

How State Advocates Can Improve College Student Success and Opportunity

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Introduction

The Supreme Court's 2023 decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (SFFA) effectively ended affirmative action in college admissions — supercharging the decade's mounting backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Since entering office, the Trump administration has used that ruling as a [cudgel](#) to advance its anti-DEI agenda, relying on a [misinterpretation](#) of the decision, paired with the threat of Title VI enforcement and funding cuts, to pressure institutions to retreat from anything that could be labeled race-conscious, including scholarships, student programs, and outreach.

Although some of the administration's anti-DEI actions have been deemed unlawful by the courts, the landscape remains troubling. The immediate chilling effect has already dismantled lawful supports for underserved communities across a range of sectors — from higher education to major corporations and law firms. Now, stakeholders are seeing early signs of its impact on the very group at the heart of this debate: students.

A February 2026 [Class Action](#) analysis of first-year enrollment after SFFA shows sharp declines in under-represented students at the nation's top 50 universities: Black freshman enrollment fell by 27% and Latino enrollment dropped 10%. As these highly qualified Black and Latino students are pushed towards less-selective colleges, they displace other students of color into even lower-ranked schools — a “cascade” effect that Class Action [notes](#) is reflected in this data. The consequences of that dynamic are [well-documented](#): students who “undermatch,” enrolling in institutions below their academic preparation level, are 15 percentage points less likely to complete their degrees than similarly prepared peers.

With many direct levers for advancing DEI under heightened scrutiny, advocates have an opportunity to identify and pursue alternative state-level strategies that can still meaningfully improve outcomes for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

Here, we provide a roadmap that advocates could push state policymakers to implement — one that advances evidence-based policies that create holistic opportunities for under-represented students that will allow them to thrive in college and career.

Policy Guide for State Advocates

Increase Access to Postsecondary Education

Expand Access to Dual Enrollment Programs

Dual enrollment programs allow high school students to take college-level courses and earn credit before graduating, offering a pathway to postsecondary education that can advance equitable access at scale. Today, [more than 80% of high schools](#) offer dual enrollment options, with [about a third](#) of high school students enrolling in at least one course by graduation, and popularity is growing. Participation in dual enrollment [nearly doubled](#) from 2013 to 2023, with more than 2.8 million students taking dual enrollment courses during the 2023-24 school year alone. These programs are [linked](#) to higher college enrollment, completion, and even higher wages after high school, while also saving students money by shortening the time to a credential. Despite these gains, access remains uneven; white and higher-income students are [far more likely](#) to participate in dual enrollment than their under-represented peers. Ensuring equitable access to these opportunities is essential to closing longstanding gaps in college preparation and credential attainment.

State-Level Policy Actions Advocates Should Champion

- Broaden entry requirements and provide students with multiple points of entry, including (but not limited to) the successful completion or fulfillment of prerequisites or demonstrated proficiency (through exam scores or GPA) in the subject area in which they seek to be dually enrolled
- Require that information about dual enrollment (including fees, course offerings, benefits, and course requirements) be provided to all high school students and families. States should also build awareness through active outreach to middle schools and community-based organizations
- Minimize or eliminate students' out-of-pocket costs, such as course and exam fees
- Require schools to automatically enroll students in dual enrollment courses who meet eligibility requirements (with the option to opt out)
- Revise state K-12 accountability systems to incentivize schools to provide all students — particularly those from underserved backgrounds — opportunities to enroll and succeed in dual enrollment programs

Promising State Model: Ohio

In 2017, Ohio [expanded](#) access to its College Credit Plus (CCP) dual enrollment program through its Innovative Programs (IP) policy. Through IP, the state allows approved high schools and colleges to waive placement-testing requirements and instead use alternative eligibility measures such as high school grades or offer open access to all students. The policy was created in response to concerns that testing requirements were excluding students who could succeed in dual enrollment if given adequate supports. To address fears that broader access might decrease student success in the advanced coursework, the IP policy requires high school/college partnerships to design and implement targeted supports specifically geared toward the needs of under-represented students. Early research provides [suggestive evidence](#) that the policy has expanded participation; for Black and Latino students specifically, the policy was associated with a 15% to 30% increase in dual enrollment participation.

