



EQUITY IN ACTION:

A Decade of Transforming Illinois Higher Education

The Partnership for College Completion Impact Report



Acknowledgements

The Partnership for College Completion launched in 2016 to address disparities in college access by race and income, and examine the persistent and widening racial and socioeconomic disparities in college degree completion.

Since its inception, PCC has ushered in a new—and urgent—conversation on higher education equity. None of this progress would have been possible without the extraordinary contributions of PCC’s talented staff, the vision and support of the Board, and the generosity of its funders and partners.

PCC extends deep gratitude to the Gorter Family Foundation for supporting this report and being a part of the impact it chronicles. This report was also made possible through the work and initial drafting by Molly Maguire at Avenir Advisors.

From the PCC Executive Director and Board Chair

Higher education is at a critical inflection point. Unnecessary and reckless actions by the Trump administration and decades of disinvestment by the state puts the dream of going to college further out of reach for many. However, here in Illinois, the Partnership for College Completion (PCC) remains committed to our guiding mission to address systemic inequities in our higher education system—inequities that have been part of that system since before this country’s founding. Despite evident challenges, Illinois has at hand the remedy of intentional investment and targeted support to make postsecondary opportunities accessible and affordable.

For a decade now—and in constant collaboration with partners across the state—PCC has doggedly pursued greater equity and opportunity for Black and Latinx students, first-generation students, rural students, and students from low-income backgrounds in Illinois. As present events demonstrate, progress must always be protected because it is always at risk. While we work to build from the foundation set over the past ten years, however, Illinois has a complex story to tell—and PCC continues to have a key role to play.

The work is not easy. But the results are worth it. Through the data and results detailed in this report,

we show how vital higher education equity is to the health and success of students and the state. You will learn here about what our advocacy and policy team does on a daily basis to protect students and create opportunities for communities marginalized by economic and education systems. You will learn about our continued partnerships with two- and four-year institutions around Illinois through our two signature programs. And, you will see we fortify all that we do with the strongest available evidence and a willingness to follow where new insights lead.

To achieve the scale of systemic reform most needed in Illinois, we as a state must move from intent to investment. PCC is uniquely positioned to continue its leadership in driving systemic solutions to higher education equity across Illinois. With the continued support of our Board, Investors Council, institutional champions, partner organizations, and donors, we can elevate our work to the next level because our students and the institutions that serve them need us now more than ever.

Thank you for your interest in PCC’s mission, vision, and ongoing commitment. We look forward to working in partnership to realize the full impact that collective action can bring.



Dr. Kyle Southern
Executive Director



Dr. Doug E. Wood
Board Chair

PCC Board Members

To the individuals—past and present—who gave their time, leadership and guidance to make PCC what it is today and what it will be next, thank you!

AS OF DECEMBER 2025

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Origins of the Partnership for College Completion

Before 2016, the higher education policy landscape in Illinois would best be described as disjointed, shaped by decades of inattention and disinvestment. Statewide funding shortfalls culminated in a two-year budget impasse that deeply harmed the state's colleges and universities, along with college attendance among Illinois residents. Statistics from these years are stark. Illinois community colleges and public universities had their state appropriations reduced by 21% and 24%, respectively, from 2005 to 2014. This trend was then compounded by the devastating budget crisis of 2015-16, where appropriations were reduced by over 71% in a single year. Also during that time, the state's underfunding of financial aid resulted in over 1.2 million students not receiving the financial aid grants for which they were eligible. By 2017 Illinois had become a national outlier in terms of higher education funding, with just 4% of Illinois' total state expenditures going toward higher education, a staggering drop from 13% in the early 1990s.

Within this context, a visionary group of education funders in the Chicago area came together to seed an idea that would become the Partnership for College Completion. Kyle Westbrook, Ph.D., was hired to launch the organization, sparking the urgent, statewide conversation on higher education equity that did not yet exist. This effort sparked a movement that PCC would lead in Illinois to address equity disparities, including those for first-generation college students, Black and Latinx students, and students from low-income backgrounds.

As the state's only policy and advocacy organization focused exclusively on postsecondary and higher education, PCC set out to go deep on the issues with the greatest potential for transformative, systemic impact. This newly-formed organization prioritized interventions and reforms that could meaningfully advance equity, access, affordability, and student success. In doing so, PCC became a catalyst and a convener—bringing together organizations with overlapping policy goals and amplifying their collective voice and impact.

A decade later, PCC is considered the state's go-to expert on higher education policy and a trusted, reliable partner with a proven track record of action and effectiveness.

