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After the Funding Is Through: CACG Program Sustainability

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, CACG provided \$66 million per year for two years to agencies or organizations designated by each state's governor. The passage of the Healthcare and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010 expanded the program for an additional five years and increased annual funding to \$150 million.

Currently, there is some uncertainty about the future prospects of the grant program at both the federal and state levels. While CACG is slated to continue through the end of the 2014-15 grant cycle, there is some speculation that funding could end earlier due to a weakened federal fiscal landscape. In addition, some states lost their funding for the 2012-13 cycle after failing to meet federal maintenance of effort provisions (discussed below) and other states may follow in their footsteps.

For these reasons states need to think about program sustainability sooner rather than later. This issue of *Western Policy Exchanges* highlights four recommendations that the CACG Network and others should consider as funding enters an uncertain period.

Introduction

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) launched the College Access Challenge Grant Network in 2008, soon after the federal government provided initial grant funding to the states. WICHE designed the network to give Western states an opportunity to collaborate and improve their grant programs by sharing ideas and promising practices with colleagues in other states, learning from college access and success experts, and collectively addressing common challenges that face those implementing such programs. During the 2011-12 grant cycle, **Alaska, Idaho, Nevada, North Dakota, Utah, Texas, Washington,** and **Wyoming** participated in the CACG Network.

Several developments related to federal maintenance of effort (MOE) requirements over the past year have left many states – including the Network states of **Nevada** and **Washington** – without grants for the 2012-13 cycle. Under the federal MOE provision, states must maintain funding for public institutions at a level equal to the average of the five previous academic years, as well as maintaining funding for financial aid at private institutions at a similar level. If states do not meet these requirements, they are ineligible to receive CACG funds without receiving an MOE waiver from the U.S. Department of Education.

Meeting MOE requirements in the current fiscal climate is challenging. But even for states that are not in danger of losing the current grant for this reason, the time to start thinking about the future of college access and success efforts is now. The ongoing uncertainty as to whether or not Congress will eliminate CACG before the expected end date and the reality that funding is expected to end altogether after the 2014-15 grant cycle mean that states need to consider program sustainability strategies before it is too late.

This issue of *Western Policy Exchanges* highlights four recommendations that states should consider as they move forward with their programs:

- ▶ Secure political buy-in to continue current access and completion efforts.
- ▶ Collect, analyze, and disseminate comprehensive data that measure program progress and success.
- ▶ Narrow the scope of program activities to focus only on those that add the most value.
- ▶ Partner with other groups or entities engaged in similar activities so that access and success efforts can continue without interruption.

Before discussing these four strategies, below is a closer look at how states have used CACG funds and at threats to the program at the federal and state level.

Persistence Pays

Activities in most CACG Network states have remained basically unchanged from the 2010-11 grant year until now. **Alaska** continued to expand its near-peer mentor program, the Alaska College & Career Advising Corps (ACAC), in the 2011-12 grant year, establishing seven new sites in remote or rural areas. **Idaho** narrowed the focus of its program but continued to successfully offer dual credit assistance, hold Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion events, and expand its own near-peer mentoring program to a new region of the state. **Nevada** persisted with efforts to create a college-going culture through the GoToCollegeNevada.org campaign and the further implementation of the GoToCollege Ambassadors advising program. **North Dakota** is still relying on its comprehensive website to provide college and career planning for parents, traditional students, and counselors, as well as to middle school students, adults, and others. **Wyoming** issued more need-based College Access Grants and expanded its near-peer mentoring program, the Wyoming College Advising Corps (WyCAC).

Several state programs have had success collaborating with partners and issuing subgrants to grassroots organizations that work directly with students. One

promising side benefit to this: state agencies often require subgrantees to incorporate sustainability planning into their proposals. The **Utah** CACG program increased its FAFSA completion efforts through partnerships, but required sustainability plans from all subgrantees. **Texas**, which similarly requires a sustainability plan from its subgrantees, helped more low-income students finish college in 2011-12 through a grant program that provides funding to students who had already earned 60 credits.

