

April 17, 2020

Open Letter to Texas Leaders on Supporting College Students During COVID-19

As Texas higher education organizations dedicated to college access, affordability, and student support systems, we jointly recommend that institutions, state agencies, state leaders, and legislators place student needs at the forefront of the COVID-19 response.

While the COVID-19 pandemic continues to upend life across Texas, students are experiencing unprecedented disruptions to their education — including the transition to digital classrooms; closure of cafeterias, libraries, and student support offices; and students scrambling to leave dormitories. Many students with campus jobs have suddenly lost income and are not covered by work-study provisions in the CARES Act. Students who continue to work in essential businesses risk their own health as they support Texans in hospitals, grocery stores, and more. These circumstances have left the most vulnerable Texas students in peril.

During this critical moment, institutions, elected officials, and state leaders must collaborate on policy that will ensure Texas students can move through this crisis into a future of prosperity. We support equitable policies that assist students most impacted through this crisis. By prioritizing student needs, particularly for our most vulnerable students, we are investing in the economic recovery of Texas. Reflecting this support, we share the recommendations below for how Texas leaders can respond now and in the next legislative session.

COVID-19: What Texas Can Do Right Now to Help Students

Recommendation: Align campus-level efforts to address basic student needs, including internet access, while prioritizing students most in need.

We recognize the great work of institutions to rapidly respond to the current crisis. As Texas builds a plan, we recommend a clear and coordinated process for how emergency aid will be distributed at both the state and campus level. Funds should be made quickly available to students who face food or housing insecurity, who are parenting, or who may be in danger in their current living situation. We ask institutions to prioritize immigrant students, undocumented students, DACA recipients, students enrolled part-time, first-generation college students, student parents, former foster care youth, financially independent students, and historically underrepresented students in the emergency aid process. Emergency aid should not be based solely on Pell eligibility, as eligibility alone does not include the range of students who need access to aid. Additionally, ensuring internet access for students is a critical step that must be addressed immediately to ensure all students can continue making academic progress.

Recommendation: Simplify communications on emergency aid and multi-tier resources (e.g., SNAP, health care, unemployment benefits, childcare, academic advising) and create support measures to help students navigate resources.

Given the range of supports, regional initiatives, and new aid available, understanding how to access benefits is itself a barrier. Students in crisis need to know what resources they qualify for and who to contact for

assistance. We urge institutions to use campus student liaisons--under provisions passed in the 86th legislative session--and to expand other student support systems such as financial aid offices or academic advising. These supports will promote coordinated communication regarding housing, food, unemployment, counseling, child care, and academic resources. Institutions might consider a train-the-trainer model whereby all staff on campus can be trained on existing student resources and how to help students navigate them.

Recommendation: Ensure no negative student loan or financial aid impact to students as a result of the crisis.

Texas students, many of whom faced only several days' notice that they are losing their on-campus housing and jobs, are experiencing numerous challenges. In addition to the personal and familial housing and financial insecurity exacerbated by the crisis, students confront the additional challenges of adapting to digital classrooms, all under the severe stress caused by a global pandemic. As a result, students may have to reduce academic hours; some may even have to defer their education to a later time.

No student should be penalized, lose aid eligibility, or be limited in applying to future aid, as a result of academic action taken during semesters impacted by the COVID-19 crisis.

In addition, aligned with action taken at the federal level in the CARES Act, all state and private student loan payments should be suspended until at least September 30, 2020 and accrue zero interest during this period. All involuntary collection activity for state and private student loan debt should be suspended until at least September 30, 2020. Any involuntary collections for state and private student loans since March 13, 2020 should be returned in line with the federal relief.

All 2020 recipients of the Texas College Work-Study Program should continue to receive their work-study funds regardless of if the student was able to continue employment.

Recommendation: Adopt a plan to actively protect campus climate in internet-based classrooms especially regarding civil rights, school safety, and harassment (including cyber-harassment).

Texas students are already facing immense stress and a number of challenges due to the COVID-19 crisis. Texas institutions must proactively work to ensure that all of the safety measures for ensuring a productive inperson campus climate are adapted to meet the needs of the exclusively digital learning spaces of today. Institutions should consider specific measures to protect students from Native, Black, Brown, LGTBQ+, immigrant and other impacted communities, especially individuals who identify as Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) that may have been subjected to racism related to COVID-19.

Recommendation: Dedicate resources for mental health care access and teletherapy.

As students' lives are shifted, it is more important than ever for Texas to provide access to mental healthcare for students. We recommend institutions dedicate resources and time to create a plan to support the mental health and emotional well-being of students experiencing prolonged distance learning and social isolation. Specifically, we advise providing clear communication to students on how to make a teletherapy appointment. We urge all leaders in Texas to consider other ways students can access and benefit from services ensuring their mental and emotional health.

Recommendation: Implement a transcript notation policy that signifies the Spring 2020 semester occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students are concerned about how this semester will affect their future goals--such as scholarships, graduate school applications, honors programs, and more. Universities have led decision-making by implementing Pass/Fail options. We support further measures to ensure that long after the pandemic ends, students are not negatively impacted by classes dropped or their choice to use Pass/Fail instead of letter grading. To support institutions in this effort, we recommend the Higher Education Coordinating Board provide statewide articulation of the Pass/Fail options and other alternative grading policies being offered.

