

# A Story of Decline: Performance and Policy in Illinois Higher Education

## Executive Summary

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## Performance and Policy in Illinois Higher Education: Key Points

**Falling behind:** Illinois used to be a leader in higher education, but in the past decade, it has fallen behind in college preparation, participation and affordability; at the same time, the state has made no progress toward ameliorating a persistent pattern of inequity in higher education.

- The state has seen declines in the percentage of high school freshmen enrolling in college within four years and the percentage of high school graduates immediately enrolling in college.
- The share of 25- to 49-year-olds enrolled in college has dropped markedly.
- Tuition has risen sharply while family incomes have fallen. At the same time, state support for need-based grants has dropped significantly.
- Blacks, Hispanics and people living in poverty are far less likely than other Illinoisans to enroll in college or, if they do enroll, to graduate within six years. Inequity in higher education is especially prominent in Chicago, which has a fifth of the state's population and high proportions of black, Hispanic and low-income residents.

**A hard road ahead:** The state's decline in higher education performance would be worrisome at any time, but several facts make it even more so:

- By 2020, 55% of Illinois' workforce will need at least an associate degree. To reach that goal, Illinois must increase production of associate and bachelor's degrees by 5.4% annually.
- Over the next two decades, the state's Hispanic population is projected to increase dramatically. Given that Hispanics in Illinois underperform in higher education, the growing Hispanic population presents a huge challenge to the state's higher education system.
- Illinois has seen large cuts in the state's appropriation for higher education, and the state's fiscal problems are unlikely to end soon.

**Explaining the decline:** Illinois' drop in higher education performance follows the state's 1995 reorganization of higher education, which abolished the "system of systems" and replaced it with more localized university governance. This change, compounded by a variety of other factors, helped to create a leadership vacuum that has produced two long-running problems:

- Failure to establish shared state goals and priorities for higher education.

The lack of statewide policy capacity for higher education can be traced to several developments, including a weak and ineffective Illinois Board of Higher Education, political corruption and inattention to higher education at the state level, a lack of trust and cooperation among state agencies, and a lack of accountability for higher education performance.

- Failure to allocate resources strategically to meet state goals and priorities.

Illinois has shifted away from funding need-based student financial aid, reduced support for students in the independent sector, failed to develop a planned statewide approach to tuition increases, and failed to align state appropriations with state priorities for higher education.