

# Supporting the Class of 2021 Through Postsecondary Transition

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MorraLee Keller, Bill DeBaun and Carrie Warick

When our nation shut down in March because of the COVID-19 pandemic, states had to figure out what education would look like for the remainder of the academic year. These abrupt changes affected not only students' ability to learn but also their access to the support system that would help prepare them for steps beyond high school. With the continued disturbance of the current national emergency — from both public health and economic standpoints — the high school Class of 2021 will also face challenges as it works to transition from high school to postsecondary education.

High school students nationwide — regardless of whether they are attending school in person, virtually or in a hybrid model — are already facing challenges that could hinder their college attendance. ACT and SAT testing locations are canceling test-administration sessions. Schools that meet in person are limiting access to outside groups, including college-access programs that assist with Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion and college applications. School counselors, who carry a heavy though improving [caseload](#), are responding to an [increased need](#) for mental health support. National college fairs and campus tours have gone online. Students are facing a college-admissions season with reduced in-person support and are reliant on internet access.

Further, historically underrepresented students — students of color, students from low-income backgrounds and students who are first in their family to go to college — already [faced](#) barriers associated with their background that are now compounded by the pandemic. Now, the barriers created by systemic racism and college unaffordability are paired with the fact that many students will experience various levels of [learning loss](#) through virtual classrooms that may have an impact on their future academic accomplishments.

## EQUITABLE TRANSITIONS THROUGH PANDEMIC DISRUPTIONS

This Policy Brief is part of a series dedicated to various facets of the transition from secondary to postsecondary education, now complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on the populations already underserved in our nation's education system. The series — which builds upon "[A State Policymaker's Guide to Equitable Transitions in the COVID-19 Era](#)" — provides actionable steps and examples for state policymakers to consider as they address the transition from high school to college and the workforce. The other Policy Briefs are available at [ecs.org](https://www.ecs.org).

This brief explores challenges that students are facing and actions that states, and sometimes school districts, can take to support students in their postsecondary transition during these far-from-normal times. Those actions include:

- Addressing systemic barriers to college access exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Adapting data driven decision-making to the virtual environment.
- Leveraging federal funds to support postsecondary transition.

In many cases, states oversee the policies that can break down barriers for students. In other situations, school districts must take the lead. But states have an important role to play there too: they can set minimum requirements for areas of innovation and uplift best practices from within and outside their states. Chief education officers can both set guardrails and promote best practices along with setting state policies that serve students.

The postsecondary-transition space is one of many areas where the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated barriers in society. States can play a significant role in not only addressing those heightened barriers during the crisis but also by considering long-term changes that could eliminate them permanently.

States that support their students through these public health and economic crises may have a stronger chance of not only [restoring](#) their economies but making their state postsecondary education landscape stronger and more equitable than it was before. These supports not only serve states well for the Class of 2021 and the Class of 2022, but they help create a new normal that is more equitable for students for years to come.

## Address Systemic Barriers to College Access Exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic

Historically underrepresented students interested in applying to and entering postsecondary institutions have hurdles piling up as they enter their senior year. Further, underrepresented students who receive college-going [supports](#) are more likely to access and succeed in college than those who do not. In-person opportunities such as attending high school, working with a college counselor/advisor, taking a college-entrance exam, visiting college campuses, attending college fairs, taking dual-enrollment courses or getting assistance with a FAFSA have greatly decreased, and in some places evaporated, during this pandemic.

Solutions are needed at school, district and state levels to address these inequities. State education departments, legislatures and education organizations have begun to change practices and student supports in response to the pandemic, but they will very likely need policy updates or even mandates to sustain progress toward closing attainment gaps. The following are student-facing policy solutions to bring down the barriers exacerbated by the pandemic.

## Address College Preparation Through Dual Enrollment, AP Exams

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High school seniors may consider dual-enrollment courses or AP exams to increase the academic rigor of their study. According to the

National Student Clearinghouse, participation in dual-enrollment programs [increased](#) this year, by 3.7% at four-year colleges and 2.2% at community colleges, compared with overall enrollment, which has fallen. However, complete data about AP enrollment is not currently available. Encouraging future classes to enter these pathways may improve the likelihood that they will enter college.

While the news may be mixed on curriculum, students are still struggling in many places with [access](#) to devices and/or broadband internet, which will affect their ability to learn. State officials may consider waiving high-stakes graduation exams if K-12 schools remain virtual for an extended period of time. Students' ability to reach the required passage threshold may be inhibited by the virtual learning process and possibly the virtual testing environment as well. Any additional barriers to high school graduation also affect the successful transition to postsecondary programs. Chief state school officers can consider initiating the necessary steps to secure a waiver for these exams from the U.S. Department of Education. States such as **Georgia, Michigan, Oklahoma, South Carolina** and **Texas** have [discussions](#) underway to request the needed waiver.

