

New York Policy Agenda

In New York, postsecondary education remains one of the strongest pathways to economic mobility and long-term stability. Yet for too many students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds and communities of color, that promise remains out of reach. Structural inequities embedded across our financial aid and higher education systems continue to create unnecessary barriers to access, persistence, and completion. These barriers translate into unmet need and limited economic opportunity, reinforcing, rather than disrupting, the racial wealth gap in our state.

These challenges are not the result of individual failure, but of systems that are overly complex, under-resourced, and misaligned with the realities students face. When financial aid is insufficient, emergency support is unavailable, and colleges rely on punitive debt-collection practices, students are forced to make impossible choices between staying enrolled and meeting basic needs.

Informed by the lived experiences of students and families across New York, uAspire's 2026 Policy Agenda calls for a reimagining of how the state invests in and structures college affordability. This agenda advances a student-centered vision for higher education, one that prioritizes equity, transparency, and sustainability so that college serves as a true engine of opportunity.

Emergency Aid (S4884)

Emergency aid is essential to ensuring that students can stay enrolled and complete college when unexpected financial crises arise. Too often, a short-term crisis, an overdue rent payment, a medical bill, or a childcare disruption becomes the reason a student stops out entirely, derailing their dreams and potential. S4884, sponsored by Senator Andrew Gounardes, establishes an Emergency Aid Grant Matching Program through the Higher Education Services Corporation to provide SUNY and CUNY campuses with state matching funds for the emergency aid programs they already administer. This structure empowers campuses to deliver flexible, timely support for housing, food, transportation, childcare, technology, medical expenses, and other urgent needs, responding to students' real-life challenges. By investing in emergency aid as a core part of college affordability, we not only prevent students from leaving school over temporary setbacks but also strengthen their pathways to degree completion, economic mobility, and a future where every New York student has a fair chance to succeed.

Reforming the New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP)

Reforming the New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) is essential to building a student-centered financial aid system that reflects today's college realities and advances equity and degree completion. While increasing the value of TAP is critical, meaningful reform must also modernize the program's structure and delivery. As outlined in our policy brief, *A Path Toward Educational Equity: Reforming New York State's Tuition Assistance Program*, updating TAP to better reflect the full cost of attendance beyond tuition; removing outdated eligibility and enrollment rules that penalize part-time, working, and adult students; and ensuring aid is predictable, portable, and aligned with students' actual enrollment patterns. These structural reforms are necessary to address the hidden costs and administrative barriers that disproportionately impact students of color, first-generation students, and those balancing work and family responsibilities. A modernized TAP must not only make college more affordable upfront, but function as a completion-focused tool that supports persistence through graduation, strengthening economic mobility and equity across New York's higher education system.

Solutions to Institutional Debt

Solutions to resolving institutional debt are crucial to college completion for students of color and low-income students. This debt refers to money owed directly to a college or university by current or former students, arising from charges like unpaid tuition balances, library fines, or parking fees. Many students accrue institutional debt due to financial aid shortfalls, unexpected costs, or institutional errors beyond their control. New York is one of five states that allow public colleges to send past-due student debt directly to the state attorney general's office. There should be alternatives to aggressive debt collection and state-level reforms that offer clearer pathways for students to resolve their institutional debt and get back on track with their education.

Higher Education Funding Reform

New York's public higher education system, comprising SUNY and CUNY, serves over one million students across 85 campuses and plays a critical role in advancing economic mobility, expanding access, and strengthening the workforce. Yet the state's current higher education funding formula is outdated and ineffective. It has not kept pace with changing student demographics, rising costs of living, or the structural barriers that affect persistence, retention, and graduation, resulting in inconsistencies in institutional resources and inequitable student outcomes. By reimagining how the state invests in higher education, New York can strengthen opportunity, dismantle barriers, and make higher education a true driver of economic mobility and social equity.

Join us in the fight for college affordability!