Increase Access to Advanced Coursework in High School

As EdTrust has [consistently uplifted](#), research shows that access to advanced coursework opportunities, such as through Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, lead students to increased academic outcomes, including higher graduation rates and fewer absences and suspensions. Despite these clear advantages, far too many students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are excluded from these opportunities. This disparity is driven by both fewer AP and IB courses offered at under-resourced schools and inequitable access to those courses within the schools that do offer them; EdTrust's own [research](#) shows that if AP participation reflected the demographics of the nation's student body, 640,000 more students of color and low-income students would be enrolled.

State-Level Policy Actions Advocates Should Champion

- Require districts to create policies that more equitably enroll and group students in advanced coursework, such as open or automatic enrollment
- Allocate more resources to expand the availability of IB, AP, and other advanced courses in low-income schools and schools serving a high percentage of students of color
- Minimize or eliminate students' out-of-pocket costs, such as course and exam fees
- Revise state K-12 accountability systems to incentivize schools to provide all students — particularly those from underserved backgrounds — opportunities to enroll and succeed in advanced coursework programs

Promising State Model: Washington

In 2019, Washington became the [first state](#) to adopt an automatic enrollment policy for advanced coursework for all of its high-schools. Made effective in the 2021-22 school year, the policy requires that districts automatically enroll students in advanced math, English, and science courses if they meet or exceed state standards on eighth grade or high school assessments. The policy, inspired by prior [success at the district level](#), addresses equity gaps in advanced coursework by removing barriers like teacher or counselor recommendations and opt-in requirements. [Research](#) on its effectiveness at the district level indicates that when advanced courses are “opt-out” rather than “opt-in,” overall enrollment in advanced coursework increases, with larger gains for under-represented students and for students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Expand Direct Admissions Practices

Direct admissions programs use state longitudinal data systems to automatically admit students to college based on academic indicators such as GPA, coursework, and standardized test scores. These policies are rapidly expanding: [17 states](#) have implemented or plan to implement statewide direct admissions systems; all but [one](#) of these have been adopted since the start of this decade. Direct admissions is also growing among institutions, with more than 230 colleges [partnering](#) with the Common App for its direct admissions program for the 2026 to 2027 application season, growing from 70 partners when it [launched](#) in 2023. Notably, early research suggests that direct admissions can help alleviate the equity gap in postsecondary education: [analysis](#) of the Common App's earlier pilot program found that direct admissions increased the likelihood that students of color and those from low-income or first-generation backgrounds would apply to college.

State-Level Policy Actions Advocates Should Champion

- Adopt statewide direct admission policies for public higher education institutions that proactively inform students that they have met the admissions criteria
- Improve state longitudinal data systems, public reporting, and student-facing information to ensure that policymakers, advocates, and communities have access to disaggregated data on access, participation, and outcomes. This data should be used to assess academic quality, identify inequities, and hold systems accountable, while protecting sensitive student information
- To reduce barriers between admission and enrollment, pair early admission offers with financial aid and scholarship estimates and allow admitted students to bypass any supplementary application requirements (e.g., personal essays, letters of recommendation)

Promising State Model: Idaho

Idaho's [direct admissions system](#) automatically admits high school seniors to some or all of the state's public colleges based on ACT/SAT scores, unweighted GPAs, and course credits. After determining eligibility using the state's longitudinal data system, students receive guaranteed admission letters each fall. To enroll, students simply select a college and submit a free, brief application, which typically [takes](#) 13-17 minutes to complete. Early [research](#) has found that the state's direct admission program increased first-time undergraduate enrollment by 4-8% and in-state enrollment by 8-15%. Notably, the research found minimal-to-no impacts on the enrollment of Pell-eligible students, underscoring the need to concurrently reduce other barriers between admission and enrollment, such as financial constraints.

