

STUDENT SUCCESS:
REPORT ON EQUITY PLANS AND PRACTICES
FISCAL YEAR 2024 AND FISCAL YEAR 2025



Illinois Board of Higher Education
September 2025

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BACKGROUND

In 2021, the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) in collaboration with the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) and the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) launched a new higher education strategic plan, “[A Thriving Illinois](#),” after a nine-month strategic planning process that included a 37-person Advisory Committee, nine design working groups that involved 200 stakeholders, institutional trustees, executives, faculty, staff, community organizations and advocates, philanthropic leaders, and other experts. The plan is built on the premise that Illinois needs a strong higher education ecosystem to ensure every family, community, and the state can thrive. In the vision laid out in the plan, a thriving Illinois has an inclusive economy and broad prosperity with equitable paths to opportunity for all, especially those facing the greatest barriers. It is guided by three interconnected goals: Equity, Sustainability, and Growth.



Close the equity gaps for students who have been left behind.



Build a stronger financial future for individuals and institutions.



Increase talent and innovation to drive economic growth.

A *Thriving Illinois* identifies 25 strategies across these three goals, including setting a statewide [norm for institution-level equity plans](#). In 2022, Governor Pritzker signed HB 5464 (P.A. 102-1046), requiring all public institutions of higher education – and encouraging private institutions – to create and implement plans to eliminate disparities in college enrollment, retention, completion, and student loan repayment rates.¹ IBHE is charged with annually reporting to the Governor and General Assembly as outlined in [110 ILCS 205/9.16](#).

This report fulfills the annual statutory reporting requirement for Fiscal Year 2024 and Fiscal Year 2025 to cover the transition from the prior underrepresented groups report, which did not require institutions to develop specific action plans to improve student outcomes. The statute directs Illinois higher education institutions to leverage quantitative, qualitative, and other campus-specific data to assess and identify strategic actions to close gaps for student populations experiencing inequities in college outcomes on their campuses.

Equity Plan Framework

IBHE and ICCB convened a twenty-member [Advisory Committee](#), consisting of college and university leaders, advocates, and experts, that worked through 2023 to inform the design of a framework and guidance for the submission of baseline setting equity plans. IBHE and ICCB provided colleges and universities with the [framework](#) and their individualized data in November 2023. A webinar was held in December 2023 to support each college and university with development and submission of their plans by May 31, 2024.

The framework outlined an approach to analyzing its current state and prompted each institution to present:

- Institutional vision, statements, and goals for diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility;
- Assessments and analyses of data on equity gaps for low-income students, Black students, Latino students, adult students, rural students, students with disabilities, and other underrepresented groups, as identified in 110 ILCS 205/9.16, and based on statewide data analysis;
- Analyses identifying barriers in policy and practices that have led to equity gaps for various segments of the student population;
- Evaluations and assessments of programs, efforts, and curricular or pedagogical changes that have been implemented to address the equity gaps and their outcomes, “lessons learned” that inform this plan, and the practices/policies recommended;

¹ P.A. 102-1046 (110 ILCS 205/9.16)

- Campus climate assessment methods, timelines, and findings, along with their implications for the institution's plan and practices to ensure all students feel welcome and supported on campus;
- Policies, strategies, services, and practices to be implemented, changed, or continued to close equity gaps in enrollment, persistence, advancement, completion, and student loan repayment rates;
- Timelines for implementation with appropriate milestones;
- Approaches to assess near-term and long-term outcomes of the strategies with data and metrics to be collected and reviewed;
- The approach followed in developing the equity plan, including efforts to ensure broad participation in the development of the plan, including students, faculty, staff, executive leadership, institutional committees, administrative personnel, and transfer coordinators.
- The relationship of the equity plan to other institutional plans (e.g., institutional strategic plan, enrollment management plans, etc.);
- Plans to solicit ongoing feedback and how information will be shared with staff, students, faculty, and the community.

All institutions submitted their plans by the May 31, 2024, deadline. With the support of the Governor's Office, IBHE and ICCB were able to engage with a team of national experts to help develop the evaluation rubric based on the framework and led the equity plan review process. Steps were taken to ensure that the reviews were consistent across reviewers, and each equity plan had multiple reviewers. In November 2024, each institution received individualized feedback on their plans to encourage continuous improvement and robust implementation. A webinar was held October 21, 2024 for all institutions to review the high-level findings and the consultant experts also presented the findings to the IBHE Board at its [November 13, 2024 meeting](#).

The review team identified evidence-based, best, or promising practices to elevate for other institutions as well as barriers, themes, and strategic actions that were consistent across plans.

