

AGENDA ITEM 5A.

APPROVAL OF THE MONETARY AWARD PROGRAM (MAP) ADVISING WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

Submitted for: Action

Summary: Despite the significant disadvantages of limited financial resources and unfamiliarity with the college going process, MAP recipients graduate at about the same rate as other students attending the same school. However, since only a minority of schools graduate 60 percent or more of their first-time, full-time freshmen within six years, graduation rates at most Illinois schools could be improved. Some MAP recipients don't graduate at all, and of those that do, many take a long time to do so. Increased time to degree increases the costs of students' programs and decreases the likelihood of completion. Some MAP recipients do drop out, many after only one or two semesters, and never complete a program that results in a credential. This can be an additional burden for MAP recipients who may have borrowed money to augment their grant aid and leave school without acquiring the credential necessary to be able to earn income sufficient to pay back the loan.

To help address the completion issue that results in a perceived "inefficient" distribution of MAP funds, the legislature put forth HR 296: "[ISAC] is directed ... to form a working group to examine the best practices for academic advising of higher education students who are MAP recipients, with an emphasis on support services for low-income and first-generation college students ..." The hope of those offering this resolution was that providing some additional support for students receiving MAP, who are often first generation students with preparation and adjustment issues, will increase the likelihood of success for these students, demonstrated by increasing graduation rates, and speed up time to degree completion for others.

Two recommendations were made by the Working Group to be presented to the Commission for adoption. The first recommendation sets out a goal of a five percentage point increase in the schools' completion rates within six years. The completion rates were expanded to include more students than those tracked by the traditional first-time, full-time six-year graduation rate often used as a measure of success. While the Working Group was not comfortable prescribing particular support programs for all schools, they were comfortable requiring that all schools provide strong academic advising for students who were defined by the school to be "at-risk" and for all first-year students. This is the core of Recommendation Two. The Working Group felt that it was better to let the schools determine their at-risk populations and what constitutes strong academic advising. The Group did want schools to provide detailed information on their programs and submit that information to ISAC in the budget packets and included those instructions as part of Recommendation Two.

Action requested: Staff recommends the Commission approve the two recommendations summarized in this agenda item which establish targets for increased completion and a requirement for mandatory advising for at-risk and first-year students. ISAC staff will then develop rules and programs as necessary to implement the recommendations.

ILLINOIS STUDENT ASSISTANCE COMMISSION
MAP ADVISING WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Despite the significant disadvantages of limited financial resources and unfamiliarity with the college going process, MAP recipients graduate at about the same rate as other students attending the same school. However, since only a minority of schools graduate 60 percent or more of their first-time, full-time freshmen within six years, graduation rates at most Illinois schools could be improved. Some MAP recipients don't graduate at all, and of those that do, many take a long time to do so. Increased time to degree increases the costs of the student's program and decreases the likelihood of completion. Some MAP recipients do drop out, many after only one or two semesters, and never complete a program that results in a credential. This can be an additional burden for MAP recipients who may have borrowed money to augment their grant aid and leave school without acquiring the credential necessary to be able to earn income sufficient to pay back the loan.

MAP recipients who don't complete also increase the cost per graduate for the program. This is a perceived "inefficiency" that is especially problematic when money allocated to the program is insufficient to meet demand. The MAP program currently is serving only about half of the students eligible for the program and is providing them with less than half the expense coverage (about 35 percent at public universities and about half at community colleges) that was provided a decade ago. MAP dollars are scarce resources and not wasting them is a priority for everyone involved with the program. Improving program efficiency, i.e., increasing the percentage of students who complete their programs in a timely fashion, has become a priority, while at the same time, not limiting the access to the post-secondary education of their choice for low-income students remains important.

To help address the completion issue that results in a perceived inefficient distribution of MAP funds, the legislature put forth HR 296: "[ISAC] is directed ... to form a working group to examine the best practices for academic advising of higher education students who are MAP recipients, with an emphasis on support services for low-income and first-generation college students ..." The hope of those offering this resolution was that providing some additional support for students receiving MAP, who are often first generation students with preparation and adjustment issues, will increase likelihood of success for these students, demonstrated by increasing graduation rates, and speed up time to degree completion for others.