Invest in K-12 School Counselors, Career Advisers, and College-Access Programs

K-12 school counselors, career advisers, and college-access programs collectively foster a "college-going culture" by advising students through the process of completing college and financial aid applications, making informed postsecondary choices, preparing for standardized tests, and accessing college visits. Research [shows](#) that these supports matter for postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and degree completion, with [one study](#) finding that adding just one high school counselor can increase four-year college enrollment by 10 percentage points. Yet the students who need the most support — those in schools serving large numbers of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds — typically [have the fewest counselors available](#). Compounding this challenge, [over 70% of school counselors](#) are white, leaving a significant gap in racial representation that can affect students' sense of belonging and support.

State-Level Policy Actions Advocates Should Champion

- Expand state investments to train and support a pipeline of strong and diverse school counselors in college and career readiness to ensure that every student receives high-quality college and career advising support in high school
- Facilitate and invest in research and the scaling of best practices that help all students navigate their pathways to success. Prioritize the creation of resources and tools that enable navigators to provide evidence-based, equitable, high-quality guidance to all students

- Foster partnerships between local education agencies (LEAs), colleges, universities, community-based organizations, and industries to ensure seamless transitions for all students from high school to postsecondary education and the workforce
- Support the development and use of new technology platforms that have proven effective in empowering counselors to better support students throughout their college and career readiness journey
 - Explore how emerging technologies, including AI, can enhance counseling and advising to ensure that every student receives personalized, timely guidance
- Expand college-access programs, particularly in economically disadvantaged K-12 schools, to complement the work of federal TRIO programs
- Equip schools with easy-to-understand resources to provide students with accessible and consistent information about postsecondary options, including graduation rates, enrollment outcomes, and loan and repayment options

Promising State Model: Maryland

Maryland's landmark [Blueprint for Maryland's Future](#) public education law, enacted in 2021, established a statewide college and career counseling program that [requires](#) all public middle and high school students (grades 6-12) to receive career exploration and individualized advising, including guidance in selecting one or more post-college and career readiness pathways. Students receiving special education services, including those with the most significant needs, are also required to receive differentiated career counseling tailored to their goals and supports. The program officially launched in fall 2023, and while its impacts have not yet been formally evaluated, the state has begun collecting early implementation data through annual career counseling reports.

Curtail Admissions Practices That Disproportionately Harm Under-Represented Students

In the wake of the end of race-conscious admissions policies, it is more important than ever to eliminate practices that further tilt the playing field toward wealthier and whiter applicants. Binding early decision, which requires students to commit before seeing their financial aid package in exchange for a higher chance of acceptance, greatly restricts students' ability to compare academic and financial options — a constraint that disproportionately harms students who cannot afford to make uninformed financial commitments. Indeed, a 2022 [report](#) found that applicants from the wealthiest ZIP codes were twice as likely to apply early decision as all other applicants. Legacy and donor admissions, which give preference to the children of alumni and donors, similarly [reinforce inequities by disproportionately benefiting white students](#) who are [more likely](#) to be the children of alumni of selective colleges.

While the use of legacy preferences has declined under increased scrutiny from advocates and policymakers after SFFA, universities have increasingly adopted early decision, leveraging it to boost yields and perceptions of selectivity. As noted in a December 2025 *New York Times* [opinion piece](#), this includes the University of Michigan, which adopted binding early decision [for the first time](#) in 2025, and the University of Virginia, which reinstated the practice [in 2019](#) after previously eliminating it due to concerns about barriers for students from low-income backgrounds.

