



College Affordability Summit: FAFSA and Beyond

June 9–11, 2026

Hilton Indianapolis Hotel

All times are listed in Eastern time.

Tuesday, June 9, 2026

5:00 p.m. Reception

Monument Hall
(Lower Level)

6:00 p.m. Dinner

Monument Hall
(Lower Level)

7:00 p.m. Summit Welcome

Presenter: Rep. Katie Stuart, Illinois General Assembly

7:05 p.m. Opening Plenary: Redefining Affordability: How Philanthropy Is Advancing New Perspectives

Monument Hall
(Lower Level)

Panelists: Katie Berger, Lumina Foundation; Justin Draeger, Strada Education Foundation; and Chibuzo Ezeigbo, Joyce Foundation

Moderator: John Burczek Dreier, Midwestern Higher Education Compact

While conversations on college affordability often focus on institutions and public policy, philanthropic organizations play an important role in shaping strategies, supporting innovation, and advancing student-centered solutions. This session features a facilitated conversation with leaders from national education philanthropy on how foundations are approaching college affordability, where they are investing, and the partnerships they are building to drive meaningful change.

Panelists will share perspectives on emerging priorities, promising practices, and lessons learned, while exploring how philanthropy can complement institutional and state efforts. Attendees will gain insight into the broader ecosystem working to advance college affordability and the value of cross-sector collaboration in accelerating progress.

8:00 p.m. Evening Concludes



MIDWESTERN HIGHER EDUCATION — COMPACT —

Wednesday, June 10, 2026

7:30 a.m. Breakfast Hour

Monument Hall
(Lower Level)

A full hot breakfast buffet will be available throughout the hour.

8:30 a.m.

Summit Welcome

Victory
Ballroom
(Floor 9)

Presenters: Samara Asghedom, Midwestern Higher Education Compact; Rep. Bob Behning, Indiana General Assembly; and John Burczek Dreier, Midwestern Higher Education Compact

Start the first full day of the Summit with a welcome that sets the tone for the days ahead. Hear opening remarks, learn about MHEC's key priorities and work, receive important logistical details, and prepare for impactful conversations.

9:00 a.m.

Plenary Session: U.S. Department of Education Update: Priorities, Progress, and What's Ahead

Presenter: Under Secretary Nicholas Kent

Join Under Secretary Nicholas Kent for a comprehensive update on the U.S. Department of Education's current priorities, recent progress, and strategic direction for higher education. This keynote will provide a clear, operational overview of the Department's work and its practical implications for institutions, states, and students.

The session will highlight key developments across core areas, including federal student aid delivery, data transparency, and efforts to support student success and completion and alignment with the workforce. Attendees will gain insight into ongoing work to improve federal student aid and strengthen the overall experience for institutions and learners engaging with these federal programs.

9:30 a.m.

Plenary Session: Making Affordability Work: A Fireside Chat on Federal Student Aid and Student Access

Presenters: John Burczek Dreier, Midwestern Higher Education Compact and Aaron Lemon-Strauss, U.S. Department of Education

For millions of students, college affordability is shaped by their ability to access and navigate federal financial aid. In this fireside chat, Aaron Lemon-Strauss of Federal Student Aid and MHEC President Susan Heegaard will discuss how systems, processes, and partnerships can better support students in paying for college.

Drawing on recent FAFSA modernization efforts, the conversation will explore trends in financial aid delivery, including expanded Pell Grant eligibility, user experience improvements, and collaboration across federal, state, and institutional levels. Attendees will gain insights into strategies for simplifying processes, reducing barriers, and creating a more accessible and student-centered financial aid experience.



10:30 a.m.

BREAK

10:45 a.m.

Victory
Ballroom
(Floor 9)

Interactive Session: College Affordability in Practice: Peer-to-Peer Exchange

This interactive working session brings together participants in similar roles from across states, institutions, and organizations for peer-to-peer discussions on college affordability. Attendees will explore shared challenges, emerging questions, and promising strategies related to pricing, financial aid, student communication, and access.

Through focused conversations and practical exchange, participants will compare approaches, identify common barriers, and share effective practices. The session is designed to foster new connections and generate actionable ideas that participants can bring back to their organizations while laying the groundwork for the state-based discussions that follow.

11:30 a.m.

Plenary Session - Collaborative Strategies to Support Adult Learner Re-enrollment and Affordability

Presenters: Joanna Dressel, Elizabeth Looker, and Toni-Anne Richards, Ithaka S+R

More than 36 million adults in the United States have some college experience but no credential, and many face affordability challenges that hinder re-enrollment and completion.

This session explores the financial and structural barriers shaping adult learners' educational journeys, drawing on national and regional data as well as examples from institutions, states, and regional collaboratives. Participants will examine affordability challenges and actionable strategies across preparation, enrollment, persistence, and completion.

