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# Western Policy Exchanges

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The **College Access Challenge Grant (CACG) Program** is a federal formula grant designed to foster partnerships among federal, state, and local governments and philanthropic entities to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. Created by the College Cost Reduction Act of 2007, the CACG Program provides \$66 million per year for two years to state agencies or organizations designated by each state's governor. Recently introduced federal legislation would expand and continue the program for an additional five years as part of the proposed College Access and Completion Fund.

CACG is a formula grant program based on state population and poverty levels, with a minimum grant of \$330,000. Each state is required to provide matching funds totaling half of the grant award it receives through in-kind or cash contributions. States received CACG funds if their proposed projects met specified grant criteria, which include providing information to students about the college application and financial aid processes, conducting outreach and professional development activities, and offering student loan cancellation or repayment options. In an effort to bring states together to share promising practices and learn from common challenges, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) invited its 15 Western state members to join its CACG Consortium and Network.

CACG Consortium members – Alaska and Nevada – receive a variety of WICHE services, including grant development and management, program implementation and evaluation, and ongoing expert consultation and guidance. The consortium states are also members of the CACG Network, which includes North Dakota and Washington. Idaho is considering joining the network in the coming year. The CACG Network provides a forum in which staff involved in developing, implementing, and maintaining state CACG efforts can share and discuss issues related to the administration of their programs. Through two annual network meetings and an interactive Website, state leaders and policymakers share promising practices and common obstacles.

This issue of *Exchanges* highlights the challenges and accomplishments of state CACG projects and presents lessons learned across the four states that were part of the network in the first year. If the grant is extended – a very real possibility – states will have an opportunity to develop sustainable programs that greatly increase postsecondary participation and success for low-income students. Having the chance to learn from each other will help states improve their own programs and develop sustainable initiatives.

## Alaska

For far too many Alaskans, education and training beyond high school is not a priority. The state's college-going and completion rates are among the lowest in the nation, and policymakers face significant obstacles as they attempt to increase college access and success, particularly among low-income or first-generation students and their families. A 2007 Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) report commissioned by the state noted that Alaska's younger population was not educationally prepared to sustain or enhance the state's economy and workforce in the coming years as the baby boomer generation begins to retire. The report also recommended the establishment of a peer mentor program in the state as one strategy to increase college access.<sup>1</sup>

In response to the findings and recommendations of IHEP's report, the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE) used the state's CACG award to partner with the Anchorage School District (ASD) and the University of Alaska (UA) to develop and implement a pilot peer-mentoring program. Basing its program on the National College Advising Corps "near peer" model, Alaska has successfully recruited, hired, trained, and integrated two college/career guides into Robert Service High School in Anchorage.

### **Project Overview**

Alaska's CACG project is housed in the outreach division of ACPE, which is tasked with early awareness and intervention activities for Alaska youth. The goals of Alaska's CACG project include fostering college awareness; increasing the rate of enrollment in postsecondary education for all students, with an emphasis on underserved populations; and developing strategies for program sustainability.

Funds from the CACG Program allowed Alaska to continue the coordination of college access services that were already underway. The state created the College Access Advisory Team in 2007 for the purpose of identifying gaps in Alaska's college pipeline and formulating a strategy for creating a college-going culture. Once Alaska was awarded CACG funds, an internal workgroup composed of key stakeholders was established to guide CACG project development and implementation.

An extensive planning process preceded the implementation of Alaska's CACG project. ACPE convened an internal workgroup of 15 key stakeholders, including state and national partners, who met every two weeks for the purpose of guiding and refining the development and implementation of the pilot program. Alaska's CACG project director also reconvened the statewide College Access Advisory Team, which was instrumental in the creation of the initial CACG project design. This group of key business, community, education, and government leaders continues to play a major role in the program's expansion and sustainability.

### **Outcomes**

Services to students at Robert Service High began on March 2, 2009, and the program is already making an impact after only a few months of operation. The college/career guides are both recent University of Alaska Anchorage graduates and offer a unique perspective that supplements and enhances current counseling activities. To date, 1,208 students at Service High have received outreach services, ranging from individualized college and career advising to information about financial aid and college entrance exams.

The program boasts several other achievements. The college/career guides administered the Universal Encouragement Program online survey, which provides school leadership and counselors with vital information for individual guidance on career and educational pursuits. The survey also provides a student body profile which will be used to establish program baseline data about students' attitudes, values, and planning for education or training beyond high school. During the six week survey period, a total of 444 students, or 24 percent of the student body, responded. The guides also assessed over 50 percent of the high school's seniors regarding their current education and career plans. Student body surveys and interviews will continue during year two, producing ongoing data that will help to track college access and success at the pilot location as the project moves forward.