State-Level Policy Actions Advocates Should Champion

- Enact bans on legacy and donor admissions, following legislative models from Colorado, California, Illinois, Maryland, and Virginia
- Leverage available state levers (e.g., funding formulas) to restrict the use of binding early decision

Promising State Model: California

In September 2024, California [passed](#) a law banning legacy and donor preferences in admissions at nonprofit colleges in California, covering both public and private institutions in the state. Despite the significance of the law — California is only the second state in the nation (after Maryland) to prohibit legacy admissions across both public and private institutions — much of its [original enforcement mechanism](#) was stripped out during the legislative process. What began as a proposal with strong financial penalties was ultimately softened into a reporting requirement for noncompliant institutions to publicly disclose how many students are admitted based on legacy or donor preferences. Moreover, the law [defines](#) covered private institutions as those that “receive, or benefit from, state-funded student financial assistance or that enroll students who receive state-funded student financial assistance.” As such, private institutions that forgo such state funding are exempted from the law. Although these provisions weaken the policy’s immediate impact, the law still holds promise for increasing transparency and accountability in admissions practices across the country.

Increase Funding for Postsecondary Education

Require FAFSA Completion for High School Graduation

[Many students](#) — particularly those of color and those from low-income backgrounds — are deterred from applying for financial aid and enrolling in college due to a lack of clear information about available federal aid and the application process.

The high school class of 2024, for instance, [left almost \\$4.4 billion](#) in Pell Grants unclaimed because many students did not complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Requiring high school seniors to complete the FAFSA as a graduation requirement through a statewide policy would ensure that they are exposed to the form and develop an understanding of the federal (and, often, state) student aid available to them. Completing the FAFSA can consequently set students up for success in higher education by reducing the financial barriers that often prevent them from attending and completing college. It’s also crucial that these policies include an opt-out waiver — or accept an alternative application for financial aid — for students who cannot or choose not to complete the FAFSA, such as undocumented students. States should allow school counselors or other in-school staff to approve a student’s decision to opt out of this requirement and should not penalize LEAs for schools with approved opt-outs.

State-Level Policy Actions Advocates Should Champion

- [Join](#) the 14 states that have implemented universal FAFSA policies by requiring completion of the financial aid form for graduation
- Ensure universal FAFSA policies include an opt-out waiver — or accept an alternative application — for students who cannot or do not want to complete the form

Promising State Model: Texas

In June 2019, the Texas governor signed House Bill 3, which [requires](#) students to complete and submit the FAFSA or the Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA) before graduating from high school. Students are exempt from submitting a FAFSA or TASFA if their parent or guardian completes an opt-out form, if the student is 18 or older and completes an opt-out form independently, or if their school counselor waives the requirement for “good cause.” Each school district and open-enrollment charter school must adopt an opt-out form approved by the Texas Education Agency and make it available in English, Spanish, and any other language spoken by a majority of students in language programs within the district or school. If a school fails to make an opt-out form available to students and families, students cannot be deemed out of compliance with the requirement.

Following the implementation of the FAFSA high school graduation requirement, Texas experienced [significant improvements](#) in FAFSA submission and completion rates. The high school class of 2022, the first class subject to this requirement, saw a 13.9% increase in FAFSA submissions and a 12.5% increase in FAFSA completions in Texas.

Increase Funding and Access for Need-Based State Financial Aid Programs, Including Direct Funding Toward Basic Needs

With more than 3 in 5 college students [experiencing](#) some form of food or housing insecurity and a [majority of voters](#) deeming education unaffordable, ensuring equitable access to adequate financial aid is not only essential but urgent. Unfortunately, state financial aid has not kept pace with rising tuition costs, leaving more students with unmet financial need and increasing their reliance on borrowing. These funding shortfalls can widen existing inequities, creating additional barriers that deter Black and Latino students and students from low-income backgrounds from pursuing higher education. Moreover, a recent EdTrust report [found](#) that many state financial aid programs have exclusions or restrictions — including residency or citizenship requirements, income thresholds, and academic requirements — that limit access and success for the most vulnerable students.

