

COLUMNS | Opinion *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Your turn: It's time to invest in Black, Brown and low-income college students

Lisa Castillo Richmond, Cherita Ellens & Robin Steans Special to the State Journal-Register

Published 4:35 a.m. CT April 12, 2024 | Updated 4:35 a.m. CT April 12, 2024

Over the past two decades, investments in higher education were hard to come by in Illinois.

Years of cuts and a state budget impasse caused students to look for colleges and universities outside of Illinois to further their education, with many even making the unfortunate decision not to go to college at all.

This trend has forced universities to reduce the resources they have to support students through to graduation and increased tuition costs to make obtaining a degree even more difficult for students.

While recent investments into the state higher education system have paved the way to progress, Illinois still has a long way to go to reach equitable and full funding across our university system.

To see strong, robust increases in enrollment and graduation rates, institutions will need more resources and appropriations from the state so they can better meet the needs of the unique student populations they each serve.

After two and a half years of work, the Commission on Equitable Public University Funding has laid out a blueprint for Illinois to consider student needs when disbursing funding to public universities.

Formed as a result of SB815 in 2021, the Commission was charged with creating Illinois' first-ever formula to disperse funding to public universities.

As leaders of equity-focused non-profit organizations in Illinois, we are proud to have served on this Commission and believe its recommendations could transform our public universities, ensuring they meet the needs of all students. Now that the Commission's report has been published, it's time to begin raising awareness about the importance of a strong and diverse higher education system and the benefits of making this change.

Grounded in accountability and stability, the proposed funding formula helps make universities less reliant on tuition revenue as state appropriations increase.

With more reliable revenue sources, universities can fund the services students rely on to succeed and complete their degrees. Taking action on the Commission's recommendations could be a game-changer

for every student who chooses to attend a university in Illinois and a boost to our state's economic vitality.

Research shows that when a state invests in higher education, its economy improves in the long term. In addition to the overall economic impact it can have on a state, students who graduate can go on to get jobs that will help them lead more financially stable lives compared to those who do not earn a degree.

The average college graduate earns \$1.2 million more in their lifetimes and could contribute \$1.7 million to the state GDP, according to the National College Attainment Network.

By the time the model is fully funded, it could produce nearly tens of thousands more university graduates, resulting in a potential economic upside that is real and powerful for our state. In addition to the economic benefits of higher education, college graduates are less likely to be involved with the justice system and live longer and healthier lives. Illinois must make this investment into higher education for the benefit of our students and our state as a whole.

Importantly, by investing equitably into higher education, we'll see a greater return in Black, Brown and low-income communities across the state – which have been underserved for far too long. The Commission's recommendations are a long-term investment into these communities as graduates can go on to more financially stable careers.

Advance Illinois, Partnership for College Completion and Women Employed have been dedicated to equity since our organizations' respective inceptions.

Throughout our combined decades of making change in the state, we've helped pass equitable policies in the Illinois legislature and helped our state forge new paths that have created better opportunities for all Illinoisans.

Now, it's time to do the same for our students and the higher education institutions that serve them.

We hope you'll join us as we continue to advocate and educate lawmakers on the importance of putting the Commission's blueprint into action so that every student in every part of our state can attend an institution that has the resources to meet their needs. Our students and our state deserve nothing less.

Lisa Castillo Richmond is the Executive Director of Partnership for College Completion, Cherita Ellens is President and CEO of Women Employed, and Robin Steans is President of Advance Illinois. They each served as Commissioners on the Commission for Equitable Public University Funding.