Additionally, the guides provided information about postsecondary preparation, planning, and career exploration during classroom presentations, program marketing, and a financial aid night organized by ACPE

and hosted by Service High. The guides reached out to a wide range of students – including those who weren't on the college prep track and 180 English as a Second Language (ESL) students – to explain the importance and benefits of college participation and completion. In addition, the guides exposed Service High students to the Alaska Career Information System (AKCIS), a Web-based information tool designed to help teens and adults explore career and educational opportunities in Alaska and throughout the U.S.

Onsite coordination with existing programs and activities was crucial to project success and also helped to avoid duplication of current counseling efforts at Service High. Prior to program implementation, ACPE met with school leadership, as well as the entire Service High counseling staff to establish how to best integrate CACG project activities with existing services. Once the college/career guides were in place, they were able to supplement and enhance college access efforts throughout the school with the aid of key school personnel.

Alaska's CACG work has led to several additional outcomes that will play a role in sustaining this and related efforts in the state. One example: A comprehensive database to track program activity and success, created by ACPE. This database could possibly serve as a template for a tool capable of tracking college participation and completion across the entire state.

In the future the University of Alaska System will play an increasingly important role in creating program capacity and sustainability, helping ACPE coordinate the training of future college/career guides and assisting with the development of program infrastructure.

### **Challenges**

In addition to the general lack of a college-going culture in the state of Alaska, the demographics of Service High pose significant obstacles to the goal of increasing college enrollment during the pilot phase of the project. Service High has the most diverse student body in the Anchorage School District, and current data show a steady decline in postsecondary enrollments over the past three school years – from roughly 70 percent in 2005-06 to 55 percent in 2007-08. Reversing this trend is going to be a challenge, but the alignment of CACG and ACPE college access goals

has the potential to change current attitudes and values towards education beyond high school, not only at Service High but across the entire state.

### **Nevada**

Nevada faces unique challenges in raising the level of college awareness and participation within the state. Recent studies have shown that while the number of jobs requiring some form of postsecondary education in the state is expected to rise, Nevada consistently ranks near the bottom in college access and attainment.<sup>2</sup> Far too many state residents lack basic knowledge about the college preparation process, not to mention the different types of support available to students and their families.

Governor Jim Gibbons designated the Nevada P-16 Advisory Council to have executive oversight over the state's CACG program. The Nevada P-16 Advisory Council was created in statute during the 2007 legislative session and consists of K-12, higher education, and business representatives appointed by the governor, the Nevada Assembly, and the Nevada Senate. In an effort to increase college awareness and participation, the Nevada P-16 Advisory Council partnered with the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) and WICHE to expand and further implement NSHE's existing Go To College program. The centerpiece of Nevada's CACG plan is a public information campaign designed to foster a college-going culture in the state, while communicating college and workforce readiness expectations. The campaign's core message is that college is a necessary and attainable goal for all students.

### **Project Overview**

The state's P-16 Advisory Council – which is charged with strengthening coordination between elementary, secondary, and higher education systems to ensure that pupils in the 12th grade are adequately prepared to make the transition from high school to college or careers – oversees Nevada's CACG activities. Council members are expected to take advantage of their contacts in the K-12, higher education, and business communities to push the college access goals outlined in the CACG Program. NSHE serves as the program's fiscal agent, while WICHE administers Nevada's grant on behalf of the P-16 Advisory Council.

Nevada's CACG project goals include increasing the number of students who pursue education and training beyond high school; creating a statewide college access network of education professionals and stakeholders; and developing organizational methods and capacity to sustain program activities.

Nevada's information campaign consists of three distinct yet complementary pieces. Classroom visits targeted at students in the 3rd, 6th, and 8th grades in low-income schools will feature representatives from the business and higher education communities, who will stress the importance of continuing education beyond high school. College access workshops for counselors and other education professionals will be held in Reno, Elko, and Las Vegas in an attempt to create a sustainable statewide network of education stakeholders to share best practices and coordinate efforts. In addition, an intensive marketing campaign, aimed primarily at high school students, uses television ads, print materials, social networking, and a campaign Website to spread the message that college is for everyone.

Nevada's Go To College campaign complements and expands upon existing NSHE initiatives designed to create a college-going culture in the state. NSHE already publishes "The College Journey" brochure for students, parents, and counselors, detailing the requirements for college attendance in Nevada. Further, the goals of the Nevada's CACG project fit well with NSHE's other college access activities, including TRiO programs at the University of Nevada's Las Vegas and Reno campuses, the statewide GEAR UP initiative (and the program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas), the Dean's Future Scholars and Silver Scholars program, and the Millennium Scholarship Program.