PCC pursues its mission through three core bodies of work:



1 — POLICY DEVELOPMENT, ANALYSIS, AND ADVOCACY



2 — INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE AND CAMPUS-LEVEL POLICY IMPLEMENTATION



3 — RESEARCH AND DATA



Summarizing PCC's Impact

This narrative documents the opening chapters of PCC's story. It couples data with reflections from stakeholders across Illinois' higher education ecosystem to illustrate how PCC's unique model has driven meaningful and measurable change in student access, success, investment, and institutional culture.

PCC's highlights and accomplishments include the following:

A decade later, Illinois' higher education landscape looks markedly different. PCC's leadership has moved the state from fragmented, reactive policy to an equity-minded agenda that links research, advocacy, and institutional reform.

Through sustained partnerships with legislators, agencies, and higher education institutions, PCC turns ideas into action, helps shape legislation, and improves the experiences of students across every region of Illinois.

- 1 From 2016 through 2025, PCC has published **16 reports to increase awareness of the systemic challenges within Illinois' higher education system** that can be addressed by our state officials, and by colleges and universities.
- 2 PCC has published **89 policy and practice recommendations**. **Twenty have been adopted by the state of Illinois**, and 35 new recommendations are being considered.
- 3 In 2018, PCC launched the Illinois Equity in Attainment (ILEA) Initiative, the first organized action of its kind. ILEA brought together a diverse group of **25 institutions to implement campus commitments to narrow equity disparities and increase student success**, spurring dozens of reforms on campuses and at the state level.
- 4 **PCC championed the 2021 Developmental Education Reform Act**, which maximizes students' potential for success. By PCC's estimates, this reform to date has resulted in an estimated 64,000 fewer student enrollments in developmental education courses.
- 5 **PCC led the initial ideation, proposal design, creation of a coalition to support and introduce a first-of-its-kind funding formula** for public universities in the state legislature. This legislation would enable a funding model to adequately and equitably fund public universities across the state, and direct resources to best serve students who stand to benefit the most from postsecondary completion.

PCC Policy Priorities

PCC provides a leading voice on higher education policy in Illinois, and the organization serves as a pivotal advocate and partner for racial and socioeconomic equity. Legislative leaders and policy stakeholders frequently request PCC's guidance in developing and analyzing higher education policy issues.

PCC anchors its deliberative process for determining policy priorities in the concepts of pursuing big solutions and finishing what it starts. While many higher education interventions can be legislated, not all have a meaningful effect on student outcomes—especially for PCC's priority populations of first-generation, Black, Latinx, and low-income students.

PCC's core policy agenda—spanning both legislation and the state budget—revolves around three priorities: **affordability**, **access**, and **accountability**. By concentrating its efforts in these areas, PCC has been able to design and advance legislation with the greatest potential to transform the educational trajectories of first-generation, low-income, Black, and Latinx students.



“As Chair of the House Higher Education Appropriations Committee, I understand that the rising costs of obtaining a college degree are making higher education increasingly inaccessible for many Americans, especially in Illinois. This underscores the importance of the Partnership for College Completion, whose leadership during Advocacy Days and participation in public press conferences demonstrates their unwavering commitment to advocating for equitable funding and access to college in Illinois.

PCC has been a powerful voice for equity in higher education, organizing impactful events that bring students and stakeholders together to advocate for change. I was proud to have PCC participate in the Protect Higher Education press conference [in March 2025], and I look forward to continuing our collaboration to ensure that every Illinois student has the opportunity to thrive.”

