

# A State Policymaker's Guide to Equitable Transitions in the COVID-19 Era

Sharmila Mann

It is critical that policies enabling effective student transitions from high school to college and work are intentional in ensuring equitable outcomes. This intentionality takes on greater importance in light of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondary-to-postsecondary transitions have an inherent problem: State and federal structures for governance, financing and accountability of K-12 education are [separate, different and often almost wholly unrelated](#) to those of postsecondary education. While many states have made great strides in aligning these systems, the transition process remains riddled with hurdles. Even the [nearly 40% of students](#) fortunate enough to have a parent with a bachelor's degree — and thus the likely support of family, educators and community who understand the system — find themselves [struggling to navigate](#) postsecondary entrance, financial aid systems, course-placement processes and support services.

These issues are [greatly amplified](#) for student populations historically underserved by both systems. This includes students from low-income households; first-generation students; Black, Latinx and Native American students; English-language learners; students with disabilities; students without access to digital

The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the barriers faced by underserved students as they navigate the transition from high school to postsecondary education.

These barriers threaten to amplify existing inequities in postsecondary access and attainment, which in turn harm individual and state goals for economic prosperity.

State policymakers can reduce barriers and improve outcomes by taking specific action steps now to ease the burden of the pandemic for students with the least resources.

resources; students in foster care; homeless students; and justice-involved students. These students have [many unique strengths](#) born from their experiences that make them excellent candidates for college. They do not take college attendance as a given. They are aware of the barriers ahead of them and [determined and purposeful](#) in their pursuit of postsecondary education. They are creative and adaptable, having spent a lifetime learning how to make the most of limited resources. Through [shared structures and experiences](#), they have developed strong community bonds.

At the same time, these populations of students encounter a [host of systemic challenges](#) that their white peers, financially resourced peers, native English speaking peers, peers who are not differently abled and peers with intergenerational college experience do not face. Many of these barriers lie outside of education. For instance, [centuries of discriminatory policies and practices](#) in housing and employment have had direct and indirect consequences for educational access and success. Other barriers are inherent to education systems, which [make certain assumptions](#) about the capacity and economic support available to students. These assumptions include stable living environments; adequately met basic needs; absence of disability; fluency in English; access to the technology necessary for learning; and familiarity with the rules, requirements and constraints of existing educational systems. Students who fall outside of these expectations find themselves [relying on services](#) that are inequitably distributed across schools.

The structural barriers arising from separate educational systems, as well as the systemic barriers experienced by underserved student populations, have been both [exacerbated and brought into keen relief](#) over the past

## Unemployment levels swung from **3.5%** in February to a record **14.7%** in April.

several months as the country grapples with the realities of the pandemic. The pandemic has already exacted a severe [fiscal toll](#) that is likely to get worse in the coming months. The U.S. economy has [plunged into a recession](#). [Unemployment levels](#) have [swung drastically in 2020](#) from 3.5% in February to a high of 14.7% in April, the largest on record since the Great Depression. Further, the many job losses across the country have meant [significant drops in state revenue](#). In a time when additional services are needed, states will be [forced to make deep cuts](#) in order to achieve legislatively mandated, balanced budgets.

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## Opportunity in Crisis

The pandemic has exposed and democratized the pain of systemic pressures that were previously often limited to underserved populations. Students and families across the U.S. are struggling to make sense of a variety of inequities and access barriers that have long plagued the secondary-to-postsecondary transition. State policymakers have an unprecedented opportunity to engage in a redesign effort that fundamentally restructures systems to address pervasive and long-standing challenges.

This Policy Guide explores the intersection of three distinct policy issues — ensuring effective transitions from high school to postsecondary, supporting educational attainment among historically underserved student populations, and addressing the educational impacts of the pandemic — to provide actionable

opportunities for policymakers to make lasting impacts on existing inequities. It outlines relevant context and common challenges in six thematic areas: admissions and enrollment, academic readiness, access to financial resources, experiential learning, new learning environments and non-academic supports. A color-coded check mark beside each policy option indicates whether it is ✓ an immediate action item, ✓ an action item which, if enacted now, would see effects in six to 12 months or

✓ an idea for long-term structural change.

