NACAC

National Association for
College Admission Counseling

ELEVATE EQUITY: ILLINOIS

A Practice and Policy Convening on College Access and Admission

Supported by:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past five years, the nation's system for college admission has experienced a series of intense challenges. First came the COVID pandemic in 2020, the effects of which will impact college access for years to come. Then the United States Supreme Court effectively ended the consideration of applicants' race or ethnicity during the application review process in the June 29, 2023 decisions in the SFFA v. Harvard and SFFA v. UNC cases. This was followed by a significant disruption in the rollout of the federal government's Free Application for Student Financial Aid (FAFSA) form in 2024, which further disrupted the postsecondary pipeline of students.

Despite these significant disruptions, however, the college admission counseling profession remains steadfast in its determination to continue to pursue equity in college access through research, innovation, and best practice communication.

Illinois has, for the past five years, served as a bellwether for the nation in terms of overall enrollment in postsecondary education.[1] Given this, Illinois can serve as a reference point for other states looking to better understand how to face these challenges. The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) worked in collaboration with the Illinois Association for College Admission Counseling and the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) to host a convening at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) on Dec. 9, 2024. This event brought together a diverse range of K-12 and higher education policy and practice stakeholders to address short- and long-term challenges and opportunities in the wake of the court's decision. The convening focused on identifying op-

portunities to address barriers to equity in the major areas of recommendation for state and federal policy listed in NACAC's joint 2022 report with the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), *Toward a More Equitable Future for Postsecondary Access*. The Elevate Equity: Illinois Convening Report details the key takeaways and learnings from that convening.

> Postsecondary guidance is essential to equity — but too often sidelined in school accountability systems, funding priorities, and staffing models.

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[1] National Student Clearinghouse; Illinois Board of Education (https://www.ibhe.org/datapoints.html)

KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE CONVENING

The recommendations in this report are grounded in discussions from the Elevating Equity: Illinois convening, which brought together over 120 practitioners, policymakers, students, and postsecondary leaders from across Illinois.

PARTICIPANTS ELEVATED SEVERAL KEY INSIGHTS SPECIFIC TO ILLINOIS:

► Illinois is rich with strong policy foundations — but fragmented in implementation. Participants praised the state's PaCE framework, FAFSA mandate, and emerging direct admission efforts, but emphasized that uneven implementation across regions, school districts, and institutions limits their impact.

► Direct admission holds promise but needs clarity and consistency. Attendees noted that many students and families are confused about eligibility and next steps, and that better alignment with financial aid timelines is critical for success.

► School counselors are stretched thin — and so are their toolkits. Many described advising as under-resourced and overly reactive, lacking state-supported tools or structures for college match, career exploration, and follow-up after graduation.

► Students are navigating systems not designed for them. Participants shared examples of students who receive conflicting information from different institutions, struggle to track deadlines, or miss out on opportunities due to lack of timely communication.

► Collaboration happens but often depends on relationships rather than infrastructure. Several highlighted the need for regional intermediaries or hubs to facilitate more consistent K–12/higher education partnerships.

These insights reflect a strong appetite for action — and a belief that Illinois is well-positioned to lead the nation in designing a more navigable and student-centered transition to college.

> Illinois can lead in shifting college admission toward student-centered, identity-affirming approaches.

To accelerate equity-driven policy and practice, the convening generated specific recommendations for institutional, state, and federal policy and practice in a roadmap built around three core goals and five actionable recommendations:

GOAL 1: ENSURE EVERY STUDENT HAS THE SUPPORT TO PLAN AND PURSUE A POSTSECONDARY PATH

► Invest in high-quality, consistent postsecondary advising by hiring and training more counselors, embedding advising time into the school day, and partnering with community organizations and higher education institutions.

► Build a statewide student navigation infrastructure through the development of a centralized digital platform that integrates college planning tools, financial aid updates, and direct admission.

GOAL 2: ALIGN SYSTEMS ACROSS K–12, HIGHER EDUCATION, AND STATE POLICY

► Create regional postsecondary transition networks to coordinate messaging, timelines, and data use among schools and colleges.

► Build accountability for postsecondary outcomes by tracking FAFSA completion, enrollment, and other indicators within state and district planning tools.

GOAL 3: DESIGN WITH AND FOR STUDENTS

► Center student voice and experience in systems change by embedding student feedback into program design and offering paid leadership roles to support co-creation.

The Elevate Equity: Illinois convening serves as a foundation for continued dialogue and action toward a more inclusive and accessible postsecondary education system. These recommendations provide a blueprint for statewide collaboration and reform. By fostering cross-sector collaboration and prioritizing student-centered policies, Illinois can lead the way in addressing systemic inequities and expanding educational opportunities for all.

> Students need consistent, culturally responsive support — not just to get in, but to make confident, informed decisions.

BACKGROUND

In January 2022, NACAC and NASFAA published the report, *Toward a More Equitable Future for Postsecondary Access*. The purpose of the report was to engage students and higher education thought leaders in an effort to reimagine the college admission process with the assumption that racial equity was a primary goal. The result of the report included six practice-related recommendations for college admission and financial aid, as well as overarching recommendations with applicability to each of the six practice areas.

As context for these recommendations, the report noted that "The effects of racism extend into postsecondary education, as we have known for decades thanks to the tireless efforts of researchers, advocates, practitioners, and, most importantly, students. The effects of systemic racism touch every element of college admission — a process that, at its origin, was not fundamentally designed to promote equity." A critical observation of the process that led to the final report formed the basis for one of the two overarching recommendations. The report noted: One important observation from this process was that a significant challenge to making substantial, sustained advances toward racial equity for admission and financial aid leaders was the difficulty in "getting on the balcony," or gaining an elevated perspective to see the larger picture and avoid the traps of groupthink, inertia, and the grind of everyday work.[2]

As one thought leader quoted in the report said:

I run into this seemingly every day — the question of budget and resources. We don't have enough time to do this, or we don't have enough staff to do it that way. And it really raises the fundamental question: Where are your priorities? It's both the time and money. The question of the competing other priorities and how this gets understood, I would argue, as legitimately mission-central, embedded part and parcel of the institution...I think it's actually a question of psychology and approach that's overlaying in the ether about the approach, intentionality, and transparency associated with these issues.

- Thought leadership panel participant

This participant highlighted that a common challenge in rethinking the design of a system is the tendency to assume that the system's current design is fixed or a "given." That tendency was underscored in this grant process as discussions often turned to how we can better adapt students to the system, rather than better adapting the system to students. **As a core component of the design approach, a culture of continuous learning is a critical element of any transformation process. To be successful, strategies for change need to be sustained by a set of initiatives to fast-track transformation and sustain long-term behavior change across an organization or profession.**

[2] Heifetz, Ronald A., and Linsky, Marty. "Get on the Balcony. (Why Leaders Need to Step Back to Get Perspective),"Harvard Business Review Press, 2002. (https://www.hbsp.harvard.edu/product/1667BC-PDF-ENG)

CREATING A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS LEARNING IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

One year after the publication of *Toward a More Equitable Future for Postsecondary Access*, the United States Supreme Court made a pivotal ruling that eliminated the consideration of applicants' race or ethnicity in the admission process in the SFFA v. Harvard and SFFA v. UNC cases. This landmark decision came after the COVID-19 pandemic, which is expected to impact college access for years to come.