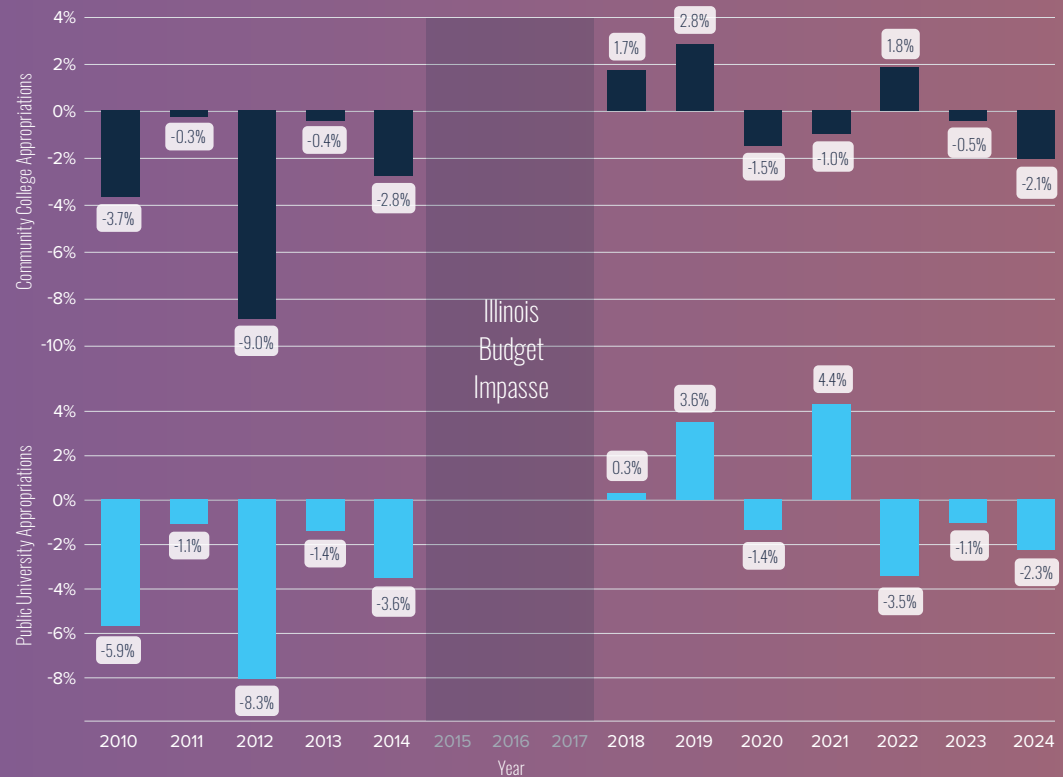
Illinois State Representative La Shawn K. Ford

PCC and College Affordability

State Appropriations for Community Colleges and Public Universities

In the years leading up to the Illinois budget impasse in 2015, community colleges and public universities faced consistent cuts in state funding, which priced students out of college altogether or pushed Illinois students to other states. PCC's strong advocacy for increased state investment helped secure modest funding gains and prevented harsh cuts over the past seven years, even after adjusting for inflation. This brought more stability than institutions had experienced in recent years.

Moving the Needle: PCC's Push for Illinois' Colleges and Universities



Year-by-year state funding changes show sharp cuts to public institutions before the budget impasse, with recent years showing more level funding. Advocacy by PCC helped secure gains for Illinois community colleges and public universities.

State Appropriations for Student Aid Grants

Illinois' principal vehicle for state need-based financial aid is the Monetary Award Program (MAP). Facing funding shortages during the last two decades of higher education disinvestment, MAP dollars have always been allocated on a first-come, first-served basis and have often run out of funding before serving all eligible students. Between 2000 and 2019, the state denied MAP grants to 1.7 million eligible students simply because the program was underfunded. Underfunding MAP has significant implications for equity, as 58% of MAP recipients are first-generation college students and more than 60% of Black and Latinx undergraduates are MAP recipients.

In 2018 the state appropriated \$392 million to MAP, supporting approximately 129,000 students with a maximum award of \$4,869. **Seven years later, thanks in part to PCC's advocacy, the 2025 state investment in MAP increased to over \$721.5 million, a 42% increase (after adjusting for inflation), which is projected to support more than 151,000 students with a maximum award of \$8,064.** MAP grants cover 47% of tuition and fees¹ at public universities. While there is plenty of work still to do on college affordability, these are important steps in the right direction for Illinois.

Equitable Public University Funding

PCC recognized that temporary and incremental MAP fixes were not enough. Illinois colleges and universities need a funding model that is adequate, equitable, and stable. In 2021, PCC played an instrumental role in establishing

the Commission on Equitable Public University Funding through the passage of Senate Bill 815, which tasked the Commission with creating the funding model.

As a member of the Commission, PCC worked hand-in-hand with institutional, state, and advocacy leaders for more than two and a half years to craft the first-in-the-nation model for adequately and equitably funding public universities. The SB 815 Commission's efforts culminated in the release of a comprehensive report and set of recommendations in March 2024.

PCC then led extensive efforts with the bill sponsors in the Illinois House and Senate and partner organizations to codify those recommendations into law. PCC stepped up to navigate contentious, technically complex negotiations to deliver legislation that was achievable, impactful, and historic.

This transformative bill, first introduced in July 2024, intends to establish a fair and stable funding formula for Illinois' public universities. Its combination of system-level vision and institutional-level specificity has the potential to shape how states allocate limited financial resources, positioning Illinois as a national leader in equitable higher education funding.

When the Adequate and Equitable Public University Funding Act is signed and fully funded, the state will direct an estimated \$1.7 billion in additional annual investment into Illinois' public universities. This targeted support will incentivize public institutions to better reflect the state population. Students will be the first to experience the effects of the legislation, which can support the 185,620 students currently enrolled in Illinois' public universities, as well as an estimated 122,200 additional graduates over the next fifteen years. The state will also benefit from an expanded tax base and more economically mobile population, as these additional graduates are estimated to contribute \$691.5 million more in annual state taxes.

