



Guiding Principle 4:



**Increase Access to
Postsecondary
Education**

Michigan must commit to eliminating family income as a barrier to residents obtaining postsecondary credentials.

Photo taken at Grand Valley State University
in Allendale



Rationale

Michigan should strive to be the leading state in residents with postsecondary degrees and credentials. Postsecondary training is becoming increasingly important to earning a living wage, and Michigan needs to make sure that all Michiganders have access to the training needed to succeed in the labor market. The number of residents with a postsecondary credential is not changing fast enough to meet demands. Even among younger Michiganders—those aged 25 to 34 years old—only 41.8 percent have earned an associate degree or better, and Michigan must improve this number to be a top state.¹⁰⁰

Too often, cost is a major barrier to education attainment. Our state must make the commitment to eliminate this obstacle. Some students are forgoing postsecondary training as they perceive college and other training as out of reach financially, while others are assuming significant amounts of debt to pay for their education. Michigan ranks below the national average in the share of the population with a certificate or degree and is well below the level of leading states. Michigan will not be able to become a top state if postsecondary opportunities become increasingly unaffordable.

Investment in postsecondary education benefits everyone, not just Michiganders who participate in training programs. The availability of skilled workers is becoming increasingly important to attracting business investment and growing as a state, and the presence of a highly-skilled labor force will be a prerequisite to maintaining state economic growth. Additionally, college graduates raise the earnings of others in their communities. In total, the estimated benefits to the rest of society from college attainment are comparable to the substantial benefits that accrue directly to college graduates.¹⁰¹

What does a 21st century Michigan look like?

Michigan students—both traditional students (ages 16–24) and adult students—can access the training they need to be successful in the workforce, regardless of their income. Michigan has become a top state for college achievement and postsecondary credentials because it has made college and training affordable and accessible to all Michiganders. Access to community college is universal and public four-year colleges are affordable and within reach for all Michigan families.

Michigan financial aid programs are coordinated with higher education and training

opportunities and are easily understood by students, adult students, and their families. Students and their families have the supports they need to navigate the application and financial aid process. Students understand the return they will earn on postsecondary training, and see it as an important investment that will pay them lifelong dividends. Policymakers, colleges, and other training providers are all committed to ensuring that college and training remain affordable and that income is not a barrier to success.

What does Michigan look like now?

State support for higher education in Michigan has been falling and tuition has been

increasing. For two- and four-year universities, Michigan has had the fifth greatest decline in state funding over the past five years. Michigan now ranks 42nd for state support of two- and four-year institutions, and Michigan has the fourth least-affordable tuition levels in the nation.¹⁰² In the ten-year period between 2003–2004 and 2013–2014, Michigan cut grant aid in the state budget by 43 percent, while nationally, state-provided student financial aid increased by 61 percent. Michigan ranks 39th out of 52 states (inclusive of D.C. and Puerto Rico) in investment in student financial aid per capita. Michigan spends \$9.70 per capita in student financial aid.¹⁰³ To be a top-ten state, Michigan

would need to spend approximately \$46.85 per capita, or a total of \$464 million—four times the amount we currently spend.¹⁰⁴

College and training programs are expensive in Michigan, and students, adult students, and their families must often make the difficult choice of whether to take on significant debt to access postsecondary opportunities. This choice can be particularly challenging for low-income families. This challenge is amplified because dropout rates are high, resulting in a risk of taking on significant debt without earning a credential that would lead to higher earnings.

Measuring Success

While we implement these strategies, we must track progress and outcomes by asking questions such as:

- Is college attainment and the number of certificates earned increasing?
- Is the average debt burden of Michigan students decreasing?
- Is the average time to degree completion falling?

Key Strategies

- 4.1 Determine the proper funding level for higher education
- 4.2 Support universal access to community college for all Michigan students
- 4.3 Make four-year degrees more affordable for students who demonstrate merit
- 4.4 Support all students with counselors skilled in career guidance and postsecondary access

4.1–Determine the Proper Funding Level for Higher Education

Determine the proper funding level for higher education to support Michigan’s goal of being a leading state for postsecondary credential attainment.

Details

Becoming a leading state for postsecondary degree and credential attainment will likely require significant new investment. The Commission has recommended state investment in two strategies aimed at making postsecondary attainment more affordable: providing universal access to community college, and making four-year degrees more affordable for students demonstrating merit. The state should consider strategies including direct funding to higher education institutions, enrollment-based funding formulas, performance-based funding formulas, as well as other methods to incent best practices, tuition restraint, and spending efficiency.

Rationale

Postsecondary training is becoming increasingly important to earning a living wage, and Michigan needs to make sure that all Michiganders have access to postsecondary training. Too often cost is a barrier to attainment, and addressing cost issues will require both additional investment and efficient spending. Michigan currently ranks poorly in funding for higher education, ranking 41st lowest on a per-capita basis and 37th lowest as a percentage of income.¹⁰⁵

The low funding level is a contributing factor to Michigan having the fourth least-affordable tuition levels in the nation. Michigan will not be able to become a leader in higher-education attainment with low levels of investment and unaffordable tuition levels. Policymakers need to review how higher education is currently funded and determine the changes needed to make Michigan a leading state for postsecondary attainment. These strategies must account for changing demographics and enrollment trends and promote healthy enrollment management.

Potential Responsible Party

The Governor and Legislature should work to determine ways to improve efficiency.

4.2–Support Universal Access to Community College for All Michigan Students

Support universal access to community college for all Michigan students.