### **Outcomes**

Nevada's primary outcome during the first year of the grant related to the careful planning and coordination of its CACG activities. This will allow the campaign's three phases to aggressively unfold in year two. The state collected GEAR UP data from 2006-07 to measure college attitudes and awareness among Nevada students and their parents. This baseline data will be compared with future GEAR UP data to see if Nevada's public information campaign has had a positive effect on college awareness levels.

As part of the effort to recruit classroom speakers, NSHE developed a CACG frequently asked questions (FAQ) sheet and a speaker invitation form to distribute to business leaders and postsecondary professionals across the state, encouraging them to participate in Nevada's Go To College information campaign. NSHE also identified a strategy for increased distribution of "The College Journey" informational brochure to schools, counselors, students, and parents across the state. Additional brochures have been printed and will reach a wider audience as the grant moves forward.

KPS|3, an advertising agency located in Reno, was selected to assist with the development of an effective marketing campaign that will increase college awareness in the state. In addition to creating a Go To College Website, which will serve as the campaign's focal point, KPS|3 developed two television spots aimed at low-income students and their parents, created targeted Facebook ads, and designed a trifold Go To College brochure, which will be widely distributed across the state. Nevada's CACG advertising campaign will continue throughout the fall 2009 school semester and will, it is hoped, translate into increased college enrollment.

After Reno, Elko, and Las Vegas were selected as the sites of the first college access workshops, planning of the meetings began. The goal of the workshops is to introduce the Go To College campaign to school counselors and other education stakeholders and help them to better understand and take advantage of the numerous college access resources available to their students as a result of the state's CACG project. Further, these workshops will foster the creation of a sustainable statewide college access network that will continue after the CACG project comes to an end.

### **Challenges**

To date, the greatest challenge facing Nevada's CACG project has been one of geography. Nevada is composed of several distinct regions, including two very urban communities – Clark County in the South, which includes Las Vegas, and Washoe County in the North, which includes Reno – and a number of sparsely populated rural communities scattered throughout the state. Trying to coordinate efforts between these areas has proved somewhat problematic, but full implementation of the state's information campaign

in the coming year should allow each region to better manage college access efforts in the future.

After the project's meticulous planning process was complete, the Go To College information campaign commenced at the beginning of the 2009 fall semester. With classroom speakers lining up to visit low-income schools and the multimedia advertising campaign already underway, year two of Nevada's grant promises to be a busy and successful time. More importantly, because the college access activities and priorities of the P-16 Advisory Council and NSHE align well with the goals of the CACG Program, Nevada's Go To College campaign has the potential to change current attitudes and create a college-going culture throughout the state.

### North Dakota

North Dakota ranks in the top 10 nationally in college-going rates and high school completion, indicating that the state has been relatively successful in promoting a college-going culture. In designing its proposal for the CACG Program, the state elected to focus on developing a coordinated statewide college access network to reach students who may still be missing out on postsecondary opportunities.

#### **Project Overview**

North Dakota Governor John Hoeven chose the North Dakota University System (NDUS), which is the state's higher education agency, to implement the CACG project. NDUS is partnering in this effort with public and private postsecondary institutions, including the state's five tribal colleges, which serve predominantly American Indian students.

The partnership with the tribal colleges is crucial, as one of the emphases of the project is to improve postsecondary access and success for American Indian students. These students are four times more likely than the white students to live in poverty and two times less likely than Asian-American and white students to meet ACT benchmarks for English composition.

The state launched its project with three central goals:

- ▶ To establish a statewide college access network.
- ▶ To assess statewide progress toward increasing college access and factors surrounding accessibility.
- ▶ To develop a state college access strategic plan.

North Dakota's access network, similar to the effort underway in the state of Washington (see below), was designed to foster coordination and collaboration among the diverse organizations and programs that provide college access services throughout the state. Currently, North Dakota lacks a mechanism to assess gaps in services, provide opportunities for networking and collaboration, and provide state-level leadership to the college access effort, particularly for low-income students. The network's overarching goal is to improve the state's capacity to work with underrepresented students and their parents in order to increase student enrollment and improve student success in postsecondary education.

To establish the network, the state invited a diverse group of public, private, and tribal higher education organizations, along with community agencies, to form a College Access Challenge Grant Steering Committee, which provides guidance for the overall project and forms the foundation of its college access network.

The project convened the first of what is planned to be an annual state college access conference to bring together the access providers, institutions, and students from across the state. Following this meeting the steering committee met to plan the direction of state college access efforts.