Attendees will leave with a deeper understanding of why collaborative solutions are necessary and how state initiatives, regional partnerships, and communities of practice can create more seamless pathways for adult learners.

12:30 p.m.

Monument Hall
(Concourse-
Lower Level)

LUNCH

Join us for a buffet lunch and informal networking with colleagues from across the region. Take this time to recharge and continue the conversation.



1:30 p.m.
Vincennes
Room (Floor 2)

Breakout Session 1A - Price, Trust, and Action: New National Research on What's Driving Affordability Confusion and How States and Institutions Can Respond

Presenters: Justin Draeger and James Ward, Strada Education Foundation

Students and families still believe in higher education. But they're confused about the cost, skeptical that colleges are being straight with them, and making enrollment decisions in a fog of pricing complexity. In this session, Strada Education Foundation presents findings from its 2026 Perceptions of Affordability report, alongside the Strada State Opportunity Index, to offer both a diagnosis and a direction forward. We'll also introduce Student-Centered Enrollment Management Principles, developed with a national coalition of enrollment leaders and backed by 20 endorsing organizations, as a practical framework for states and institutions working together on price transparency and predictability.

1:30 p.m.
Indianapolis
Ballroom
(Floor 2)

Breakout Session 1B - Engaging Hoosiers Through Destination FAFSA: Direct Messaging to Traditional and Adult Learners

Presenters: Angel McAllister and Victoria Phair, Indiana Commission for Higher Education

Join the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (CHE) for an update on their Destination FAFSA grassroots outreach campaign. This session will highlight how CHE is engaging students and families through layered communication strategies designed to boost FAFSA completion. We will also explore outreach approaches for adult learners, the role of strategic community partners, and practical considerations for keeping campaign efforts affordable and sustainable.

1:30 p.m.
Corydon
Room (Floor 2)

Breakout Session 1C: Power of CANs: Driving College Affordability

Presenters: Ryan Fewins Bliss and Jamie Jacobs, MCAN

College Access Networks (CANs) play a critical role in translating state policy into local action. This session will highlight Michigan's approach to advancing affordability through coordinated statewide strategies, including the role of College Access Networks (CANs), cross-sector partnerships, and policy alignment.

Learn how coordinated, place-based strategies can increase uptake of financial aid, strengthen advising systems, and ensure students access the resources available to them. This session will offer actionable strategies for states looking to build or strengthen CANs as a lever for affordability and student success.

2:30 p.m.

BREAK

Snacks available in Victory Ballroom Foyer.



2:50 p.m.

Victory
Ballroom
(Floor 9)

Interactive Session: From Dialogue to Action: State-Based Collaboration on College Affordability

Building on the peer-to-peer connections established in the previous session, this working session shifts the focus to state-based collaboration. Participants will join colleagues from their state to explore affordability challenges and opportunities within a shared policy context.

Through guided discussion, attendees will identify what's working, where gaps remain, and how collaboration among institutions, state agencies, and partners can advance affordability goals. The session is designed to help participants translate shared learning into state-specific ideas, priorities, and next steps.

3:50 p.m.

BREAK

4:10 p.m.

Vincennes
Room (Floor 2)

Breakout Session 2A: Connecting Students to Postsecondary Pathways Using MI Student Aid Programs

Presenter: Emily Hurtado-Arboleda, MiLEAP

Michigan is investing heavily in student futures; last academic year more than \$558 million in state financial aid was awarded to over 153,000 college students. This reflects a 30% increase in students served compared to the 2023-24 academic year! Discover how the Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP) is expanding access, simplifying financial aid, and partnering with schools and organizations to open more pathways to postsecondary education and career success.

4:10 p.m.

Indianapolis
Ballroom
(Floor 2)

Breakout Session 2B: Apples to Apples: Implementing a Statewide Standard Financial Aid Offer Letter

Presenter: Wendy Robinson, Minnesota Office of Higher Education

In 2025, the Minnesota Legislature passed the College Financing Literacy Act, which will require all of Minnesota's higher education institutions to adopt a standard financial aid offer template. This session will detail the genesis of the Act, how Minnesota is working to implement standard financial aid offer letters, and lessons learned along the way. This session will explore the philosophical, political, and practical realities of trying to make it easier for students and families to make apples to apples comparisons when it comes to paying for college.

4:10 p.m.
Corydon
Room (Floor 2)

Breakout Session 2C: Capped Out: New Federal Loan Limits and What They Mean for Students, Schools, and States

Presenter: Clare McCann, Postsecondary Education & Economics Research (PEER) Center

This summer, new federal loan limits for graduate students, parent borrowers, and part-time students are set to take effect, bringing a sea change to the higher education affordability landscape. Already, many colleges and states are taking steps to help affected students. This session will explore the impacts of the changes across institution types, states, and fields of study, drawing on modeling and research conducted since the new limits were signed into law last year. It will also outline some of the approaches already being considered by state policymakers in response to the changes.

5:00 p.m.