The MAP Advising Working Group (Working Group) was directed to:

- Catalog existing student academic advising and support programs in this state;
- Survey existing literature on effectiveness of similar programs across the country;
- Make recommendations to the Commission regarding minimum standards for student support and advising; and
- File a report to the Commission and the General Assembly on or before Feb. 3, 2014.

The report and supporting documents were filed on time with the legislature. Commissioners each received an electronic copy and all materials are available on ISAC's web site. Two recommendations were

made by the Working Group to be presented to the Commission for adoption. This agenda item describes the Working Group’s recommendations and offers them to the Commission for adoption.

Discussion of Recommendation One

The results of an ISAC-developed survey of Illinois MAP-eligible schools as well as discussions within the Working Group confirmed the diversity of Illinois postsecondary institutions with regard to student abilities and attributes, school cultures and student performance, and the types and availability of student support programs now in place. Postsecondary schools in Illinois range from some of the most competitive in the nation to open admission institutions specializing in short-term training. The students attending them come from varied backgrounds, including vast wealth and extreme poverty, and represent all different levels of preparation and readiness for college. Most students, regardless of which institution they attend, are required to have academic advising at some point during their college years, generally as freshmen. Table 1, below, reveals that nearly all schools require academic advising for at least some of their students.

Table 1: Academic advising provided to students at Illinois MAP-eligible postsecondary institutions

	All Respondents	Public Universities	Private Institutions	Community Colleges	Hospital Schools	Proprietary Schools
Require advising for all	54%	40%	82%	26%	100%	33%
Require advising for some	36%	50%	7%	70%	0%	50%
Require advising	90%	90%	89%	96%	100%	83%

Illinois schools also provide a wide array of services in addition to basic academic advising to accommodate the needs of their students. Additional counseling and mentoring was the most frequently mentioned (by 71% of the respondents), followed by transition and orientation programs, early warning programs and faculty/student mentoring relationships. Counseling services were provided by both faculty and professional staff with professional staff dominating at community colleges. Transition and orientation programs varied in intensity and focus with some being more general orientation programs appropriate for everyone, while others were more intense, targeted programs for students at risk. These more intense programs were often summer programs, for freshmen prior to their initial semester.

Various types of early warning systems are also popular. While some schools defined early warning as checking midterm grades, other programs begin the process much sooner, as early as the second week of class, by checking for attendance and requiring faculty to notify the administration of students exhibiting difficulties. Table 2 shows the percentage of responding schools that already have the most popular types of support programs in place.

The type and frequency of student support programs varies by sector with the private universities generally offering a few more programs, especially additional counseling and early warning programs than the other sectors.

Table 2: Other support programs frequently offered by Illinois schools in addition to academic advising

- **Counseling and mentoring 71%**
 - Academic advising done by faculty and professional staff
 - Additional counseling usually by professional staff
- **Transition and orientation 60%**
 - Some took place in the summer
- **Tracking and early warning 57%**
 - Earliest occur prior to midterms – some during the first two weeks
 - Often coupled with early/intensive counseling and advising
- **Student-faculty interactions 50%**
 - More common at four-year schools

Table 3: Frequency of Support Programs by Sector

	All Respondents	Public Universities	Private Institutions	Community Colleges
Additional Academic Support	75%	61%	78%	75%
Counseling and Mentoring	71%	70%	80%	60%
Transition and Orientation Programs	60%	60%	60%	63%
Tracking/Early Warning Systems	57%	46%	65%	53%
Student/Faculty Interactions	50%	54%	57%	30%
Learning Communities	28%	28%	29%	18%

Schools offer these programs in response to the needs of their students. Illinois postsecondary institutions serve all segments of the higher education market with schools that range from the most selective in the country to relatively “open admission” schools that provide a wide variety of applied and technical programs. Grouping schools roughly by the ability level of their students, one finds a range of graduation rates associated with each academic level – some schools appear to do better at graduating their students than others with equal ability. But translating that into a set of support programs that could be recommended was not possible for several reasons. First, the total number of schools was too small to draw conclusions from Illinois data alone. The existing programs offered were diverse, had been in place for different periods of time and the interconnections among the programs and the overall campus graduation culture were not possible to discern from the surveys. Second, an analysis of programs in other states was inconclusive, with different studies arriving at different conclusions about what support programs were valuable. And finally, the Working Group members, representing all higher education sectors, had differing opinions based on their own diverse experiences on what, if anything, should be universally required.

