

A young woman with curly hair, wearing a black graduation cap and gown, is smiling broadly. She is holding a rolled-up diploma tied with a red ribbon. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor setting.

TICAS Michigan 2024 Playbook

Organizational Alignment, Research
Focuses, and FY25 Policy Priorities



TICAS Michigan 2024 Playbook

Executive Summary

This document outlines the strategy guiding The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS) Michigan team's 2024 work, including community outreach, policy advocacy, and research. The “Playbook” includes information on TICAS’ org-wide mission, vision, and strategic themes which has guided TICAS Michigan’s development and approach to the work. We’ve also added the TICAS Michigan team’s reflection of 2023 and a look into 2024 research and policy focuses and priorities.

The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS)

The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS) is a non-profit, nonpartisan policy and research organization that advocates for every student, regardless of race, ethnicity, or family wealth, to have access to a quality higher education program without the need to incur debt to realize their dreams of earning a college credential.

Our vision is to reimagine a national higher education system where students can successfully complete a college credential with confidence that their education will afford them a pathway toward economic mobility and financial sustainability. To achieve this, TICAS’ strategic themes provide a student-centered framework of what higher education reform should aspire to and will serve as our compass as we carry out our advocacy over the coming years.



“To meet these challenges, we will continue to root our efforts in student-centered [policy and] research to inform decisionmakers of the realities that families, institutions, and borrowers face while navigating the higher education system we have today.”

– Sameer Gadkaree, TICAS President

Strategic Themes

- ✓ Students with financial need do not need to rely on debt to pursue and complete a college degree.
- ✓ Students can easily access supports they need to help them graduate and advance their careers; states and systems have the data and resources to monitor and close opportunity gaps.
- ✓ Students can pursue a quality college degree close to home, supported by policies to weed out predatory programs.
- ✓ Higher education policy and systems increase economic mobility and support racial inclusion in the workforce.
- ✓ Student debt does not create persistent economic hardship when debt does not pay off.

State level policy and advocacy teams work towards these themes by building stronger partnerships, drawing on national best practices, and collaborating with stakeholders on the ground.