Details

Michigan should increase financial aid to support universal access to community college and preapproved career technical education programs. Universal access should be available to recent high school graduates and returning adult students. To qualify for expanded state support, community college students would need to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and draw down any available federal grant aid. Policymakers should ensure that this program does not just include community college students seeking to transfer to four-year universities after graduation, but also supports skilled trades, including construction and manufacturing. Policymakers should also ensure that this program is well integrated with K–12 career and technical education programs, and the state should seek to expand partnerships with businesses to support internships and apprenticeships.



Photo taken at Marshall High School in Marshall

Community college tuition is currently relatively affordable in part because residents living in community college districts pay property taxes to help support the colleges. Areas not currently in a community college district should be required to join the nearest community college district and levy the commensurate millage to participate in this program. The state should also work with community colleges and public four-year universities to ensure that credits earned at community colleges transfer to four-year institutions.

Rationale

The United States led the world in making high school universally available to all students. Between 1910 and 1930, access to high school and high school attendance increased dramatically. The high school movement provides a clear illustration of the power of universal access. In 1910, just 9 percent of young people in America earned a high school diploma, but by 1935, 40 percent did, and this percentage continued to increase in the decades that followed. Universal high school

represented a substantial investment, but there is no doubt that its effects on the United States were both economically and socially transformative.

Michigan needs to view postsecondary training as a necessary step to fully participating in the economy and democracy. If Michigan is to become a leader in residents with postsecondary degrees and credentials, it is time to consider moving our current system of universal education from P–12 to P–14. Postsecondary education is becoming increasingly essential to earning a living wage. Michigan needs to make postsecondary educational opportunities available to every citizen so they can fully participate in society.

Although community college in Michigan is relatively affordable, it is still out of reach for some citizens. Ensuring universal access to community college will send a strong message to Michigan citizens regarding the importance of postsecondary training.

Potential Responsible Party

The Governor and Legislature must make the necessary investment and policy changes.

4.3—Make Four-year Degrees More Affordable for Students Who Demonstrate Merit

Michigan should provide scholarships to make four-year degrees more affordable for students who demonstrate merit.

Details

Michigan should provide scholarships to help students who have demonstrated successful academic records afford four-year degrees at public universities without taking on onerous debt. The scholarship should be provided to graduates of Michigan high schools with a high school grade point average of 3.0 or better. Students should be required to fill out the FAFSA and draw down any federal grant aid for which they are eligible.

The Commission encourages policymakers to leverage the scholarship program to incentivize enrollment and attainment of degrees in four-year programs leading to professions with current and future demand for qualified college graduates, including elementary and secondary teachers (see also strategy 1.1—improve Michigan's teacher preparation program).

To maintain the scholarship, students must be continuously enrolled and be making satisfactory progress toward degree completion. The scholarship can be claimed for four years.

It is important that the state earn the best rate of return possible on this investment. Toward this end, the state should adopt best practices in improving completion rates, and work with universities to constrain tuition cost growth.

Rationale

Postsecondary education is becoming increasingly important to labor market success, but cost is a major obstacle to students completing degrees and certificates. Many students take on onerous debt completing their degrees, debt which can prevent them from starting a new business, buying a house, or starting a family, with some students simply choosing to forgo college rather than taking on debt. To be a top-performing state, Michigan needs to commit to making college more affordable for students who have worked hard in high school and have demonstrated merit. Using a broad-based measure of success, such as grade point average, as a basis for the scholarship provides a more effective means of motivating students than using a single high-stakes test.

Potential Responsible Party

The Governor and Legislature must make the necessary investment and policy changes.

4.4—Support All Students with Counselors Skilled in Career Guidance and Postsecondary Access

Provide every student with a counselor with expertise in helping students access career and postsecondary learning opportunities.

Details

Michigan should ensure that every high school student has the support of a counselor skilled in career guidance and postsecondary learning opportunities. Commissioners saw the power of skilled counseling during a listening tour event in Southeast Michigan. These counselors can help students select the program that best fits their interests and provides them with the best opportunities for success in college and the labor force. Counselors can also help students navigate the application and financial aid process. These counselors should work with the business community to help identify the skills and careers that are most in demand so they can help direct students into high-demand fields. All students can benefit from college and career counseling, but counselors skilled in postsecondary opportunities are especially valuable to low-income and first-generation college students. Michigan currently ranks fourth worst in student counselor ratio at 732 students per counselor and so should strive to immediately be at the national average ratio of 491 students per counselor with a long-term goal of meeting the 250 students per counselor ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association. Achieving the goal of 250 students per counselor would make Michigan a top-five state in this metric.¹⁰⁶

Michigan colleges and universities must also have supports in place to help with student completion. The state should help colleges and universities identify best practices in supporting student retention and completion and provide incentives and support for adopting these best practices.

Rationale

Navigating the application and financial aid process is complex and can be particularly challenging for low-income and first-generation college students. Providing additional support to these students while they are in high school can help them successfully transition from high school to college. Students need assistance identifying the degree, certificate program, and career that is the best fit for their interests. They need assistance applying for these programs, and they need assistance filling out financial aid forms and identifying how to access the financial aid that will allow them to access postsecondary programs. Problems in any one of these areas can derail a student's chance at postsecondary learning.

To address these challenges, students need access to professionals skilled in college and career counseling. Many schools have too few school counselors, or counselors with too little experience and expertise in advising students for postsecondary opportunities and careers. This needs to change. Students should not miss out on college simply because they could not fill out a FAFSA, or because they were unaware of a program that would provide them with the training they need to access the job they want. Michigan needs to ensure that every student has access to a counselor that can answer their questions, provide guidance, and assist them with navigating the college application process.