has documented the racism and stereotyping that students of color experience both inside and outside the classroom and the negative impact that has on mental health and persistence. Conversely, a sense of belonging has been shown to be one of the biggest factors in student retention, particularly important for students of color who attend predominantly white institutions (PWI). As a reflection of the broader society, campuses have always been sites where racial tensions and resulting social justice movements have emerged, but the heightened attention to systemic racism and issues of racial injustice in recent months should create a sense of urgency in the importance of ensuring that campuses are welcoming and supportive of ALL students and allow them to reach their full potential both as students and people. Improving campus climate is part of the bigger picture of how to move institutions to become anti-racist in a meaningful way and [promote equity in higher education](#). Recommendations to improve campus climate include:

- Hire and support a more ethnically diverse faculty, administration, staff, and policymakers at all levels. supports for students of color but provide important learning for ALL students.
- Require ongoing cultural competency training for students, staff, and faculty. Special attention should be given to the unique challenges of addressing racism and harassment in a virtual classroom environment.
- Support [race-conscious programs](#) as research and best practices show that holistic, culturally-relevant programs and services are particularly effective in supporting students of color throughout their college experience.
- Reshape curriculum to be less Eurocentric, particularly in history and English courses. This includes providing ethnic studies courses, in addition to a course diversity requirement, to facilitate learning about non-white histories, literature, culture, etc. that can be powerful
- Develop safe spaces on campus for students of color, such as multicultural centers and support programs.
- Support ethnic student organizations, leadership opportunities, identity-based mentoring programs, peer counseling, and educational programming targeted to students of color.
- Have transparent, timely, and appropriate policies and responses to racial harassment, hate crimes, and related incidents, as well as [mental health support](#) for victims of such trauma.

Conclusion

Each recommendation here carries within it individual actions that provide opportunities for inclusive conversations and the elimination of racial, gender, and economic inequities, large and small. It is important that all higher education policy, regardless of any specific targets, be viewed through a racial equity lens. For example, financial aid policies, particularly related to student loan debt and repayment, may have disparate outcomes for students of color given the proven racial wealth gap. Any policy levers (e.g., admissions, advising, remediation, testing, academic supports, etc.) need to take into consideration the disproportionate impact for students of color in Illinois in order to address the racial equity gap. The impact of COVID-19 disruptions to higher education is another example, as it has disproportionately affected women and students of color both economically and academically.

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Developing a statewide higher education racial equity plan is not easy, so while we have a tremendous opportunity, it also comes with significant challenges and responsibilities. In fact, University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education, along with the Lumina Foundation, noted [five obstacles that stand in the way of racial equity at the system level](#) that education leaders and policymakers should look out for. Additionally, the ongoing COVID-19 crisis has taken a significant toll on the financial and economic health of the state of Illinois, higher education institutions, and students, compounding the lasting effects of not having a state budget for two years. However, with strong leadership, collaboration, and commitment, we can overcome these obstacles and should not wait any longer to address racial equity in Illinois' higher education systems, structures, and institutions.

We must be intentional about bringing together stakeholders that represent diverse viewpoints, investigating policies for disparate impact, and recognizing at each stage of policymaking that it will take active work to move beyond the status quo to make systemic and structural change. We need to use our collective strengths and assets to improve access, persistence, and completion for ALL college students in Illinois, which requires intentionally closing racial equity gaps. The future economic strength and sustainability of Illinois' communities depend on it.

About Women Employed

Women Employed's mission is to improve the economic status of women and remove barriers to economic equity. Women Employed (WE) relentlessly pursues equity for women in the workforce by effecting policy change, expanding access to educational opportunities, and advocating for fair and inclusive workplaces so that all women, families, and communities thrive. Making college affordable, accessible, and equitable, as well as strengthening career pathways to family-sustaining wages are two of [WE's key Policy Priorities](#).

- WE is a leading advocate for low-income students. Recent work includes successfully advocating for a \$50 million increase in state need-based financial aid as well as partnering with the Illinois Attorney General's office to pass a Student Loan Bill of Rights ensuring students are protected from predatory lenders.
- WE serves on the Illinois Developmental Education Task Force and works with the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), the Partnership for College Completion, lawmakers, and advocates to create new developmental education policies that better serve students, and ensure those policies are implemented across the state.
- WE worked with the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) to develop a Workforce Education Strategic Plan, which charts a path to aligning the statewide community college system and the state's workforce development system with economic development directions and workforce needs.
- WE co-leads the Illinois Higher Education Network coalition, which strives to coordinate efforts around shared policy priorities, pursue equitable higher education funding, and engage student-facing organizations in advocacy efforts in supporting low-income students, student parents, and students of color.



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