PCC and College Access

The Developmental Education Reform Act (DERA)

Developmental education refers to remedial courses that institutions assign to students they consider academically underprepared, typically based on placement test scores. Intended to help students who need additional skills development prior to taking college-level math and English, developmental education has morphed into one of the most significant barriers to college access and completion.

When PCC started its work to address developmental education reform in 2018, tens of thousands more community college students had to spend valuable time and financial aid on developmental education courses that many of them did not need, that were ineffective in providing skill development, and that didn't count as college credit. The equity implications of developmental education were particularly jarring, as over 70% of Black students who enrolled in Illinois community colleges were placed in a developmental education course in at least one subject, with only 6% of those students ultimately graduating.

In 2019, PCC led the development and passage of Senate Joint Resolution (SJR) 41, which created an inventory and analysis of all developmental education models offered in the state to identify reforms for improving student success in developmental education.

DERA mandated two specific concepts:

Placement reforms, requiring institutions to place students in college-level courses if they meet standards on any one of multiple measures, including high school GPA, high school transitional courses, and transfer credit from another institution. This enables more students that do not need developmental education to bypass it.

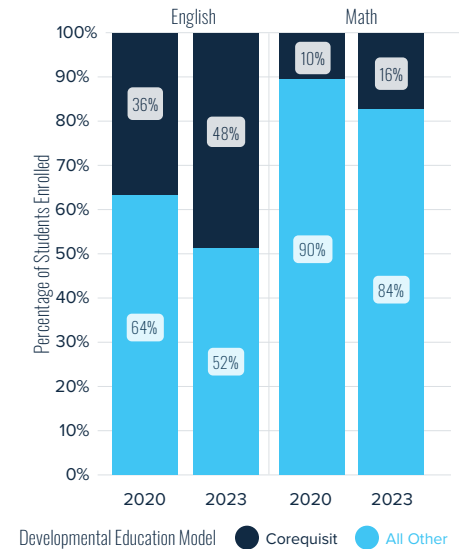
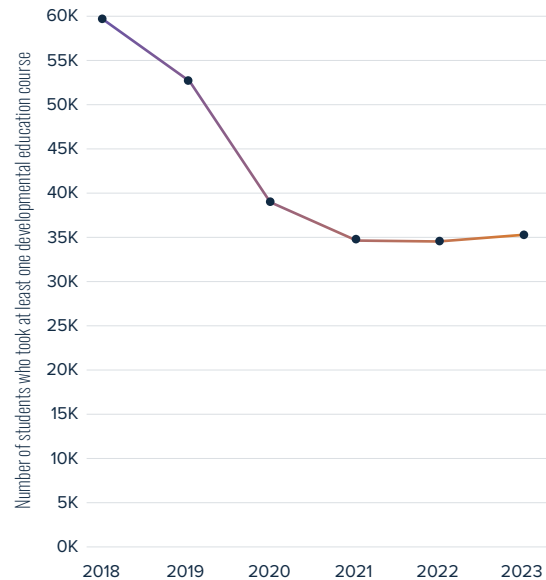
Model scaling, requiring institutions to submit plans to implement and scale the developmental education model that evidence shows is most likely to “maximize students’ likelihood of completing gateway courses in mathematics and English within their first two semesters.” Corequisite support, which places students directly into credit-bearing courses while providing additional, tailored support to help them succeed, is the only model that meets that criteria.

The March 2021 passage of DERA marked an inflection point for PCC as an organization, as it not only developed the legislative proposal, but also leveraged its network of allies and champions in the state legislature to secure its passage. Following enactment, PCC has been one of the main partners supporting the implementation of DERA, which has been critical in ensuring true change is happening throughout the state.

DERA's impact, which has been reinforced by PCC's developmental education implementation initiative:

- 1 Since 2018, there have been an estimated 64,000 fewer enrollments into developmental education courses for community college students.
- 2 Enrollment in developmental education courses stood at 49.4% for the Illinois high school class of 2014 who enrolled in an in-state community college. This rate dropped to 28.2% for the graduating high school class of 2023.
- 3 Compared to traditional models, the corequisite model championed by PCC resulted in Black and Latinx students being five to seven times more likely to pass a math gateway course within their first year, and four times more likely to pass English. Similarly, Pell recipients in corequisite were four times more likely to pass a gateway course in math and over three times more likely in English.
- 4 More students are being placed into corequisite models, with a 46% increase in math corequisite enrollment and 21% increase in English corequisite enrollment from 2020 to 2023.

Before and After: PCC's Advocacy and the DERA Legislation



The DERA legislation has resulted in declines in developmental education enrollment and is shifting more students into corequisite models.

