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3035 Center Green Drive • Suite 200
Boulder, Colorado 80301-2204

T 303.541.0200 F 303.541.0243

www.wiche.edu

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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 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 raised funding to \$150 million per year.

During its first two years, the College Access Challenge Grant (CACG) was a federal formula grant program based on state population and poverty levels, with a minimum grant of \$330,000. The CACG was included in the Healthcare and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010, which raised the minimum award to \$1.5 million. Grant criteria give states a great deal of leeway to design their programs. Allowable activities include offering need-based aid to low-income students, providing college access outreach and information to students and their families, assisting with the financial aid process, conducting professional development for guidance counselors, and granting loan forgiveness to those working in high-need occupations or areas. All states received funding during the first two years of the program.

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 member states to join its CACG Consortium and Network. WICHE provided the two CACG Consortium states – Alaska and Nevada – with a variety of 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 provides a forum for staff involved in developing, implementing, and maintaining state CACG efforts to 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 challenges. For the first two years, Alaska and Nevada belonged to the CACG Consortium and Network, while North Dakota and Washington were members of the CACG Network alone. After the 2010-11 awards were announced, Wyoming and Idaho joined the consortium, replacing Nevada, which became a network state along with new members Texas (a non-WICHE member state) and Utah. The CACG Network's full membership currently includes Alaska, Nevada, Idaho, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

Now that the grant has been extended, states have an opportunity to develop sustainable programs that greatly increase postsecondary participation and success for low-income students. Having the chance to continue learning from each other will help states improve existing programs and create new initiatives that are built to last. This issue of

Western Policy Exchanges highlights the ongoing accomplishments and challenges of state CACG projects and presents lessons learned across the four states that were part of the network in the second year: Alaska, Nevada, North Dakota, and Washington.

ALASKA

Thanks in large part to the thoughtful planning, development, and implementation of its pilot phase, Alaska's CACG program continued to make significant progress in its second year of operation. After providing direct services to students at Robert Service High School in the Anchorage School District (ASD) for one full year, the Alaska College/Career Advising Corps expanded into another ASD location, Bartlett High School, and is poised over the next year to expand into other parts of the state, including suburban and rural locations. The steady growth of Alaska's CACG program continues to raise awareness of postsecondary options for low-income and first-generation students and foster a college-going culture throughout the state.

Project Overview

The goal of Alaska's CACG program is to increase the number of high school students who graduate from secondary school and enroll in and complete postsecondary education (with an emphasis on underserved populations), while developing strategies for long-term program sustainability. After a 2007 report from the Institute for Higher Education Policy recommended the establishment of a peer mentor program in the state as one strategy to increase college access, the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE) piloted the College/Career Advising Corps in conjunction with state and national partners.¹ ACPE is uniquely positioned to coordinate CACG program efforts because of its mission: to promote and support higher education for all Alaskans. Over the past two years, CACG activities have gained statewide support from key partners, including the superintendent of the ASD, the University of Alaska Statewide System, the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, and the Alaska State Chamber of Commerce.

The state's CACG program design and implementation continues to be guided by Alaska's College Access Advisory Team, a workgroup of 15 key national and state partners – including key business, community, education, and government leaders – convened by ACPE. The College Access Advisory Team provides a comprehensive view of Alaska's college access

initiatives, facilitates dialogue on critical policy issues, and provides ongoing feedback to continuously improve program effectiveness.

Alaska developed its program, including the Alaska College/Career Advising Corps, based on a model devised by the National College Advising Corps (NCAC), a nationwide consortium of colleges and universities that works to increase the number of low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented students entering and completing higher education. The NCAC model trains recent college graduates in college access and success strategies and then places them alongside counseling and career resource staff in high schools with a high concentration of first-generation, low-income, and minority students. During Alaska's project pilot phase in Anchorage, two college/career guides worked alongside guidance counselors and other high school staff to motivate, encourage, and assist low-income and first-generation students through the career exploration, college preparation, and college/training application processes. As recent University of Alaska Anchorage graduates, college/career guides offer high school students their "near peer" perspective throughout the college preparation process.