Because of the uncertainty of the data the Working Group did not want to become too prescriptive in its recommendations. It did, however, want to encourage progress toward increasing completion rates. It decided to set goals for schools and allow the schools to develop their own programs to meet them. The first recommendation sets out a goal of a five percentage point increase in the schools’ completion rates in six years. The completion rates were expanded to include more students than the traditional first-time, full-time six-year graduation rate often used as a measure of success. Schools offering Baccalaureate degrees would provide that rate, in addition to the four-year and five-year rates. They will also track the progress of their transfer students separately and report on degree completion for that group. All graduation rates will be tracked at the school level and by race/ethnicity, MAP recipients and an additional group of “at risk” students, if this group includes others besides MAP recipients. Determining completions in this way also allows any achievement gaps the school may have to be highlighted. The second part of this recommendation requires schools to reduce any achievement gap by 25 percent during the six-year period.

For community colleges, the performance metrics to be used are the Complete College America (CCA) Outcome Metrics Two and Three, allowing community colleges to count transfers without degrees as successful completions. Many students stay only a year or two at a community college before transferring to a four-year institution and completing a bachelor’s degree there. By allowing community colleges to receive credit for this successful transfer and having the four-year institution record completions for transfer students, this large and growing segment of the student population will no longer be ignored in graduation rate calculations.

Because many schools have a cohort of part-time students who can take ten years or more to graduate, the CCA's Progress Metric Five: Year-to-Year Retention will also be tracked by all schools so that progress with this cohort can also be observed. And finally, to provide another measure of MAP efficiency, all MAP-eligible institutions will provide CCA Progress Metric Six: Course Completion. This metric calculates the proportion of attempted credit hours being completed by students. This metric would be provided for all students in a cohort and for MAP recipients in that cohort. Improvements in this measure can be translated into MAP "savings" that can be compared from year to year. Higher ratios indicated that less MAP money is spent on courses that a student fails to complete. The complete Recommendation One is given below.

Recommendation One

"Illinois MAP-approved institutions will institute programs to enable them to meet a target five percent improvement in graduation and completion rates over the next six years and begin to close any achievement gaps, defined as a gap between the schools' Integrated Postsecondary Education Database (IPED) graduation rate or the community college completion rate (defined below) for all students in a cohort and the rates for the school's designated at-risk group, MAP recipients, and minority students. The six-year goal for achievement gaps is a 25 percent reduction. The graduation rates that should be tracked will be the following:

- For public and private baccalaureate degree granting institutions the measure tracked will be the IPEDS first-time, full-time, same school graduation rate for 100%, 150% and 200% of program time. Schools will also track the graduation rates of their transfer students by establishing a separate cohort for these students. Both cohorts will be divided into subsets: race/ethnicity; MAP recipients; and the school's at-risk group (if it differs from all MAP recipients). Schools will have the flexibility to select the incoming freshmen (both full and part-time) most at risk of not completing at their institution. If this group does not include all MAP recipients, an explanation should be provided as to why it does not.
- Most schools that award bachelor's degrees have relatively small numbers of part-time students who can take eight to ten years or more to graduate. In addition to the IPEDs graduation rate, which tracks only full-time students, institutions will also track part-time student progress using the Complete College America's Progress Metric 5, fall-to-fall retention. The denominator of the retention metric is the number of first-time students entering in the fall semester of a specified year. The numerator is the number of students in the cohort (denominator) enrolling in the next consecutive fall semester. Full-time and part-time cohorts will be tracked separately. Students will be tracked this way from year to year to provide a "still attending school" category when comparing graduation rates. Both cohorts will be divided into subsets: race/ethnicity; MAP recipients; and the school's at-risk group (if it differs from all MAP recipients).
- For community colleges, CCA outcome metrics two and three – graduation (at the 100%, 150% and 200% of program completion time) and transfer out rates - would be combined to create two completion metrics, one for full-time students and one for part-time students. CCA Outcome Metric Two, graduation rates, calculates the percentage of entering undergraduate students who graduate from a degree or certificate program within 100%, 150%, and 200% of program time. CCA Outcome Metric Three, the transfer out rate, is the annual percentage of students who transfer from a two-year campus to a four-year campus. The graduation metric measures those students who leave with a credential; students who successfully transfer to another institution may have a credential or may not. Community colleges will disaggregate the completion metric to show students who obtained a credential and did not transfer, students who transferred without

first obtaining a credential, and students who obtained a credential and transferred to another school, to avoid double counting.