PCC and Accountability in Illinois Higher Education

MAP Refund Fund

For-profit institutions generally produce poor completion rates and charge the highest prices to students with the least ability to pay, leading to the greatest debt accumulation and worst outcomes of any sector in higher education. Worse because of intentional targeting, they enroll large numbers of Black, Latinx and low-income students. Illinois is one of only ten states that allows for-profit colleges to receive state aid. Since MAP is a zero-sum grant program, every dollar that these institutions receive is one that does not go to a low-income student at a public or non-profit college.

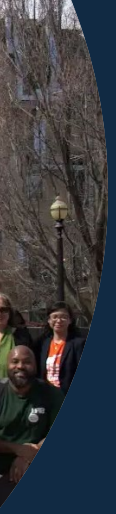
With these facts in mind, PCC led the introduction and passage of HB 2898. The bill required for-profit institutions found to have used deceptive or misleading practices and received MAP funds to pay back those funds to the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC). The bill passed overwhelmingly by a vote of 51-3 in the Senate and 103-3 in the Assembly. Since its implementation in 2023, the law has safeguarded about 3,800 for-profit college students who received \$19 million in MAP grants, and it will continue to protect thousands of students and millions of MAP dollars.



Student Parent Data Collection Act

Student parents face unique and significant obstacles to completing a degree. Prior to PCC's founding in 2016, the state lacked the data to report the number of student parents in Illinois, leaving minimal visibility and action to address the needs of this population.

As a first but monumental step, PCC led the legislation establishing the Student Parent Data Collection Act (SB 267) in 2021, which mandates the creation of a statewide report on the growing population of student parents at Illinois public colleges and universities that has reached 52,000 and their academic outcomes. PCC's leadership ensured the development of an operational and comprehensive definition, the execution of a workable data collection plan, and mandated annual reporting on this student group.



PCC's Legislative Impact: A Decade of Advancing Equity in Higher Education

PCC-Led or Supported Legislative Initiatives

- > The HR 1017/SR 1647 resolution that required the state to consider disaggregating data and to look at student subgroups as part of its “60% attainment by 2025” goal, instead of just aggregating outcomes across all race and income groups
- > PCC pushed Illinois to break from its standing funding allocation model of how it distributed \$48 million to higher education institutions in the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER). This represented the first deviation in recent memory from the state’s inequitable funding formula, and better enabled institutions to sustain services and retain students throughout the pandemic.

- > PCC led the Child Care Assistance Program amendment to the Higher Education Student Assistance Act (SB 3149). After only two years of implementation, an estimated 350,000 MAP-eligible students have received information about child care assistance programs and federal dependent care allowances.

- > PCC supported the charge to amend the Higher Education Student Assistance Act (SB 3138). The act provides that the identity and address of a scholarship, grant, or financial assistance applicant or recipient under the Act is private information. Since its implementation, this law has protected the personal information of approximately 450,000 students.

- > The organization supported the creation of the Mental Health Early Action on Campus Act (HB 2152), which provides guidelines for public institutions to improve mental health services. HB 2152 impacts roughly 60,000 students a year who use college mental health services. PCC also supported an amendment (SB 4055) that provided \$19 million in 2022 to assist institutions in implementing the legislation.

- > PCC supported the Public University Uniform Admission Act (HB 26), guaranteeing admission to an estimated 75,000 high school students who were in the top 10% of their class and met the public university’s other admission requirements.

- > The Higher Education Fair Admissions Act (HB 226) makes submitting standardized test scores optional, which has enabled approximately 23,000 Illinois public university applicants to enroll without submitting ACT/SAT scores in the first two years of implementation.

- > The Higher Education Benefits Navigator (HB 4201) has the potential to improve access to public benefits for an estimated 300,000 students through assigning Benefits Navigators who help students apply for assistance.

- > The Student Debt Assistance Act (SB 3032) protects approximately 240,000 current and former Illinois students by specifically prohibiting transcript withholding, shielding them from future financial harm due to unpaid institutional debt, and requiring institutions to offer a repayment plan.

- > The Illinois Student Assistance Commission pushed forward a bill to expand the recipients for the Grant Program for Exonerees (SB3771). The legislation allows dependents of exonerees to receive a grant toward tuition and mandatory fees for up to two semesters per academic year for undergraduate or graduate study at Illinois public universities and community colleges.

- > PCC also supported HB 1312, which creates “safe zones” around courthouses and requires institutions to establish clear protocols for immigration-related enforcement, reinforcing that safe learning environments are foundational to educational access.

