

June 9, 2020

The Honorable Holly Mitchell  
Chair, Senate Budget & Fiscal Review  
Committee  
State Capitol, Room 5050  
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Philip Ting  
Chair, Assembly Budget Committee  
State Capitol, Room 6026  
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Richard Roth  
Chair, Senate Budget Subcommittee #1  
State Capitol, Room 2080  
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Kevin McCarty  
Chair, Assembly Budget Subcommittee #2  
State Capitol, Room 2136  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**RE: Equity Priorities for 2020-21 State Budget for Higher Education**

Dear Chairs Mitchell, Ting, Roth, and McCarty,

As organizations committed to equity in higher education, we urge you to prioritize college access and student success for our most vulnerable students in the 2020-21 State Budget. We understand the difficult decisions before the Governor and the Legislature presented by the current pandemic, as well as the urgency for federal action to provide greater support. Despite these realities, **we are concerned both about the short-term emergency response and the long-term equity implications of our actions and believe Black, Latinx, undocumented, and low-income students must be at the center of our policy and budget decisions.** These students face well-documented success gaps in distance learning that stand to be further perpetuated by COVID-19.

Given the long-standing inequities that have been exacerbated and laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic, **we have identified three equity-driven, high-priority investments** that would help ensure our most vulnerable California students don't become casualties of this unprecedented public health crisis:

**1. Establish a COVID-19 Intersegmental Response Council**

The COVID-19 crisis has altered life for millions of Californians overnight. Exacerbating this unparalleled reality is the segmented solution-finding underway within the various bodies of higher education in California. What has become painfully obvious in the early aftermath of COVID-19 is that the absence of a statewide postsecondary coordinating body has forced a patchwork approach to identifying and understanding severe gaps throughout our entire higher education system. In turn, addressing the areas of greatest need and maximizing efficiency is a near impossibility.

COVID-19 is dramatically highlighting the dire need for collaboration and communication across higher education segments. Now is the time for the state to immediately **establish an Intersegmental COVID-19 Response Council to tackle specific issues related to students' transitions across systems and serve as the state's central repository for guidance to students, families and the public** about issues of access, financial aid, transfer, dual enrollment, and certificate and degree completion. This Council should have dedicated staff and could be financed through use of the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund provided by the CARES Act.

**2. Funding to Support Equitable Access to Distance Learning in Postsecondary Education**

The pandemic has required students, educators, and campus leaders to quickly pivot to distance learning; in this transition it has also become clear that there is a wide variance in students' ability to

access the necessary technology to fully participate, as well as the quality of online instruction. While there is a large degree of variance among institutions around how much instruction will be provided in a traditional, in-person modality this coming fall, it is clear that a significant amount of higher education instruction will be delivered virtually for the foreseeable future.

The state must ensure that this quick pivot in instructional modality be resourced to sustain a longer duration of distance learning, or face growing racial equity gaps in student access and success. For vulnerable populations, that historically struggle with online education, without additional support they are in danger of falling further behind or worse yet, falling-out altogether. We urge the state to provide **targeted funding to public postsecondary colleges and universities to support their efforts in helping students bridge the digital divide, including:**

- ✓ Developing a Statewide Equity Index to measure the impact of distance learning;
- ✓ Requiring colleges and universities to agree upon equity indices that help mitigate disproportionate student impact due to COVID-19;
- ✓ Investing in equity-minded professional development for faculty to ensure they are delivering high quality online coursework; and
- ✓ Launching a state-based procurement initiative to coordinate the purchase and acquisition of critical technology for students and faculty to participate in distance learning.

### 3. Meeting Student's Basic Needs & Funding Emergency Aid

COVID-19 has exacerbated the existing struggles felt by students in overcoming non-tuition costs associated with attending college, including student hunger and homelessness. The shift to distance learning has also required many students to acquire new technology in order to continue participating in their courses, at the same time that they or their families might have lost work due to the recession underway. While the CARES Act provided some funding to support emergency aid grants, the U.S. Department of Education has sought to restrict undocumented students from such support, with confusion about regulatory compliance and rapidly changing U.S. Department of Education guidance limiting access to these funds for undocumented students. Additionally, on a per student basis the California Community Colleges (CCC) received less than a quarter on every dollar compared to the California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC), only worsening existing inequities in financial resources available between the systems to serve low-income students. These gaps left by the federal emergency response require California to take action to ensure undocumented students and those enrolled at the CCC can access emergency aid to offset the additional costs they might be facing.

**Given the unprecedented magnitude of need for California's students, we support the increase of Cal Grant B awards.** In order to ensure that undocumented students not receiving a Cal Grant can still be supported, **we also urge that you allocate an additional \$25 million in one-time funding to in order to finance emergency grants to students that did not receive assistance via the CARES Act**, with \$17.5 million directed to the CCC, \$5 million to the CSU, and \$2.5 million to the UC.

California's college graduates provide the healthcare, science innovation, and safety net needed to get through the COVID-19 pandemic – a public health crisis unlike any other in modern history, with disproportionate impacts on Black, Latinx, undocumented, and low-income communities. Policy and budget solutions to these unprecedented times require bold and unprecedented leadership, and a willingness to meet the challenges of this pandemic with investments that directly respond to the inequities laid bare by COVID-19. We urge you to consider these priorities to prevent further disproportionate impact for Black, Latinx, undocumented, and low-income students.

Thank you for your leadership,

Organizational Signatories Here

CC: Senator Toni G. Atkins, Senate President pro Tempore  
Assemblymember Anthony Rendon, Speaker of the Assembly  
Lande Ajose, Senior Policy Advisor for Higher Education, Office of Governor Gavin Newsom  
Chris Ferguson, Assistant Program Budget Manager, California Department of Finance