## Support Seniors in the College Application Process via Advising, Virtual Tours, Broadband

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One of the concerning barriers presented by the pandemic is the lack of ability for students to meet with their school counselor or college-access advisor. Even in high schools where students are attending in person, external partners are not able to hold their traditional

after-school events. This creates additional barriers to access. Advisors help students develop college lists, complete applications, coordinate visits from campus recruiters, schedule campus visits and finish the FAFSA.

In many cases, moving these services online is possible if the students have a device and internet access. States also may consider providing workarounds and resources for students who do not have the [technological access](#) necessary to participate. States could work to address such goals by supporting virtual college advising and virtual tours through organization, partnerships, or outreach directly to their students.

For [virtual advising](#), **Washington** has created a statewide texting chatbot to which students can send questions. **Arizona** has a similar [tool](#) focused on financial aid that was created by the partnership of Achieve60AZ, the Arizona Commission for Postsecondary Education, College Success Arizona and Arizona State University. **Illinois** provides [near-peer mentors](#) statewide to assist high school seniors in navigating the college-going process; the state has continued support during the pandemic and moved all events to a virtual platform. **Rhode Island** has several virtual or text-based FAFSA-completion initiatives available on the website [Prepare-RI](#).

States can support virtual campus tours by publicizing and supporting the many nationwide options developed. The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and their state associations are offering [virtual college fairs](#) in lieu of large in-person events. [CampusTours.com](#) and [The Princeton Review](#) have thousands of virtual campus tours available to assist students with “visiting” campuses, as they determine their application list.

## Examine Role of Standardized Tests in Admissions

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State leaders or state systems of higher education, depending on where [the authority](#) lies, may consider examining the admissions requirements for their institutions. Public institutions of higher education are the backbone of the postsecondary system. Examining the role of standardized tests in their admissions practices could ensure that barriers do not prevent the inclusion of students of color, students from low-income backgrounds and students who are first in their family to attend college.

States may consider both supporting students who attempt to take standardized tests and making those tests optional as part of the public system of postsecondary education admissions requirements. States could consider adopting or continuing to support statewide administration of college-entrance exams such as the ACT and SAT.

**Ohio** is an example of one state that followed this practice and experienced [disruptions](#) because of the pandemic.

Further, state postsecondary education agencies could explore moving their colleges to using test-optional admissions and merit-aid practices for the Class of 2021. Test date and site cancellations since March 2020 have devastated the ability of current seniors to take a college entrance exam. [NACAC](#) has tracked more than 1,400 four-year colleges that have announced test-optional policies. This includes the example set by the **California** State University system, which has gone [test-optional](#) on all campuses for this admissions cycle.

However, there are more than 2,300 four-year colleges in the country, and the test-optional policy will have more impact if it is universal this year. This would limit the confusion and level the playing field for students interested in applying to college. Where possible, states could also encourage private institutions to go test-optional or to follow the [guidance](#) supported by the associations of independent colleges which stresses that admissions policies should be as holistic as possible.

## Adjust the Financial Aid Process to Support FAFSA Completion

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The complications of the financial aid process are well documented in preventing students from accessing financial aid, even prior to the pandemic. The application process should not further hinder access to financial aid, particularly when it is likely that many students will be newly eligible for it. To help combat this barrier, states could consider requiring completion of the FAFSA and extending state financial aid deadlines if the deadlines arrive before aid has been exhausted. In particular, the state of **Louisiana** has increased FAFSA completion among high school seniors by more than 20 percentage points by creating this requirement. Louisiana was particularly successful in this endeavor because of the training the [state provided](#) to school district level staff. States that consider this strategy should do so only if they feel confident that they can support school districts in fulfilling this requirement.

## Adapt Data Driven Decision-Making to the Virtual Environment

Given the dramatic shift in the college-going process, states may consider using data driven decision-making, whether for the first time or with increased focus, to ensure that students — particularly students of color, students from low-income backgrounds and students who are first in their families to attend college — do not fall through the cracks. Policies promoting the thoughtful collection, analysis, reporting and use of data represent promising opportunities for states to support students' postsecondary transitions.

Thoughtful policies include data disaggregation by student and institutional characteristics. Disaggregation helps policymakers and the public to identify equity gaps (many of which are persistent), tailor practices intended to address them and then confirm that, as a result, they narrowed or closed. Each of the policies below benefits from disaggregating data by student characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, first-generation status) and institutional characteristics (e.g., two-year or four-year program).