PCC has also pushed back on legislation that would have harmed students, such as:

- > SB 3539, which would have used a flawed methodology to disqualify institutions from receiving MAP. This legislation would have kept problematic for-profit colleges in the business of receiving state funds with an implied endorsement from the state.

- > PCC opposed legislation related to income sharing agreements (ISAs), negotiating with supporters until the final bill (HB 1519) prevents all but ISAs with the most student-friendly terms to operate in the state. This has saved an estimated 43,000 students a year from borrowing misleading private loans to fund their education.

For a decade, PCC’s legislative advocacy has been instrumental in reshaping Illinois’ higher education landscape, ensuring that equity is no longer an aspiration—but a measurable, actionable commitment embedded in state policy.



PCC Advocacy and Community Engagement

As part of the effort to build support for its vision of Illinois higher education, PCC established and currently leads the Coalition for Transforming Higher Education Funding, which functions as the engagement and advocacy arm for the passage of the equitable funding formula legislation. The Coalition engages with diverse advocate stakeholder groups and student advocates.

PCC coordinates the following activities through the Coalition:

- › Convenes hundreds of advocates virtually and at the Illinois State Capitol for the annual Higher Education Advocacy Day
- › In collaboration with core partner organizations, it welcomed 500+ community members across six Community Conversation events to educate stakeholders and build support for the need for an equitable public university funding formula
- › Across four advocacy campaigns, PCC undertook hundreds of advocacy actions, including letter writing, social posts, and phone calls directed to legislators
- › Secured nearly 3,000 statements of support for the Adequate and Equitable Public University Funding Act in 2025



“PCC has been an indispensable partner in the fight for equity in public higher education. Their leadership as a member of the Commission on Equitable Public University Funding, coupled with their commitment to community engagement through statewide town halls and listening sessions, has elevated the urgency of passing an adequate and equitable university funding formula. PCC’s ability to mobilize students and advocates—most recently during two successful Advocacy Days—demonstrates the power of grassroots engagement in shaping policy that meets the needs of historically underserved communities.”

Illinois State Representative Carol Ammons



Since its inception, PCC has recognized the importance of student voices in research and policy work, which is why PCC launched the Student Advisory Council (SAC) in March 2019. Each SAC cohort includes students from colleges and universities across Illinois who serve one year-terms and advocate for greater equity and inclusion at their institutions, and state and institutional policies that support equity and student success. Through each cohort, students gain advocacy experience, resources, and tools to bring positive changes to their campuses. The SAC also provides a platform for students to develop leadership skills and expand their social and professional networks while contributing to PCC's collective impact.

PCC uses student voice in its research agenda as well. In early 2024, PCC published a report and limited-series podcast called, "What We Need to Succeed: PCC Student Advisory Council's Perspectives on Campus Supports." Based on insights from the 2022-23 SAC cohort, the report highlights personal experiences and challenges students face, amplifying their voices in higher education equity discussions. PCC also conducted in-depth interviews with 15 students for "Seamless Success: Transforming College Transfer in Illinois," a mixed-methods report on college transfer released in 2025, and continues to prioritize qualitative data in its reports.



Research in Service of Policy

Since its founding, PCC has produced research and reports on equity in college degree completion in Illinois; college affordability for Black, Latinx, and rural students; regional disparities in postsecondary outcomes within the Chicago metro area; and inequities and insufficiency in public higher education funding.

In turn, PCC uses these reports to raise awareness and shape public discourse on equity in Illinois, and its research has directly informed policy and advocacy achievements.



2017



“Unequal Opportunities in Illinois”

PCC’s inaugural report, which started the conversation on systemic inequity in higher education in Illinois.

2018



“Policy Brief: Transfer”

In pursuit of this goal, policymakers should consider how historically terminal degrees could be articulated for transfer to four-year institutions. By reframing policies and institutional practices to prioritize college students, they will graduate faster and with less debt, and the state will continue to be a national model for transfer student success. This brief was a precursor to PCC’s 2025 report.

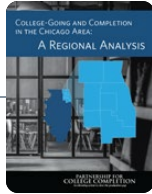
2019



“Policy Brief: Remediation Reform”

Too many college students were spending valuable time and money on remedial courses they didn’t need, hindering their likelihood of degree completion. The problem was twofold: students are over-placed in developmental education due to unreliable and inconsistent placement measures, and most students placed in developmental education don’t complete due to minimally effective traditional course structures and delivery. This brief was the catalyst for the Developmental Education Reform Act (DERA).

2020



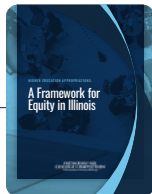
“College-Going and Completion in the Chicago Area: A Regional Analysis”

A report that offers an examination of enrollment, attainment, and completion in the seven-county metropolitan Chicago area, using a number of sources including a unique regional analysis of data from financial aid applicants.