Institutional Equity Plans

The remainder of this report spotlights institutional trends; points out strengths, barriers, and challenges to implementation; highlights promising practices for possible scalability and transferability across institutions; identifies alignments with statewide equity goals; and identifies next steps.

Institutional Visions

How did institutions describe equity, inclusion, and accessibility, and their visions and goals?

All colleges and universities included their institutional visions, statements, and organizational goals in alignment with *A Thriving Illinois*. For many, this vision was established prior to the development of the equity plans and aligned with the institutional mission and strategic plans to provide the services and supports every student needs to be successful. Institutions expressed the value of coordinating efforts across campus units to improve how their systems and practices operate to remove systemic barriers to student success and the academic and professional experiences of students, faculty, and staff from all backgrounds. For example, one campus was working to facilitate a more welcoming campus culture, with the recognition that this work calls for long-term and sustained efforts and actions across campus functions.

Institutional Barriers to Student Success

What kinds of equity gaps, challenges or barriers did institutions identify for solving through their plans?

Across equity plans, colleges and universities identified institutional practices and systemic barriers resulting in different rates of enrollment, retention, student advancement, transfer, and degree completion for students with similar characteristics. Colleges and universities noted their practices led to different outcomes for Pell grant

recipients and low-income students, students with disabilities, men, rural students, first generation students, parenting students, Black students, Latino students, Native American students, and Asian American students.

Affordability in tuition and fees, enrollment policies and norms (such as medical withdrawal processes and registration holds), credit accumulation standards, sense of belonging and a need for more effective actionable campus data systems to inform strategic change and institutional performance were all noted as key barriers. Institutions also reported that students who are struggling with issues related to affordable housing, transportation, and childcare are less successful than their peers. These barriers are often missed until it's too late, due to limitations in campus climate survey methods, multiple data systems that are not connected, and lack of disaggregated and cross-sectional data analysis.

The equity plans highlighted:

- Affordability and basic needs challenges
 - 10 universities and 39 community colleges (out of 45 community colleges) identified affordability as a barrier to student success, especially for Pell-eligible low-income students.
 - 4 universities and 17 community colleges pointed to student basic needs (e.g., food insecurity, limited access to transportation and childcare, etc.) as a challenge related to affordability.
- Bureaucratic obstacles to enrollment
 - 13 colleges and universities described the need to improve enrollment procedures by addressing inconsistencies and cumbersome processes in financial aid, advising/registration, and placement testing that negatively impacted low-income students, rural students, students with disabilities, English language learners, Black and Latino students.
- Credit accumulation barriers
 - 7 universities and 20 community colleges identified credit accumulation barriers, including gateway courses resulting in high rates of D and F grades, and course withdrawals (i.e., DFW courses).
 - Low-income, rural, parenting students, and Black and Latino students were commonly identified as students experiencing barriers to credit accumulation.
- Sense of belonging
 - 8 universities and 21 community colleges identified the need improve sense of belonging especially for students with disabilities, rural students, first-generation students, low-income students, Black, Latino, and Native American students.

Metrics and Data on Progress

What kinds of data and evidence were used to identify gaps and barriers to institutional visions for equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility? How are institutions practicing relevant assessments and program evaluations for continuous institutional improvements?

IBHE and ICCB provided each institution with comprehensive campus-specific datasets aligned with statewide data. Most campuses also drew from both campus-produced data and analyses as well as the results of campus climate surveys conducted by respected external vendors to inform their equity planning and development.

However, some campus equity plans pointed out the difficulties in strategically identifying, implementing, and measuring efforts to improve performance in enrollment, retention, advancement, and completion. One institution's equity plan explained, "By bringing our current technology and operation systems up-to-date, we will better be able to collect, analyze and make data informed decisions as well as enable flexibility to address ongoing change." Some others pointed to the need to improve disaggregated data analysis practices. Others are working to begin implementing CRM (customer relationship management) systems to organize, collect, and analyze student data.

Several plans pointed to challenges in accessing and engaging in disaggregated and cross-tabulation data analysis that would allow for more in-depth data analysis that acknowledged multiple identities. For example, while they recognized that students held multiple identities, such as students with disabilities whose low-income

status also positioned them to experience educational barriers, some campuses described limitations to their datasets that prevented them from engaging in a more detailed study of students and the multi-faceted diversity of their experiences.