The situation was further complicated by a significant disruption in the rollout of the federal government's Free Application for Student Financial Aid (FAFSA) form in 2024, which posed additional challenges to the postsecondary student pipeline. Amid these upheavals, the college admission counseling profession remains unwavering in its commitment to uphold equity in college access through rigorous research, innovative strategies, and effective best communication practices.

NACAC's role in shaping the future of college admission counseling is guided by a vision that postsecondary education should be available to all who seek it. At present, colleges and universities, as well as secondary schools, are taking immediate action to respond to the short-term changes resulting from the court's decision and developing long-term plans to ensure that the pursuit of equity in postsecondary education continues to advance.

The 2022 NACAC-NASFAA report identified the importance of "getting on the balcony" to (1) enable professionals, leaders, and policymakers to remove themselves from daily considerations to think at a high level about strategies related to equity and (2) facilitate discussions that might not ordinarily take place given the structures and silos that often prevent substantive exchanges across the divides that separate educational institutions and policy apparatuses. In the shared governance of higher education, state and federal policymakers play a critical role in shaping the landscape of higher education.

With those goals in mind, convening professionals who are at the heart of responding to disruptions such as those facing students, schools, and colleges over the past four years can be a critical part of ensuring that local, state, and federal policy keep pace with barriers to postsecondary access.

> Without timely, disaggregated data, we're flying blind when it comes to closing equity gaps in college access.

A FOCUS ON ILLINOIS

ENROLLMENT IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

National Student Clearinghouse indicates that Illinois serves as a bellwether for overall enrollment in postsecondary education over the past five years.

Figure 1.2 Fall Total Enrollment at All Institutions

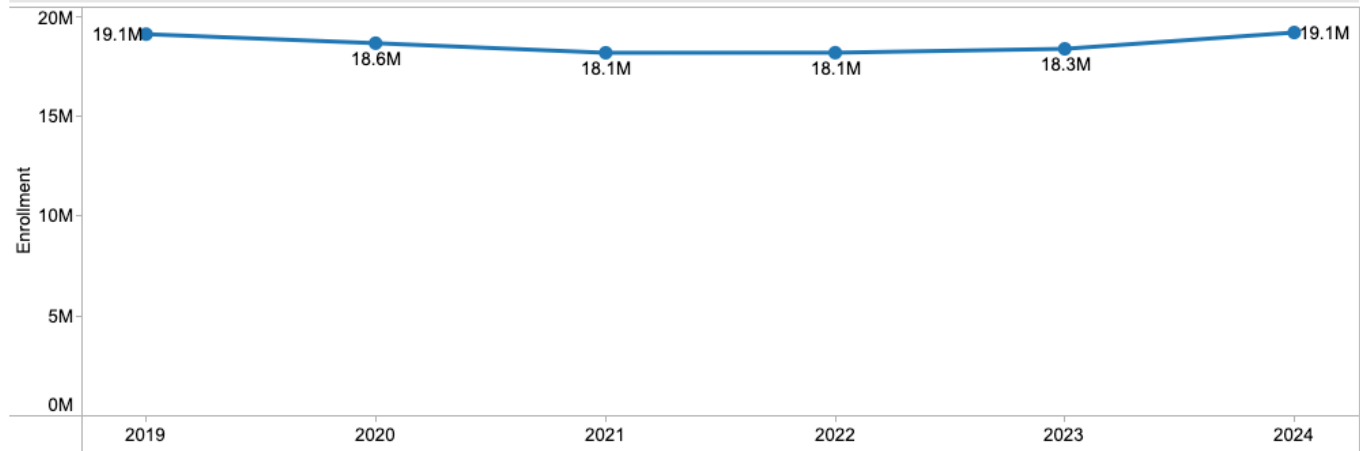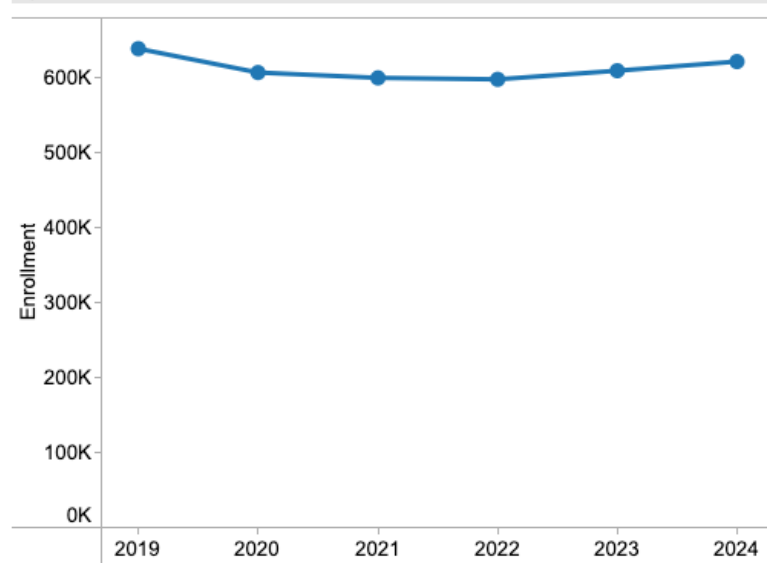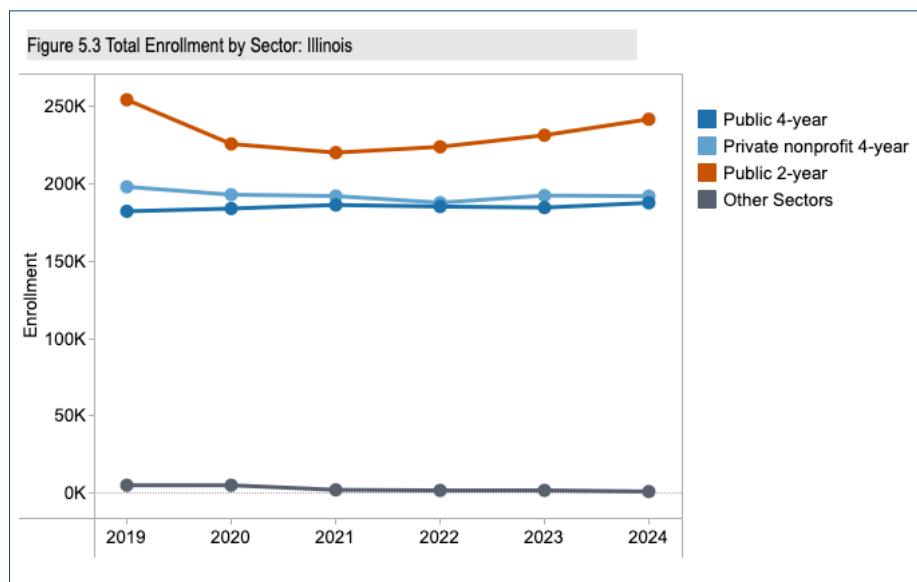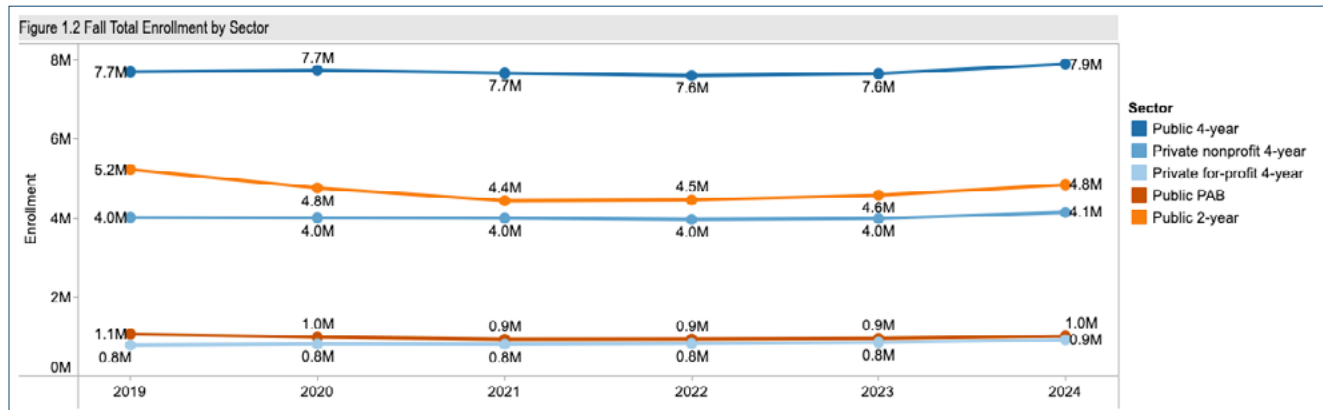| Year	Enrollment
2019	19.1M
2020	18.6M
2021	18.1M
2022	18.1M
2023	18.3M
2024	19.1M