In 2010 the Alaska College/Career Advising Corps officially became a member program of NCAC. Membership provides state project leaders with a network of dedicated college access practitioners across the country and allows college/career guides in Alaska to interact and share best practices with near-peer mentors from other states.

Outcomes

Since March 2009 three recent University of Alaska graduates have provided services to over 2,400 students at Service and Bartlett high schools through activities including career exploration, postsecondary preparation, and providing resources and information on the full spectrum of college and training application processes. Data collected at the end of year one indicate that the program's near peer encouragement and engagement strategies have already had a significant impact on student attitudes and aspirations:

- ▶ A 4 percent increase in the number of students who plan on attending four or more years of postsecondary education.
- ▶ A 13 percent increase in student pre-college activity such as taking college entrance exams or participating in college campus-based programs.
- ▶ A 6 percent decrease in students expressing a belief that college is not affordable.

With the Alaska College/Career Advising Corps established at two locations within the ASD, ACPE is ready to expand into other areas of the state, including rural communities, in order to develop statewide capacity for college access services, as well as long-term program sustainability. Through careful planning with project partners, ACPE has developed criteria for the selection of new peer mentor sites and for determining the levels of service available to interested schools or communities. For schools, the required characteristics include a predominantly low-income/first-generation student body, an established track record of K-12 and postsecondary collaboration, the support of district or school leadership, and the ability to provide technology and work space and to participate in data collection.

As the advising program enters its third full year of operation, a postsecondary completion component will be added to track students' postsecondary progress, identify key transition points, and build intervention strategies. Specifically, Alaska is in the process of creating a research and analysis unit within ACPE. This unit will craft critical policy questions, track student progress and collect program data, and facilitate the continued improvement of Alaska's educational pipeline through evidence-based interventions.

Challenges

Even with early program success, Alaska continues to face significant challenges. At 28 percent, Alaska's current college-going rate is among the nation's lowest, and the state faces significant challenges in trying to increase access and success for low-income and first-generation students. Student pipeline data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that only 6.6 percent of 9th graders in the state graduate from high school four years later and complete a bachelor's degree "on time" (within six years of enrollment), placing Alaska at the very bottom of the nation.² NCES similarly reports in 2009 that only 18.5 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds in the state were enrolled in any form of postsecondary education – again, the worst record in the nation.³

The state must do a better job of moving its citizens through the education pipeline and into successful careers if Alaska is going to remain economically competitive in the coming years. By 2018, 63 percent of the jobs in Alaska will require some form of postsecondary education or training, according to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce. Furthermore, over the next 10 years, new jobs in Alaska requiring postsecondary education and training will grow by 12,000, while jobs for high school graduates and dropouts will grow by 6,000.⁴

The state's demographic, geographic, and cultural diversity presents further challenges and necessitates program flexibility and creativity to best serve students throughout the state. As the program expands into rural and native communities, one model will not fit all.

Alaska's CACG program has proven an effective strategy in addressing these challenges, while simultaneously creating a college-going culture. The program also has the potential to create a statewide practitioner network devoted to college access and success through sharing best practice methodologies of state and national partners and aligning state postsecondary goals and priorities.

NEVADA

After an intense year of project planning, Nevada's CACG program accomplished a great deal and met several goals during its second year of operation. In addition to launching a comprehensive college access marketing campaign aimed at students and their parents, Nevada's program reached hundreds of low-income and first-generation students across the state through classroom visits, speaking engagements, and college fairs. Now that the "GoToCollegeNevada.org" campaign is fully operational, the state is focusing on improving student outcomes and raising awareness regarding the value of a college education for everyone throughout the state.

