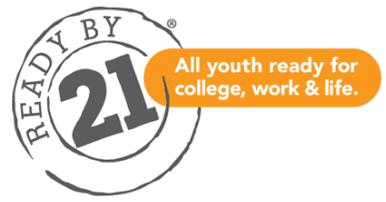


Credentialed by 26 State Policy Recommendations



FLORIDA

Leaders across the country agree that America must have more citizens with a postsecondary credential to be successful in the 21st century. Policymakers in all 50 states are realizing that, in order to maintain economic vitality their state's policies must support higher education access and success. Unfortunately, in an age of unprecedented budget cuts, direct funding for state higher education systems is being reduced severely.

While direct funding for higher education obviously has considerable influence on college access and success, it is not the only way that states can support their college students. Postsecondary attainment is also heavily influenced by the programs, services, and supports made available to students by state agencies other than the higher education system. These other agencies and systems include, but are not limited to: health and human services, child welfare, transportation, labor, and the K-12 system.

States can and should examine the programs, services, and regulations of these other systems to ensure that they are supporting the post-secondary success of their citizens. The most proactive states will institute college-friendly policies and procedures in each of these systems. At the very least, states should remove barriers to success and other college-adverse policies from each of these systems.

The policy team at the Forum for Youth Investment has conducted a series of interviews with college access and success practitioners and specialists in Maryland, Florida and California that have identified policy changes that will help these states better support post secondary attainment. The series of interviews has been distilled into a short set of policy recommendations that focus on both regulatory and legislative opportunities, with a heavy emphasis on no-cost/low-cost solutions.

State policymakers want, and need, reliable information about how to make their states more college-friendly. The following fifteen recommendations provide leaders with unbiased, cost-effective policy recommendations that will be good for students, good for tax-payers, and good for the state.

The Forum for Youth Investment is a nonprofit, nonpartisan "action tank" dedicated to helping states and communities make sure all young people are ready for college, work, and life. The Forum has been working with innovative policymakers since 1998, including Children's Cabinets and other coordinating bodies that work across sectors to support success for all young people in their state.

ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

1. Create STEM-specific need-based financial aid for STEM majors at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. (MEDIUM TERM; MEDIUM COST)

Labor market projections for Florida indicate a serious need for college-graduates in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math in the coming decades. Need-based financial aid is critical for thousands of Florida's students, but it is most critical for STEM majors as they often require more remediation and higher course credit loads (thus extending the time that students are in school).

STEM majors are also among the most demanding disciplines and often require students to spend more time in class/lab and to pursue time-intensive co-curricular activities (especially when it comes to gaining entry into STEM-specific graduate programs); thus, meaning less time for paid work. For low-income, first-generation, and other vulnerable students, additional need-based aid to support STEM education has the potential to produce a substantial increase in the number of Floridians who can be employed in STEM fields.

2. Offer more evening, weekend, and summer classes and give working students and students with children enrollment priority. (MEDIUM TERM; MEDIUM COST)

Nationally, three out of four college students who drop out say that having a more flexible class schedule that would accommodate their work and family commitments would have kept them in school. Practitioners in Florida said the same thing about the students they serve. Public colleges and universities in Florida have the opportunity to be a national leader in this area by listening to their students and responding to one of their most straightforward needs. The benefit in increased completion rates is likely to far outweigh the, largely administrative, costs of implementing this recommendation.

SOCIAL AND CIVIC SUPPORTS

3. Engage students in meaningful conversations about policy change at every level. (SHORT TERM; LOW COST)

Students are an exceptionally valuable, widely underutilized source of information about what would boost their college access and success rates. Florida has a newly established state-wide Youth Commission to perform policy advisory functions at the state level. Additionally, students should be invited to participate in discussions about policy change at the institutional, system-wide, and state levels. Engagement opportunities must be genuine, diverse, and sustained if they are to be successful.

4. Expand partnership with Single Stop USA. (MEDIUM TERM; LOW COST)

Single Stop USA is a non-profit organization that provides a clear, accessible, single point of service where community college students can enroll in public benefits programs, receive financial and legal counseling, and receive free tax preparation (including the FAFSA). Single Stop is supported largely by private dollars and is expanding nation-wide over the next several years. Single Stop currently operates two centers in Miami and the state should aggressively expand its partnership with Single Stop in a way that would result in this ground-breaking non-profit offering services at community colleges throughout the state.