Figure 5.2 Total Enrollment: Illinois

A look into higher education sectors shows similar patterns between Illinois and the national enrollment numbers.

Figure 1.2 Fall Total Enrollment by Sector

Figure 5.3 Total Enrollment by Sector: Illinois

SCHOOL COUNSELING AND COLLEGE ADVISING

According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, analyzed by the American School Counselors Association (ASCA), Illinois maintains a 501:1 student-to-counselor ratio in public K-12 schools, which is higher than the national average of 385:1 and the recommended ratio of 250:1. A NACAC analysis of the Department of Education's High School Longitudinal Study (HSLS) revealed that by working one-on-one with a school counselor, students were seven times more likely to complete a FAFSA form, four times more likely to enroll in postsecondary education, and twice as likely to enroll in a bachelor's degree program than students who did not work with a school counselor, even after controlling for income and other differences. As such, school counselors can and do make a significant, positive difference in the lives of students.

Outside of the school setting, community-based organizations (CBOs) provide critical supports to students in both urban and rural areas. Ensuring strong partnerships between schools, CBOs, students, and families will be an essential component of improving equity in college access.

> By working together, we can ensure that every student in Illinois — regardless of background or zip code — can access, navigate, and thrive in their chosen postsecondary path.

POLICY ENVIRONMENT

While subject to the same national trends affecting other states, such as the pandemic and FAFSA delay, Illinois also offers its own unique dynamics affecting postsecondary access, including a legislature and gubernatorial administration that have prioritized support for education.

▶ The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) strategic plan for 2024-27 includes as its first two goals the development of an equity impact analysis toolkit and an equity journey continuum for K-12 schools.

▶ The Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) and the Illinois legislature introduced a significant overhaul of the state's higher education funding formula to ensure an equitable allocation of funds to institutions serving under-represented populations.

▶ Over the past six years, Governor J.B. Pritzker has worked with the Illinois legislature to enact dozens of bills aimed at improving equity in education.

▶ The Illinois Board of Higher Education received a grant to implement a direct admission program for community college students transferring to public universities and recent high school graduates. This direct admission program will proactively inform eligible students that they are accepted at an institution without the student submitting an admission application.

OBJECTIVES, STRATEGIES, AND WORKING GROUP DISCUSSIONS

OBJECTIVES

To accelerate state and federal policies that are optimized for equity and support the spread of high-leverage, equity-focused college admission practices, the convening focused on the following objectives:

1. Examine the state policy approach to selectivity in public higher education institutions and identify associated equity barriers.

2. Identify opportunities to improve state college application infrastructures to minimize barriers to equity and simplify the process for students.

3. Discuss policy approaches to strengthening the school counseling/college advising presence, as well as the ranks of college admission officers, to better support under-represented and marginalized students.

4. Explore insights into innovations in Illinois K-12 grading and assessment and ways that such innovations can be used to improve equity in admission.

5. Identify opportunities to engage Illinois students in state and federal policy discussions about college access.

STRATEGIES

The Elevate Equity: Illinois convening was a facilitated symposium with project stakeholders to explore four primary recommendations related to college admission policy and practice from the 2022 report, including (1)

ensuring college advising amplifies student voices, (2) ensuring direct admission works, and (3) assisting students and professionals in the wake of five years of upheaval. The convening included panel presentations on each topic, followed by working group breakout sessions where participants responded to question prompts to identify challenges and opportunities facing college admission counseling professionals in those areas. Finally, we sought to create a list of key concepts and questions against which institutions can begin to evaluate/assess equity implications of admission policies and practices.

TOPIC #1: ENSURING COLLEGE ADVISING AMPLIFIES STUDENT VOICES

As the needs of students and the institutions they attend have changed, it is important for college advising to keep up. While the Supreme Court's decision in Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard/UNC limited what demographic information application readers can see, it does not limit what students or counselors can say about the applicant's background. Accordingly, the conference posed the question, "How can school counselors and college advisors ensure students feel comfortable sharing the full breadth of their experiences?" It also asked participants to consider, "What is the most effective way for colleges and universities to learn about applicants?

> While the Supreme Court's decision in Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard/UNC limited what demographic information application readers can see, it does not limit what students or counselors can say about the applicant's background.

WORKING GROUP QUESTIONS

QUESTION 1: WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES YOU FACE IN GETTING STUDENTS INVOLVED IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES AT YOUR SCHOOL/INSTITUTION ABOUT COLLEGE ADVISING OR ADMISSION?

DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

In discussing the challenges of involving students in decision-making around college advising and admission, participants identified a range of barriers at the student, family, and institutional levels. Students often lack the confidence, context, or exposure needed to meaningfully engage, and many don't know what questions to ask or how to advocate for themselves. First-generation and low-income students, in particular, may face economic and informational disadvantages that limit their agency. Overwhelm — from too much information, too many options, or competing life priorities — can further disengage students. Parental misalignment or disinterest, especially when students and families are not on the same page, complicates support. Schools also face structural challenges, including unprepared counselors, fragmented communication across support organizations, and institutional policies that don't reflect students' actual needs. To address these issues, groups emphasized the importance of early exposure, acting on student feedback, and creating more streamlined, student-centered systems of support.

KEY IDEAS FROM PARTICIPANT DISCUSSIONS ON THE QUESTION

STUDENT AGENCY AND VOICE

▶ Ideal support structures are informed directly by student input (e.g., student voice committees).

▶ There is a growing need to formalize and expand opportunities for student feedback (e.g., surveys, listening sessions).