Project Overview

In an effort to increase college awareness and participation in the state, the Nevada P-16 Advisory Council partnered with the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) and WICHE to expand and further implement NSHE's "Go To College" program. The centerpiece of Nevada's CACG plan included a public information campaign designed to foster a college-going culture in the state, while at the same time communicating college and workforce readiness expectations in both English and Spanish. Target audiences for the campaign were students in the third, sixth, and eighth grades in low-income schools and high school students either applying for college or preparing to enter the workforce. The campaign's core message is that college is a necessary and attainable goal for all students.

With the information campaign firmly established and NSHE taking over for the P-16 Council as the sole agency responsible for overseeing the grant, Nevada will use new program resources to expand activities related to increasing college preparation and participation, including piloting accelerated associate

degree programs and providing subgrants to fund projects that provide college and career-planning activities to high school students.

Outcomes

While Nevada's primary accomplishment during year one of the grant was the planning and coordination of its CACG activities, during the second year, the program has made tremendous strides in reaching out to students, families, counselors, and teachers through the creation of a campaign website; increased distribution of informational brochures and other materials designed to raise college awareness; and the airing of television spots promoting the program and the site. NSHE and WICHE staff also met with counseling staff from across the state and attended numerous events related to college access and participation. There was a concerted effort during the second year of the grant to brand Nevada's CACG program, with the goal of creating long-term sustainability. The numerous contacts made throughout the state because of Nevada's CACG activities are expected to help build capacity as the program moves forward.

The focal point of Nevada's campaign is the GoToCollegeNevada.org website, which features a wealth of information regarding college access, including required courses, financial aid deadlines, college contact information, career options, and what parents can do to get involved. The website also hosts a contest, which asks students to "pledge" to go to college for the chance to win a laptop computer. At the end of the fall semester in 2009, 335 students had submitted pledge forms and two won laptops. NSHE also created a GoToCollegeNevada.org Facebook page and maintained weekly updates for over 450 fans. Recent viral marketing efforts include GoToCollegeNevada "tweets".

In addition to the website activities, Nevada's program launched two television spots, aimed at low-income students and their families and airing on targeted local and cable channels in Clark, Elko, and Washoe Counties. NSHE also developed a new informational brochure, which was widely distributed throughout the state. The second phase of the media campaign commenced with the creation of a Spanish-language website, television spots, and brochures.

NSHE and WICHE completed nine school district counselor workshops throughout the state and presented the GoToCollegeNevada.org campaign to 624 counselors statewide. Evaluations show that 79 percent of participants thought the workshops provided useful information, and 81 percent thought

the campaign content was useful. NSHE also presented and provided materials to 35 schools throughout the state, exposing over 3,000 parents, students, and school staff to the GoToCollegeNevada.org message. The presentations, in both English and Spanish, consisted of classroom speaking engagements and appearances at community resource fairs, career days, English Language Learner assemblies, parent meetings, and an elementary school college week.

Nevada's media campaign provides a foundation that has allowed the state to widen the focus of its CACG program. In addition to enhancing the website to include more career information and options and running public service announcements aimed at helping students and families plan and save for college, NSHE will provide subgrants to fund projects that increase awareness about the value of a college education and support career planning activities for high school students. Nevada will also use new CACG resources to pilot additional accelerated associate degree programs across the state or expand existing ones, in an effort to shorten the amount of time it takes students to enroll in a baccalaureate program or enter the workforce.

Challenges

Despite the momentum built by Nevada's program during the second year of the grant, the state continues to face challenges in raising the level of college awareness and participation. Many state residents still lack basic knowledge about the college preparation process and the different types of support available to students and their families. As Nevada expands the scope of its CACG program to include a greater focus on not just college awareness but also on enrollment and completion, project leaders face significant obstacles. In 2018, 54 percent of Nevada's jobs will require some form of postsecondary education, which is nine percentage points below the national average.⁵ According to *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, Nevada ranks last in the nation in the number of first-time freshmen enrolled in any U.S. college compared to the number of ninth graders four years earlier.⁶ Just 28 percent of Nevadan's hold a degree or credential of value.⁷

Increasing opportunities for college graduates across the state will be as important as increasing college participation in the coming years. Nevada's CACG program is providing the necessary information to students and parents regarding college access. The next round of funding will allow the state to foster greater student success.