Washington, which coordinates its CACG efforts with the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) initiative and other federal grant programs, continued to fund subgrants to organizations working to sign students up for the College Bound Scholarship program. Low-income students sign up for this “promise scholarship” in middle school and agree to maintain at least a 2.0 GPA through high school, complete the FAFSA, and not be convicted of a felony. In return, the state agrees to provide “last dollar” financial aid (which covers any need unmet by other financial aid sources) for the student to attend a state institution. The state also partnered with organizations looking to increase college awareness in rural areas and among Spanish-speaking students and their families. **Washington** has emphasized offering grants to organizations that are willing to use the funding as start-up capital before incorporating the activities into their regular activities.

Thanks to the flexibility of the CACG program, states use their funding in a variety of ways. Because of this diversity, not every approach to sustainability is applicable to every state effort. But the recommendations presented in this brief offer general guidance that can help states create specific strategies to sustain college access and success programs well beyond the life of the CACG program.

Time Has Come Today

In any discussion of CACG programs, it is important to note that even though Congress has authorized and appropriated funds through the 2014-15 grant cycle, the continuation of the program is not guaranteed. In past budget resolutions, the U.S. House of Representatives has suggested eliminating funding for the program. Concerns have been raised about the federal college access funding landscape, which some claim has become duplicative, with multiple programs – such as GEAR UP and TRiO – working toward the same general end as the CACG program. With the balance of power in Washington remaining the same after the recent election, much uncertainty remains as

the president and a divided Congress work to address serious fiscal disagreements involving sequestration and annual appropriations. It is possible that Congress could reorganize programs targeting low-income students or eliminate one or more altogether.

Another concern affecting many states, including **Idaho**, **Nevada**, and **Washington**, is meeting MOE requirements. The Higher Education Opportunity Act requires states to fund higher education at a level “equal to or greater than the average amount provided for non-capital and non-direct research and development expenses or costs by the State to the public institutions during the five most recent academic years for which satisfactory data are available.”¹ States must similarly maintain funding for student financial aid at private institutions. If states do not meet these requirements, they cannot receive CACG funds without a waiver from the Secretary of Education.

Twenty-two states requested an MOE waiver in 2011 because of cuts to higher education in previous legislative sessions; the same number of states (including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) requested a waiver in 2012. While **Idaho** and **Washington** (along with other states) were able to use American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds to meet MOE requirements in 2011, that was not an option in 2012, due to the loss of stimulus funds. **Idaho** met MOE by reallocating financial aid funds and demonstrating “effort” through its support of the Dual Credit for Early Completers program, originally established in 2011 and funded at the same level in FY 2012 and FY 2013. **Nevada** and **Washington** were denied funding for the 2012-13 grant cycle.

Recommendations

With the uncertainty surrounding CACG, states need to plan how to sustain their efforts. The following recommendations can help states to maintain the momentum they have established over the past four years should the grant program end entirely or be dramatically redesigned.

- ▶ **Secure Political Buy-in.** Engage the governor’s office, state legislature, foundations, or any other entity that can advance the goals of your program – and do it as soon as possible, before the grant comes to an end. Because the governor designates the agency responsible for overseeing CACG, he or she should already be familiar with program efforts in the state and can advocate for continuation of the work once grant funding comes to an end. The state legislature allocates

higher education funding and can also serve as an ally and advocate for keeping program activities alive. For instance, to help sustain its near-peer mentor program after CACG ends, **Idaho** engaged state legislators about the mission and accomplishments of the program to date, including aligning the goals of the program with the broader economic and workforce development goals of the state. Starting a policy discussion well in advance of the end of the grant will allow state leaders to make a formal budget request during the 2014 legislative session. Additionally, **Washington** has worked with members of the state’s U.S. Congressional delegation to build support for the CACG program and to keep them informed of the state’s grant activities. Local and national foundations can also fund access and completion activities, provided project directors reach out early with thoughtful plans and proposals for consideration.

