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Let's tie college funding to student success

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As this hot summer ends, parents and students are anticipating the start of the school year, thinking about buying school supplies and pants that are long enough to cover legs that have grown since the last school year. My husband and I are looking forward to seeing more of our younger daughter, who will soon have to end the vampire-style schedule that teenagers keep.

And in this school year I am anticipating something new in higher education: performance funding, a way to reward good results.

We all know our state needs to have a more educated workforce to compete for jobs in a global economy. As a state, our goal is to have 60 percent of our workforce possess a meaningful college degree or certificate by the year 2025. We admit enough students into our community colleges, colleges and universities to achieve this goal, but not enough students are graduating or obtaining the certificate that they sought.

Performance funding will link a small portion of the state's higher education budget to how well colleges and universities help students achieve their educational goals. It will be an incentive to not just get students in the door, but to improve the odds that students will succeed.

We already have a kind of performance funding in place. Community colleges are funded, in part, based on the number of credit hours that are being taken. And we rightly pay attention to enrollment figures in all of higher education. But as a former teacher, I know that enrolling is just one measure of an institution. That's why students in my classes didn't get any credit for just showing up -- they had to show me they had learned the material.

As a teacher I used a variety of methods to determine how well students were learning. Exams, papers, and presentations combined to get a good picture of student progress. In that same way, performance funding will not use just one measure of success in higher education. Higher education institutions in our state have a wide variety of missions. Performance funding will encourage those institutions to meet their missions, whether it is challenging the high school valedictorians or developing the potential of students looking for a skilled career.

The first step toward performance funding is being taken now. Governor Quinn will soon sign legislation launching our state's efforts. I am a part of a broad-based panel working to identify a range of fair and accurate measures of success in higher education. These efforts will focus on what builds opportunity, both for the individual students and for our state's economy.

Performance funding has the chance to help shape our state. As we sharpen our pencils for the school year, let's sharpen our focus on how higher education can build Illinois into a state of opportunity. And let's get there.

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