Through this Policy Guide, as well as an upcoming series of Policy Briefs detailing specific issues and policy solutions, Education Commission of the States aims to support state leaders as they enact policies to directly, equitably and positively impact student transitions from high school to postsecondary education.



## Admissions and Enrollment

When schools and colleges closed in spring 2020, it created massive disruptions for the nation's [3.7 million graduating high school seniors](#) and their plans for the fall. Some students found their plans hampered by incomplete preparation; others were unable to meet requirements or deadlines essential to staying on their postsecondary trajectory. This presents significant concerns about the process and logistics of secondary-to-postsecondary transitions, namely: college enrollment barriers amplified by disruptions to the end of the spring 2020 semester; changes to enrollment plans in response to arising financial constraints and the shift to online education; and gaps in data, connection and communication that may mean students do not receive the support they need to effectively navigate the space between systems.

### Admissions Requirements

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Historically, college admission decisions have relied heavily on [two types of metrics](#): students' high school performance and their

**An estimated 1 million first-time test-takers were unable to take the ACT or SAT this spring.**

standardized test scores. Both have been disrupted in the 2019-20 school year. Schools have taken [appropriate, short-term measures](#) such as shifting to pass-fail grades and automatic grade promotion; unfortunately, for many seniors, such measures have translated to high school graduation without a true validation that they met necessary requirements. Further, the standardized ACT and SAT college-readiness assessments were [not administered in spring 2020](#), preventing [an estimated 1 million first-time test-takers](#) from taking their exams earlier this year. As a result, many rising juniors and graduating seniors will have neither a strong indication on their high school transcripts of their performance of the past year, nor an assessment measure quantifying their level of college readiness.

## POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Revise admissions systems to use multiple measures.** With test scores missing for much of the current graduating class, major postsecondary systems are [moving to implement test-optional admissions](#); holistically [rethinking admissions practices](#) that give an advantage to students from high-income households could help sustainably level the playing field. Policymakers can support and incentivize these institutional efforts by ✓ developing collaborative agreements with postsecondary systems, ✓ re-examining requirements for state-aid distribution to institutions and ✓ setting guidelines for best practices in admissions policy.

## Shifting Enrollments

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The pandemic shutdown necessitated a [rapid shift to online learning](#) for both high schools and colleges. However, even students able to access online instruction often found it [unsatisfactory](#). Many colleges are considering [adopting hybrid delivery models](#) for fall 2020. Absent the in-person collegiate experience expected from residential four-year institutions, [many students will turn to lower-cost and local options](#), particularly [community colleges](#). While this is a reasonable path forward, those who choose this as a short-term shift may find it [difficult to transfer course credits](#) across institutions in the future. Studies show that, on average, [students lose 40% of their credits upon transfer](#).

## POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Address barriers to cross-institution credit transfer.** [Transferability of course credits](#) has been a [perennial issue](#) for high school students who complete college-credit courses before graduation, as well as for [the 64% of bachelor's degree earners](#) who attend multiple postsecondary institutions on their way to a credential. State

policymakers can work collaboratively with postsecondary institutions and systems to [greatly reduce or eliminate such transfer issues](#). For [instance](#), they can ✓ provide consistent guidance on qualification requirements for introductory courses, ✓ create a transferable core of lower-division courses, ✓ establish guaranteed transfer of an associate degree, ✓ develop common course pathways toward a variety of popular degrees and credentials and/or ✓ develop common-course numbering systems.

## Students Lost From the System

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The pandemic threw the education system into chaos in spring semester 2020. It was difficult — if not impossible — to [track student attendance](#), engagement and performance. Students who might have been noticed if they were chronically absent from the classroom could be missed entirely in the sudden virtual environment. Seniors who managed to complete high school but were struggling academically or financially may also be effectively lost from the system if the pandemic cements their decision to forgo college. For many underserved students, delaying enrollment for a [gap year](#) or two in response to the pandemic means [they will never engage](#) in postsecondary education. For those who do, the data is not promising: Students who fail to pursue postsecondary education immediately after graduating from high school are [much less likely to ever earn a credential](#).

## POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Ramp up communications to keep students engaged.** [Studies have shown](#) that students who receive messaging about the importance of continuing their educational trajectory are more likely to stay on the path. Policymakers can ✓ support communications campaigns that provide clear and consistent guidance on requirements, revised deadlines, financial

aid and [consumer-protection provisions](#). Policymakers can also ✓ streamline application and enrollment so that those practices are more easily communicated. To further support

student engagement, state leaders can ✓ consider building a [near-peer advising corps of recent graduates](#) to re-engage students most likely to be lost from the system.



## Academic Readiness

[According to national data](#), before the pandemic, only 25% of graduating seniors were ready for college-level math courses; only 27% were ready to engage in college-level writing. In addition, [research indicates](#) that between 40% to 60% of entering college students require developmental education in English, math or both subjects. These trends are likely to be amplified by pandemic disruptions. This presents significant concerns about students' academic readiness to engage in college courses, namely: the availability of high school course options that prepare students for postsecondary success; accurate course placement in high school and college in the absence of traditional readiness metrics; and effective and efficient pathways for transitioning students to catch up on content where they have fallen behind.

### College Readiness in High School

The pandemic has [disrupted the education](#) of at least two classes of graduating seniors — the class of 2020 and the class of 2021. For the class of 2021, one of the most beneficial steps to recovery — particularly for students from underserved populations — will be to [engage in credit-bearing college-level coursework](#) during their senior year. Yet, [barriers](#) such as unclear qualification requirements and high course

**Between 40% to 60% percent of entering college students require developmental education in English, math or both subjects.**

costs can prevent engagement. In addition, without appropriate advising, students may engage in courses that [do not provide credits of value](#) for their future trajectory.

### POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Strengthen statewide dual enrollment to improve systems alignment.** In well-aligned systems, students complete their pathways because they know what is required of them and how to access the education they need. [Strong dual enrollment programs](#) serve as a clear on-ramp to a credential of value. Students choose appropriate coursework based on their college and career aspirations; course pathways, in turn, are linked to career pathways. State policy can support efforts to strengthen statewide dual enrollment through ✓ guidance; ✓ allocations; and ✓ regulatory requirements that improve course access and availability, navigational supports, program integrity and credit transfer.

## Accurate Placement and Accelerated Progression

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The pandemic [disrupted assessments](#) across the country in spring 2020. As a result, high schools and colleges will need to find alternate ways to meet students where they are in terms of content knowledge and skills development. Faculty in both systems will need to develop higher levels of [assessment literacy](#) so they can design, use and interpret formative assessments to match students with appropriate content and provide supports for students to catch up to expected academic levels. In addition, students will need [multiple opportunities and methods](#) to demonstrate proficiency.

### POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Consider performance-based models for academic progress.** Much of the disruption of the pandemic was felt in time. These disruptions underscored the fact that typical [time-based policies and measures](#) of student success are not feasible in a universally virtual environment. This creates an opportunity for policymakers to ✓ encourage schools and colleges to adopt [competency-based models](#), where students progress through material as they master it, rather than on an external time frame. State policymakers can ✓ provide flexibility in a variety of areas — including instruction, staffing, assessment and reporting requirements — in service of [equitable student attainment](#).

## Post-Graduation Academic Intervention

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As a result of the pandemic's disruption of the school year, many seniors will be graduating without the benefit of the last few months of high school coursework. This can be particularly detrimental when the content is [critical to student readiness](#) for postsecondary placement in credit-bearing courses. Students from historically underserved populations are [more likely to be placed](#) into traditional developmental sequences. Students required to take these sequences prior to accessing credit courses are [much less likely to ever complete a credential](#).

### POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Incentivize successful academic intervention models.** To accelerate students successfully, schools and colleges will need to look to programs with proven results. [Summer bridge courses](#) can help counter “summer melt” and increase the likelihood of successful transition to credit-bearing postsecondary coursework. Once in postsecondary institutions, students are [much more likely to complete their first credit-bearing course](#) if the institution implements a program of [corequisite remediation](#). State policymakers can ✓ provide guidance and financial incentives and ✓ set requirements to utilize successful bridge programs and corequisite remediation models.



# Access to Financial Resources

In our pre-pandemic economy, [nearly 85% of college students](#) accessed some form of financial aid to support their postsecondary expenses. In an economy hampered by a global pandemic, those financial supports become increasingly critical, even as available funds at the state and federal levels shrink. In the coming months, state policymakers will want to monitor and review areas of particular concern, namely: financial aid eligibility rules that will be difficult or impossible to meet because of pandemic disruptions; increased requests for aid package modifications because of changing student circumstances; and the impact of declining state revenues in a recessionary period on student financial aid.

## Aid Eligibility

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[Completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid](#) is a key step for students to take to secure financial support for their postsecondary pursuits. Yet, early data show that this year's FAFSA completions are [trending 3.2% lower than usual](#). Requirements for documentation, signatures, and physically printing and mailing submissions can slow down students in pandemic lockdown. [Aid eligibility requirements](#), such as student GPA and ACT/SAT scores, will be impossible for many students to meet given end-of-year school closures and assessment cancellations. [Time restrictions](#) on student loans and grant aid can mean that financial support expires before students complete their studies.

**Nearly 85% of college students use financial aid to support their postsecondary expenses.**

## POLICY ACTION IDEA

### Revise financial aid eligibility rules.

State leaders can [✓ examine aid program components](#) — such as hard deadlines, complex application processes and strict eligibility requirements — that are often hurdles for students with the greatest need. These can be replaced with rolling deadlines, streamlined applications and multiple measures for eligibility. In some cases, state aid program eligibility requirements are in statute and will require [✓ legislative change](#) to address. State policymakers can also [✓ work across agencies and roles](#) to [develop better systems](#) that remove some barriers permanently.

## Modifications to Aid Packages

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The pandemic has wreaked havoc on family finances. [Skyrocketing levels of unemployment](#) have put [millions of families](#) into a precarious financial position. Students from these families are facing shifting financial realities that have changed their aid eligibility. Unfortunately, under current rules, existing aid applications can be modified only through [individual student requests](#). This puts the onus on the student, a heavy burden for those already struggling to navigate the system. In addition,

the sheer number of students caught in these circumstances almost guarantees an overwhelming number of requests to a limited workforce of institutional financial aid officers.

### POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Implement holistic solutions that do not depend on student initiative.** As state policymakers make choices about spending federal stimulus money from the [CARES \(Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security\) Act](#), they could ✓ prioritize the establishment of a statewide program that provides a set amount to students to offset postsecondary expenses in the coming semester or year if their parents have lost their job. This allocation could be automatically provided to students whose parents are in the state's unemployment database. After the current pandemic abates and state finances begin to recover, policymakers could ✓ consider continuing such programs to support students experiencing family financial stress.

## Declining State Revenues

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The pandemic has left [state economies struggling](#). State leaders know that [significant budget cuts](#) are looming; the question is not

whether there will be a shortfall to deal with but how much of one they will face. Education budgets — particularly postsecondary education budgets — often [take a large portion of the funding cuts](#) in recessionary times, as there are other revenue sources — family and federal — to bolster these budgets. However, depending on families' ability to pay for college, when tuition is already higher than ever and more families are out of work, creates a perfect storm for students who are already at risk of not attending college.

### POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Focus limited dollars on students with the greatest need.** While the pandemic did not create the inequities present in the financial aid system, it has certainly exacerbated them. Students from historically underserved populations are [bearing the brunt](#) of the effects of the pandemic, both [health](#) and financial. State policymakers can ✓ double down on investments in programs — such as need-based aid — that are known to specifically support those students who might not otherwise attend college. They can also ✓ target funding to community colleges, which will likely be carrying a much greater share of the student population in the next few years.