“Priced Out: Rural Students” “Priced Out: Latinx Students” “Priced Out: Black Students”

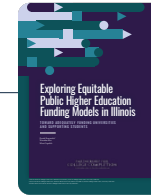
Priced Out, PCC’s series of three affordability reports, uniquely outlined the history of state disinvestment in higher education and how that has led to tuition and fees rising and enrollment falling at public institutions. This brief was the catalyst for the Developmental Education Reform Act (DERA).



“Higher Education Appropriations: A Framework for Equity in Illinois”

PCC advocacy and this report helped lead to the creation of the Commission on Equitable Public University Funding, where PCC also served as a Commissioner.

2023



“Exploring Equitable Public Higher Education Funding Models in Illinois”

The report shows how decades of performance-based funding formulas have failed to result in gains for students or the states that implemented them and outlines a new path for this policy area.



“Racial Diversity on Campus After Affirmative Action”

Following the Supreme Court’s decision on affirmative action in the college admission process, this report examines the state’s data and context, offering recommendations to continue the unfinished business of expanding access to higher education for students of color.





2024



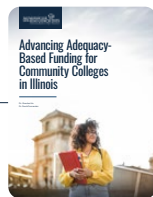
“What We Need to Succeed: PCC Student Advisory Council’s Perspectives on Campus Supports”

This student-focused report and podcast series focuses on the stories and perspectives on student support services, advising, mentorship, and more.



“A Progress Report on Reforming Developmental Education in Illinois”

This comprehensive report on the Developmental Education Reform Act (DERA), evaluates the early impact of DERA and progress since the bill’s enactment. Using public data and incorporating findings from an analysis by the Center for Research on Reform in Education (CRRE) at Johns Hopkins University funded by grant funds secured by PCC, this report offers insights into DERA’s impact and opportunities to enhance support for community college students in Illinois.



“Advancing Adequacy-Based Funding for Community Colleges in Illinois”

A report which critically examines Illinois’ community college funding models, emphasizing the need for equitable allocations to better support low-income, Black, Latinx, and first-generation students.

2025



“Seamless Success: Transforming College Transfer in Illinois”

PCC published this report which analyzed how to improve transfer processes and pathways in Illinois. This mixed-methods report dives deep into not just research and data, but also Illinois transfer students’ experience to offer actionable recommendations to address inequities within the transfer system, and position PCC to apply these learnings as to embark



“Beyond Income: How Wealth Can Better Target State Funding for Higher Education”

PCC joined with the Higher Education, Race, and the Economy (HERE) Lab and The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS) to publish this report that analyzes how wealth and income combine to affect students’ chances of getting to and through college.



“Effective, Equitable, and Efficient: A New Paradigm for Holding Universities Accountable”

This report pulls key lessons from K-12, healthcare, and Illinois’ transitional math and English implementation to uncover the following principles and oversight metrics for higher education funding accountability.

Institutional Equity Change: Integrating Policy & Practice at the Campus Level

Passing legislation is essential, but insufficient on its own to ensure the necessary change. Illinois required a trusted entity able to work with institutions to analyze data, design, and deploy new approaches, and implement new state policy. PCC is that trusted ally, forming deep relationships with administrative leaders and practitioners through campus partnerships to provide expertise and technical support to achieve lasting impact.

PCC's focus is on empowering the practitioners within these institutions—faculty, administrators, and staff—who drive change. PCC provides practitioners with the tools, strategies, and insights needed to foster a more equitable and supportive educational environment, directly benefiting students who rely on these educational systems for their success. PCC also helped institutions by collecting, reviewing, aggregating, and reporting student- and institution-level data to find trends, develop institutional equity plan strategies, and work with college and

university teams to analyze their impact. This commitment to transparency and data sharing ensured continuous improvement across institutions, helped them establish and work toward their first set of institutional equity goals.

Illinois Equity in Attainment (ILEA) Initiative

PCC launched the Illinois Equity in Attainment (ILEA) Initiative in Fall 2018. This initiative was PCC's first deep foray into institutional change work at the campus level, and included a diverse cohort of 25 colleges and universities that made a public commitment to eliminate racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps on their campuses by 2025. These institutions engaged in rigorous efforts to support first generation college, Black, Latinx, and Pell-eligible students.

Together, these institutions enrolled 31% of all higher education students in the state, but because of the diversity of their student bodies, they accounted for 48% of all Latinx and 39% of all Black students.