TICAS Michigan Team

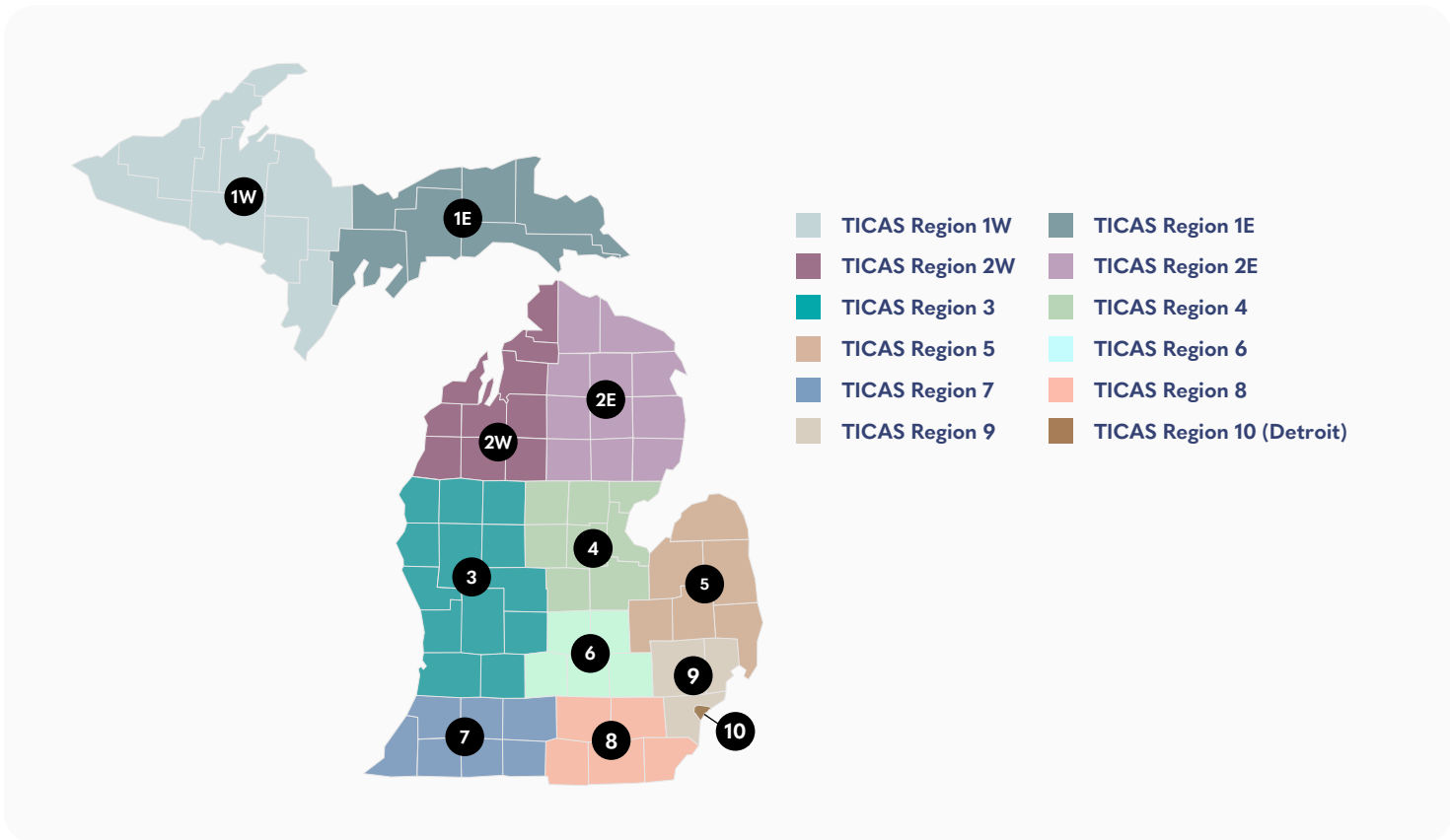
The TICAS Michigan team strives to be a resource, educator, and advocate on higher education policies and processes in Michigan. We seek to uplift and elevate community and student voice in policy decision-making to ensure student and family’s needs are met in their pursuit of postsecondary credentials.

Community Engagement

In Michigan (2023), the focuses and priorities were centered on outreach, listening, and learning. To ensure we were hearing from communities across the state, we identified 10 distinct regions and took steps to develop at least five community-based partnerships in each region. Through building these partnerships, we wanted to learn what difficulties communities were facing, what things folks were looking for from a policy partner, and what kind of resources would be helpful to getting the work done. What we heard from these conversations was that communities were craving:

- ✓ Equitable engagement with community leaders across the state.
- ✓ Education and training on advocacy and policy engagement in MI.
- ✓ Easy to understand data, research, resources, and tools for MI higher ed policy.
- ✓ Elevation of student advocates and cultivation of and support for student engagement; and
- ✓ Reflection of and focus on solutions for real, timely issues in state-wide policy priorities.

From these uplifts, we built stronger partnerships across the state; created short, easy-to-understand resources on policy processes and issues; crafted our policy priorities to align with our partners; adapted policy solutions aligned with partner feedback; and developed an inaugural student advocacy training cohort experience. We continue to prioritize these focuses alongside TICAS’ org-wide mission and vision to drive our work in 2024, engaging national and state policymakers, community service providers, and our students and families in their shared goal to address college affordability.



2024 Theme: Transparency in Affordability

Need-based financial aid is the most effective tool to help students afford access to college and earn credentials by closing the structural gap between college costs and students' ability to pay. The costs that students face after grant aid is applied to the 'sticker price' is what we refer to as net price and that is the most important piece of information for students and families making college decisions as well as for advocates assessing college affordability.

The federal government attempted to address confusion between sticker price (the cost typically seen on an institutional website) and net price (the cost remaining after the average grant aid is applied) by requiring all colleges to maintain a net price calculator (NPC) on their websites, but these tools are hard to find, to use, and to interpret. Confusion about the likely real cost of college continues to fuel widespread concerns about college unaffordability, deterring enrollment and leaving crucial federal and state financial aid resources on the table.