## Experiential Learning

Experiential learning traditionally involves in-person, hands-on opportunities to manually apply skills learned in traditional classroom settings. Remote learning presents obvious challenges to an instructional model that is based on in-person interactions, but there are ways states can continue delivery of these critical programs to students, including the

**Nationally, **77%** of high schoolers engage in CTE programs.**

[77% of high schoolers](#) who engage in career and technical education programs. To support remote learning models for CTE, policymakers

will need to address several critical issues: delivery of hands-on programs in a virtual world; connecting students to appropriate CTE courses, pathways and experiences; and the role of CTE in developing the future workforce.

## Program Delivery

With the pandemic [spurring a move](#) to virtual education and services, many CTE programs — including apprenticeships, internships and work-based learning — are [striving to figure out](#) how to provide students with appropriate experiences that are true to their mission of authentic engagement. While [many programs have shifted](#) to existing virtual-learning platforms, concerns continue about the rigor of curricula minus the hands-on experience. In addition, [credentialing requirements](#) in many fields include face-to-face hours in a live work environment; such requirements cannot be met in traditional ways while pandemic restrictions are in place.

### POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Revise CTE program requirements to allow for competency-based models.** State policymakers can relieve programs of hands-on, time-based requirements by replacing them with more flexible, [competency-based structures](#) and [multiple methods](#) for meeting competencies that can work across both in-person and virtual environments. Programs that define and measure against competencies and can be adapted across delivery platforms help students certify their learning and demonstrate value to employers regardless of the mode of instruction they experience. State policymakers can ✓ alter requirements to allow virtual engagement with employers to count toward the hands-on portion of CTE program requirements, ✓ provide guidance on moving to competency-based structures and ✓ create incentives for regional partnerships to expand the range of available options.

## Connecting Students to Opportunities

While multiple CTE programs may be offered through local high schools, [students need the support of trained career counselors](#) to develop high-quality, personal career plans early in high school that allow them to take advantage of available coursework and training before graduation. In addition, [educators need to connect with employers](#) to learn which skills are needed for a variety of career pathways and to learn where students can find the programs that will allow them to develop those skills. The pandemic has magnified the difficulties associated with matching students to opportunities; as students go virtual, they are less likely to connect with teachers, counselors, coaches and advisors who could surface their needs and direct them toward appropriate options.

### POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Develop capacity to utilize data in existing state longitudinal data systems.** Data systems that support student connections to career pathways should include information to help educators identify which students need extra support. Survey data from students currently engaged in a variety of CTE programs can provide information about the rigor and quality of experiences. Data systems should also contain information from employers about which skills and credentials are of high value. While the [majority of states](#) have invested in cross-sector data systems, [few have truly developed the capacity to analyze the collected data](#) and create effective policy. State policymakers can help meet these needs by ✓ providing guidance on data priorities and ✓ [encouraging and investing in training on effective data use](#).

## Workforce Development for Economic Recovery

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As the immediate disruption of the pandemic passes, states will need to focus on rebuilding their economies. Prior to the pandemic, over 7 million jobs across the country remained unfilled, in part because of [the lack of skilled applicants](#). [These jobs](#) — the ones that are more recession-proof, are in growth sectors and are able to drive economic prosperity — are likely to require longer-term training programs or skills-development initiatives. This presents a unique challenge. Students will [need programs that will lead to immediate employment](#), yet the real need is for postsecondary pathways that lead to [the kinds of jobs](#) that are going to survive the current crisis.



## New Learning Environments

When instruction moved fully online for most students in spring 2020, it was a radical, emergency move — unexpected, and with the assumption that students and educators would soon return to their brick-and-mortar schools and colleges. Now, it is clear that some, if not all, instruction [will continue in a remote or hybrid environment in 2020-21](#). This highlights the challenges of implementing virtual learning spaces for all students, preparing faculty for effective instructional delivery online and attending to course quality in virtual environments.