▶ Many students are unsure of what questions to ask or how to advocate for themselves in the process.

▶ Alumni voices are essential and should be included to expand perspective and credibility.

PARENTAL AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

▶ Securing parent and family buy-in early (before upper high school grades) is critical.

▶ There is a wide spectrum of parental involvement — some are deeply engaged, others are uninterested or disconnected.

▶ Engaging all family members, especially those who are reluctant or disinterested, remains a persistent challenge.

▶ Students and families are often not aligned in their goals or understanding of the college process.

▶ Families frequently experience information overload and confusion due to inconsistent or complex messaging.

BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

▶ Students may display limited interest or have a narrow, short-term focus on the future.

▶ Economic segregation and lack of exposure prevent some students from understanding or navigating the college process.

▶ Students may distrust advice from outside mentors if it conflicts with that of their school counselors — who may themselves lack deep knowledge of financial aid or admission.

▶ Fear (e.g., of cost, the unknown), mental health challenges, and lack of motivation can undermine engagement.

▶ Competing life priorities often means students can't engage in college timelines or expectations.

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

▶ Students face communication overload, often receiving too many undifferentiated messages and key information is easily lost in a sea of emails and announcements.

▶ Communication needs to go beyond surveys — students respond better to regular, meaningful interactions.

▶ We need to improve how we highlight and elevate truly important information so it cuts through the noise.

INSTITUTIONAL ALIGNMENT AND SUPPORT

▶ Many university policies and systems are not student-centered, and can feel inaccessible or exclusive (e.g., lack of affordability, lack of cultural alignment).

▶ There's often a misalignment between what institutions offer and what students actually need or want.

▶ Application processes can be unnecessarily complicated, with added components that may not serve a purpose.

▶ School counselors are not always adequately prepared or resourced to support complex student needs.

▶ Coordination among organizations that support students is inconsistent, leading to gaps or duplication.

STUDENT CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

▶ Some students need personalized encouragement and one-on-one engagement to feel confident participating.

▶ First-generation students often lack at-home support for navigating college-related decisions.

▶ Students may not see themselves as decision-makers in their own futures, and some are generally disengaged.

▶ Others may overextend themselves — creating unrealistic plans without sufficient guidance or support.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

▶ Schools and organizations must be willing to genuinely adjust programs based on student feedback to build trust.

▶ Early and consistent exposure to college knowledge is essential — students can't ask for what they've never seen.

▶ Support shouldn't be siloed pre-college; instead, invest in more comprehensive and sustained counseling.

▶ Create and use meaningful engagement strategies that go beyond transactional interactions to build lasting student relationships.

QUESTION 2: WHAT SUCCESSES HAVE YOU EN-COUNTERED WHEN INVOLVING STUDENTS IN DECI-SION-MAKING PROCESSES AT YOUR SCHOOL/INSTI-TUTION ABOUT COLLEGE ADVISING OR ADMISSION?

DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

Schools and institutions are successfully engaging students in the college advising and admission process through various strategies that emphasize personalization, access, and student voice. Early involvement, one-on-one advising, and small group support — especially for first-generation students — help to establish strong foundations. Alumni play a significant role by returning to share their experiences and mentor current students.

Additionally, providing students with exposure to colleges through tours (both virtual and in-person) and personalized visits enhances their familiarity and confidence.

Creative approaches, such as student-driven content and leadership development, foster motivation and a sense of ownership. The effective use of data, transparent communication with families, and regular reflection by students further enhance the impact of these initiatives. Finally, developing student-centered programs, including tiered counseling models and advisory councils, ensures that student voices help shape and improve the services offered.

KEY IDEAS FROM PARTICIPANT DISCUSSIONS ON THE QUESTION

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

▶ One-on-one senior meetings help tailor post-secondary planning.

▶ Small group advising and targeted support for first-generation students build community.

▶ Strategic individual meetings provide focused guidance.

ALUMNI INVOLVEMENT

▶ Alumni returning to visit or speak with students creates strong connections.

▶ Alumni panels and mentorship (both formal and informal) offer relatable insights.

▶ Former students sharing their college journeys helps current students envision possibilities.

COLLEGE EXPOSURE AND TOURS

▶ Annual college campus visits — both virtual and in-person — ensure access for all.

▶ Personalized college visits offer meaningful student experiences.

▶ Alumni-led college fairs extend peer-to-peer influence.

▶ Early and consistent exposure demystifies college environments.

CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

▶ Personal and creative student engagement increases buy-in.

▶ Essay workshops and application support help students stay focused on their own growth.

▶ Student-led content (e.g., stories by students for students) fosters authentic voice.

▶ Leadership development and motivation-building are essential for success.

COMMUNICATION AND DATA UTILIZATION

▶ Sending estimated financial awards to families builds transparency.

▶ Data informs student-institution matches and enhances advising.

▶ Following up with students on progress and feedback strengthens trust.

▶ Regular student reflection after major experiences deepens learning.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

▶ Parent and family involvement ensures shared decision-making.

▶ Engaging families in planning builds support networks.

▶ Peer mentorship within the community enhances belonging.

▶ Addressing financial concerns directly supports access.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND IMPROVEMENT

▶ Designing student-centered programs empowers student voices.

► Initiatives like the CPS Alumni Voice Advisory Council (AVAC) are showing early success.

► Tiered counseling models (like MTSS) ensure equitable support, with data-driven interventions for those needing more help.

QUESTION 3: WHAT CHANGES WOULD NEED TO OCCUR IN THE CURRENT STRUCTURE OF YOUR WORK TO BETTER ALLOW FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE DESIGN OF POLICIES AND PRACTICES THAT AFFECT THEIR TRANSITION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION?

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The discussion surfaced a shared commitment to more profoundly involving students in shaping the policies and practices that affect their transitions to postsecondary education. Participants emphasized capturing diverse student voices early and consistently through one-on-one engagement, cohort models, and multiple feedback channels. To support this, they identified the need for more significant investment in staffing, lower counsel-or-to-student ratios, and increased advocacy and funding for comprehensive counseling services. The significance of clear, accessible, and transparent communication — especially regarding admission and financial aid — was emphasized. Additionally, creating more user-friendly systems and websites was deemed essential.

Strengthening alignment and consistency across schools, districts, and higher education institutions emerged as a crucial step toward creating a seamless student experience. Participants also advocated for earlier exposure to college and career pathways, beginning in ninth grade or even earlier, while stressing the importance of grounding students in their motivations.

Finally, there is a call for a shift toward a more student-centered and flexible approach that meets students where they are, reduces pressure, and fosters greater collaboration among educators and support staff.

KEY IDEAS FROM PARTICIPANT DISCUSSIONS ON THE QUESTION

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND VOICE

► Leverage the National Student Clearinghouse data as a proxy for student input.

► Prioritize inclusivity in capturing diverse student perspectives.

► Begin one-on-one conversations with students earlier in their academic journey.

► Create small, consistent student cohorts for ongoing connection.

► Establish multiple feedback channels (surveys, focus groups, panels) before, during, and after college.

SUPPORT AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

► Increase staffing to support individualized counseling.

► Reduce the student-to-counselor ratio (currently ~340:1).

► Advocate for the full scope of school counselors' roles, including college guidance.

► Secure more funding for school counseling services.