- ▶ **Collect, Analyze, and Disseminate Data.** The most compelling evidence that a program is having an impact on access and success for low-income students is comprehensive data showing progress over the course of the grant. **Alaska** used National Student Clearinghouse data to track program impact over the past four years. One location in the Anchorage School District, Bartlett High School, had a college-going rate of only 40 percent in 2009, the year before it joined the ACAC program. Using Clearinghouse data, the state found that the number of students enrolling in postsecondary education the fall after graduation from Bartlett increased to 44 percent in 2010 and 49 percent in 2011. Internal data collected by ACAC staff show similarly promising results. For instance, between 2009 and 2011, there was a 14 percent increase in the number of students who participated in the program and then were admitted into a postsecondary institution. These positive results allow **Alaska** to show policymakers and potential funders the value of the program, with the goal of continuing current levels of service to students and of facilitating expansion across the state.
- ▶ **Narrow the Focus.** Avoid thinking too big or trying to save everything that is part of the current CACG effort. Instead, focus on the one or two activities that are showing the most promise or positive results and work on sustaining those efforts. Specifically, identify the activities that add the most value and that could be combined with existing work in other areas. Over the past two

years, **Idaho** has reduced the number of grant activities undertaken to concentrate on efforts that have proven to be the most successful: enhanced dual credit opportunities for low-income students, increased usage of the Idaho Career Information System, and expansion of the state's near-peer mentor program. Focusing on fewer activities will hopefully allow **Idaho's** program to more easily transition to sustainability.

- ▶ **Partner with Programs that Will Outlast CACG.** Combine access and completion efforts with those of groups that are already working in similar areas – and will continue to do so if CACG ends. This applies to both state- and national-level efforts. During the 2012-13 grant cycle, for example, **Idaho** will transition the training of high school and postsecondary counselors to the Idaho Digital Learning Academy (IDLA), which already has the resources in place to coordinate counselor training across the state. This ensures that the professional development opportunities undertaken by its CACG program will continue if grant funding ends. Similarly, **Washington's** CACG program worked with school districts in 2011-12 to transfer oversight of scholarship outreach programs originally undertaken over the first four years of the grant. Some Network states – including **Idaho, Nevada, Texas, and Utah** – are also participating in national access and success efforts such as Complete College America (CCA). While CCA differs from CACG in its methods and approach to access and success at the state level – with CCA placing a greater emphasis on completion as opposed to access – both programs share similar overall goals of raising postsecondary attainment. Framing CACG programs as important tools to meet state goals – such as those developed as part of CCA – can help ensure political and financial support for the continuation of these activities. Similarly, Lumina Foundation's Big Goal seeks to increase the number of Americans with quality postsecondary degrees and credentials and the National Governors Association's Complete to Compete initiative allows states to monitor performance and progress towards raising student achievement in college. Leveraging partnerships with like-minded initiatives such as these can help to ensure the sustainability of CACG-funded access and success programs.

Conclusion

States in the CACG Network have made tremendous strides over the course of the grant through program expansion and providing direct services to students. The foundation has been laid. The next step is to ensure that the valuable work already accomplished continues. No matter what the future holds, there will still be opportunities for states to continue the crucial work they have already undertaken thanks to the CACG program. The college access and completion agenda will continue to dominate policy discussions in the years to come, and the opportunities to partner with state and national efforts should be plentiful. In fact, an argument could be made that CACG project directors and staff are better qualified than most to plan and implement new access and success efforts because of their previous experience in working with low-income and first-generation students through the program. But the momentum established over the past four years can only continue if states start developing and implementing strategies for sustainability in conjunction with ongoing grant activities.

Endnotes

¹ College Access Challenge Grant Program Application Package for FY2011 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2011), accessed 17 November 2012 at <<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/cacg/applicant.html>>.

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 WICHE 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. For more information about the CACG Consortium and Network, please visit www.wiche.edu/cacg.