### Digital Access

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The pandemic has underscored [the breadth and depth of the digital divide](#), separating students who have stable, consistent access to

### POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Build pathways to long-term workforce development.** The traditional credential pathway will not be feasible for many in the new economy. Leaders from K-12, postsecondary and workforce systems will need to work together to [develop credential pathways with multiple entry and exit points](#), allowing learners to pause and restart multiple times as they toggle between education and work. State policymakers can [encourage this evolution](#) by ✓ providing [guidance on credentials of value](#); ✓ creating [frameworks for credential stacking](#); and ✓ establishing incentives for education and workforce system leaders to work collaboratively to develop, deliver and track the success of such pathways.

**In 2017, 7 million school-age children lived in households without home internet service.**

technology hardware (e.g., desktops, laptops, tablets and handheld devices) and broadband internet service from those who do not. In 2017, [7 million school-age children](#) lived in households without home internet service. States, districts and schools have made heroic efforts to bring both devices and internet service to as many students as possible, ranging from the [distribution of laptops and tablets](#) to [driving buses around town to serve as mobile hotspots](#). Nevertheless, thousands of students have had [no access to instruction at all](#) for the final months of the 2019-20 school year.

## POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Invest in building robust, statewide technology infrastructure.** Providing equitable education services in an increasingly digital world will require investments in technology infrastructure. In some cases, this may mean getting creative with delivery, such as satellite services instead of physical connections to broadband. State policymakers can ✓ [partner with internet-service providers](#) to offer last-mile service to a larger number of households, ✓ [prioritize infrastructure investments in state budgets](#) and ✓ [creatively leverage federal broadband funds](#).

## Online Delivery

Moving beyond the emergency measures required at the end of the 2019-20 school year, schools and institutions have recognized that faculty and teachers [will need significant support](#) in the fall to provide a quality online learning experience to students. Educators will need to move away from adapting existing materials to online delivery and instead [rethink their course and support structures](#) to serve students in virtual environments. They will need to learn how to change instructional structures for effective online delivery; provide tutoring and other supports most effectively online; and deliver instruction through multiple modalities, including handheld devices.

## POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Support educators with intensive professional learning.** Faculty and teachers unfamiliar with online education delivery will need to [develop an entirely new skill set](#) to feel confident in facilitating learning through virtual platforms. State policymakers can support schools and colleges in this effort by ✓ [providing coherent](#)

guidance on locating [virtual teaching and learning resources](#), ✓ [allocating federal CARES Act funds for professional development](#) and ✓ [communicating their support of local and national efforts to develop faculty cohorts working together to master these skills](#).

## High-Quality Virtual Education

Recent polls indicate that [roughly one-sixth of students who had planned to attend a four-year institution this fall](#) may abandon those plans, in part because [their online experiences to date do not seem to justify the cost](#). In the pre-pandemic world, such institutions could promise an immersive, in-person college experience. Now, students see these experiences replaced with remote learning “[on the fly](#).” To be worthy of their investment, students will look to institutions to provide truly high-flex, high-quality course models — incorporating the tenets of competency-based education — and support services that, while being provided through alternate modalities, meet their needs to the same extent as a residential campus.

## POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Incentivize instructional design for the digital world.** Truly effective online education requires a [fundamental redesign](#) of instructional methods, course delivery and student support. State policymakers can ✓ [offer institutional incentives for the development of better digital-instruction models](#) — including the adoption of accessible platforms, a move to competency-based education and faculty training on effective digital delivery. In addition, policymakers can ✓ [provide guidelines and incentives for the development of effective virtual student support services](#).



# Non-Academic Supports

Students' well-being — including mental and physical health, as well as meeting basic needs — inherently affects every facet of their lives, including academic achievement and progress. The transition from secondary to postsecondary is a critical time for students under normal circumstances and requires even more care and intention during the pandemic. In addressing challenges to the delivery of non-academic supports, states may want to pay particular attention to college advising in a virtual environment, food and housing insecurity exacerbated by the pandemic, and capacity to provide mental and emotional health supports to an expanded set of students.