► Strengthen higher ed's role in offering accessible support and orientation resources.

COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION TRANSPARENCY

► Clarify how decisions are made in admission and FAFSA processes.

► Simplify and streamline admission systems.

► Ensure resources are transparent, user-friendly, and easy to access.

► Improve website quality and navigability.

COLLABORATION AND CONSISTENCY ACROSS SYSTEMS

► Strengthen alignment and messaging between school districts and community-based organizations (CBOs).

► Promote consistent college readiness messaging across all grade levels.

► Standardize or align systems (e.g., portals, aid letters, orientation) across schools.

► Better align timelines and transitions between high schools and colleges, especially feeder schools.

EARLY EXPOSURE AND PREPARATION

► Begin college and career exposure in 9th grade or earlier.

► Provide tailored resources for early high school and experiential learning in later grades.

► Emphasize career pathways, not just college.

► Implement pre-college matriculation programs for enrollment and next steps.

► Help students identify their "why" to ground future planning.

STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH AND FLEXIBILITY

► Shift focus from being faculty-centered to student-centered.

► Meet students where they are in their journeys.

► Offer flexible pathways to reduce pressure and fear of "making the wrong decision."

► Avoid assumptions about what students "should" know.

► Encourage stronger collaboration among educators and support staff.

TOPIC #2: ENSURING DIRECT ADMISSION WORKS

As Illinois works to remove barriers to college access, now is the time to consider how to design a direct admission system that works for its students. This session encouraged participants to critically evaluate the implementation of direct admission in Illinois. During the discussion, panelists and attendees considered ways for institutions, counselors, and policymakers to collaborate to lessen the burdens on students. They also discussed the principles related to communication and engagement with both students and practitioners that should be established.

WORKING GROUP QUESTIONS

QUESTION 1: WHAT DO YOU NEED AS A PROFESSIONAL TO ENSURE THAT A POLICY LIKE DIRECT ADMISSION IS SUCCESSFUL?

DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

To ensure the success of a policy like direct admission, professionals need to focus on several key areas: maintaining lower student-to-counselor ratios, utilizing data to track matriculation and persistence, and coordinating a comprehensive system that includes college partners. Clear communication and marketing strategies are essential, along with clarity regarding the application process and financial implications for students. Stakeholder engagement is crucial, including training for counselors and providing easy-to-understand resources for students and families. Ongoing transparency, accurate data, and a robust communication strategy will help foster trust and understanding among all parties involved.

KEY IDEAS FROM PARTICIPANT DISCUSSIONS ON THE QUESTION

COMMUNICATION AND CLARITY

► Consistent and clear messaging from states/institutions to high schools, and from schools to students.

▶ Transparent guidance for students and families on the application vs. opt-in process.

▶ Clear, student- and staff-friendly language and materials.

▶ Early and ongoing communication throughout the process.

DATA AND METRICS

▶ Professionals need real-time, accurate statewide student data to evaluate impact and refine outreach strategies.

▶ Transparent financial information and yield rates builds trust and empowers students to make informed decisions.

▶ Tools like UAspire (used by UIC) clarify affordability and financial aid impact.

DIRECT ADMISSION PROCESSES

▶ A single, streamlined platform for direct admission would reduce complexity and ensure equitable access for all students.

▶ School counselors want input into eligibility criteria to ensure it reflects students' readiness, not just GPA.

▶ Transparency on scholarship availability and a list of participating colleges would help students make realistic, confident choices.

▶ Safeguards are needed to maintain college match/ selectivity for students.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

▶ Direct admission only works if it's embraced on the ground — that means readiness and buy-in from high schools, districts, and CBOs. Support from feeder high schools and marketing to the high schools are needed.

▶ Colleges need to directly engage (i.e. presentations, visits) to build relationships with students and families.

▶ Coordinated stakeholder communication strategies will help inform cross-team collaboration.

MARKETING AND OUTREACH

▶ A strong campaign builds legitimacy, trust and awareness — students need to know this is real, not a scam.

▶ Easy-to-use marketing materials (e.g. a Toolkit for high schools with emails, posters, step-by-step visuals) make it simple for schools to amplify message and instruct applicants.

▶ Families are more likely to engage if information is presented in accessible ways (flyers, webinars) and clearly articulate the benefit of direct admission.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

▶ Counselors can't support students effectively without time, training, and reasonable caseloads.

▶ Implementation support must include training on tech (especially the placement test) and logistics — not just policy.

▶ A clear list of participating colleges helps manage expectations and promotes informed exploration.

QUESTION 2: WHAT KEY QUESTIONS WOULD YOU HAVE ABOUT DIRECT ADMISSION?

DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

Key questions about direct admission include inquiries regarding financial commitments, equity in the admissions process, and the implications for college enrollment and persistence. Concerns about GPA comparisons among different high schools, the involvement of various stakeholders, and how this approach fits into the broader admission landscape are also prevalent. Additionally, questions about the potential impact on community college enrollment, the criteria for participating institutions, and the role of financial aid in direct admissions are critical for understanding the initiative's effectiveness and sustainability.

KEY IDEAS FROM PARTICIPANT DISCUSSIONS ON THE QUESTION

EQUITY AND ACCESS

How can direct admission be truly equitable from a college's perspective, considering the influence of GPA, high school resources, location, and systemic inequities like racism?

► Will direct admission programs exacerbate the gap between highly selective institutions and others?

► How can we prevent students from under-matching and ensure they are not placed at institutions where they may struggle to succeed?

► How might an opt-in process create inequities, and how can we ensure its effectiveness?

► How can the concept of direct admission be communicated more clearly to all stakeholders?

► What strategies will be used to ensure students are matched with institutions that align with their needs and potential?

DIRECT ADMISSION PROCESS

► What is the actual process for students to apply through direct admission?

► Will the Common App's direct admission program be adapted to meet the needs of all Illinois students?

► How does direct admission differ from the standard application process via the Common App?

► What criteria and process are used to match students to institutions?

► How will under-matching be identified and addressed to incentivize better matches?

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS AND AID

► What financial commitments are required to support the direct admission process?

► While admission is direct and guaranteed, how will financial aid be integrated into the process?

► How will financial aid and merit scholarships interact within this framework? How can they be integrated to ensure fairness and accessibility?

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

► Have all key stakeholders been involved in designing the program?

► What kind of support will be addressed?

► Once admitted, how will colleges ensure students remain enrolled and succeed?

► What strategies will be used to build relationships and communicate effectively with students and families about direct admission?

► How can guidance be provided to students and parents about the expectations and support structures in place?

► How do we ensure that students understand what it takes to be successful once they enroll?

► How can we ensure clarity for professionals about admission criteria and distinctions between essential criteria and additional requirements by colleges or the Common App?

► How can we shift the perception that a more complex admission process indicates higher quality, and reset expectations to demonstrate that a simpler process can still provide high-quality educational experiences?

DATA AND MEASUREMENT

► Is there a robust data system in place to support and track the direct admission program's progress and outcomes?

► How does direct admission influence the counseling of students regarding "fit" with participating institutions and other higher education entities?

► Does research demonstrate that direct admission programs lead to increased enrollment and persistence rates?

► How are GPAs from different schools compared to ensure fairness in the direct admission process?