#### **Outcomes**

By reaching out to diverse stakeholders to form its steering committee, the project has laid a strong foundation for the development of an effective college access strategic plan in the second year. Project leaders have worked hard to build statewide momentum for collaboration and coordination by heavily involving many of the different stakeholders. These leaders anticipate that this bottom-up approach will likely result in an effective state college access strategic plan, which will be developed in the second year of the project.

NDUS also worked to bring effective partners on board early in the planning process. For example, the project included tribal colleges and engaged them in the strategic development of the project, which will likely prove to be an important step in improving access and success for American Indian students.

Additionally, the state reached out to the Bank of North Dakota, which was identified as a key partner at the outset of the process and provided funds for the state

matching portion of the grant. The project is using these funds to purchase off-the-shelf Web technology to launch a college access Web portal ([www.nd-can.com](http://www.nd-can.com)), which provides information to parents, students, and school counselors, as well as career exploration, planning, and test preparation resources for high schools (some of these features are still being developed but are expected to launch soon). Using out-of-the-box technologies enabled the project to get its college access Website up and running relatively quickly, without the technical headaches that can delay “homegrown” Web projects.

In addition, as mentioned above, the project hosted a college access network conference. This statewide conference did not draw as many student attendees as organizers had hoped, but it did attract many school counselors and others who influence students, and it received positive media coverage, as well. As the project continues, the state is looking to reevaluate ways to stage the event in order to gain the maximum benefit. The event also provided an opportunity for members of the steering committee to convene to discuss future plans for the state’s college access network.

The state is also beginning the process of gathering data via student surveys to accomplish its second goal: assessing its progress toward increasing college access and studying factors surrounding accessibility. Survey results will inform the strategic planning process and help guide North Dakota’s college access effort.

## **Challenges**

Like many of the other states, North Dakota lacked some of the baseline data necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of its efforts to reach and educate the target population about the importance of postsecondary education. Although broader measures of college-going and college success rates were available, it will take time to develop metrics that can accurately assess the project’s impact. In addition, North Dakota’s large CACG Steering Committee proved slightly unwieldy when it came to managing the grant. In response, the project team created an executive committee to handle this function, improving grant management without losing the broader input of the group. North Dakota’s dedication to building an energized and broadly based foundation to drive the policy and practice changes will make the coming years of the effort more successful.

## **Washington**

The CACG effort in Washington began in an extremely favorable policy environment. In 2007 the state enacted the College Bound Scholarship Program, which promises to provide scholarships to low-income students to cover the tuition, fees, and a \$500 stipend for books (at public institution rates) as long as they promise to graduate from high school, demonstrate good citizenship, and enroll in a college or university. Students must sign up for the program in the 7th or 8th grade.

With the College Bound Scholarship as the centerpiece of the state’s efforts to improve access and success in postsecondary education for low-income students, Washington chose to leverage its CACG funds to support this program as well as to expand other existing efforts and campaigns.

## **Project Overview**

The governor designated the state’s Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) to design and implement the state’s CACG project. HECB identified these primary goals for the project:

- ▶ Increasing the sign-up rate of low-income families for the College Bound Scholarship.
- ▶ Increasing college awareness and financial aid opportunities for low-income students.
- ▶ Providing college preparation activities (for instance, activities related to College Goal Sunday), tools, and resources for low-income students.

In developing Washington’s proposal for the CACG Program, HECB elected to enter into partnerships with non-profit organizations by holding a subgrant competition. The general goal of the subgrant competition closely matched that of the CACG Program: to increase participation in the College Bound Scholarship Program, develop successful support models, and expand the capacity of existing services. HECB selected four organizations: The College Success Foundation, the Northwest Education Loan Association, the Metropolitan Development Council (Tacoma), and the Community Foundation of North Central Washington. The subgrantees have used CACG funds to stage events and otherwise publicize the scholarship opportunity, reaching out to low-income 7th and 8th

graders and their families to encourage them to sign up for the program. The subgrantees have leveraged the CACG funding to develop and implement myriad models that provide support services to students from 6th grade to 12th grade.

### **Outcomes**

Washington was able to launch its program more quickly and with fewer challenges than other states due to its extensive preplanning process and the decision to utilize the services of existing organizations rather than building a new one from scratch. By the time the state's CACG application was submitted to the U.S. Department of Education, the project team had already concluded the subgrant competition and received all proposals. The state announced the four winners in September 2008, only two weeks after the federal awards were granted. While other states had understandable difficulties in starting new programs, Washington's decision to take advantage of existing capacity in the nongovernmental sector allowed direct activities for students to begin relatively quickly.