NORTH DAKOTA

North Dakota continually ranks near the top among the states on many education measures, particularly on important college access outcomes such as high school completion and college-going rates. In 2008 the state was seventh in the nation in public high school graduation rates (81.9 percent) and fifth in the percentage of 19-year-olds enrolled in college compared to the number of ninth graders four years earlier.⁸ The state's positive outcomes tend to mask underperformance by some groups, particularly tribal students. Additionally, the state faces a significant long-term demographic challenge, as the population of traditional-aged students that feeds the educational pipeline is projected to decline in future years, meaning that the state will have to improve performance just to maintain the current number of degree-holders.⁹

This challenging demography underscores the importance of the state's efforts to improve its already impressive educational outcomes and develop a coordinated statewide plan to promote college access.

Project Overview

The North Dakota University System (NDUS) continued to manage the state's CACG program during the 2009-10 grant cycle. In general the project team continued its efforts from the previous year and implemented several different components of a major outreach effort to create a college-going culture. This effort included a specific focus on tribal students, who score significantly lower than other students on most educational outcomes.

In a significant change, the governor's office shifted responsibility for administering the grant from the NDUS to the Bank of North Dakota (a state-owned bank that is part of the state government) for the 2010-11 grant. The Bank of North Dakota had functioned as a partner of NDUS during the first two years of the grant and also provided matching funds that helped the state purchase software to launch its college access website. Although NDUS has significant funds that will carry over from the second year of the grant, the bank began its initiatives under the expanded program in 2010.

The project has focused its efforts on three main areas: building a website to provide college-going information to high school, middle school, and elementary school students (www.nd-can.com); creating a statewide college access network to guide development of college access policy and programs; and providing direct outreach to low-income and underrepresented students to develop a college-going culture among them.

Outcomes

During the second year of its CACG program, the North Dakota team continued to build on the efforts from the previous year. Like many other states, North Dakota spent a large portion of the first year of its CACG program in a planning process to define grant activities and initiatives in greater detail. This made the 2009-10 grant year the first full year of project implementation.

With its strong partnership with the Bank of North Dakota, the project team launched a statewide college access website during the first year of the grant. The project team worked to improve the site during 2009-10 and updated many of the features to include more information for prospective students. Additionally, North Dakota launched a website specifically aimed at prospective tribal students, who have much lower college-going rates. This website includes a chat service that allows students to have real-time conversations with an advisor about the process of attending college.

The state also developed a communications campaign focusing on college access. In one innovative approach the state worked with a communications firm to develop short videos promoting college access for distribution in areas of the state with low college-going rates, particularly in tribal regions. The project aired the videos during public service television programs that are shown at hospitals in the tribal regions under the assumption that this could target whole families. Students also see them at their high schools during video announcements, on Channel One (the teen news network), and elsewhere.

At the completion of the first year of the program, the project team had begun to develop a statewide college access network made up of stakeholders and service providers focusing on college access. With many different organizations, agencies, and institutions involved in offering different types of college access programs, the state hoped that building a coordinated statewide network would help streamline services and disseminate ideas and practices that were proving effective. Currently, the network has significant participation from multiple state government agencies, as well as from public and tribal postsecondary institutions.

The project also contributed to the state's College Goal Sunday campaign, a program that brings together financial aid professionals from postsecondary institutions, along with other volunteers, to help college-bound students and their families complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). College Goal Sunday is designed to raise awareness among low-income students of college opportunities

and the availability of financial aid; provide college preparation tools for low-income high school students; and create a state college access network that would look to improve access to postsecondary education.