## College Advising

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College advisors will have more on their plates than ever this fall. Students will need [all of the usual supports](#) (e.g., navigating course schedules and understanding where to go for various services), as well as connection and guidance to ease amplified anxieties about [new learning environments](#). Advisors will need to [present key messages](#) through multiple modalities to reach students. Institutions will need to [develop a student communications plan](#) that is widely shared, as well as [build support banks](#) for faculty and advisors that include scripts, templates and FAQ documents.

### POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Support institutional efforts to ramp up online advising.** Policymakers can ✓ share best practices statewide on such topics as intrusive advising, helping students feel connected, and [integrating social and emotional supports](#) in

**Over 4,000 postsecondary institutions were impacted by the pandemic.**

virtual outreach efforts. They can ✓ provide coherent and consistent requirements for virtual advising and student orientation, and ✓ partner with state, local and national organizations to identify students who are more likely to need support. In the longer term, state policymakers can ✓ consider investing in [peer-advising networks for students](#) and [professional support networks for advisors](#).

## Food and Housing

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[Over 4,000 postsecondary institutions](#) were impacted by the pandemic. In response, many [closed dormitories and food-service programs](#) for the last months of the spring 2020 semester. While this was appropriate in the short term, it brought into focus both the inequities faced by historically underserved students, as well as the [volume of students who are food- and housing-insecure](#). According to [recent survey results](#), nearly half of students currently rethinking their decision to attend a four-year institution may be shifting their enrollment to community colleges, which have often [served as a hub for student support services](#). Yet, [recessionary budget cuts to community colleges](#) are likely to mean cuts to social and support services.

### POLICY ACTION IDEA

**Prioritize supports to those most significantly impacted.** State policymakers can ✓ establish

partnerships with other state agencies (e.g., health and human services) to collectively problem-solve and communicate to students about accessing available services. They can ✓ help postsecondary institutions establish [collaborative agreements with food banks and pantries](#), ✓ [advance legislation](#) to support refunds of room and board charges to students, and ✓ direct federal stimulus funds to community colleges for the continued provision of essential student services.

## Mental and Emotional Health

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The pandemic has been a traumatic experience for many students, especially for those from historically underserved populations. It will be important for institutions to be intentional about [increasing capacity](#) for [trauma-informed care](#). Educators and counselors can acknowledge the trauma, connect with students, encourage expression of their

experiences and help build their capacity for healing. With campuses shut down, students will need [access to telehealth services](#) and virtual pathways to form peer-to-peer connections.

### POLICY ACTION IDEA

#### **Eliminate barriers to virtual delivery of critical support services.**

State policymakers can ✓ connect institutions to existing networks of mental health service providers and ✓ work to [remove current policy barriers to telehealth access](#). State education agency staff dedicated to pandemic recovery efforts can ✓ make mental health support a priority consideration. State leaders can ✓ convene stakeholders and partner organizations to increase visibility of the issue, develop best-practice guides and establish networks for effective dissemination. In the longer term, policymakers can ✓ commission qualitative research studies to examine the effectiveness of various interventions.

## Final Thoughts

The challenges outlined in this Policy Guide are difficult and real, as are the pressures on state policymakers to quickly seek effective solutions that will limit the harm of the COVID-19 pandemic for the greatest number of people. Certainly, immediate action has been necessary, and states have worked tirelessly over the past several months to rise to the challenge. Ad hoc solutions have been put in place to limit the damaging repercussions to individuals, families and communities. Certain decisions — such as the allocation of federal stimulus funds — have required swift action. Yet, every crisis also presents an opportunity — and given the immensity of its impact, the pandemic also presents an unprecedented opening.

This Policy Guide draws out equity concerns that are deepening with the pandemic. To effectively support historically underserved students, state policymakers will need to identify and locate these students; determine which policy interventions will best support them; connect with partners — including other state agencies, as well as national and local organizations — to deliver appropriate services; and communicate widely to students and families to ensure awareness of available supports. With a keen focus on equity-oriented policy, state leaders can help ensure that the students with the least resources do not experience disproportionately negative impacts from the fallout of the pandemic.



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