In Michigan specifically, students and families are unaware of the resources available to them to make college affordable. The Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce found in their 2023 State of Education and Talent Report that only 23 percent of Michigan voters had heard of the Michigan Achievement Scholarship which is the newest and most heavily marketed state aid program that generously reaches families with incomes upward \$150,000 household incomes. Additionally, only 15 percent of folks had heard of Michigan Reconnect, which provides free in-district tuition and fees to Michiganders over the age of 25 a degree or credential (temporarily lowered to the age of 21 in, FY24) at Michigan public community colleges. Furthermore, just over half of the Michigan High School Graduating Class of 2023 (50.5%) filled out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the required application to determine eligibility for the state financial aid programs, institutional aid, the federal Pell Grant, and federal work study and federal student loans. This means that about 49 percent (54,013) of Michigan's graduating high school seniors last year had no idea what resources they may have qualified for to apply towards the cost of a 4-year college/university, a community college, or a skilled trade/training program.

This year, we plan to dig deeper to uncover and understand what college affordability means to Michiganders, especially the most vulnerable populations, and how it affects decisions they make to pursue or not pursue postsecondary pathways. What we learn will help drive the identification of new and strengthening of existing proposals to increase enrollment and reduce the burden of college costs from FAFSA completion to application and enrollment processes, transfer, early credit accumulation and more. All of which is integral to contribute to the assessment and advocacy needed to support closing the equity mobility and viability gaps between populations in Michigan towards improved long-term livelihoods.

As part of this work, we will also expand the widespread, hyper-focus on tuition and fee costs among the general public, policymakers, and other stakeholders to the full cost of attendance. The real cost of college includes tuition, fees, housing, food, transportation, books, technology, child-care (where applicable) and the other tools students need to not only be successful students but meet

their basic needs as human beings. Despite creating some of the most significant barriers to successful completion for students from low-income households, these broader costs of attending school are too often left out of the conversation about college costs and affordability, leaving students and families unprepared financially once they have enrolled. This leads students to utilize burdensome loans (including predatory and high-risk private education loans), work more hours than research shows are compatible with success in coursework, or stop out of school entirely. This can leave students in the most vulnerable position of all: with loans but without the degree or credential that makes paying off the loans viable.

The overall lack of knowledge about the real costs of college and the financial aid that a student is likely to receive is preventing students and families from making informed decisions about their futures, and the state from reaching its college attainment goal.

TICAS Michigan Policy Goals

To address the gaps in knowledge and resources that help fuel college (un)affordability, we plan to advocate, analyze and uplift critical information to increase community understanding of the issues at play, student-centered policy solutions, and collaborate with stakeholders who are invested in improving the lives of Michigan’s students and families. Our policy focuses, research, and goals in Michigan align with TICAS’ overall areas of focus:



Access

Enhancing students’ exposure to quality postsecondary education opportunities and simplifying processes for accessing financial aid that eliminates “guesswork” in determining what is affordable.



Affordability

Broadening the concept of college affordability to include the full cost of college (beyond tuition and fees) while equitably expanding financial aid resources to mitigate costs and minimize the dependence on student debt.



Success

Elevating the importance of intensive supports and wrap-around basic needs resources for students in pursuit of postsecondary credentials.

As part of our development with community leaders in 2023, our policy priorities moving forward will be based in the identified needs uplifted by communities across the state of MI to support the improvement of access, affordability, enrollment, and successful completion of postsecondary credentials leading to acquiring viable career opportunities. We will however continue to contribute and work closely with state-level higher education stakeholders, executive and legislative officials, and state departments for the improvement of larger systemic solution creation, enhancement, and implementation within the state.

Our community-based policy priorities listed below were identified by community leaders and are categorized by the TICAS MI Team’s policy focuses of Access, Affordability, and Success.

