

College Access and the Uphill Battle for Equity

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The College & Career Access Center (CCAC) of Jackson is a very small agency with a very big goal. Our mission: *"Navigating ALL Jackson County residents to productive careers through the pursuit of appropriate career training or post-secondary education."* Since 2008, we have built and expanded upon a humble framework, placing emphasis on closing the college access and attainment gap for those students from historically underserved backgrounds: first generation students, low-income students, and students of color. Our advisors work diligently, drawing inspiration and pride from the measurements that define our successes. One key measure is completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). This application, particularly the Pell grant eligibility it determines, often represents the deciding factor in a student's ability to attend college.

For the academic year 2019-20, the College & Career Access Center assisted Jackson's graduating Seniors in reaching 72.5% FAFSA completion. This rate exceeded Michigan's state average of 56% (ranking 27th in the U.S.) as well as the national average of 57%. We celebrate that accomplishment, but also realize the FAFSA is only an indicator. Our consultations and survey feedback within Jackson's 13 connected Community Schools tells a much different story than the FAFSA completion rate. We know that, even at maximum loan and Pell eligibility, many students are still unable to afford college. In 2020, 72% of graduates indicated an intention to attend college. Only 56% actually made it. This year, 82% expressed college or university aspirations. Yet, to date, only 53% have even completed a FAFSA. This is an extremely disheartening gap. When our advisors speak to students, seeking to gain an understanding of this disparity, the number one reason we hear: affordability. Even with a FAFSA in place and full Pell, many students are still unable to afford the overall cost of attendance.

We know part of the reason for this year's numbers is driven by the Covid-19 pandemic. The financial devastation it caused can definitely be seen in canceled and delayed post-secondary plans. In reality, however, covid merely cast a brighter light on a dilemma we already know to be true. Those families and students hardest hit by covid represent the target population the CCAC strives to support and the problem runs far deeper than the covid pandemic. We have witnessed the cost of attending public institutions increase nearly 100% since 2001 while federal aid has fallen woefully short of keeping pace over that same period. Unfortunately, the search for answers and solutions usually results in circular debates, blame, and finger pointing. *Institutions should control their costs of tuition ... Lender and borrower policies require greater responsibility ... Throwing federal money at the problem only perpetuates the cycle.* Ultimately, the students in greatest need wind up with the fewest answers and the least options.

In March, the CCAC had the opportunity to participate in NCAN's Virtual Advocacy Week. We were honored to advocate on behalf of Jackson's 13 connected districts, speaking passionately of the need to address the eroding purchasing power of the Pell and the ever increasing affordability gap. Our director noted the maximum Pell grant covered less than 30% of the cost of attendance at a public four-year university for 2020-2021. Consequently, nearly 75% of public four-year institutions are unaffordable to the average Pell Grant recipient. Advisors and student fellows shared dramatic testimonials, sharing our

mission and the populations in greatest need. With hope and optimism, we appealed on the state and federal level for much needed support from our elected officials. Predictably, our pleas were met with polite conversation and agreement on the overall importance of education. While the time each Representative and Senator allowed us was greatly appreciated, there is also a call for realistic perspective. Conversation without action amounts to idle storytelling. Crisis requires conviction. It is not enough to agree on the broad directional ideal of education.

Reflecting upon the question of equity in college attainment, there is no doubt a need to meet in the middle. Is it up to public and private institutions to reduce their cost of attendance or the responsibility of Congress to increase the purchasing power of the Pell? Why not both? That seems simple in theory but avoids one grim view that cannot be ignored: a fundamental difference in ideology. The mission of the CCAC includes ALL Jackson County residents. This stems from our commitment to navigating every resident to a post-secondary institution or career training program. It stems from our belief that every student has the right to education - including low income students, students of color, and first generation students. We believe that education is a right, not a privilege afforded only to the wealthy. We firmly believe no student's post-secondary goals should be bound by their economic status. In order to close the attainment gap and truly create equity, we must level the playing field. Success should never be determined by whether or not you can afford it.