



Working Together to Address the COVID-19 Crisis

The Pandemic Unveils Harsh Realities

As the economic and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic reverberate across the nation into our homes, federal lawmakers are providing financial relief to help restart the economy as states scramble to create jobs and deploy resources to guard against further job losses and budget cuts. Lumina Foundation believes recovery begins with serving today's students and workers through a steadfast commitment to quality and racial equity. Our approach prioritizes equity for learners and communities and invests in a transformed talent-development system that will lead to a safe and systemic national recovery that fosters individual prosperity.

Three Vital Steps Toward Recovery

1) Address student needs. The COVID-19 crisis sheds light on issues facing today's students — a growing group that is more racially diverse, older, and juggling more family, work, and financial pressures than ever before. These current and prospective students often are the same people we see on the front lines of the pandemic, delaying their education to serve as essential workers. They are the same students who have long sought flexible schedules and quality online classes. They may be the same students who are now unemployed and need short-term opportunities to upskill and reskill for new careers. News stories across the nation have highlighted the various ways colleges and universities have worked to address students' needs, from keeping dormitories open for students who are homeless, to distributing laptops and food vouchers, to running Wi-Fi in parking lots so students can do homework in their cars. These efforts are valuable, but they're just a start. Dramatic and permanent shifts are needed to help students recover and keep learning.

2) Focus on racial equity. During economic turmoil, it's easy to focus on income as we lose social and economic mobility. Certainly, extra resources should go to low-income students. But we also know that racism underlies our system of higher education, and racial disparities will continue to grow and worsen in this public health crisis without strong, proactive efforts in policy and practice. As policymakers work to address the impact of COVID-19 on their states and show meaningful commitment to dismantling systems of oppression in their states, they'll need to understand explicitly how communities of color — specifically Black, Hispanic, and Native American communities — are experiencing the crisis, and then find solutions that address those disparate needs and outcomes.

3) Ensure quality. Educational quality must remain front and center as colleges plan for the upcoming academic year. People hurt by the economic downturn will seek opportunities to upskill or reskill, so it's critical that programs offer high-quality outcomes for all learners regardless of their delivery method. These programs must lead to continued education, high-demand jobs, and improved livelihoods.

Policy Suggestions for State Leaders

It's clear that students' lives have been upended by campus shutdowns, business closures, and soaring job losses resulting from the pandemic. At Lumina Foundation, the nation's largest private foundation dedicated to helping people get education and training after high school, we are especially worried about those who have historically been left behind: first-generation students, low-income students, and people of color.

Though the federal government provided support through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act and is considering additional relief packages, the needs are still enormous. As the recession affects the budgets of states and higher education institutions alike, new models for meeting students' needs will emerge. Equity must be the foundation of all of these efforts. For education providers, this includes decisions on everything from budgets and financial aid to wraparound services, borrower protections and emergency aid. At the federal and state levels, equity should drive decisions on funding for higher education as well as income supports, child care, basic needs, and safety nets. To ensure fair and equitable outcomes and increased college attainment for students of color, resources must be allocated in a highly targeted and coordinated way.

As states pivot from crisis response to economic recovery, here is our best advice to policymakers, drawing on Lumina's expertise across broad portfolios of work:

1) Accelerate quality credential pathways. Now is the perfect time to dramatically transform the higher education learning infrastructure to ensure that all learning counts and all credential pathways lead to jobs that meet urgent workforce needs. We anticipate that the unemployment crisis will drive attention to and demand for short-term credentials. States will need to quickly adopt high-quality credential criteria and take seriously the task of updating provider lists to eliminate declining occupations and accelerate high-quality, high-demand credentials. This will be especially critical as hospitality, retail, and other service jobs decline and new in-demand occupations emerge.

2) Ensure sustainable financing. Compounding budget cuts in 2020, states will likely see significantly reduced appropriations in 2021. Governors and state budget offices should look across state agencies and ensure that all available resources from K-12, higher education, workforce development, human services, and other federal sources are knit together in a way that expedites government support for those in need. Strategic financing like this can help prioritize and protect scarce resources. So, too, can considering student outcomes when deciding stimulus allocations. States will also need to ensure that financial aid programs are adequately funded and configured to reach many more students in need. State systems and institutions should partner to find the best ways to work on behalf of students in these historically difficult economic times. Without an explicit focus on equity and quality, state actions in this dire period could worsen disparities in income and attainment, and restrict access to education for low-income and adult learners.

3) Plan for mass transfers, unpredictable enrollment patterns, and closures. Essential workers, those who lost jobs, and others face tough decisions about their plans for future education and training. Some will delay school, change programs, or stop out altogether. As a result, enrollment patterns will be in flux, and transfers will be more common — likely away from residential colleges and toward schools closer to students' homes with strong online programs. States should make sure that transfer policies, unit-level data systems, and credential pathways ensure that no student loses credits, time, or money — and that learners have easy access to their academic records as they make decisions about enrollments and transfers. With budget cuts looming, we also expect school closures to drive many learners to workforce programs or community colleges. States need comprehensive plans for supporting students who are displaced by sudden institutional closures, particularly at small private colleges.

4) Coordinate online learning. To save money and ensure quality, it's time for states to take an active role in coordinating online classes across higher education. Rather than developing separate and duplicative courses, states should identify high-quality, high-capacity online courses that can be recognized and scaled up across institutions to reach large numbers of learners.

5) Build social safety nets. Social safety net programs, which provide a wide range of services to individuals and families in need, are straining to meet the needs generated by the pandemic and economic crisis across states. The federal government has provided new resources and is removing or relaxing restrictions for many of these programs. Even so, states will need to build and offer support on a larger scale to coordinate effective access to and delivery of services so learners have what they need to succeed. The long-term response will require sustainable structures of federal and state support.

Call To Action

In the coming weeks and months, Lumina Foundation will continue to offer guidance and expertise through a series of policy memos that further explore these challenges and solutions. We will announce ways that Lumina will support federal, state, institutional, and community efforts to advance equity-minded policies that drive America's ongoing recovery. Our goal: to help people get back on their feet and keep learning.

We welcome your ideas, expertise, and partnership in this historic moment.