May 23, 2024

The National College Attainment Network (NCAN) represents over 600 college access and success organizations across the country committed to helping students, especially first generation college-goers and those from low-income families, attain a postsecondary degree. NCAN members, including community-based organizations, state agencies, and institutions of higher education (IHEs,) implement data-driven strategies and best practices to support approximately two million students to and through college each year. As a result, our members are deeply knowledgeable about the metrics and data collection needed to ensure students can make informed decisions about education after high school and realize success in their postsecondary pathways.

We recommend the following areas of focus to best assess the efficacy and performance of IHEs as recipients of the Postsecondary Student Success Award Program:

1. **Disaggregating program data based on first-generation and Pell Grant recipient status**: While the RFI recognizes the need for strategic programming to foster the success of all students, NCAN members know that first-generation college students and those from low-income backgrounds are likely to face unique challenges as they navigate their postsecondary journeys – whether economic, social, or academic. The Department of Education (ED) should seek to ensure that student success programs are both attuned to the challenges specific to these student populations and well-equipped to effectively support students navigating these barriers. Strong candidates for awards should be able to produce data disaggregated by first-generation and Pell status, to demonstrate that programming is equally effective in achieving success for those student groups as it is for their peers.

2. **Student performance and retention, specifically through the first two years of college**: Research suggests that the first two years of college are key inflection points for postsecondary student success. Recent data from the National Student Clearinghouse
indicates that roughly a quarter of undergraduate first year students drop out of college, while sources suggest attrition between the second and third year of college is an additional ten percent. Recognizing these retention trends, alongside a lack of sophomore-specific support at IHEs, several NCAN members, including College Success Foundation and OneGoal, have targeted their student success strategies and data collection efforts to focus on performance during these critical years. We suggest that ED use sophomore year performance metrics as a benchmark to measure applicant institutions’ program success and the efficacy of these initiatives to support students’ progress toward postsecondary degree completion. Evidence of student success throughout the first two years of college likely indicates an effective college completion model.

3. **Ensuring economic mobility through career readiness and employment outcomes:** Highly effective postsecondary student success programs include career goals in their definitions of success and are able to demonstrate a positive impact on students’ career preparation and/or employment after graduation. For example, NCAN member, Bottom Line, strives to ensure that all students are employed or continuing their education six months after college graduation. College Possible, another NCAN member, tracks employment rate, retirement savings, and alumni income after graduation, documenting a median individual income significantly higher than the average family income of program participants. Award recipients should be able to provide evidence of similar career and financial success metrics, to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programming on economic mobility.

We thank you for your efforts to recognize high-quality, evidence-based, student success programs, working to improve postsecondary attainment and economic mobility for students across the country.