Recommendation: Increase outreach efforts to and reduce barriers for admitted students from the high school class of 2020 and students transferring institutions.

As the COVID-19 crisis will likely continue into the summer months and perhaps beyond, the high school class of 2020 is facing unprecedented barriers to enrollment. If we don't take concerted action, we are facing the likelihood of the lowest college enrollment rate in recent Texas history. High school seniors intent on pursuing a postsecondary education are now sorting through complicated financial aid forms, struggling to access and pass required exams to demonstrate college readiness, complete enrollment forms, and secure transcripts and other documents from their high school institutions, often without the traditional counseling and coaching support they would have received to complete these complex transition processes. Students intent on transferring institutions are encountering similar obstacles.

We recommend institutions increase staffing in enrollment management offices and financial aid offices to support outreach to incoming students at this time. Institutions should provide clear, published guidelines for students to help them navigate the complicated steps. We also recommend removing barriers to enrollment such as waiving housing deposits and allowing for alternatives to demonstrate college readiness that don't require testing during this time of social distancing.

COVID-19: What Texas Can Do Next Session for Students

Recommendation: Texas must vastly increase its need-based financial aid to support students as they rebound from the economic impacts of COVID-19.

COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing difficulties many students were facing, including covering the many costs of housing, food, health care, transportation, books, fees and numerous other costs today's students face even as college costs continue to rise and student debt skyrockets. This global crisis has further exacerbated a college affordability crisis.

Texas must invest in today's students through a vast expansion of need-based aid programs. Students are the future of Texas, and require this critical need-based support from the state to overcome the ramifications of these crises. Expansion of need-based financial aid programs--including the TEXAS Grant and TEOG programs--will be critical in the next legislative session to ensure students facing the economic fallout of COVID-19 can afford to participate and succeed in Texas higher education.

Recommendation: Increase targeted supports for today's students, such as emergency aid and wraparound services.

The majority of Texas students today come from what have been previously considered “nontraditional” backgrounds. Today’s Texas students are student-parents, students attending two-year institutions, adult learners, independent students, and students from other historically underrepresented groups.

Because of underlying inequities, many of the challenges today’s students face in earning a higher education credential have been dramatically worsened by the COVID-19 crisis. In response, Texas should drastically increase support for today’s students through funding and the legislative creation of targeted programs. We recommend institutions create emergency aid programming that extends to 2021 to address ongoing student needs as we recover from the pandemic. Other measures such as utilizing campus liaisons to assist particular student populations, including adult learners and student parents in state need-based financial aid, and investing in wraparound campus services are examples of steps that can be taken next legislative session to help today’s students recover from the COVID-19 crisis.

Recommendation: Bolster access to comprehensive campus mental health care.

Texas must be prepared to support the mental health of students, particularly as they navigate the transition back to campuses and ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Texas students already experience a shortage of mental health counselors. The International Association of Counseling Services recommends college counseling centers maintain a ratio of one full-time professional staff member for every 1,000-1,500 students, yet we understand many Texas universities struggle to meet that ratio. Texas must invest in student mental health systems that are accessible and affordable.

Recommendation: Take action to combat the student debt crisis in Texas by implementing state-level legislative protections against unscrupulous student loan servicer activity.

Texans will continue to face the severe economic fallout of the COVID-19 crisis, which has exacerbated the pre-existing student debt crisis. For the Texas economy to rebound with strength, Texans cannot remain burdened by student debt as a result of unscrupulous servicing practices.

Strong state-level student borrower protections are needed to ensure that Texas student loan debt is mitigated as quickly and as cost-effectively as possible. State laws requiring servicers to inform borrowers of all repayment options, including income-based repayment and loan forgiveness program eligibility, apply payments in a manner that maximizes loan payoff instead of servicer fees, and the creation of a student loan ombudsman are examples of the many steps The Legislature must take to safeguard student loan borrowers as they recover from the financial ramifications of the COVID-19 crisis.

Recommendation: Create consumer protections for student loan borrowers in default so that Texans can move forward after the pandemic.

While federal student loan debt collections are currently on hold due to the CARES Act, the economic impacts of COVID-19 will affect borrowers for years to come. Texas should create ongoing protections for borrowers in default or delinquency to ensure borrowers are protected from wage and income garnishment and have a

manageable way to make payments. Additionally, such protections should include private student loan borrowers and borrowers with non-federally-backed student loans.

We look forward to working with leaders across Texas on navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. To discuss these recommendations in greater detail or collaborate on other steps for students, please contact the leaders of the Texas Postsecondary Advocates Coalition and the Austin College Attainment Network.

Sincerely,

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Austin College Attainment Network

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The Texas Postsecondary Advocates Coalition is a group of organizations committed to college affordability, access, and student supports.

The Austin College Attainment Network (ACAN) is a network of Central Texas organizations committed to removing systemic barriers to post-secondary credentials so that every student can reach their highest potential.

Austin Partners in Education
Austin College Attainment Network
Breakthrough Central Texas
Center for Public Policy Priorities
College Forward
Con Mi MADRE
Deeds Not Words
E3 Alliance
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