North Dakota also built on its efforts from the 2008-09 grant cycle and organized a statewide college access conference aimed at high school students, parents, guidance counselors, and school administrators. The conference, titled “College Within Your Reach,” targeted low-income and underrepresented students. The project team adjusted this conference based on feedback from a similar event the previous year by scheduling it at a time when more students could attend.

The team also hosted a conference for parents, students, school administrators, and others to help build a college-going culture. It featured an inspirational address by a nationally-known motivational speaker designed to push students to enroll in college and earn a degree.

Challenges

The transferring of project management from NDUS to the Bank of North Dakota may create some challenges for the project, as the new project team will look to reevaluate the direction of the grant and identify new initiatives that may be possible with the increased grant funds. The fact that the bank was a major partner in the first phase of the North Dakota project should ease the transition for the new project team. The state’s college access network also continues to develop, but it does not yet have a major role in helping develop and implement state policy. As it becomes a stronger body with broader representation, its membership will likely be able to help develop a cohesive statewide plan for college access and assist the CACG program with implementing the necessary activities to meet the state’s long-term needs and objectives.

WASHINGTON

Washington has used its CACG funds to support outreach efforts to increase sign-up rates for its College Bound Scholarship, which guarantees college tuition scholarships for low-income students, provided they meet minimum academic standards and do not commit any crimes. Students must sign up for the program in seventh or eighth grade, make a pledge to graduate from high school, demonstrate good citizenship, and enroll in a postsecondary institution. In return, the state promises to pay for tuition and fees at public institution rates and provide money for books.

Washington issued four subgrants to organizations in the state with proven track records in promoting college access, enabling them to carry out grant activities. In the two years since the initial grants, participation rates in the College Bound Scholarship program have increased significantly. Because the scholarship program targets seventh and eighth graders – still years away from college – it is not yet possible to measure its impact on college attendance by low-income students. However, the state expects the outreach effort and scholarship program to pay off in the coming years, as the initial cohorts of participants reach the college-going age. Like North Dakota, Washington also worked to increase the number of students participating in College Goal Sunday.

Project Overview

Washington’s Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) managed the state’s CACG program for the 2009-10 grant cycle, as it had in the past. In addition to specifically promoting the College Bound Scholarship, the project sought to increase awareness of financial aid opportunities and provide college preparation activities.

Thanks to extensive preplanning before the grant began in 2008 and a decision to build on existing programs rather than start an entirely new one, Washington launched its CACG effort relatively quickly, compared to many other states. The preplanning meant that the state was able to carry out a full slate of activities in its first year and then build on those activities in the second year, while incorporating lessons.

In 2008 the project funded four subgrants to existing college access organizations for two years. Each of these subprojects included components to increase participation in the College Bound Scholarship program, in addition to numerous other activities. The state viewed these subgrants as a way to test and evaluate different approaches to promoting college access.

One subgrant was based on a model promoted by the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Participation (GEAR UP) initiative: it provided academic counseling focused on ensuring that students are prepared for the transition to postsecondary education. The counseling services focused on both middle school and high school students. A second subgrant followed a model based on the federal TRIO programs and worked with students to emphasize the link between college majors and careers. This subgrant also supported college visits for potential students. A third subgrant focused on boosting the number of sixth graders enrolled

in a college awareness curriculum and increasing the number of locations participating in College Goal Sunday. The last subgrant helped to develop a statewide and regional college access network, in addition to focusing on boosting enrollment in the scholarship program.

Outcomes

Through the CACG subgrants and other project activities, Washington:

- ▶ Tripled the number of College Goal Sunday sites to reach more students.
- ▶ Provided College Bound Scholarship counselors in all nine state educational service districts.
- ▶ Conducted a statewide media campaign to promote the College Bound Scholarship.
- ▶ Signed up 46,300 students for the College Bound Scholarship program (as of April 2010).