Broadly, states play a critical role in signaling to districts and schools which data to prioritize, and states also play a key role in providing technical assistance for using that data effectively. States also have their own statewide data systems that can provide insights and help districts and schools to identify and address inequities.

## Use Postsecondary Aspiration Surveys to Connect Students to Proper Supports

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There is seldom enough postsecondary advising to meet the needs of all students, so determining the level of support students need is key to matching them with the right supports. One way to do this is via aspiration surveys that help determine students' questions, concerns and plans.

Although senior exit surveys are often delivered at year's end, collecting data early in the year (or even earlier, throughout the high school experience on an annual basis) provides timely, actionable data for connecting students with the information and support they need.

A practice that builds on aspiration survey data involves sending a guide to students in grades 9-12 with information on high school graduation, college and career. The **District of Columbia** Public Schools, Chicago Public Schools, and **California's** Long Beach Unified School District and Orange County Public Schools, among others, [engage in this practice](#). These guides assist students with pursuing the postsecondary pathways that best match their aspirations.

States can encourage this practice by communicating it to districts and schools as an expectation and by providing examples of [high-quality surveys](#). Examples include **Oregon** and **Vermont**, which conduct [senior exit surveys](#) to [understand aspirations](#) and roadblocks statewide; but these are mainly

used in a summative fashion for research purposes. These surveys could provide very valuable data if the timeline for data collection, analysis, and reporting shifted to be earlier in the senior year or even in the summer between the junior and senior years. States could then disseminate the data to districts and schools in a timely fashion. There could be economies of scale in delivering and analyzing these surveys statewide rather than leaving it up to each district or school. On the other hand, state aspiration surveys would probably lose the granularity and flexibility of designing, delivering and connecting to individual students at the local level.

## Connect Districts and Schools With Their National Student Clearinghouse Data

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The National Student Clearinghouse is the most comprehensive national source of data on students' postsecondary outcomes. Data contained in the NSC covers 99% of students enrolled in public and private postsecondary institutions; 70% of secondary students are covered by the NSC's StudentTracker for High School service. This service, which provides K-12 stakeholders with information on their graduates' postsecondary outcomes, is available for \$425 annually per high school. The data is invaluable for postsecondary advising. Unfortunately, the data often requires an analyst to produce actionable insights, and that position is a luxury for many districts to hire.

To achieve economies of scale, state education agencies may consider negotiating state-level StudentTracker contracts. To support this step, SEAs may also want to clean and disaggregate data by district and school,

and then send that data to the local level to use. States such as **Idaho** and **Michigan** have put similar [systems](#) to good use and make that [data available](#) to K-12 stakeholders. Many other statewide longitudinal data systems now incorporate NSC data. Failing a state-level NSC contract, states could provide the funding that districts need to pay for the StudentTracker service. This would be a relatively low-cost way to ensure that districts have the best available data to act on regarding students' postsecondary outcomes.

## Promote FAFSA Completion Data and Ease Access to It

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Given the importance of FAFSA completion as a signal of postsecondary intention and a leading [indicator](#) of postsecondary enrollment, state financial aid agencies could actively promote using FAFSA completion data for targeted outreach. Through [Student Aid Internet Gateway](#) agreements with Federal Student Aid, at least 48 states have access to student-level FAFSA completion data that they can pass through to districts, schools and approved community partners.

SEAs could support this work by actively making stakeholders aware of the availability of these data and streamlining the process for accessing it. (See **Connecticut's** [letter](#) to this effect.) Additionally, states who choose [this work](#) may consider providing [FAFSA-completion data](#) in a user-friendly [dashboard](#) to which stakeholders have access — **California**, **Nebraska** and **Washington** serve as examples for this. States can also play a technical assistance role. For example, statewide FAFSA-completion campaigns exist in **Louisiana** and **Utah**, which are both [student- and family-facing](#) and [counselor- and school-facing](#).

## Measure College and Career Readiness on School Report Cards

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Organizations will pay the most attention to the measures they are required to report. With that in mind, state's departments of education could include measures of college and career readiness on district and school report cards. More than 30 states now include a [postsecondary enrollment measure](#) on their report card, and this brings attention to the practices preparing students for postsecondary pathways.

At a minimum, the National College Attainment Network recommends postsecondary enrollment rates (obtainable from the NSC) and FAFSA-completion rates as key performance indicators. The [Data Quality Campaign](#) is a rich resource for a number of others. It highlights **Michigan** and **Pennsylvania** as states implementing this practice particularly well. For example, **Pennsylvania's** Future Ready [PA report card](#) gives users an interactive look at students' disaggregated postsecondary outcomes (college, military, career) as well as progress made toward both college completion and industry-recognized credentials. **Michigan's** report card dives deeply into demographic and institutional disaggregation while considering a bevy of metrics including the typical (enrollment rates) and the more niche (time to complete 24 college credits). These diverse ways of looking at the data inform both the public and policymakers on postsecondary outcomes.

