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Testimony: Student Success in Texas Higher Education

The Center for Public Policy Priorities (CPPP) appreciates this opportunity to provide written testimony on the Senate Higher Education Committee interim charges exploring student barriers to college success, the use of technology in college courses, and developmental education programs at Texas institutions of higher education.

Strategies for Student Success

Texas students face a multitude of financial and academic barriers to college completion. CPPP supports student success strategies that include a strong commitment from the state to reduce student dependence on loans, increase financial preparation for college, and efforts to bring effective developmental education programs to scale statewide.

Student Supports

- **Declare a statewide goal to reduce student loan dependence.** To prepare Texas' workforce and future leaders, state policymakers and institutions of higher education must work together to ensure a fair and balanced method of paying for postsecondary education. Loan dependence to finance a student's college education is linked to lower persistence and success compared to need-based grant aid. Increasing state investments in grant aid, and supporting early college financial preparation through matched college savings accounts, are two strategies the Legislature can use to reduce student dependence on loans and promote college attendance and completion.
- **Promote and fund matched savings accounts for college and other account-based scholarships for students—beginning no later than the 7th grade.** Texas should take full advantage of recent policy changes to the state's 529 plans—the Texas College Savings Plan and the Texas Tuition Promise Fund—which establish a public-private platform for matched college savings accounts for low- and moderate-income students. The Texas Save & Match, yet to receive public funding, seeks to enhance college access and success for families and students with high financial need. By making a small investment, the Legislature and the Texas Prepaid Higher Education Tuition Board can leverage additional private sector dollars in order to provide “early financial aid” through incentivized college savings accounts. Through the Match the Promise Foundation, a nonprofit established to accept private donations, Texas philanthropists have a secure platform to match savings guaranteed to be used for legitimate college expenses.
- **Promote and fund early financial preparation strategies for college,** including FAFSA preparation and account-based financial education for every Texas student in the K-12 system. Texas can reach more aspiring college students by promoting FAFSA and TASFA completion more broadly among those most in need of resources to pay for college. Integrating FAFSA/TASFA preparation assistance into existing platforms such as at Volunteer Income Tax



Assistance (VITA) sites, public school financial education courses and other VITA-type delivery platforms can reorient students who assume college is out of reach to learn how they can finance their education.

- **Ensure that Texas K-12 Grade Students Learn Strategies to Plan and Pay for College.** Texas should imbed postsecondary education financial preparation into the K-12 space to make it easier to transition into college and to encourage a college-going culture in the state.
- **Enhance student support services.** Student support services such as academic and financial aid advising play an integral part in guiding students through their degree plan, and helping students understand how best to navigate their financial obligations during and after college, including debt repayment, default prevention, savings building, and budgeting, as well as their earnings potential based on their course of study and career path.
- **Student Success Courses.** Texas should require a college-credit course for all incoming freshmen to explore career options and pathways in the postsecondary education system, including information on industry-recognized credentials, expected salary by occupation, and the necessary degree plan to move towards a particular career. The course should also include information about effective study skills and resources students can access while in school. San Jacinto Community College currently offers a similar course

Developmental Education

- **Bring Developmental Education Reforms to Scale.** Through various state and philanthropic efforts, many developmental education pilot efforts are underway in the state. We recommend that the state Legislature begin taking the next steps to ensure that evidence-based best practices in developmental education, with proven results, begin to be scaled statewide. Specifically, emphasis should be given to programs that allow co-enrollment in developmental education and credit-bearing coursework. Further emphasis should be given to contextualized learning where students learn basic academic skills alongside their vocational coursework, such as those strategies employed in the I-BEST model. Texas is already successfully implementing similar initiatives through Alamo Community College and Houston Community College.
- **Ensure Flexible and Inclusive Transfer and Articulation Agreements for Developmental Education Coursework.** Specifically, the Legislature should ensure that articulation and transfer agreements are flexible and inclusive of innovative developmental education programs such as *Mathways*, which blend developmental education math coursework along with credit-bearing curriculum.

Technology

- **Online Learning.** While CPPP supports innovation in delivering developmental education and college coursework through various mediums, including online learning, we urge the Legislature to ensure that the use of technology and the development of remedial coursework online be based on the most current research available. Research from the Community College Research Center suggests that online courses at community colleges create technical difficulties for students, and increase the social distance they experience from college faculty and classmates. Further, online courses lack the structure that is found in traditional face-to-face courses. These findings are concerning since the majority of community college students are low-income and more than half are underprepared for college-level coursework. Texas should approach the use

of online learning with caution and verify that there is research demonstrating the effective use of these delivery models to serve low-income, underprepared, and adult students.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments and recommendations.

Sincerely,

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For More Information

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About the Center

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