Wednesday Sessions Conclude

6:00 p.m.

Networking Dinner

Monument Hall
(Concourse –
Lower Level)

Unwind after the first full day with an evening reception featuring food stations, beer and wine, and plenty of opportunities to connect. Join colleagues for relaxed networking as you continue conversations and build new relationships.

7:30 p.m.

Networking Dinner Concludes

Thursday, June 11, 2026

7:30 a.m.

Breakfast Hour

Monument Hall
(Lower Level)

A full hot breakfast buffet will be available throughout the hour.

8:30 a.m.

Day Two Welcome

Victory
Ballroom
(Floor 9)

Presenter: Kim Cook, National College Attainment Network (NCAN)

8:45 a.m.

Plenary Session - Washington Update: What's Next from Congress and the Administration?

Presenter: Tom Harnisch, State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) and Louisa Woodhouse, National College Attainment Network (NCAN)

This session will provide a federal higher education policy update and legislative outlook, with a focus on college affordability. As Congress and the Administration advance proposals affecting federal student aid, institutional oversight, workforce pathways, and a range of other priorities, this session will unpack what is changing, what is at stake, and what comes next. Attendees will gain a clear understanding of current legislative dynamics, emerging regulatory actions, and budget priorities shaping higher education—along with practical insights into how these developments may impact states, systems, and institutions in the year ahead.



9:45 a.m. BREAK

10:05 a.m. Breakout Session 3A: Better Together: Navigating Universal FAFSA Through Strategic State Partnerships

Vincennes
Room (Floor 2)

Presenters: Erick Drumheller, Education Quest and Malinda Jean-Baptise, Nebraska Department of Education

In 2022, Nebraska joined the growing number of states requiring FAFSA completion for high school graduation. However, moving from legislation to implementation required more than just a mandate—it required a unified front.

This session explores the creation and evolution of the Nebraska FAFSA Task Force, a powerful collaboration uniting the Nebraska Department of Education, non-profits, and higher education institutions. We will dive into the "Nebraska Way" of handling the universal FAFSA rollout.

10:05 a.m. Breakout Session 3B: Journey to College: MDHEWD's Strategic Approach to Outreach, Engagement, and Program Growth

Indianapolis
Ballroom
(Floor 2)

Presenters: Alison Notter & Gary Standiford, Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development

Learn how the Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development's Journey to College initiative redesigned its outreach approach to better serve counselors and students statewide. This session highlights the team's structured academic-year outreach model, communication strategies, partnership development, and data-driven improvements. Presenters will share the tactics behind achieving significant increases in participation and resource use, along with tools that support sustainable, scalable program delivery.



10:05 a.m.

Corydon

Room (Floor 2)

Breakout Session 3C: FutureReady States: Lessons Learned (So Far)

Presenters: Alisha Cederberg, Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement; Christina Warden, Women Employed; and Kermit Kaleba, Lumina Foundation (moderator)

States have invested nearly \$5 billion in expanding access to short-term workforce credentials in recent years, and the passage of Workforce Pell further signals an important shift in how stakeholders view these programs as part of overall federal and state higher education and workforce strategies. However, questions remain about how to ensure quality and effectiveness of these credentials. In Lumina's FutureReady States initiative, teams in twelve states are working to map current policies and practices around short-term workforce credentials, define key success metrics, and develop plans to maximize the value of these credentials to learners, businesses, and communities. This session will feature an overview of early lessons from the FRS initiative, including a recently released analysis of opportunities and challenges across all twelve states, and a deep dive on how leaders in Illinois and Michigan are approaching the work. Attendees will be able to learn about emerging trends in short-term workforce credential investments and engage with state agency leaders on how different approaches are driving outcomes.

10:50 a.m.

BREAK

11:10 a.m.

Victory

Ballroom

(Floor 9)

Closing Plenary Session - Two Years Out: The Impacts of the FAFSA Change and Where We Head Next

Presenters: Bill DeBaun and MorraLee Keller, National College Attainment Network (NCAN)

Two years into implementation of the FAFSA simplification, the landscape of federal student aid has shifted in promising ways. The simpler, speedier FAFSA and the expansion of Pell Grant eligibility opened pathways for millions of additional students. This closing plenary examines what we've learned from NCAN's FAFSA Tracker data about completion rates and Pell Grant receipt patterns since the changes took effect, including what's improved, what's lagged, and what the data suggests about for whom these shifts have been a benefit.

This two-way presentation will bridge research, policy, and practice. We'll walk through key findings on FAFSA completion and Pell uptake by state and student population, then pivot to hear from the audience: identifying the research questions that practitioners, policymakers, and advocates need answered to keep advancing affordability and completion work at the state level. What's the data gap in your work? What would change how you approach your students, your state policy conversations, or your funding strategies?

This is a cross-sector conversation between all of the summit's attendees about what matters most for the next phase of our collective work.

12:00 p.m.

Summit Concludes