ILEA's impact across the state and at the campus-level has been significant. These have included dozens of institutional policy changes related to equity and student success, as well as inspired policy actions initiated by the

Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) and the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) that affect all public institutions in the state. Among the most significant achievements:

- > The 25 ILEA institutions developed 240 strategies across 10 policy areas in their equity plans.
- > To assess institutions' proposed equity strategies, PCC mapped them to several leading indicators, such as retention rates and first-year GPA, and lagging indicators, namely completion rates, ultimately resulting in nearly 500 distinct metrics to monitor the progress and impact of the ILEA cohort.
- > ILEA equity plans catalyzed change within individual institutions and garnered attention and momentum at the state level.
- > Both IBHE and ICCB have integrated PCC practices into their state-level strategic plans and sought PCC's support in implementing resultant legislation.
- > PCC contracted with NORC at the University of Chicago to conduct an independent study of ILEA's outcomes. NORC deemed the ILEA collaborative a success, adding that it "serves as a resource that colleges and universities can rely on for practical and psychological support, and a potential political body of collaboration."

A Network Supporting DERA Implementation

The community of practice PCC established for DERA implementation built upon the earlier success of the approaches designed and deployed in the ILEA Initiative. PCC already had a valuable, tailored framework for improving the culture and practices at Illinois institutions, one that cemented the primacy of student-centric programming and articulated a cohesive standard and set of goals for institutions to work towards. Furthermore, PCC was able to leverage existing relationships with state and institutional leaders where it had already established trust, and a track record of fostering constructive dialogue and negotiation, all of which contributed to the project's early momentum.

In late 2023, PCC launched its DERA implementation network, a two-year cohort providing 17 Illinois community colleges and universities with technical assistance and expert guidance to reform their developmental education programs. Although four-year institutions were included in the cohort, the majority of PCC's efforts focused on community colleges, which enroll far more students in developmental education and are often the starting place for the majority of Illinois' Black and Latinx high school graduates.

Although this work remains ongoing, the fruits of PCC's efforts are evident. Through a series of virtual webinars and in-person convenings, PCC began seeding the field

with a comprehensive understanding of institutions' obligations under DERA, the data supporting corequisite models, how to design and implement corequisite models of support, and how to adequately and reliably collect and analyze student impact data.

PCC has hosted annual events dedicated to DERA implementation, bringing together about 400 attendees to promote collaboration and mutual learning among participating institutions. Through sustained collaboration and trust-building, participating institutions shared critical data, questions, and feedback, enabling PCC to provide additional, targeted coaching and strategic support. Partnerships with esteemed institutions such as NORC at the University of Chicago and the Office of Community College Research and Leadership at the University of Illinois—renowned for its contributions to equity-focused education policy—further solidified PCC's role as a trusted driver of institutional reform. This approach has increased compliance with DERA mandates while advancing equitable outcomes for students statewide.

These collaborations enabled PCC to ground its work in rigorous data, cutting-edge research, and actionable evidence, lending both credibility and influence to its efforts.



“PCC has served as an important equity accountability partner, helping schools create and implement plans through the pandemic.”

ATtribution: NORC in its “Implementing Equity Policies in Illinois Higher Education Institutions” report.

The Work Continues

During its first decade, PCC has evolved from a visionary idea into a driving force for equity and transformation in Illinois' higher education system. Through its credibility, expertise, and proven results, PCC has advanced student-centered policy while delivering tangible improvements on college campuses.

PCC has led the transformational legislation that gets at the heart of why student success and completion rates remain stratified by race, ethnicity, and income. By focusing on high-impact policies like developmental education reform and education finance, PCC has raised expectations for what public institutions should be expected to deliver for students.

PCC has earned the trust of institutional leaders while also leading conversations about how to go even further and do better for students. It has accomplished both, in part, through the development of rigorous data and analysis and a sophisticated communications operation that worked in tandem to provoke a statewide recognition and commitment to reform.

A decade ago, PCC's founders were right to perceive that the state needed a dedicated organization to offer a vision of higher education. From their vision evolved an organization with the knowledge and expertise to advance educational justice. PCC's initiatives have demonstrated the power of using its three levers of action, coupled with an advocacy mentality to add support, expertise, and focus on the need for data and evidence to build that compelling case. PCC organized itself around a new model—one that uses the twin levers of policy and practice, and that now serves as an example for how state-level policy, advocacy, and institutional reform can work together.

As we reflect on 10 years of work, evolution, and impact, we gratefully acknowledge the many people and partnerships that have enabled our accomplishments to date. We know a better, more equitable system of higher education is within reach because we have already seen what is possible when we work toward an equitable vision. That vision will continue to guide us for the years ahead as we strive for the educational justice all students deserve.



EQUITY IN ACTION:

A Decade of Transforming Illinois Higher Education

The Partnership for College Completion Impact Report