State-Level Policy Actions Advocates Should Champion

- Increase need-based aid award amounts to better support students from diverse economic backgrounds
- Expand eligibility criteria for state financial aid programs to allow a broader range of students to qualify for aid
- Prioritize simplicity and flexibility to ensure that state need-based aid applications remain accessible for all eligible students
 - Evaluate utilizing public benefit program eligibility (SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, etc.) to identify and automatically enroll students for state aid programs
- Make sure that state aid is “first dollar,” allowing students to “stack” other grants, like Pell Grants, on top of state aid so they can use the additional funding toward non-tuition costs like housing, food, and transportation
- Require or incentivize state higher education institutions to direct more institutional aid toward need-based aid versus non-need-based scholarships

- Consider whether changes are needed to ensure more college students, particularly underserved students, are eligible for statewide benefits programs
 - Invest in benefits navigators at higher education institutions to assist students in determining eligibility for benefits programs and applying for assistance
 - Invest in outreach to institutions to ensure all students understand benefits eligibility requirements and application processes

Promising State Model: Indiana

Established in 1990, Indiana's [21st Century Scholars program](#) provides eligible students from low-income backgrounds with scholarships covering up to 100% of college tuition at two- and four-year colleges. The program also provides advising and other student success resources, such as dedicated support staff, to help students persist through college graduation. In 2023, Indiana expanded access to this scholarship program through [House Enrolled Act \(HEA\) 1449-2023](#), which automatically enrolls financially eligible seventh and eighth grade students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch.

Bolster State-Level Funding for HBCUs/MSIs and Other Institutions That Serve as Engines of Socioeconomic Mobility

Minority-serving institutions (MSIs) [enroll](#) 4.8 million students — more than 25% of all undergraduate students and half of all undergraduate students of color in the country. These institutions also educate a disproportionate share of students from low-income backgrounds and play a crucial role in expanding economic opportunity. Yet, despite their outsized impact, they have been consistently underfunded by states for the [last three decades](#). As socioeconomic inequality continues to widen, states must do far more to correct this imbalance.

State-Level Policy Actions Advocates Should Champion

- Provide the federally required state matching funds for HBCUs that were established under the Second Morrill Act of 1890
- Compel states to adopt equitable funding approaches through state outcomes-based funding (OBF) formulas that incentivize the enrollment and completion of under-represented students
- Mandate a statewide equity funding audit that specifically examines current and historical funding inequities across institutions — particularly those that predominately serve students of color and students from low-income backgrounds

Promising State Model: Indiana

Following large, disproportionate declines in enrollment and completion rates for low-income students in recent years, Indiana policymakers [revised](#) their outcomes-based formula in 2024 to include low-income enrollment and completion (measured via Pell Grant status). Although the effects of this change haven't yet been studied, state policymakers intend to leverage these accountability measures to prompt institutions to take concrete action to reduce disparities for low-income students.

Implement Strategies That Increase Student Success

Create Positive College Campus Climates for All Students — Including Students of Color

Research [clearly](#) shows that college students of color who feel safe and welcomed on campus and receive continuous, tailored support have positive social and academic outcomes, including increased participation and graduation rates. A 2025 [study](#) found that evidence-based belonging practices led to a 12% increase in students earning A and B grades and a 26% reduction in Ds, Fs, and withdrawals. Sadly, [research](#) also suggests that students of color are less likely than their white peers to report feeling at home on their college campus.

The current administration has actively exacerbated this disparity by targeting the very programs designed to foster a sense of belonging for students of color. Worse still, the federal government has effectively abandoned its responsibilities to safeguard students against hate. For all of 2025, the Department of Education's (ED) Office for Civil Rights (OCR) [resolved zero](#) cases of racial harassment, despite nearly 1,000 pending cases. This is particularly alarming, as OCR received nearly 24,000 discrimination complaints in Fiscal Year 2025, a record-breaking count that is “more than three times the number from 2003 and nearly double the number from a decade ago,” according to an April 2026 [report](#) by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Minority Staff.

