
MEMORANDUM

June 15, 2020

To: Governors' Offices
From: National Governors Association
Re: K-12 to Postsecondary Transitions During COVID-19: Opportunities for Governors and States

Background

During this time of unprecedented educational and economic disruption, governors and state leaders can take steps to ensure equitable access to postsecondary education for graduating seniors. Each year, roughly [2 million](#) high school students will enroll in a two- or four-year institution. Those who go on to complete their postsecondary education have much stronger [labor market outcomes](#) than their peers who do not. COVID-19's disruption of traditional educational supports and timelines could have a lasting impact on the current class of high school seniors' educational and financial future. Though evidence is preliminary, several recent surveys suggest that a significant number of high school seniors are reconsidering their college plans for 2020, with as many as 20 percent indicating they may not attend at all if their institutions are only able to provide online instruction.¹ At least [one survey](#) found that minority students were significantly more likely than their white peers to report that the impacts of COVID-19 may either change their top college choice or make them more likely to not enroll at all this fall.

Policy Considerations

This memo presents several policy interventions for governors to consider over the next few months as they work to address the emerging issues with the high school to college pipeline. Governors may also consider using the Governors Emergency Education Relief (GEER) fund as a resource to support the strategies identified below. NGA has released a companion resource that provides more information on the allowable uses and requirements of the [Governors Emergency Education Relief Fund](#).

FAFSA Completion

Student eligibility for state, institutional, and federal aid is often determined by information submitted on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). This form, which includes dozens of questions about individual financial circumstances, has [proven to be difficult](#) for families to complete even under normal circumstances. As of May 15, all but two states were on pace to see declines in [FAFSA completions](#) compared to last year. Recent research by [Gallup](#) highlights the important role that financial aid has on minority students' college decisions, suggesting that declining completions will disproportionately impact these students. Here are some examples in which states are acting to increase FAFSA completion:

¹ Simpson and Scarborough, Cirkled, Arts and Sciences Group, Eduventures, Brian Communications, Junior Achievement and Citizen's Bank, EduVentures, Niche

- Most states and institutions have their own FAFSA completion deadlines. Multiple states, including New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Indiana have extended their FAFSA deadlines to allow students more time to submit the application.
- States may use existing programs and infrastructure to deliver support virtually. For example, Indiana has delivered [tailored assistance](#) to students seeking help with FAFSA completion. The National College Attainment Network (NCAN) has identified several other state and nonprofit [FAFSA completion efforts](#) occurring across the country.

Summer Bridge Programs

Many students transitioning from K-12 to postsecondary education may be facing a significant learning loss due to the semester disruption and may need support to help them transition to postsecondary education coursework successfully. One strategy to provide academic and transitional support is through institutional summer bridge programs. Bridge programs typically serve students from underrepresented populations and offer curricula to prepare them for the overall transition and for college-level coursework. While summer bridge programs are typically sponsored by individual postsecondary institutions, [positive outcomes](#) might warrant statewide replication in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- States and institutions could leverage emergency aid from the CARES Act to retool or create summer bridge programs. Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) is using its federal stimulus dollars to create a new [academic bridge program](#) called JumpStart, which will provide the high school graduating class of 2020 with online instruction in up to two entry level courses such as mathematics, history, and English. NOVA [selected these courses](#) specifically, because they apply directly to NOVA degrees and a high percentage of transfer pathways.

College Decisions and Financing Options

A number of institutions have moved back application decision deadlines in response to COVID-19. However, some students are now faced with entirely different financial circumstances as they develop or modify their plan to pay for their education. This is especially problematic since financial aid offer letters are [difficult and complex](#) documents and the financial uncertainty facing families during the COVID crisis will only exacerbate prospective students' confusion about their options. Governors may promote existing resources to craft a virtual support services network for students navigating these transitional processes.

- FormSwift, funded by the Seldin/Hering-Smith Foundation, launched an [online platform](#) called Swift Student to help students appeal to financial aid office decisions. The tool could be an especially helpful resource for students whose financial circumstance have significantly changed.
- States could leverage existing advising networks or create new ones to support students. Tennessee's [AdviseTN](#) assists juniors and seniors at participating high schools as they apply to and enroll in postsecondary institutions. These existing efforts could be utilized to provide outreach to students and ensure that they understand the state landscape of postsecondary reopening and available supports.

Survey the Senior Class



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Students may have unique needs during this time. States can work with school districts and education organizations to capture information on these needs through surveys to deliver targeted support. In its recommendations to high schools and school districts, [NCAN](#) specifically identified these surveys as a priority and suggested that topics include state aid applications, the FAFSA, and outstanding college applications. States could leverage existing postsecondary success networks to collect information on senior plans through these surveys and governors could help amplify these efforts.

- Learn More Indiana, a partnership of state and local organizations led by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education, is facilitating a [senior survey](#) through its website. The survey will be used to send students targeted information based on their post-high school plans and related support needs.

Communicating Strategies for Reopening Postsecondary Institutions

Most announcements about reopening have come from individual colleges and universities. Some have announced that coursework will continue to be administered virtually while others have proclaimed that students can return to residential campuses in the fall for in-person activities. However, even schools that have already announced plans may need to adjust them in response to changing health circumstances during the summer and early fall. This information is critical for both students currently enrolled and high school seniors making a college decision. Governors can leverage their communications platforms to help disseminate key updates from institutions. They could also use their convening power to coordinate statewide reopening strategies.

- Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont commissioned [recommendations](#) for postsecondary education reopening, which have been adopted by multiple other states in the Northeast.
- Several recently released statewide reopening plans such as [Hawaii](#) specifically identify the reopening phases at which public higher education institutions can resume in-person instruction.

Conclusion

This year's class of high school seniors are facing unique challenges as they attempt to transition into postsecondary education including financial uncertainty, a lack of support structures and an ever-changing landscape around institutional reopening. Governors and their education agencies have an opportunity to provide wide-ranging supports for those navigating the college-going process during these trying times and clearly communicate the plans institutions have for the upcoming semester. These efforts can support access to postsecondary pathways for students making these critical transitions during the COVID-19 disruption.

For questions or concerns related to the contents of this memo, please contact NGA staff:

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