

Simon: Remove barriers to college completion

Written by Kara Beach
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Receives "Champion" Award from College Changes Everything conference

CHICAGO – July 11, 2013. Lt. Governor Sheila Simon, the state's point person on education reform, urged educators to continue working to remove academic and non-academic barriers for college completion as she accepted the 2013 College Changes Everything Champion Award today from the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC).

The award, presented annually at the College Changes Everything conference, recognizes an individual who has made significant contributions to help the state improve college access and completion efforts for Illinois students. Simon said undergraduates attending four-year schools, full-time and right out of high school make up less than 30 percent college students nationwide, and more students are attending for-profit schools than ever before. She said more transparency and low student loan rates will help older, part-time students succeed.

"I will continue to advocate for higher education that is affordable and accessible for all Illinois students, and to focus on reforms that help students from all backgrounds earn credentials that translate to good-paying jobs," said Simon, who visited the state's 12 public universities and 48 community colleges in her first two years in office. "I count higher education institutions and education advocates across the state as great partners as we focus on increasing the college completion rate in Illinois."

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This month, Simon will convene education leaders to develop a statewide College Scorecard with data on completion rates and costs that will help students make the most of their tuition dollars. The effort follows a resolution drafted by Simon and approved by the General Assembly urging all Illinois colleges and universities to prominently display a link to a federal College Scorecard on their websites to help students assess college costs.

Simon has also worked with students and advocates to urge Congressional action on student loan rates. On July 1, interest rates on some federal student loans doubled. Simon has encouraged students to contact their federal representatives to explain what \$2,600 annually – the average increase with doubled rates – means to them.

Simon and the state Board of Education are also rolling out the state's first middle school and high school math curriculum models this fall. Prompted by Simon's work on Senate Bill 3244, the units outline teach techniques aligned with Common Core standards and are designed to reduce remedial needs at college. Math is the biggest academic barrier to college completion, Simon said.

"Sheila Simon is one of the true champions of education in Illinois, and it's my honor to present her with this recognition," said Eric Zarnikow, executive director of ISAC.

The conference, coordinated by ISAC, brings together educators, students, legislators and other advocates to work towards the state's college completion goal. To keep pace with employer needs, the state wants 60 percent of working-age adults to hold a college degree or credential by 2025.

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