- Community colleges would also report CCA Progress Metric 5: Fall to fall retention, divided into the same subgroups as the completion metric.
- To provide another measure of efficiency, all MAP-eligible institutions will provide CCA Progress Metric 6: Course Completion. This metric calculates the proportion of attempted credit hours being completed by students. The numerator is the number of credit hours earned by a student at the end of an academic year. The denominator is the number of credit hours a student attempted during the same academic year. This metric would be provided for all students in a cohort and for MAP recipients in that cohort. Improvements in this measure can be translated into MAP “savings” that can be compared from year to year.”

The recommendation also included the following procedural requirements:

- “The fall 2014 (school year 2014-2015) data provides the baseline assessment. Programs designed to improve graduation outcomes should be in place by fall 2015 (school year 2015-2016).
- ISAC and the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) will help provide tracking for students changing institutions. MAP-eligible schools will be required to provide ISAC and ICCB with sufficient data to allow these entities to continue to track these students.
- Schools with graduation rates in excess of 80 percent will be exempt from the five percent increase target but will be subject to the achievement gap targets.”

Discussion of Recommendation Two

While the Working Group was not comfortable prescribing particular support programs for all schools, they were comfortable requiring that all schools provide strong academic advising for students who were defined by the school to be at risk and for all first-year students. The Working Group felt that it was better to let the schools determine their at-risk populations and what constitutes strong academic advising. They did want schools to provide detailed information on their programs and submit that information to ISAC in the budget packets.

There were support programs that most members thought had good track records of success and could be successfully and cost-effectively implemented at some Illinois schools. The Working Group recommended these programs but did not want to require them. These programs include providing blueprints to students outlining all the courses needed to complete the requirements for their programs within a 100 percent time frame; implementing an early warning system, defined as a system to alert school counselors of students’ academic problems *prior* to midterms; providing a freshman transition or orientation program; and offering financial literacy programs that include the importance of graduating on time to keep costs reasonable. In addition to these programs, the Working Group also felt that school policies such as prohibiting at-risk students from enrolling late and providing a single advisor for each freshman that would follow him through school showed promising results at schools in other states. Recommendation Two follows.

Recommendation Two

“The following list of interventions is either required or recommended by the Working Group. While all programs should be considered by Illinois MAP-eligible institutions, not all may be appropriate given programs already in place and the needs of the students each institution serves.

Required:

- All MAP-eligible schools are required to make strong academic advising available for all students and provide mandatory advising for first year students and students that are part of the at-risk population identified by the school. Because of the diverse nature of schools in Illinois, each MAP-eligible school may determine the structure of the advising program at their school.
- A description of the school’s advising program and all other support programs targeted at student retention and completion shall be provided with the budget packets submitted to ISAC. The description of each program will include the type of program, its delivery mechanism (face to face, on-line, etc.), the targeted group of students, the number of students in the program, whether it is mandatory or voluntary, and the program length and duration.

The Working Group recommends that schools consider adding the following programs, if they are not already operating at the school:

- A blueprint for each incoming student illustrating how she can complete her program in the most timely manner – usually this would be four years for a four-year program; two-years for a two year program; the most efficient path possible should developmental education be required. The blueprint must clearly lay out what courses she should attempt each semester and emphasize the advantages of a full course load. If the student is uncertain about goals or majors, they should be required to participate in a career guidance program during the initial year with the purpose of declaring a major by the end of the first term of the second year.
- A student tracking/early warning system should be established that alerts school officials early if a student is off track. The identification of students in difficulty should be coupled with additional intensive advising (academic, financial, social or emotional) designed to remove the roadblocks that keep the student from progressing. Early alert is defined as contact with the student and assessment of student behavior prior to the second half of any given term.
- A mandatory freshman transition and orientation program. Many Illinois schools already have some introductory program but the programs vary in intensity, breadth and quality. A good program should have students meeting frequently and provide a comprehensive introduction to college life and the services and support groups each school offers.
- A financial literacy program for incoming students that emphasizes the cost of borrowing, the importance of graduating on time, and the resources available to help pay for college.
- Adoption of a single advisor model for each incoming student so that the advisor and student get to know each other and form a strong relationship throughout the students years at the institution.
- Denial of late registration to classes for at-risk students who would be severely disadvantaged by starting out a week or two behind everyone else.”

