

After years of watching top students leave for other states, U. of I. and lawmakers begin to respond



With help from her parents, Sharon and Lionnel Bush, 18-year-old freshman Kayla Bush moves into her dorm room on campus at the University of Illinois at Chicago on Aug. 22, 2018, in Chicago. (Erin Hooley/Chicago Tribune)

[Dawn Rhodes](#) **Contact Reporter** Chicago Tribune

For years, Illinois universities have watched as thousands of the state's best and brightest students headed elsewhere for college.

Lured by generous scholarship offers, and spooked by the state's budget stalemate and rising tuitions, Illinois students have increasingly pursued their higher education in other states. Enrollment has slid, and Illinois is losing far more local students to other states than it is attracting nonresidents to attend college here.

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Now, the [University of Illinois](#) and a bipartisan group of lawmakers want to change that.

On Monday, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is announcing a free tuition and fees program for admitted Illinoisans whose family income meets or falls below the state median. That follows several bills signed recently by Gov. Bruce Rauner aimed at persuading local students to choose Illinois colleges. One new measure sets aside \$25 million for public universities to match and create a pool of merit-based scholarships, not based on financial need.

Education officials have spent years warning that the state's problems with enrollment, infrastructure, tuition and funding — all of which were exacerbated by the yearslong budget impasse — were giving higher education in Illinois a black eye. Universities in other states have, in turn, aggressively courted top students from Illinois with generous, merit-based financial aid packages. But in a shift, many now see signs that state politicians are embracing the same urgency to retain local students and are willing to back it up with new public policy.

"We've been making this case as strongly as we could for quite a while, and we're very happy to see the state legislators and the governor and the Higher Education Working Group start to focus on this issue," said Tim Killeen, president of University of Illinois. "It's not just for U. of I. but for the whole state."

Sen. Pat McGuire, D-Crest Hill, is among the legislators who formed that working group last year; its 12 members come from both houses and parties. After months of research and collaboration with university experts, the group listed a half-dozen immediate initiatives.

Rauner signed four bills born out of that group, all of which generated near unanimous support in Springfield.

"Yes, we feel urgency. We have a sense of common purpose," McGuire said. "I hope that it will help students and families gain a sense of confidence about Illinois higher education."

"This is the first we've seen in a long time, a public policy interest in higher education in Illinois," said Joni Finney, director of the Institute for Research on Higher Education at the [University of Pennsylvania](#). "Now it's about finding the set of public policies that you have to put together to be in place for the long term to turn this ship around."

U. of I.'s new program, Illinois Commitment, launches in fall 2019 for freshmen and new transfer students under 24 years old.

The program pledges to pay tuition and basic fees for in-state residents accepted to U. of I. and whose family income is \$61,000 or less. The family must also have less than \$50,000 in assets to be eligible. Posted tuition and fees for in-state students this year are between \$16,000 and \$21,000, according to U. of I.'s website. Illinois' truth-in-tuition law requires tuition to remain the same for students for four years.

Student volunteers help carry the belongings of other students as they move into dorm rooms on campus at the University of Illinois at Chicago on Aug. 22, 2018, in Chicago. (Erin Hooley/Chicago Tribune)

The funding is good for up to four years of uninterrupted enrollment for new students and three years for transfer students, provided they make satisfactory progress toward a degree.

Illinois Commitment covers tuition for any program — areas like engineering typically charge more — but not room and board, books, course or laboratory fees, all elements that comprise a sizable chunk of the cost to attend college.

U. of I. is spending \$4 million each of the next four years to support the initiative, officials said.

Illinois long has shouldered a reputation for being too expensive, particularly for low- and middle-income families, Chancellor Robert Jones said in an interview. While the three Illinois campuses have frozen base tuition for four years, first-time undergraduate costs at Urbana-Champaign are higher than many schools of similar enrollment and research activity, according to school officials and federal data.

U. of I. devotes the majority of its financial aid based on need, and the majority of students do not pay the full published price of attendance. But that has not done enough for some prospective students, Jones said.

"We know firsthand there are far too many students who have worked hard that really don't bother about applying because of the optics out there that they can't afford it," Jones said.

Jones said officials want more applicants from underrepresented geographic and socioeconomic groups. But Illinois also loses ground on affordability when admitted students enroll elsewhere for better financial aid.

"It's a key part of the overarching process — accessibility to a world-class education," Jones said. "We have not been in a very competitive position in the two years I've been here, and this will be a course correction that we think is going to have a tremendous impact."

While Illinois invests more heavily in income-based financial aid, state legislators also focused in on merit-based aid — a tool other states have successfully wielded to lure high-achieving Illinoisans to their institutions. The [University of Alabama](#), for example, has [nearly quintupled its merit scholarship pool](#) over the past decade. Illinois students have followed. Alabama awarded 203 full-tuition scholarships, out of 305 total, to freshman Illinoisans in 2017, defraying more than \$100,000 in costs per student.

[Read: Growing brain drain: University of Alabama's gain in drawing Illinois students is a loss for Illinois »](#)

In response, lawmakers established the AIM HIGH Grant Pilot Program, a merit-based scholarship program for Illinoisans. Starting in 2019, schools can apply to the Illinois Student Assistance Commission for a share of \$25 million, which the schools must match with institutional funds. Universities then may award scholarships covering whatever costs the schools determine for admitted full-time students.

The provision establishing the grant will be repealed in October 2024. It is not clear how much money the state legislature will allocate to it in upcoming years.

“It makes sense, given competition from out-of-state schools, to offer additional merit-based scholarships so that more families see our universities as affordable,” Al Bowman, executive director of the Illinois Board of Higher Education, said in a statement.

Another new policy establishes a priority system in 2020 for the Monetary Award Program, which distributes state-funded grants for low-income students. Returning students who previously received MAP grants can jump to the head of the line to receive funding. Students must reapply for MAP each year and submit a federal student aid application by an early deadline to take advantage.

The goal is to provide better year-over-year assurance of grants. It does not guarantee grants because it relies upon the state renewing and timely providing MAP funding. Grants were severely delayed during the budget impasse, and some universities picked up the tab to help students stay enrolled.

Two higher education experts pointed to these issues in evaluating some of Illinois’ recent moves.

Finney of UPenn consulted with Illinois legislators on their policy development. She said she was concerned about increasing merit-based aid and said Illinois instead should devote more resources to MAP. State data show MAP is persistently underfunded and can support neither the total number of eligible students nor the full cost of tuition for recipients.

Thomas Harnisch, director of state relations and policy analysis for the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, had similar reservations.

“Merit-based aid has traditionally benefited wealthier students who would likely go to college anyway,” Harnisch said. “The best response would be sufficient and sustained funding of the state’s public colleges and universities along with robust financial aid for the state’s needy students.”

Other new laws endorsed by Rauner allow students to use any state university credits toward a community college associate’s degree; set new requirements for academic advising; and establish a statewide task force to collect and analyze high school and college student data.

McGuire, the state senator, said the working group is gearing up again with plans to tackle another Illinois bugaboo: public university funding. State dollars comprised three-quarters of university income as recently as 2002. Now tuition and fees dominate, driving up the prices for families.

Overall, leaders and experts agree the signs are auspicious.

“I think some political leaders are starting to realize the extent of the damage the budget impasse did to Illinois and its higher education system,” said Harnisch, of AASCU. “These bills won’t undo that damage, but it’s a step in the right direction.”

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