

Supporting Illinois' College Students Through Crisis and Beyond

“The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed just how unprepared many young adults are for sudden emergency costs. I know many peers who were laid off and can no longer depend on campus services to assist them.” - Ashal Yai - UIC '20 Alum

The challenges COVID-19 brings to Illinois' college campuses — from students wondering how they'll make rent, to accessing affordable mental health counseling — [are not new](#). But as our state responds to the global COVID-19 pandemic, we must ensure the needs of Illinois' college students are centered in policymaking. We commend the swift action by a variety of stakeholders and highlight key strategies for a student-driven agenda for state and city lawmakers, colleges, and philanthropy to address the immediate and longer-term impact of the pandemic.

Ease the Enrollment Process

- As high school and college students struggle to regain their footing amidst tremendous uncertainty and change, they are also trying to prepare for the future. The COVID outbreak coincides with the enrollment decision deadline and financial aid verification for many colleges, impacting students looking to transfer colleges or individuals preparing to enroll for the first time. This is particularly difficult for high school students who have more limited access to high school counselors. **Recommendation: Illinois colleges should extend their decision and financial aid verification deadline by at least a month.**
- Applicants may not be able to tour campuses as communities shelter in place, yet these tours are critical for prospective students to understand a campus culture and academic offerings. **Recommendation: Illinois colleges should provide virtual strategies for getting to know campuses, which may include tours, question and answer conversations with faculty and students, and pairing prospective students with mentors (who are paid for their time who are current students).**

Access to Online Classes and Classroom Supports

- With [100,000 Illinois undergraduates experiencing housing insecurity](#), many college students rely on drop-in shelters and emergency beds for their immediate daily food and housing needs. Yet, many emergency shelters do not have wifi internet which limits students from using laptops or phones to access virtual learning opportunities or complete homework at night. **Recommendation: Support shelters in expanding their wifi and publicly available computers.**
- As colleges move to digital classrooms, we must ensure every college student that needs a laptop and internet access with necessary technology and connection to attend class and complete assignments. **Recommendation: Provide students laptops and purchase wifi hotspots for those lacking internet access.**
- This personal and academic upheaval means students need greater access than ever to trusted college staff who can support students in navigating the transition to virtual learning and COVID's potential impact on their academic plans. **Recommendations: Academic advisors should offer virtual support, including over the phone for students with unreliable access to the Internet. Students who received classroom support (e.g., taking notes) should also receive related support in a virtual environment.**

Address Food and Housing Insecurity among College Students

- Emergency aid is critical to ensure students persist through the academic year. **Recommendation: Philanthropy and state and local lawmakers should invest in existing emergency grant programs at Illinois colleges and create programs where they do not exist (including by passing HB 5262). Institutions should ensure applications for emergency aid are as [simple as possible](#) and are [frequently communicated](#) to students.**
- Up to [46% of college students facing housing insecurity in the last 30 days](#) — and during the pandemic, we expect more students to struggle with affording and accessing food. **Recommendation: During the crisis, colleges and universities must ensure that oncampus food pantries remain open and are frequently advertised to students.**

If staffing during COVID-19 presents a challenge, consider leaving food pantries unlocked, while posting guidance for students to take only what they need.

- Campuses should be prepared for more college students needing food and housing support once the fall 2020 semester begins. **Recommendation: Illinois can proactively support students and our institutions by creating public benefits liaisons on every college campus who support college students in accessing public benefits (e.g., SNAP) and community resources.**

Maintain Financial Aid Resources & Status

- Students' class and instruction time will likely dip over the next few weeks and months, as students monitor the health and financial well-being of themselves and their families. **Recommendation: Lawmakers should ensure students are not penalized if they can no longer meet the Monetary Award Program [eligibility requirements](#), which may include the satisfactory academic progress requirements and exceeding the 135 paid credit hour cap.**
- Students who held on-campus jobs fear they will lose the critical wages as those workplaces shut down. **Recommendation: Campuses should continue to pay students as expected through the end of the academic year.**
- Students and advisors have a wide range of questions on college costs' impact on their studies, including: what happens if students have to drop out early & can they receive partial tuition reimbursement; can students enroll in the summer or fall even if they have outstanding academic bills. **Recommendation: Provide adjustments on expectations and partial tuition reimbursement where possible and communicate the adjustments as quickly as possible to students and their families.**
- Between losing jobs or wages, incurring medical costs, and stepping in to take care of siblings, parents, or grandparents, young adults from low-income families are already facing the worst of COVID's impact and will face the steepest climb to start or continue postsecondary studies. We must ensure we maintain access for those families by expanding access to MAP grants. **Recommendation: Expand MAP grants by \$100 million in the FY21 budget and enable an additional 30,000 students from low-income families enroll.**

"I'm covered through Medicaid, but I'm afraid that it won't be enough in a time where individuals are asked not to work. I've always been afraid of getting sick because it meant time not being able to work, it meant not having sufficient funds for bills. I'm scared, it's a frightening time." – Oscar Sanchez, Harold Washington College

Support Students' Mental Health

- The COVID-19 pandemic will impact students' mental health, and students are already feeling the impact of losing access to critical on-campus supports, such as mental health counseling. **Recommendation: Illinois colleges must leverage existing campus counselors to create virtual/phone counseling while campuses are closed.**
- We also must ensure that students returning to campus in the fall have sufficient access to mental health counseling. Recommendation: State lawmakers should invest in students' mental wellbeing now by funding the Mental Health Early Action on Campus Act (P.A. [101-025](#)).

"The thought of not knowing each day of work could be your last is bothersome. Student parents are looking at alternative methods as daycares close. People have to call off work because no one can watch their kids." – Jane Andrews, DePaul University