5. Support K12 school counselors as advisors for college access. Hire more, provide more and better training, and set and track performance metrics. (LONG TERM; HIGH COST)

This is a high cost, long-term solution, but it is one that college access and success professionals throughout the state mentioned over and over again. Right now in the state of Florida, the vast majority of students do not have access to effective college counseling to help guide them through the process of applying to and preparing for college. Community based organizations try, and in many cases do a tremendous job at meeting this need, but they cannot reach all students.

Every high school student should have access to a qualified counselor who can help ensure that they are academically prepared and are able to navigate the admissions process. Providers, practitioners, and higher education experts all over the state identified this as one of the clearest and most effective ways that Florida can support college access and completion.

The National College Advising Corps is an innovative non-profit that places recent college graduates as college advisors in high schools with high need. They are currently operating in 14 states including Georgia and North Carolina. Florida should consider partnering with NCAC to bring college counseling into Florida high schools at a low cost.

BASIC SUPPORTS

6. Facilitate the expansion of the non-profit Dreamkeepers scholarship program or other “last dollar” funds or emergency grant programs. (MEDIUM TERM; LOW COST)

Unforeseen financial emergencies are a major reason why students drop out of college. Often, the emergency financial need is extremely modest compared the life-long financial disadvantage of not completing a college degree or the debt load that has already been accumulated by the time the student drops out. Dreamkeepers is a national effort to combat this highly preventable drop-out catalyst with programs in over 30 colleges across the country.

Through the program, students receive both financial assistance to get them through their emergency, as well as access to additional resources and student services—such as access to a financial literacy resource designed to help them build their long-term money management skills. The average award is under \$483 and the re-enrollment, graduation, or

successful transfer rate for students who received the award was 95% in 2010. Dreamkeepers is already operating in four Florida colleges and their model is so successful that they are looking to expand aggressively over the next few years.

Like Single Stop, Dreamkeepers is privately funded and provides an extraordinary return on investment for the state. Additionally, Dreamkeepers programs are well-positioned to leverage additional, local private dollars from each community, adding further value, and increased numbers of college graduates, at no cost to taxpayers.

7. Support affordable child care solutions for students with children. (MEDIUM TERM; LOW COST)

Almost all the providers we spoke with cited lack of access to affordable child care as a barrier for many students in Florida. The Child Care Development Fund Subsidies provides much needed support for families, but we heard from several student advocates that there is a long waiting list and a very limited number of providers.

In lieu of major changes to that program in a difficult fiscal climate, policy leaders should encourage institutions to use their departments of education, human development and psychology to operate child care facilities for students on campus, and fund student workers at those facilities with federal work-study dollars. A large number of institutions in California have taken this approach and as a result, very few of their college access and success providers report that child care is a major obstacle for students.

8. Augment tax-preparation services with FAFSA (free application for federal student aid) completion services. (MEDIUM TERM; MEDIUM COST)

Higher Education policy research has identified completion of the FAFSA as a critical barrier to college access, and practitioners in Florida agree. Pilot projects in Ohio have demonstrated a remarkable return on investment for the co-location of tax preparation services with FAFSA completion. Families are offered (and sometimes incentivized to accept) free completion of the FAFSA along with their taxes when using tax preparation providers such as H&R Block. This type of public-private partnership requires only a modest investment from the state and is likely to yield thousands of dollars in increased federal aid to Florida students, as well as substantial increases in college access and completion rates.

9. Reconfigure the funding formula for state student aid so that it doesn't penalize low-income students for working. (MEDIUM TERM; MEDIUM COST)

Many low-income students need to work in order to support themselves and their families. Current state aid formulas do not take this into account and end up penalizing low-income students by reducing their student aid eligibility approximately 50-cents for every dollar they earn. Florida should entirely eliminate this "work penalty" by reconfiguring the state student aid formula so that it no longer reduces or eliminates financial aid eligibility for low-income, working students.

10. Broaden the eligibility of the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) to include more college students and allow SNAP (via EBT) to be used on campus for on-campus meals/meal plans. (MEDIUM TERM; MEDIUM COST)

Adequate nutrition for students and their families is often a major factor affecting the persistence of low-income and other vulnerable college students. Current SNAP eligibility stipulates that students must meet one of the following requirements: work at least 20 hours a week, receive TANF, participate in work study, or be a single parent of a child under 12, or care for and live with a child under 6.

Among others, this excludes students who have recently aged out of foster care, students who are working, but who work less than 20 hours a week, and students who want to work, but are a victim of Florida's 11% unemployment rate. In addition to excluding a large part of the student population who would benefit from this support, these eligibility requirements create a perverse incentive to work more hours, which, in turn, often derails students from completing their course of study.