Through the subgrant process, Washington is evaluating different approaches for serving low-income students. The project is working closely with school districts that demonstrated promising results in signing students up for the scholarship program, in order to define the most effective strategies and disseminate them.

Although the project's short time frame – just two years, to date – makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions, the initial results suggest that an approach based on the GEAR UP model may be a particularly successful strategy. The effort has signed up 100 percent of eligible students for the College Bound Scholarship in the three middle schools in the Wenatchee School District. The program has placed college access staff in schools and used both traditional communications and new media to promote the program among students.

With the original federal CACG program scheduled to expire after just two years of funding, Washington emphasized the need for schools and school districts to assimilate many of the activities into their own service offerings, as a means of sustaining the state's efforts. In partnering with schools and districts, subgrantees tried to jump-start awareness programs focusing on the scholarship program and then pushed schools to incorporate these efforts and practices into their regular school activities for the future. Although the CACG program has been extended for five additional years, this emphasis on sustainability and the practice of using the CACG funds as a means to jump-start programs in middle and high schools will help ensure the long-term success of the program.

Challenges

The current economic landscape has made it difficult for the Washington CACG program to begin work on a planned college access web portal. Although project leaders had hoped they would begin extensive work on the web portal during the 2009-10 grant cycle, that work has not yet commenced, due to state restrictions stemming from budget constraints and the recession.

LESSONS LEARNED

The CACG program changed significantly when it was expanded and extended rather than ending in 2010, as it was originally scheduled to do. In general, most state programs initially focused on how best to use what was thought to be a short-term influx of funds without creating longer-term programs that would require state funding after the federal program ended. The five-year expansion includes a significant increase in funding, especially for smaller Western states, which now will see their grants increase more than fourfold annually.

The CACG expansion has changed the mindset and approaches of project managers, policymakers, state leaders, and even governors, many of whom now see the program as a way to build significant college access efforts that will result in lasting improvements in student outcomes. With this shift, the lessons and promising practices discovered during the first two years of the program can help guide further improvements in state efforts. These lessons include:

- **Subgrants can be an effective way for agencies to utilize funds.**

Many state agencies, especially those in smaller states, may have difficulty in overseeing, managing, and fully implementing a large-scale college access program. As the Washington program shows, reliance on proven and effective subgrant partners can be an efficient way to carry out programs in situations where the implementing agency lacks staff resources to undertake the activities. As programs grow with the increased funding, Nevada and Utah have started a process to issue subgrants, and other states are considering similar approaches. States must undertake effective oversight of these subgrantees and make a concerted effort to evaluate their work and disseminate proven ideas and methods.

- **Data are now even more crucial for evaluating program success.**

With the somewhat rushed and here-today-gone-tomorrow atmosphere surrounding the first iteration of the CACG program, few states enacted plans for

gathering baseline data and thoroughly and rigorously evaluating project outcomes. With the additional years and dollars committed to the program, individual projects will be under greater scrutiny to justify spending and prove results. Alaska has demonstrated effective ways to establish the necessary data collection and analysis methodologies that will enable the project to provide a thorough and well-documented evaluation of its outcomes.

With states required to reapply annually for the grant, and with governors having the discretion to change implementing agencies each year, projects will need to justify their activities with solid numbers and be able to make an evidence-based argument for their continuation.

- **Building partnerships and networks is crucial for long-term sustainability and program success.**

Even with the extension of the program, states need to plan for sustaining their efforts once funding ends. One promising method is to organize and coordinate among resources that are already in place within the state. Most states have now started some form of a statewide college access network, which can help continue and sustain momentum generated over the course of the CACG program. To be effective states can set clear missions, goals, and plans for these networks. With most states now involved in this area, policymakers, college access program directors, and others working on these issues should begin to share specific promising practices for organizing such networks and designing them to serve students well.

Endnotes

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