To be clear, adding these metrics to school report cards will not directly benefit the class of 2021 as it pursues postsecondary pathways. However, making these metrics publicly available lays the groundwork for better

informed students, families and communities. With better information about students' postsecondary outcomes, stakeholders can better prepare their students to make postsecondary transitions and support them throughout that process.

## Leverage Federal Funds to Support Postsecondary Transition

Many of the recommendations to address college-going during the pandemic require additional time and resources during a period when state revenues are falling due to an economy also hit hard by the pandemic. To address the needs of students, states can be as creative with federal funding sources as well as public-private partnerships to provide these supports.

## Use Federal Pandemic Response Funding for College Access Supports

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States could use funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Securities Act's [Governor's Education Emergency Relief](#) Fund to [support](#) the crucial college access and transition activities as well as the data sharing necessary to make them effective. **Tennessee** used this funding to create [#ItsGoTimeTN](#), a statewide campaign to help students make a plan for after high school. Further, states may consider what to do with a fourth pandemic-relief package should Congress pass one. In either case, targeting funds toward students with the most need would provide the largest impact, particularly if funding is less than or later than anticipated.

## Expand Statewide GEAR UP Service Population

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States with Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) grants could consider how those dollars could be redistributed to provide services statewide given the additional level of need due to the pandemic. The College Crusade of **Rhode Island** administers its state grant and [partnered](#) with the state to offer FAFSA-completion services to all seniors.

## Repurpose Federal Perkins Career Funds Where Eligible

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The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act can serve as a source of funding for states to provide career advising for students. This advising can focus on all postsecondary education pathways, including the trades, certificates, and two-year and four-year degrees. **Florida's** 2020-24 [Perkins plan](#) includes a goal to provide counseling to all students. And in **Rhode Island**, Prepare-RI combines college access and career and technical education, incorporating the Perkins V action plan as part of its postsecondary work.

## Impact on the Post-Pandemic 'New Normal'

The Class of 2021 will probably have to speak to a school counselor, visit a college, carry out their academics, and complete their admissions and financial aid applications all virtually. In the short term, these students need a great deal of support and guidance to make sure they do not miss any necessary milestones for getting into college. Efficient and effective virtual college-exploration options may open the doors to thousands of students who did not previously consider this option or who would have otherwise abandoned this aspiration given the additional barriers presented by the pandemic.

The changes necessary to support students in the short term may also be the pathway to close equity gaps in the long term for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds and students who are first in their family to go to college. Strategies such as eliminating standardized testing as a requirement for graduation or admissions, requiring FAFSA and using data to drive completion efforts, and/or rethinking the data and delivery of college-access services could all work together to close the attainment gaps.

Further, there may be benefits for the entire state higher education system from these changes. Increasing FAFSA completion can increase the Pell Grant dollars brought into a state. Stronger public-private partnerships can better leverage funds to meet more students. And closing the attainment gap elevates the state tax base through a more highly trained workforce. State investments in postsecondary transitions plausibly offer significant returns in the short and long term for both students and taxpayers.



# About the Authors

## MorraLee Keller

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MorraLee serves as director of technical assistance for the National College Attainment Network and provides professional development to both direct service providers and managers to help ensure the success and sustainability of new and existing college access programs. She offers consultation services with advice on governance issues, programming, data collection, research and best practices, and develops comprehensive training materials. MorraLee has a bachelor's degree in education and a master's degree in higher education administration, both from The Ohio State University. Contact MorraLee at [kellerm@collegeaccess.org](mailto:kellerm@collegeaccess.org).

## Bill DeBaun

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Bill is director of data and evaluation for the National College Attainment Network. In that role he researches and writes about college access and success programming that demonstrates significant results for students' college enrollment and graduation rates while additionally providing technical assistance to other initiatives. Contact Bill at [debaunb@collegeaccess.org](mailto:debaunb@collegeaccess.org).

## Carrie Warick

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Carrie is the director of policy and advocacy for the National College Attainment Network. She leads NCAN's policy and advocacy work to promote policies that support first-generation students, students of color and/or students from low-income backgrounds with access and success in higher education. This includes managing NCAN's policy priorities at both the federal and state level. Contact Carrie at [warickc@collegeaccess.org](mailto:warickc@collegeaccess.org).



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