Penalties for school non-compliance – what happens if graduation rates do not rise?

Schools are being asked to develop a set of graduation rate cohorts based on risk factors and track these cohorts through six years. Success is measured by a five percentage point increase in completion rates and a 25 percent reduction in the achievement gap within six years. Schools are also being asked to provide detailed support program descriptions in the budget packet submitted for the 2015-2016 school

year. The implementation of a strong mandatory advising program for first-year and at-risk students would need to be implemented by Fall of 2015. Not complying with the recommendations would result in program compliance issues during audits.

Raising completion rates is a long-term endeavor. It will take at least three years after implementation for any real results to be seen (with the exception of year-to-year retention rates) and a few more years before it can be ascertained if programs are working. After three years time, ISAC will evaluate the data to determine if a problem with meeting the improvement goals exists for many schools, and if it does, convene a group to make further recommendations to the Commission on how to address the issue.

How can ISAC help?

ISAC administers the MAP grant to about 133 MAP-approved schools on behalf of approximately 140,000 MAP recipients, forecasts demand for the program and tracks students' MAP usage. In it surveys students periodically, and undertakes regular database analysis. In addition, more than 100 ISACorps members work with high school students across the state providing pre-college financial awareness and other services. There is a Corps presence in each community college district. Building on these strengths, ISAC can offer additional services using its existing resources and it was suggesting by the Working Group that it do so.

Some of the services that it was recommended that ISAC provide includes renewal cards to encourage FAFSA completion and other types of targeted communication. The Department of Education sends a notice to file the FAFSA to former filers sometime in January. Some Working Group members thought a state reminder from ISAC would be a good additional reminder to students to file their renewal FAFSA applications.

It was also recommended that ISAC develop additional partnerships with colleges and universities to deliver services through its network of near-peer mentors. Events that promote engagement on a campus and introduce students to college level resources can be coordinated by ISACorps members in partnership with MAP-approved institutions.

The Working Group suggested requiring some type of student commitment document as a way for students to better understand their responsibilities when they accept grant aid. One recommendation was that students read and sign a commitment pledge before the grant is released each year. ISAC could take responsibility for developing this document and having it ready for launch in FY2015.

The Working Group also wanted a way to keep schools informed of best practices in the area of college retention and the programs that have proved successful in Illinois. The Group wanted to be able to track national progress and devise a way to keep schools informed of promising programs and provide training, if possible. Finances were considered a barrier to implementing more support programs for schools, but lack of specific information on programs that work was also acknowledged to be a significant barrier. A focus on collecting and disseminating retention and completion information could reduce this barrier. As part of the annual participation process for MAP-approved schools, ISAC can collect program and contact information about outreach and intervention programs on each campus and maintain a central database for student and parent use and for review by other schools. Since new school programs would not start until 2015; ISAC could modify the budget packets and begin collecting the information in FY2016.

Finally, the Working Group believed there is a real need for more financial awareness and planning, especially prior to college. Although preparation issues often dominate the discussion of increasing graduation rates, it is problems with financing college that is the most mentioned obstacle to completing college. For some students the financial hurdles are simply insurmountable, but for others the problem is more subtle. Difficulty paying for college can increase overall dissatisfaction with school. If a student is not doing well or doesn't believe he fits in, having difficulty paying for it can be the final straw. The Working Group recognized the lack of financial literacy as an impediment to college completion.

ISAC has been providing financial literacy programs for years. Because ISAC is not affiliated with any particular school, it can provide objective information about all college choices. It can also make contact with the student prior to his entrance into college. ISAC is well-positioned to discuss different college options such as the possibility of a community college first or to help the student appropriately match to a college or university that will challenge him. Using the Corps, our extensive IT resources and other outreach capabilities, ISAC can provide instructions and blueprints for programs, interactive materials, professional training or can run the entire program for the schools.

If the Commission approves the general level of involvement, ISAC staff will come back to the Commission at a later date with a specific set of programs designed to address the Working Group's recommendations.

Action Requested

Staff recommends the Commission approve the two recommendations summarized in this agenda item which establish targets for increased completion and a requirement for mandatory advising for at-risk and first-year students. ISAC staff will then develop rules and programs as necessary to implement the recommendations.