Almost all the institutions provided findings from campus climate surveys and other assessments to gauge patterns and differences in student, faculty and staff sense of belonging on campus. Campus climate and sense of belonging assessments included survey instruments, which were often designed and administered by external consultants and organizations, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Ruffalo Noel Levitz, Higher Education Data Sharing (HEDS) Consortium, among others. Some campuses engaged in qualitative interviews and focus groups of stakeholders to assess campus climate experiences. In some notable cases, campuses also conducted document analyses to examine policies and practice norms that shaped the opportunities and experiences of students, faculty, and staff. The equity plan requirement prompted some campuses to begin the process of implementing campus climate studies for the first time.

While less common, some campuses are engaged in routinely tracking and analyzing student momentum metrics with dashboard tools to inform their efforts to remove barriers hindering student progress and degree completion. These metrics include, but are not limited to the following:

- Student participation in key student onboarding experiences (e.g., participation in orientation, student success course completion, advising meetings);
- Meetings with a College and Career Navigator or Academic Success Advisor;
- Credit accumulation in the first-year;
- Results from the [Achieving the Dream Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool](#), including diagnostics on seven capacity areas: leadership and vision, data and technology, equity, teaching and learning, engagement and communication, strategy and planning, and policies and practices that affect student progress to degree completion;
- Course withdrawal rates by demographic groups (e.g., parents, veterans, Pell recipients, etc.);
- Transfer out (3-year rates) and employment (within 1 year) rates for community colleges;
- Requests and allocations of financial hardship grants;
- Participation in tutoring and other academic support programs to identify and remove potential barriers; and
- Debt and loan repayment rates.

Using data to identify which courses, particularly gateway courses and developmental education courses, that resulted in the highest rates of D and F grades, and course withdrawals (i.e., DFW courses) was also a relatively common metric. One campus explained reviewing “all courses with high percentage of grades assigned as DFW, to identify potential areas to support student course success.” For many campuses, the completion of Math and English courses in the first year was a strong metric predicting whether a student was on track toward degree completion and improving student completion rates.

Many campuses also reported that they collected and analyzed assessment data on faculty and staff performance and experiences. For example, several campuses routinely conducted audits of policies, practices, and procedures with an eye toward improving student success as well as faculty and staff experiences in employment and promotion. The need to improve medical leave, withdrawal, and re-enrollment policies and practices is one example that showed up in a few plans; or critically reviewing tenure and promotion policies to be more affirming of public engagement scholarship.

To improve teaching and learning experiences, some campuses empowered academic departments to assess the quality of their courses and to improve pedagogy, strategically targeting efforts toward student success in credit accumulation and advancement. These quality improvement efforts were designed with respect to faculty expertise and a trust in faculty commitments to delivering high quality learning experiences for all students. Some campuses are also working on revising course evaluations, in partnership with faculty, to make the results more actionable.

Campuses with routine data practices used metrics strongly correlated to student success to create new and expand existing approaches to course design and pedagogies and to improve institutional performance for all students.

Overall, institutions are practicing ongoing, relevant assessments and program evaluations. However, the analyses were not often tied to specific actions. This suggests that in the future more institutional attention should be placed on the development of clear theories of change and linking robust data analysis with strategic action to lead to institutional improvements.

Strategies to Improve Institutional Performance

What types of strategies and approaches are colleges and universities using to address identified equity gaps and barriers? How can institutions serve various populations better, to improve and increase access and degree completion for all students?

Colleges and universities described numerous new and ongoing strategic initiatives to remove barriers to student success. The review identified six categories of strategies, each listed with several related tactics.

1. Improve student support services

- a. *Comprehensive first-year experience and orientation programs.* 16 community colleges and 6 universities described redesigning or continuing their efforts in first-year experience support or orientation programs. They recognized the importance of a smooth onboarding experience to developing a strong sense of belonging, which is statistically correlated to higher rates of retention and student success. Orientation programs also effectively reduced summer melt (ie students who enroll but fail to show up for their first semester) in the transition into a successful first-year in college. These efforts included efforts strategically targeted at specific population segments (e.g., men, rural students, international students, first-generation, low-income students, etc.) experiencing specific barriers to success, such as students from low-income families navigating the financial aid system.
- b. *Holistic and comprehensive advising programs to support the academic, social, and emotional development of all students.* 28 community colleges and 7 universities described efforts to improve student advising to support student transitions into college, transfer from college to university, and from college into the workforce. These efforts used federal funding support and guidance through TRIO and Student Support Services (SSS) grants. Many institutions are employing a data-informed, culturally affirming approaches to strengthen advising effectiveness. Some examples of these programs include:
 - Implementing a concierge or case management model, so that students would no longer need to go from office to office explaining their circumstances and requests for support each time.
 - Early alert systems to trigger individualized attention for students who are struggling in the middle of an academic term. These systems include faculty and staff training and norming on best practices in usage of these systems.
 - Requiring routine student meetings with advisors.
 - One stop student centers, such as a Transfer Student Center offering targeted advising to transfer students in their transitions to universities or to successfully complete a bachelor's degree after transferring.
 - Holistic and wrap-around advising models based on a culture of care framework to support student mental health, financial needs, basic needs, provide for tutoring supports, academic planning and advising.
- c. *Mentoring programs.* 27 community colleges and 8 universities are planning or are already offering peer mentoring or faculty/staff-student mentoring programs to support student sense of belonging on campus, mental health, career development/workforce readiness, leadership development, and academic success. These programs are designed in culturally relevant ways to address the distinct