2024 “Access” Policy Priorities

Establish funding and program incentives for hiring and retaining student support staff including counselors, school psychologists, and college advisors.

Why is this important?

The state has recently invested in scholarships, loan repayment programs, and salary incentives to help attract and retain teachers to address the current staff shortages in schools.¹ However, the staff shortages extend beyond teachers with Michigan’s student-to-counselor ratio being third to last in the nation.² School counselors do the critical work of supporting students’ academic, career, and social/emotional development.³ Similarly, school psychologists apply mental, behavioral, and learning health knowledge to help children succeed in and outside the classroom and college advisors assist students to identify a postsecondary pathway that is best for them and apply to college and financial aid.⁴ All these staff are critical for helping students meet their individual, academic and career goals.

What needs to be done?

A bill was recently introduced to require schools to have a student to counselor ratio of 250 to 1. To support this effort, the state needs to attract and retain adequate student support staff. We recommend extending current incentives to student support staff similar to the efforts put in place to address the teacher deficits and retention.

What are the potential impacts?

Increasing the number of student support staff will help reduce the current student-to-counselor ratio by incentivizing more people to become counselors. Bringing more individuals into the profession may help reduce caseloads of counselors, improving their satisfaction in the job and keeping them in the profession. Adding additional incentives for staying in the profession may also improve retention. As a result of improving the student support staff network, students may experience more frequent and in-depth interactions from their counselors, school psychologists, and college advisors, allowing them greater access to supports which may improve their mental and academic performance.

Enhancing career development, exposure, and experiences at the state and regional levels.

Why is this important?

Presently, many high school and college students have not been granted the opportunity to really understand career pathways, trajectories, and overall economic needs and vision for the state and region (e.g., understanding what in-demand jobs lead to stable, viable, and livable wages and which education pathways align with these jobs). This limits their ability to connect their education with the careers that can help them stay in Michigan, earn a sustainable wage, and become engaged citizens of the state.⁵ While there are many resources to filter through online, having in-person, hands-on opportunities make concrete pathways for students that they may not be able to discern on their own. As Michigan strives to keep and attract more young people, it will be imperative to help students identify clear pathways to learning, working, and living here.

What needs to be done?

The state needs to provide funding to community entities, programming, and/or training that elevates local, regional, and state labor needs and employment opportunities in a way that is engaging and aspirational for students. We should ensure that these efforts integrate content and activities that also help students and families better understand what postsecondary pathways lead to the credentials that can help students acquire those jobs and careers. We also need better connectivity to the state's talent needs for Michigan collegiate students through the increase of paid internships and career aligned work experiences while they are enrolled in their programs.

What are the potential impacts?

Enhancing access to career exploration and development opportunities will help students to identify potential careers early on, allow them to seek out more information about the education pathways required to pursue those careers, and help them to develop a plan to proceed down the career pathway. Providing community and regional based programming will help to overcome equity barriers, connect career exploration to community needs and build a sustainable workforce.

\$ 2024 "Affordability" Policy Priorities

Extending the Michigan Achievement Scholarship (MAS) eligibility window from 15 to 36 months post-high school graduation.

Why is this important?

The newly implemented MAS can only be used for up to 15 months post high school graduation, meaning students lose eligibility around age 19. Students do not become eligible for the newly extended Reconnect program until age 21. The disconnect between these two programs disincentivizes students aged 19-20 from enrolling in higher education. To meet the state's 60 by 30 goal, it will be important to close this access gap to ensure that all have access to resources from the state for postsecondary pursuit.

What needs to be done?

Extending the MAS window of eligibility to 36 months post-high school graduation will eliminate the age gap between it and MI Reconnect.

What are the potential impacts?

Giving Michiganders the certainty that there are resources available from the state to pursue higher education at any time will help individuals plan their education and careers around when they will be most successful, reducing resource waste. This will also help the state to spend more efficiently the dollars it has invested in financial aid programming as well as send the clear message to residents that that the state is there to contribute to their higher education, no matter what age they are ready to attend.

Aligning financial aid disbursement with federal practices.

Why is this important?

