The Illinois General Assembly’s bicameral, bipartisan Higher Education Working Group grew out of a failure of our executive branch to address the fragile state of Illinois higher education following the state’s shameful 736-day budget impasse in 2016 and 2017.

We formed in the fall of 2017, at the request of several Democratic and Republican legislators, and our working group recently met for the 22nd time. Over this period, there have been changes in the working group’s membership. Unchanged, however, are the group’s policies — such as utilizing outside experts and meeting privately — and the members’ commitment to work together and their zeal to improve our state’s higher education system.

We have already had some important legislative successes, and are working toward more.

Ambitious goals, successful bills

No executive order, Senate or House resolution, or appointment letters were behind the formation of this Higher Education Working Group. Rather, at the request of a bipartisan group of legislators, the Senate president, Senate minority leader, speaker of the House and House minority leader each chose three legislators for the group and told relevant staff to assist it. One member from each caucus was named caucus lead, but these positions are perfunctory.

The goal set by our working group was deliberately general, yet ambitious: “To help Illinois higher education thrive again.”

Last year, we helped get several bills passed and signed into law with this overarching goal in mind, and with a specific focus for improvement in three areas: access, affordability and attainment.

The successful bills from 2018 championed by our working group’s members include:

• SB 2927 — Under this new law, the state is providing matching grants to Illinois’ four-year public universities for financial-aid awards to undergraduate students in Illinois. These AIM HIGH grants require the participating universities to provide dollar-for-dollar matching funds. Our state budget for FY 2019 included $25 million for this program.

• SB 2354 — Starting next fall, students who have completed 30 academic credit hours will disclose their degree programs of interest to their college or university. The school must then adopt a meeting with the student about prerequisites for his or her degree program of interest. Under this law, too, schools will develop policies that encourage “reverse transfer credits” — students advancing toward credentials at a community college for previous transfer credits — students advancing toward their degree program of interest. Under this law, too, schools will develop policies that encourage “reverse transfer credits” — students advancing toward credentials at a community college for previous transfer credits — students advancing toward.

• HB 4781 — This bill created a task force to study how to collect data on the college and career interests of Illinois high school students, and then share this information with our postsecondary institutions.

The path to legislative success

Last year’s passage of these bills came after several months of our Higher Education Working Group, along with many hours of discussions, presentations from outside experts, and staff research.

We first heard from leaders of the Illinois Board of Higher Education, Community College Board, Student Assistance Commission and governor’s office. Next, we invited representatives from all 12 campuses of Illinois’ nine public universities to make half-hour presentations. These presentations were delivered by admissions and financial-aid personnel, (rather than presidents, chancellors and provosts), and they were critical in informing our approach to lawmaking for the 2018 legislative year.

The University of Illinois, for example, told our working group that its top-10 competitors for students had changed from Big Ten schools to a mix of Big Ten and Southeastern Conference schools. Other public universities told of dramatic enrollment losses to schools in adjacent states.

This caused members of the working group to begin considering how to stem the record exodus of Illinois high school graduates to other states.

We also learned of another important trend from three public universities in the greater Chicago area.

Our biggest competitor is nowhere,” they told us. Here’s why: In the previous year, up to 30 percent of these universities’ admitted students fell victim to summer melt and did not matriculate to any institution of higher learning — not the state university, not a private college, not a community college.

Additional presentations from high school counselors, community-based organizations and other higher-education stakeholders led our working group to explore a half-dozen remedies for Illinois’ woes.

The group was engaged in triage, hoping to pass legislation by the May 31, 2018, adjournment deadline — and the next step proved invaluable.

Jennifer Delaney, a professor of higher education studies at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, agreed to procure within two weeks white papers on need-based and merit aid, the use of a common college application for students and other topics heading our list. The Council of State Governments and other state groups also contributed materials. The Illinois General Assembly staff assigned to our working group did a Herculean job in consolidating all this research.

All of this work gave our group a bounty of ideas — programs from other states, promising research results, historical perspective and more.

From this came our legislation focusing on access (for example, developing a common application for our community colleges and universities), affordability (improving need-based and merit aid), and attainment (through improved policies on the transfer of credits and “reverse transfer” degrees). In April and May of 2018, our group met at least weekly, and sometimes twice a day, to finalize bill language, work with stakeholders and navigate the legislative process. Various members of the working group served as lead sponsors of the bills. Other sponsors came from leadership and rank-and-file members on both sides of the aisle.

Those factors, combined with members of the working group serving as leaders of the committees to which the bills were assigned, made for swift and overwhelming passage of many of our priority bills.

The end result: New ideas and laws “to help Illinois higher education thrive again.”

In addition to his leadership role on the Higher Education Working Group, Sen. Pat McGuire is chair of the Illinois Senate Higher Education Committee.

Submissions welcome

This page is designed to be a forum for legislators and constitutional officers. The opinions expressed on this page do not reflect those of the Council of State Governments or the Midwestern Legislative Conference. Responses to any FirstPerson article are welcome, as are pieces written on other topics. For more information, contact Tim Anderson at 630.925.1922 or tanderson@csg.org.