As the federal government continues to undermine campus climates for students of color, we urge state policymakers to step in and ensure that colleges remain safe, welcoming environments where every student can learn and thrive.

State-Level Policy Actions Advocates Should Require of Institutions

- Mandatory campus climate metrics that incentivize institutions to pursue evidence-based, lawful strategies that help meet the needs of student communities while remaining open to all (e.g., offices of belonging, campus affinity groups, mentorship programs, and tutoring initiatives)
- Inform all incoming and current students about existing on-campus programs offering social, academic, and economic support
- Provide transparency regarding the campus climate for all incoming and current students
 - Inform incoming and current students about their college's annual data on student reports of discrimination due to race/ ethnicity from their own campus reporting system, OCR's data on Title VI complaints, and federally recognized accreditor complaints
- Establish clearer student complaint processes for student discrimination/harassment based on race, color, national origin, ethnicity, ancestry, or actual or perceived shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics and audit existing processes to ensure they remain fully accessible to all students

Promising State Models: New York and Washington

- In August 2025, New York state [enacted](#) a law requiring all colleges and universities to designate a Title VI coordinator by November 2026 — the first of its kind in the nation. Under the law, a dedicated coordinator will oversee the institution's compliance with Title VI by establishing clear procedures for investigating and resolving complaints while providing supportive measures to students who file them, providing annual notices to all students and employees that include the institution's nondiscrimination statement, reporting procedures, and coordinator contact information, and implementing mandatory trainings for the campus community.
- In May 2021, Washington state enacted [Senate Bill 5227](#) to address persistent inequities in student retention and the under-representation of faculty of color. Under the law, colleges are required to conduct a comprehensive assessment of their campus climates every five years, with a particular goal of “understand[ing] the current state of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the learning, working, and living environment on campus for students, faculty, and staff.” Colleges are also required to conduct, at a minimum, annual listening and feedback sessions around DEI for the entire campus community in the years between comprehensive assessments.

Invest in Proven, Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success (CASS)

Beyond the barriers that limit access and funding to postsecondary education, students of color and those from low-income backgrounds also face disproportionate challenges that hinder their ability to persist in and complete their programs. Students' academic outcomes are impacted by lived realities that have nothing to do with academics. For underserved students, these realities often [include](#) family responsibilities, financial instability, and health issues. The accumulation of these barriers can undermine academic success and make it all the more challenging to navigate the bureaucratic systems that govern a program's administrative requirements, such as registration, financial-aid, degree planning, etc. To meet these students where they are, institutions should invest in comprehensive approaches to student success (CASS) programs that address multiple barriers at once.

State-Level Policy Actions Advocates Should Champion

- Expand state investments that enable the state's higher education institutions to implement evidence-based, comprehensive student supports (i.e., a coordinated set of academic, financial, social, and emotional services). These models should include structured pathways, proactive advising, financial assistance, and case management approaches that ensure students receive timely and coordinated assistance.

Promising State Model: New York

New York State Gov. Kathy Hochul has directed [investments](#) toward expanding the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) and Accelerate, Complete, Engage (ACE) within the State University of New York (SUNY) system. Originally [developed](#) by the City University of New York system (CUNY), ASAP serves associate degree students while ACE serves bachelor's degree students. Both programs target low-income students and provide comprehensive wrap-around supports, [including](#) dedicated advising with low caseloads, career services, and tutoring; priority course registration and a full-time enrollment requirement in the first year; and financial assistance such as a tuition gap waiver, free textbooks, and free Transit MetroCards.

The results of ACE and ASAP have been [significant](#), leading seven states to replicate the programs. For instance, CUNY ASAP nearly [doubled](#) three-year associate degree completion rates, increasing them from 22% to 40%, while ACE [increased](#) five-year bachelor's degree completion by roughly 12 percentage points, from 57% to 69%. A version of ASAP implemented in Ohio produced [similarly](#) strong results, including doubled three-year graduation rates and increased transfers to four-year institutions.