Currently, state aid disbursement in Michigan requires students to report their intended institution of enrollment to the state, which is an unnecessary and often unknown barrier to students receiving the state financial aid they qualify for. Additionally, the disbursement of state financial aid dollars to institutions happens long after students have started classes, leading to changes in student financial aid packages mid-late semester. These timing complications have led institutions to not include state aid eligibility on the financial aid award letters they send to applicants. This undermines the effectiveness of state financial aid investments, making college affordability more opaque and confusing for students and families.

What needs to be done?

The state should align all financial aid awarding and disbursement processes and timelines to the well-established and familiar federal student aid process. This change will remove unnecessary administrative and financial barriers for students and create a better bridge between the state and institutions to maximize available resources and close gaps in affordability.

What are the potential impacts?

Aligning state financial aid to the federal awarding and disbursement process will shift the onus of communicating a student's enrollment and financial aid eligibility from the student to the institution. This will in turn lead to stronger partnerships between the state and institutions, ensuring stakeholders are maximizing the efficiency and effectiveness of state investments. This will also promote greater transparency of state resources and institutional aid eligibility for students early in the process, creating more clarity on resources available which in turns help them and their families to make sound financial decisions for their educations and their futures.



2024 Success Policy Priorities

Expanding student housing resources.

Why is this important?

Very few community colleges offer on-campus housing options, state funding for public institutions cannot generally be used towards housing development, and state and federal affordable housing programs are not accessible to students due to work and income requirements and thresholds. This issue is particularly pressing in Michigan's rural areas where the closest community college may be over two hours away from home, deterring students from pursuing a postsecondary education. Access to safe and modern housing is critical for students to successfully complete high-quality education.

What needs to be done?

The state will identify ways to address housing insecurity for students in pursuit of postsecondary education either through creating opportunities for institutions to build and/or expand housing, local housing partnerships and development, and/or aligning state affordable housing resources to be accessible to students.

What are the potential impacts?

Providing affordable, sustainable, and consistent housing for students at community colleges will create stable learning environments to bolster student success. This could potentially improve completion and success rates at community colleges and, in the long term, get the state closer to 60 by 30.

Improving state financial aid reporting.

Why is this important?

In depth data on how many students are receiving state aid and whether these students are able to continue their education to completion is critical to evaluating whether these programs are meeting their goals to reduce costs and help students earn a postsecondary degree or credential. Most currently available state financial aid reports in Michigan include little to no information on the outcomes of students participating in programs, despite the state having access to these data. Other reports are published inconsistently and are difficult to access, making it hard to understand how the programs are working to serve Michigan and its students. To better understand the viability, the efficiency, and how to improve state programs, there needs to be better consistency, accessibility, data transparency and reporting on their current impact.

What needs to be done?

Improve the transparency of state investments in financial aid programs by ensuring annual reports are released consistently each year and include the information necessary to evaluate their effectiveness. The data in these reports should be collected across higher education institutions and measure key student outcomes, including enrollment, persistence, and completion. State departments should work together to align and connect existing state data to generate these reports.

What are the potential impacts?

Improving reporting and program evaluation would allow researchers and policymakers to identify weaknesses and inefficiencies in the state programs. This will help these stakeholders to determine what more research needs to be done, how to adapt programs to best support students, and determine if any programs should be eliminated.

Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP)

TICAS applauds the official launch of the Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP) and the naming of former Senior Education Advisor to the Governor, Michelle Richard, as Acting Director. MiLEAP, which will focus on early childhood education, postsecondary education, and education partnerships, was created by Governor Whitmer in July via executive order. We believe MiLEAP has the potential to address longstanding pipeline issues which prevent Michiganders from pursuing or completing college degrees and skilled certificates, which creates challenges for the state meeting its “60 by 30” college attainment goal. We are excited for the appointment of Michelle Richard in the role of acting director given her knack for collaboration, efficiency, and strategic alignment in the education ecosystem. We look forward to continuing to work with Michelle in her new role and support efforts on strategies on how the department can streamline college access, affordability, and success in the Mitten State.



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Endnotes

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