needs and interests among students (e.g., students with disabilities, rural students, first-generation students, men, and students of color), with programs open to the participation of all students. For example, one campus mentoring program supports first-generation STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) students in cultivating a STEM identity and sense of belonging to build resilience and growth mindset. Some campuses are partnering with non-profit organizations such as One Million Degrees and Braven to offer tailored mentoring and coaching for student success and post-graduate career achievements.

- d. *Auditing policies and practices.* Seven community colleges and 4 universities are conducting audits of communications, accessibility, course offerings and scheduling to identify areas and opportunities to improve institutional performance for student success. For example, at least one campus is auditing and reviewing websites to improve their accessibility for students with disabilities. Nine community colleges and 4 universities described plans and efforts to conduct audits of emails and other communications to students, faculty, and staff to prevent conflicting messages and to avoid overwhelming students with too many communications.
- e. *Academic support centers and programs.* 24 community colleges and 7 universities discussed the role of academic support centers in improving institutional performance in student success. These centers and programs include tutoring services, disability support services and accommodations, career development, writing centers, TRIO/SSS programs, developmental education coordination and support, and transfer advising supports. Some institutions have co-located these services, including peer tutoring programs, in libraries and one-stop learning commons.
- f. *Basic needs provision.* 21 community colleges and 6 universities have leveraged grants (e.g., ICCB's Workforce Equity Initiative or IBHE's Ending Student Housing Insecurity), state and community partnerships to support students to access affordable housing, transportation, childcare, nursing rooms, food pantries, professional clothing closets, mental health services, open educational resources, laptop and WIFI hotspot loans, emergency funds, scholarships, elimination of library fines, disability accommodations, and rural student supports. Notably, some highlighted the mandated Benefits Navigator positions on campus to assist students in accessing campus and community services for their basic needs. Benefits Navigators help students access information and connections to benefits like SNAP, Medicaid, and housing assistance. As one college explained, these holistic resource services are necessary for closing gaps in student withdrawal rates, because "many students are interrupted by life circumstances beyond academics but that affect academics."
- g. *Improve sense of belonging.* 24 community colleges and 9 universities described their efforts to assess and improve sense of belonging among students, faculty and staff. Students' sense of connectedness to the campus community both academically and socially, or [sense of belonging](#), is strongly [correlated with student retention](#) rates. By improving sense of belonging, often through a caring framework, institutions expected increased mental health, student success metrics, and employee satisfaction. Institutions targeted efforts at improving first-year experience and transfer student experiences, because student sense of belonging is lowest during times of transition for new first-time and transfer students. Many institutions described strategically designed learning communities, peer mentoring programs, and student support centers that targeted key student needs through identity-affirming approaches for students with disabilities, rural students, commuter students, low-income students, first-generation students, veterans services, immigrant and international student services, and other campus cultural centers that provide co-curricular learning opportunities and professional development for all students, faculty, and staff.

2. Enhance teaching and learning experiences.

- a. *Professional development for faculty, staff, and administrators.* 32 community colleges and 10 universities described efforts to provide professional development to support effectiveness in teaching, pedagogy, and curriculum design. These efforts included universal design for learning

(UDL) and culturally affirming pedagogy workshops for effective teaching, trainings on anti-discriminatory hiring and promotion practices, supportive coaching, mentoring, and incentive programs to encourage professional learning among faculty and staff. A focus on strengthening teaching effectiveness was one strategy discussed with an aim to improve student success among students with disabilities, adult students, low-income and first-generation students across cultural backgrounds.