In 2010, the USDA issued a memo explicitly allowing states the flexibility to expand eligibility to include students who are in educational programs that will lead directly to employment; including agriculture, human services, management, marketing, health science, and many other fields. So far, only Massachusetts has adopted this expanded eligibility. Florida should strongly consider taking advantage of this federal flexibility to ramp up support for its most vulnerable college students.

Students (and their families) who are eligible for nutritional assistance need flexibility, particularly those who live in dorms or other forms of student housing and have limited access to kitchens. Currently, SNAP is designed to be used almost exclusively in grocery stores. Florida should consider options for SNAP flexibility to help support students who spend much of their time on campus or, because of their living situation, have limited access to kitchens.

11. Address transportation struggles for students. (LONG TERM; MEDIUM COST)

Providers identified consistent, reliable, affordable transportation as one of the single most prohibitive factors for students in all areas, rural, suburban, and urban. Florida will need to address transportation challenges for a large portion of its student population in order to significantly increase college completion.

In many states, and at some institutions in Florida, colleges offer a free or discounted public transportation pass. Often this is done via partnership between the institution and the local transit authority. Even if some or all of the cost is passed on to students, at least it can be paid for via financial aid rather than becoming a deal-breaking out-of-pocket cost for students. For rural students, institutions should be mindful of the transportation challenges students face and schedule classes in blocks and at convenient commuting times, increase online offerings, and do what they can to facilitate ride-shares and shuttles.

12. Prioritize affordable, subsidized, and otherwise accessible housing near community colleges and consider policies that support access to housing for students and their families. (LONG TERM; HIGH COST)

Students, particularly community college students, struggle with safe, affordable housing that is close to campus. Students and college access and success practitioners throughout the state identified housing difficulties as a substantial barrier to college completion. Though co-locating housing opportunities near college campuses is a long-term solution, policy leaders must pay attention to this critical component of access and success if they want to substantially increase college completion rates. It's important to note that while the cost of building new housing facilities is high, the strategic placement of them next to higher education institutions may not have any additional cost at all.

DATA

13. Administer the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) at all state colleges and universities. (SHORT TERM; LOW COST)

High levels of student engagement are positively correlated to persistence to graduation, student capacity for learning, career readiness, and overall institutional excellence. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a data-driven engagement study, is the most widely used annual survey of undergraduates in the country and has been completed by almost 1.5 million students at upwards of 1,000 colleges and universities.

The NSSE results provide colleges and universities with a yardstick by which to judge their institutional effectiveness in fostering student engagement as compared to peer institutions. This survey is rigorous, cost-effective, well-respected, and provides holistic information about student engagement that institutions are unlikely to get anywhere else. Currently, very few public institutions in Florida administer the NSSE. Florida should implement this survey on a broad scale and determine which of the many possible and productive ways to use the data generated it would like to pursue first.

14. Increase the range of institutional data available to students and their families and make it easy to use. (MEDIUM TERM; LOW COST)

Florida's longitudinal data system is among the best in the country. It's widely lauded for its ability to track students through the whole educational pipeline and into the workforce. According to many independent organizations, the higher education data that Florida collects, and the subsequent utilization of that data, is at the best-practice level.

However, Florida lags behind in the type of information that it makes available to students and in the usability of that data. Information like retention and graduation rates, affordability measures beyond gross cost, average debt loads, and labor market outcomes of graduates are among the data points that will help students and families make good decisions.

Dramatically increasing the transparency and usability of this critical information could also have positive effects on the accountability of higher education institutions, without regulatory action by the state. Practitioners, in particular, hope that this will have an effect on the business practices of for-profit institutions. Georgia, Minnesota, and Texas are leaders in the development of user-friendly websites that transmit accountability information.

COORDINATION AND ALIGNMENT

15. Formalize the connection between, and alignment of, The Florida Children and Youth Cabinet and the Higher Education Coordinating Council. (SHORT TERM; LOW COST)

Florida has one of the highest performing policy coordinating bodies in the country. The Florida Child and Youth Cabinet has a five-year track record of creating efficient and effective policy solutions that ensure that Florida's young people grow up safe, healthy, educated and prepared to join the workforce. The Cabinet has both experience and expertise in cross-agency and cross-sector initiatives and partnerships and should be the go-to place for multi-agency work as it relates to higher education access and success. The Higher Education Coordinating Council has both the membership and the executive authority to continue their robust alignment work for higher education and to achieve even greater success by linking to the Cabinet.