► How does the direct admission process interact with scholarships, and how are they aligned?

IMPLEMENTATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

► What specific challenges or problems is the direct admission program aiming to solve?

► Is the direct admission model sustainable for

universities that receive these students?

▶ What happens if a student admitted through direct admission decides to transfer to another university midway through their program?

▶ Will the direct admission process discourage students who initially struggled in 9th grade but have shown improvement from applying through the regular admission process?

▶ How can we simplify the process to make it less confusing for students, families, and professionals involved?

QUESTION 3: WHAT MESSAGES NEED TO BE SENT TO STUDENTS, FAMILIES, AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS ABOUT A DIRECT ADMISSION POLICY TO MAKE IT SUCCESSFUL?

DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

To ensure the success of a direct admission policy, clear and consistent messaging is essential. Key messages should include the financial implications and next steps for students and families, assurances about the legitimacy of the program, and transparency regarding available majors and the application process. It's also important to provide information in multiple languages and to communicate the benefits and requirements of direct admission clearly. Engaging with students and families early and frequently, while offering accessible resources and support, will help alleviate concerns and build trust in the process.

KEY IDEAS FROM PARTICIPANT DISCUSSIONS ON THE QUESTION

COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY

▶ Provide clear, concise, and consistent messaging — ideally in multiple formats (e.g., bullet points, videos).

▶ Clearly explain how the process works and what steps come next after receiving an offer.

▶ Ensure messaging is unified across institutions and stakeholders, highlighting both benefits and limitations.

EARLY AWARENESS AND INFORMATION

▶ Start communication early — possibly in junior year — to help students explore options and reduce anxiety.

▶ Ensure repeated, accessible communication for families, especially in multiple languages.

▶ Clarify how and when families are informed and what the offer means for them.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS AND SUPPORT

▶ Clearly separate admission from affordability — being accepted doesn't mean costs are covered.

▶ Provide direct links to financial aid information, scholarships, net price calculators, and trusted resources (e.g., ISAC).

▶ Help families understand next steps related to applying for aid, tax preparation, and alternative funding sources.

DEFINING DIRECT ADMISSION

▶ Be explicit about what direct admission is — and is not (e.g., it's not a scam, not necessarily tied to scholarships).

▶ Clarify what's included (programs, majors, participating schools) and what requirements remain.

▶ Help families understand differences between direct admission institutions and those that don't participate.

BUILDING TRUST AND UNDERSTANDING

▶ Reinforce the legitimacy of direct admission through broad communication across schools and community-based organizations (CBOs).

▶ Acknowledge that it's a new process and reassure families about data privacy and safety.

▶ Frame the policy as a credible opportunity to expand access — not as an experiment.

TOPIC #3: RECOVERY FROM FIVE YEARS OF UPHEAVAL

In the last five years, students, families, and educators have had to navigate myriad and unprecedented challenges to college access and success. The first year of the new "Better FAFSA" posed barriers that led some students to opt out of higher education and as did the COVID-19 pandemic. During this discussion, panelists discussed trends in college enrollment in Illinois in recent years, how students and families have experienced the last five years of upheaval, and proven strategies for reengaging students who have stopped out of higher education. Panelists and participants considered what various education stakeholders in the state can do to ensure students from all backgrounds are supported to and through their postsecondary journeys, in the midst of this upheaval.

WORKING GROUP QUESTIONS

QUESTION 1: GIVEN THE UPHEAVAL IN THE COLLEGE ADMISSION LANDSCAPE DURING THE LAST FIVE YEARS, WHAT ARE YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGES IN HELPING EXPAND COLLEGE ACCESS TO MORE STUDENTS?

DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

The college admission landscape has undergone significant changes over the past five years, presenting various challenges in expanding access to higher education. Key issues include the rising costs of college, minimal resources at community colleges, and a lack of awareness among students and parents regarding the connections between academic performance and financial aid opportunities. Many students face motivational barriers and misunderstandings about the higher education system and available options. Additionally, factors such as student debt, immigration status, language proficiency, and negative perceptions of college contribute to the challenges. There is also a need for better family involvement in decision-making, effective communication from colleges, and comprehensive support systems to help students navigate their paths to college. Overall, financial barriers remain the most significant obstacle, compounded by misinformation and the complexities of college admission processes.

KEY IDEAS FROM PARTICIPANT DISCUSSIONS ON THE QUESTION

UNDERSTANDING AND AWARENESS

► Persistent gaps in student and parent understanding of how high school performance (courses and grades) connects to college access and affordability (e.g., scholarships).

► A general lack of clarity about the value of higher education and the higher education system, financial aid processes, and the full range of postsecondary options.

► Ongoing need for information-sharing through workshops, webinars, and presentations to help students and families make informed decisions.

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

► Rising college costs and the weight of student debt continue to be the top obstacles.

► Many families face financial insecurity, and current financial aid offerings often fall short of what's truly needed to make college accessible.

► Limited access to funding — especially for returning adult students or those with unresolved balances — prevents re-enrollment or persistence.

ACCESS AND SUPPORT

► Schools and community colleges often lack the staffing and resources needed to provide deep, individualized support.

► Counselors and educators have limited time to meet one-on-one with students or help them explore pathways.

► Parents also face barriers such as incomplete credentials or family obligations, which limit their own or their children's ability to pursue college.

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

▶ Emerging state laws around DEI, reproductive rights, and immigration complicate the college choice process for many students.

▶ LGBTQ+ students and undocumented families may feel unsafe or unsupported leaving home to attend college in unfamiliar environments.

▶ Language barriers also pose challenges to college readiness and long-term success.

SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE

▶ Many students view college as overwhelming or not worth the effort, especially when immediate employment offers faster access to income.

▶ Certification programs, trade schools, and other alternatives are gaining appeal as more "practical" paths.

▶ Public skepticism about the return on investment of a college degree is being fueled by negative rhetoric and political polarization around higher education.

ENGAGEMENT AND ACTION

▶ Post-COVID, there's been a noticeable decline in student participation in college visits and rep sessions.

▶ Fewer students are engaging in activities that help determine fit, such as campus tours, conversations with admission reps, or self-reflection on major interests.

▶ There's a growing need to personalize outreach — helping students identify the colleges, majors, and experiences that align with their interests and goals.

QUESTION 2: WHAT TYPES OF RESOURCES OR ASSISTANCE MIGHT MAKE THE JOB OF PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE TRANSITION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION EASIER OR MORE EFFECTIVE FOR YOU?

DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

To facilitate the transition of students to postsecondary education, various resources and forms of assistance are essential. Key recommendations include starting early with career exploration, incorporating storytelling and leadership development, and engaging families in the process. It is crucial to increase staffing levels to reduce the counselor-to-student ratio, as well as to provide professional development for educators and offer translation services. Enhancing student engagement through surveys and focus groups, simplifying the college application process, and increasing collaboration with higher education institutions are also important. Additionally, providing mental health support, developing soft skills, and improving access to college visits and resources can significantly benefit students. Transportation resources for campus visits and ensuring transparency in the enrollment process are also vital.

KEY IDEAS FROM PARTICIPANT DISCUSSIONS ON THE QUESTION

EARLY EXPOSURE AND ENGAGEMENT

▶ Begin postsecondary planning and career exploration earlier to build awareness of the importance of credentials beyond high school.