- b. *Curricular changes, including course scheduling expansion.* 11 community colleges and 8 universities discussed efforts to update curriculum offerings and data-driven approaches to expanding course offerings in scheduling (e.g., yearlong schedule) and learning modalities (in-person, hybrid, or virtual) to accommodate student needs and remove barriers to low-income students, adult students, rural students, and students with disabilities. Some of these efforts included
- updating course numbering to align with the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI)
 - working to reduce course placement testing barriers to course enrollments
 - expanding course and certificate/degree requirements to include offerings like statistics courses and social justice studies
 - empowering academic departments to review, discuss, and improve student success data
 - considering updates to degree requirements and improvements to teaching approaches and course design
 - offering novel “earn and learn” courses to meet requirements
 - participating in the Illinois Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity.

There are also future-ready curriculum initiatives and co-curricular offerings to prepare all students for leadership and workforce through data-informed and strategically targeted approaches.

- c. *Diversify faculty and staff.* 17 community colleges and 7 universities are working to diversify their faculty and staff by examining their hiring, retention, and promotion processes. They are implementing hiring training sessions and professional development workshops, expanding their outreach and publicity of open positions to increase their applicant pools, offering faculty fellowship programs to encourage recruitment and retention of talented faculty with research and teaching expertise relevant to local communities.

3. **Improve institutional research, data systems and dashboards for actionable and timely analyses.** All 12 universities and 29 community colleges are working to expand, improve, and leverage their institutional research and data capacities to inform strategic improvements to organizational performance and student success. Some are purchasing and implementing CRM systems. Many have appointed faculty and staff teams to lead and learn to increase effective and timely usage of data dashboards and systems to improve student momentum and success metrics. Others are designing or working to improve and integrate campus data dashboards to effectively feature key student success metrics. By doing so, they recognize the potential for nimble and robust data systems and institutional research leadership to identify levers for improvement and measure effectiveness of efforts. For example, campuses are using coordinated data systems for:
- a. Implementation of the required multiple measures assessment approaches for student placements in courses to ensure students have equitable access to college-level coursework.
 - b. Early alert systems to identify students needing additional support to successfully complete a specific course.
 - c. Curricular analytics to improve transfer student experiences, building on degree completion mapping projects and assets to improve timely degree completion.
4. **Strengthen student enrollment, transition, and curricular pathways.** To improve experiences of students transitioning into college, campus are working to:

- a. *Simplify admissions and improve enrollment systems.* 26 community colleges and 8 universities are working to improve recruitment, admissions, and enrollment of students. They are partnering with community-based organizations and student groups to recruit students from population segments that have not been encouraged to pursue a college degree or certificate, such as adult students, facilitating connections in student centers for prospective students to meet current students, and generally use targeted efforts to improve recruitment, yield, and retention outcomes. Some campuses are reviewing and auditing their application forms and enrollment policies. For example, one campus has changed their medical withdrawal and appeals policy by treating these appeals for re-enrollment as a health/disability accommodation, which allows students to more easily re-enroll. Reviews and changes to policies and practices in admissions and enrollment have improved experiences and opportunities for adult students, neurodiverse students and students with disabilities, English Language Learners, rural students, international students, and Black students, as indicated by data analysis.
- b. *Improve curricular pathways including developmental education reform and reducing DFW rates.* 18 community colleges and 8 universities are identifying and reducing DFW rates in gateway courses and/or working on developmental education reform in Math or English by making changes to placement procedures or implementing co-requisite models of curriculum, as required by the Developmental Education Reform Act.
- c. *Improve access to dual credit and other early college programs.* 18 community colleges and 4 universities detailed efforts to expand dual credit programs and early college programs to allow high school students to earn college credits. Institutions are seeking to strengthen their data systems to improve affordability, participation by underrepresented students such as low-income students, rural students, adult students, Black students, and others as indicated by institutional research.
- d. *Offer summer bridge programs.* 6 community colleges and 6 universities highlighted their summer bridge programs for incoming low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color for summer transitional programs to create a stronger sense of belonging on campus and higher student success rates. They also centered career exploration activities and engagement in career and technical education (CTE), and supports for seamless transfer.

CONCLUSION

Overall, there are strong commitments and wide-ranging campus-based initiatives across Illinois postsecondary institutions to contribute toward *A Thriving Illinois*. The Illinois statute for equity plans provides an important expectation for postsecondary institutions to strategically and continuously identify and eliminate barriers hindering student success. It is best to understand the equity plan baseline year documents as partial snapshots of efforts being planned or underway to close equity gaps. Over the next year, IBHE and ICCB will focus on supporting institutions in implementing the student success programs and practices outlined. And over time, we will be able to assess whether the institutional efforts and planned interventions have been effective or should be modified.