The subgrantees were able to raise awareness about the College Bound Scholarship by partnering with public school systems to host events for 7th, 8th, and 9th graders and their families. Subgrantees also increased the number of College Goal Sunday events held throughout the state and expanded GEAR UP and TRiO activities in eligible schools while pushing eligible students to enroll in the scholarship program and support those who signed up.

The CACG funding came at a crucial time when the state was set to expand its outreach and implement the College Bound Scholarship program. The timeliness of the funding gave the state such an opportunity to elevate its services and outreach to a higher level, which has resulted in nearly doubling the sign-up numbers from the previous year.

The state set an ambitious goal of increasing participation of eligible students by 10 percent each year. The project has now gathered baseline participation information from school districts across the state. In the coming years it will be possible to more clearly evaluate progress toward this goal.

The next year of the grant should again proceed smoothly in Washington as the subgrantees continue their work. The project requires each subgrantee to

evaluate their efforts thoroughly, and this should provide a wealth of information about the strategies used – both successful and unsuccessful ones – and help the state refine its approach to improving college access.

### **Challenges**

In general, HECB avoided many of the challenges and difficulties that other states faced in starting their projects by engaging in an extremely detailed preplanning process and by taking advantage of already existing infrastructure in the form of subgrantees. The state and its partners have completed many activities that will likely lead to accomplishing its outcomes. As with other states' programs, however, it is difficult to evaluate the impact that these efforts will have on the broader goal of increasing access and success for low-income students this early in the program. As more data become available – documenting changes in the percent of the target population that signs up for the scholarship program and assessing student and family knowledge of college and financial aid options – the state will have a clearer picture of whether its outcomes have been achieved.

The nationwide economic downturn provided the biggest challenge to the HECB's CACG efforts. As noted earlier, the state could not develop and launch its one-stop college access Internet portal due to fiscal restrictions that resulted from the downturn. Project managers could do little to overcome this challenge, but the project expects to begin developing the portal in the second year of the grant. In fact, the state legislature has authorized the HECB to lead the development of a single, coordinated student access portal in the 2009 session, and the work is currently under way.

### **Lessons Learned**

The first year of the CACG Program has seen the creation of widely varied initiatives designed to accomplish the common goal of increasing the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. Although the four states discussed here have embarked on different projects, several common themes emerged that can benefit access programs as the grant continues.

*Extensive planning is time-consuming but critical to success.* All four projects discussed here invested significant time and resources in the planning process. In some cases, this delayed the beginning of project activities, but engaging in a robust planning process with a wide range of stakeholders resulted in smoother implementation.

*CACG efforts can't be fairly evaluated after two years.* As states began to implement their project activities during the first year of the grant, it became clear that the effectiveness of efforts to reach out to high school (and in some cases younger) students would not be known for several years. In many cases, the target population will not have graduated from high school during the grant period, and some students may not even reach high school until well after the project's end. Evaluating efforts to improve low-income students' success in postsecondary education may take even longer.

*Flexibility in using grant funds benefits states.* The CACG Program offers relatively broad criteria for using grant funds. This has been important, as states with vastly different contexts have worked to improve outcomes for low-income students. Though state initiatives need to be consistent with the goals of the CACG Program, this freedom has allowed them to target the different low-income populations in ways that make the most sense for them and their students.

*Data are crucial for evaluating program success.* Few would argue with the importance of using data to drive public policy. The CACG Program is no different. In fact, it requires more and perhaps different types of data than most states currently collect in order to evaluate program effectiveness. States should actively examine their data needs before implementing their projects and ensure that appropriate measures are taken to collect and analyze data as the effort progresses.

*Strategic partnerships can produce opportunities.* All four of the states discussed here have benefited from partnerships with other organizations within their states. Particularly in the current climate, most state agencies lack the human and financial resources, as well as the organizational capacity, to engage students directly. Developing partnerships with organizations that have this capability allows grant projects to reach individual students and help to foster their success.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ron Phipps, *Making Alaska More Competitive by Preparing Citizens for College and Career* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2007), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Nirjan Rai, *Shaping Nevada's Future: What the State Can Do to Invest in College Access and Success* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2008), i.

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This issue of *Western Policy Exchanges* was prepared by Carl Krueger and Patrick Lane, project coordinators of the Policy Analysis and Research unit at WICHE. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the view of the US Department of Education or its employees. To download a copy of this publication or other WICHE publications, please visit [www.wiche.edu/publications](http://www.wiche.edu/publications). For more information about the CACG Consortium and Network, please visit [www.wiche.edu/cacg](http://www.wiche.edu/cacg).

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