▶ Support meaningful in-person college visits where students can experience campus life and build a sense of belonging.

▶ Provide structured guidance around visits, including how to engage with campus resources and reflect on fit.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

▶ Engage families through accessible workshops that explain the transition to college, financial realities, and soft skills needed for independence.

▶ Help families support students without adding to practitioners' workloads — this could include toolkits, translated materials, or peer-led sessions.

▶ Incorporate life skills training (e.g., banking, time

management, credit scores) to better prepare first-generation students for the realities of college life.

▶ Create more opportunities for students to connect with alumni, local employers, and community members who can speak to the value of postsecondary pathways.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS AND RESOURCES

▶ Increase staffing to lower counselor-to-student ratios and allow for more individualized support.

▶ Expand funding for both school counseling services and education-related costs.

▶ Ensure that schools have capacity — not just to admit more students but to support them with housing, advising, and wraparound services once enrolled.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

▶ Offer more free, accessible professional development for counselors and educators, including tools like National Student Clearinghouse (NSC).

▶ Provide training focused on student academic support, soft skills development, and guiding students through a range of postsecondary options.

▶ Ensure educators have up-to-date knowledge about college admissions trends and labor market alignment.

COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY

▶ Foster more student voice through surveys and focus groups that inform programming and resource development.

▶ Make data more accessible and transparent for educators and families to support informed decision-making.

▶ Clarify roles and responsibilities — who ensures students have the information they need to choose the right path?

CAREER CONNECTIONS AND EXPLORATION

▶ Deepen connections between academic programs and real-world careers through guest speakers, campus experiences, and mentoring.

▶ Help students understand how majors translate to careers and which credentials or certifications are required for specific jobs.

▶ Provide early and sustained exposure to career options to spark interest and align postsecondary planning with long-term goals.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

▶ Transportation costs make multiple college visits difficult, despite their proven impact on student preparedness.

▶ Students may be hesitant about certain options (e.g., community college) and need more personalized guidance to stay engaged during the often-tedious enrollment process.

▶ Questions remain about whether institutions participating in direct admission are fully prepared for increased enrollment — from housing and advising to student services.

QUESTION 3: IN YOUR EXPERIENCE OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS, WHAT STRATEGIES HAVE BEEN EFFECTIVE IN HELPING REMOVE BARRIERS FOR STUDENTS SEEKING TO ENTER OR RE-ENTER POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION?

DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

Over the past five years, several effective strategies have emerged to help remove barriers for students entering or re-entering postsecondary education. Clear guidance for gap-year students and planning sessions before graduation have been beneficial. Providing workshops for parents helps them navigate the college process, while mentorship programs offer essential support for new entrants and those returning to education. Collaborating with high schools to create pathways to college and using alumni for support have also proven effective. Financial

aid programs, streamlined processes, and increased transparency about available resources are critical for easing financial burdens. Furthermore, intensive one-on-one advising, data-driven counseling, and flexible support systems are vital in addressing individual student needs.

KEY IDEAS FROM PARTICIPANT DISCUSSIONS ON THE QUESTION

PRE-COLLEGE PREPARATION AND SUPPORT

▶ Host informational sessions on gap years and ensure colleges have clear, accessible instructions online for students who delay enrollment.

▶ Strengthen high school–college partnerships to create intentional pathways.

▶ Leverage ISAC resources to provide in-school support.

▶ Encourage early family engagement and partnership throughout the planning process.

ADVISING AND MENTORSHIP

▶ Provide 1:1 advising, especially for key steps like FAFSA completion.

▶ Offer consistent mentorship and planning support for both first-time and returning students.

▶ Use peer mentorship models — alumni or current college students sharing real experiences — to support transitions.

▶ Address summer melt with tailored checklists, touchpoints, and summer workshops.

FINANCIAL AWARENESS AND RESOURCES

▶ Increase awareness and access to financial aid (e.g., Illinois Promise, emergency scholarships, Pell Grants).

▶ Ensure students understand the availability of financial resources and how to navigate them.

▶ Provide timely emergency funding and financial literacy education to prevent drop-off due to unexpected expenses.

CAREER AND COLLEGE READINESS

▶ Offer career exposure and intentional college list-building activities.

▶ Run summer workshops covering practical topics like final enrollment steps, understanding schedules, accessing campus services, and setting up student IDs.

▶ Help students connect early with campus resources to ease their transition.

SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

▶ Streamline enrollment processes to reduce friction and better accommodate the realities of traditional and adult learners.

▶ Utilize virtual platforms to increase access to advising and support networks.

▶ Emphasize flexibility, empathy, and responsiveness while also preparing students and families to take ownership of the transition process.

ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

▶ Host family workshops to improve understanding and navigation of the college process.

▶ Deliver information in student-friendly formats — leveraging tools like TikTok, social media, and short videos for how-tos.

▶ Increase opportunities for 1:1 conversations and campus visits — while addressing the rising cost of transportation.

▶ Provide tools (e.g., family checklists) to guide conversations and decisions at home.

RECOMMENDATIONS
BUILDING A MORE EQUITABLE POSTSECONDARY TRANSITION SYSTEM IN ILLINOIS

Illinois has a strong foundation in policies and partnerships that support students' postsecondary journeys. Yet, persistent inequities in admission outcomes — particularly for Black, Latinx, and first-generation students — call for renewed focus and investment. The following recommendations offer practical steps to improve outcomes and simplify the journey for students and families.

GOAL 1: ENSURE EVERY STUDENT HAS THE SUPPORT TO PLAN AND PURSUE A POSTSECONDARY PATH

RECOMMENDATION: INVEST IN HIGH-QUALITY, CONSISTENT POSTSECONDARY ADVISING

WHY THIS MATTERS:

Students who receive personalized guidance are significantly more likely to complete FAFSA, apply to college, and persist in postsecondary education. Yet, in Illinois, student-to-counselor ratios remain well above the recommended threshold, particularly in underfunded and rural districts. Expanded advising can address common challenges such as college undermatch, summer melt, and incomplete financial aid applications. To act now:

▶ Increase state funding to hire more counselors and advisors, especially in districts below the Evidence-Based Funding adequacy target.

▶ Provide professional learning on postsecondary pathways, PaCE implementation, and the evolving FAFSA process.

▶ Embed advising time into the school day and offer additional touchpoints through partnerships with community organizations and higher education institutions.

SECTOR ACTIONS:

▶ State agencies: Expand programs like ISACorps and incentivize credentialed advising.

▶ Districts and schools: Schedule dedicated advising time and leverage local partnerships to support students.

▶ Higher education institutions: Offer early college coaching and mentoring in collaboration with schools.

RECOMMENDATION: BUILD A STATEWIDE STUDENT NAVIGATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Why this matters: Students and families face a fragmented experience when planning for postsecondary education. Multiple systems, deadlines, and tools make it difficult to track progress or understand next steps. A unified, mobile-friendly platform can reduce complexity and support informed decision-making.

TO ACT NOW:

► Develop a statewide portal that integrates PaCE, FAFSA updates, direct admission offers, and college planning tools.

► Use real-time data to provide nudges and notifications for students, families, and advisors.

► Ensure all resources are accessible, multilingual, and consistent across platforms.

SECTOR ACTIONS:

State agencies: Fund and manage the development of a centralized portal with ISBE and IBHE input.

Districts and schools: Integrate portal use into advising and classroom planning tools.

Higher education institutions: Sync application and financial aid data with the portal and align outreach timelines.

GOAL 2: ALIGN SYSTEMS ACROSS K–12, HIGHER EDUCATION, AND STATE POLICY

RECOMMENDATION: CREATE REGIONAL POSTSECONDARY TRANSITION NETWORKS

WHY THIS MATTERS:

While Illinois has made progress with statewide initiatives, implementation varies across regions. Regional intermediaries can bridge gaps between school districts and colleges, streamline communication, and support tailored implementation.

TO ACT NOW:

► Fund regional hubs to convene high schools, community colleges, and universities for joint planning.

► Coordinate across systems on academic calendars, advising tools, and key deadlines.

► Use shared data to identify high-need communities and coordinate outreach and support.

SECTOR ACTIONS:

► State agencies: Provide competitive grants to build out regional networks.

► Districts and schools: Participate in regional alignment efforts and data-sharing collaboratives.

► Higher education institutions: Collaborate on shared supports, including orientation and enrollment follow-up.

RECOMMENDATION: BUILD ACCOUNTABILITY FOR POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES

WHY THIS MATTERS:

Postsecondary readiness is not consistently prioritized or measured across Illinois. Without tracking and public accountability, it is difficult to improve outcomes or scale effective practices.

TO ACT NOW:

► Incorporate metrics such as FAFSA completion, college match, and summer enrollment into state dashboards and local planning.

► Create incentives and guidance for schools to prioritize these metrics in school improvement plans.

► Share best practices and data stories across the state to identify what works.

SECTOR ACTIONS:

► State agencies: Include postsecondary outcomes in school accountability frameworks and publish disaggregated data.

► Districts and schools: Set postsecondary goals and regularly review progress.

► Higher education institutions: Partner with high schools to provide feedback on enrollment and persistence trends.

GOAL 3: DESIGN WITH AND FOR STUDENTS

RECOMMENDATION: CENTER STUDENT VOICE AND EXPERIENCE IN SYSTEMS CHANGE

WHY THIS MATTERS

Students are the experts in their own educational journeys. When given opportunities to shape policies and programs, they help build systems that are more accessible, relevant, and trusted.

TO ACT NOW:

► Establish student advisory councils at the school, district, and state level to shape policies like direct admissions, PaCE, and dual credit.

► Regularly survey students about their experience with advising, application processes, and supports.

► Create paid roles for students to co-design tools, lead peer support, and inform communication strategies.

SECTOR ACTIONS:

► State agencies: Institutionalize student voice in education planning and advisory structures.

► Districts and schools: Formalize student feedback loops tied to school improvement efforts.

► Higher education institutions: Engage current and prospective students in recruitment, communications, and onboarding design.

A CALL TO ACTION

Illinois has the tools, talent, and policy groundwork to lead the nation in equitable postsecondary access. These recommendations offer a roadmap for bold, collaborative action across K–12, higher education, and community sectors. By investing in readiness, scaling direct admission, and strengthening advising systems, the state can reduce barriers, increase enrollment, and help more students take the next step with confidence. By working together, we can ensure that every student in Illinois — regardless of background or zip code — can access, navigate, and thrive in their chosen postsecondary path.

NACAC staff at Elevate Equity: Illinois.

APPENDIX

Elevate Equity: Illinois

A Practice and Policy Convening on College Access and Admission

Dec. 9, 2024, Agenda

University of Illinois Chicago

7:30 – 9:00 a.m. – Registration & Breakfast

9:00 – 9:15 a.m. – Welcome

Opening Remarks

Convening Overview and Framing

9:20 – 10:05 a.m. – Table Setting Session #1: Ensuring College Advising Amplifies Student Voices

As the needs of students and the institutions they attend have changed, it is important for college advising to keep up. While the Supreme Court's decision in *Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard/UNC* limited what demographic information application readers can see, it also restricts what students or counselors can say about the applicant's background. How can school counselors and college advisors ensure students feel comfortable sharing the full breadth of their experiences? What is the most effective way for colleges and universities to learn about applicants? Through this session and the subsequent breakout discussion, college access professionals should feel better prepared to help students tell their stories through the admissions process.

Panelists:

Maureen Woods, executive director of strategic recruitment and outreach, UIC Office of Enrollment Management

Dom McKoy, executive director, UChicago To&Through Project, Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice

Tashawnna Johnson, Chicago Public Schools alumni counselor

10:10 – 10:20 a.m. – Chancellor's Remarks

10:30 – 10:55 a.m. – Breakout 1: Effective Practices, Challenges, and Future Opportunities Related to Ensuring College Advising Amplifies Student Voice

11:05 – 11:50 a.m. – Table Setting Session #2: Ensuring Direct Admission Works

As Illinois works to remove barriers to college access, now is the time to consider how to design a direct admission system that works for its students. This session will prompt participants to think critically about how direct admission should be implemented in Illinois. Through the discussion, panelists and participants will be asked to consider how institutions, counselors, and policymakers should come together to ensure that burdens are reduced for students. What principles related to student and practitioner communication and engagement should be established?

Panelists:

Sakshee Chawla, senior policy analyst at the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO)

Ginger Ostro, executive director, Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE)

Dr. Wendy Robinson, Ph.D., assistant commissioner of policy, programming, and grants for the state of Minnesota

12:00 – 12:25 p.m. – Breakout 2: Effective Practices, Challenges, and Future Opportunities Related to Implementing Direct Admissions Well

12:30 – 1:30 p.m. – Lunch & Networking

1:40 – 2:25 p.m. – Table Setting Session #3: Recovery from Five Years of Upheaval

In the last five years, students, families, and educators have had to navigate myriad and unprecedented challenges to college access and success. The first year of the new "Better FAFSA" posed barriers that led some students to opt out of higher education, as did the COVID-19 pandemic. During this discussion, panelists will discuss trends in college enrollment in Illinois in recent years, how students and families have experienced the last five years of upheaval, and proven strategies for reengaging students who have stopped out of higher education. Panelists and participants will be asked to consider what various education stakeholders in the state can do to ensure students from all backgrounds are supported to and through their postsecondary journeys, in the midst of this upheaval.
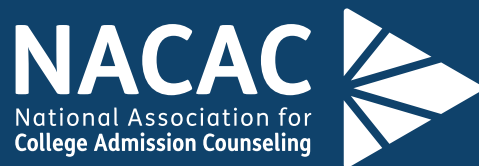
Panelists:

Amanda Janice Roberson, vice president of operations, Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)

Matt Holsapple, senior director, National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Research Center

Heidi Truax, Ph.D., executive director, Office of School Counseling and Postsecondary Advising, Chicago Public Schools

2:35 – 2:55 p.m. – Breakout 3: Define Recovery from the Last Five Years of Upheaval. Brainstorm Effective Practices, Challenges, and Future Opportunities Related to Financial Aid, College Access, and College Success

3:05 – 3:15 p.m. – Closing Remarks and Next Steps (NACAC / Task Force Representatives)