

# BUILDING MOMENTUM AT THE STATE LEVEL

NCAN Members Share Policy Priorities



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NCAN thanks the Education Commission of the States team for performing this research and authoring these reports: Siri Smillie (Director of Policy), Tiffany McDole (Assistant Director), Zeke Perez Jr. (Policy Analyst), and Emily Brixey (Policy Researcher).

This report is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

## FOR INQUIRIES REGARDING THIS REPORT, PLEASE CONTACT:

**Carrie Warick**, NCAN Director of Policy and Advocacy, [warickc@ncan.org](mailto:warickc@ncan.org)

**Raymond AlQaisi**, NCAN Policy and Advocacy Manager, [raymond@ncan.org](mailto:raymond@ncan.org)

OUR MISSION IS TO BUILD, STRENGTHEN, AND EMPOWER COMMUNITIES AND STAKEHOLDERS TO CLOSE EQUITY GAPS IN POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT FOR ALL STUDENTS.

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# INTRODUCTION

Education Commission of the States (ECS) conducted interviews with members of the National College Attainment Network (NCAN) in six states to gather insights into current and critical state policy issues. This summative paper outlines the findings of these interviews, which took place between May and July 2021. The interviews also gathered input from members on how NCAN can best advance state policy and advocacy efforts. To complement this paper, ECS produced a state profile for each of the participating states: California, Florida, New York, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas. Table 1 in the appendix details the NCAN member organizations interviewed, and the total number of interviewees, by state.

This paper analyzes trends from the interviews and is divided into three sections. The first section outlines how interviewees responded to NCAN's [state policy priorities](#), including which of the six priority areas resonated most as higher priorities within the states. Across states, **need-based student aid** and **state higher education funding** stood out as higher priorities for interviewees. In the second section, additional policy considerations and emerging issues discussed with interviewees are highlighted, including policies related to the COVID-19 pandemic that interviewees hoped would extend beyond the current crisis. Additional policy considerations raised by interviewees include **workforce development initiatives** and **supporting students' basic needs**. The final section discusses trends in the type of support from NCAN that interviewees said would be most useful. The two most common types of support identified by members were **state policy research** and **policy process engagement**.

## STATE POLICY PRIORITIES

NCAN highlights [six state-level policy priorities](#) for equitable attainment in higher education:

- Mandatory FAFSA with supports.
- Need-based aid.
- Higher education funding.
- Equitable free college.
- Access and affordability for undocumented students.
- Two- to four-year transfer pathways.



Interviewees were asked to identify which issue areas were higher priorities, and which were less of a priority, in their state. We aggregated the results to determine which issues were trending within each state. In instances where there was conflicting support among members regarding the importance of an issue area, we considered these to have “lacked consensus.” Two issue areas stood out as being the most common higher priorities across states: **need-based aid** and **higher education funding**. The table below displays how members in each state approach NCAN’s state policy priorities. We further discuss each issue area and the state policy context around the priority identification below. For additional details, please see the individual state profiles.

State	Need-Based Student Aid	State Higher Education Funding	Mandatory FAFSA with Supports	Access and Affordability for Undocumented Students	Two- to Four-Year Transfer Pathways	Equitable Free College
California	●	–	●	●	–	●
Florida	●	●	●	–	●	●
New York	–	–	●	–	●	–
Ohio	●	●	●	●	●	–
Tennessee	–	–	●	●	–	–
Texas	●	–	–	●	–	–

● Higher Priority     
 ● Lower Priority     
 – Lacked Consensus

## Need-Based Aid

Of NCAN’s state policy priorities, need-based student aid was the issue with the greatest number of members identifying it as a higher priority for their state. Members often discussed need-based aid as an essential component of support for achieving better postsecondary access and attainment outcomes. While many states that identified this issue area as a higher priority currently offer some level of need-based student aid, many expressed that support levels are too low (e.g., Ohio). Most states (e.g., California, New York, Ohio, Tennessee) mentioned the importance of including support for students’ basic needs and the true cost of attendance (housing, food, broadband, transportation, etc.) within aid programs. Need-based aid was a large concern in Ohio, where members discussed how the combination of the high cost of attendance and low levels of need-based aid led to significant student debt, which is likely discouraging postsecondary enrollment. One interviewee in California stated that this issue was the No. 1 priority for the state because it is an essential component of postsecondary access.



## State Higher Education Funding

Members also identified state funding for higher education as a higher priority. A Florida-based organization mentioned that a state-held council, which meets annually to discuss policy, regularly identifies state higher education funding as a top priority. Members in Ohio noted that higher education institutions typically receive little funding from the state and pointed to increased federal and state funding allocated in light of the pandemic as extremely beneficial. Some interviewees suggested that increased federal and state funding for postsecondary education, as appropriated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, would be helpful for the state to continue long term. Interviewees also mentioned that the funding flexibilities extended during the pandemic should continue as well. In other interviews, some NCAN members expressed a lack of confidence in understanding the landscape of higher education funding and how it differed from policy priorities around financial aid.

## Mandatory FAFSA with Supports

Interviewees were split regarding the prioritization of so-called “mandatory FAFSA” policies within their state, which require Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion for high school graduation. Based on our interviews, we hypothesize that the lack of consensus represents the variety of policy contexts across states. Some states recently passed ([California](#) and [Texas](#)) or are considering ([Florida](#)) mandatory FAFSA legislation, while other states expressed little investment in the idea due to already-high FAFSA completion rates without a graduation requirement (Tennessee). The context in Tennessee differs from other states interviewed, as Tennessee requires FAFSA completion for state financial aid programs, in addition to providing [longstanding supports](#) for completion.

While some states expressed interest in exploring a mandatory FAFSA policy, others expressed concerns about tying FAFSA completion to graduation. One interviewee in New York suggested a preference for policies that placed accountability for FAFSA completion at the school level, rather than holding students accountable. The same interviewee stated that existing attempts to discuss the mandatory FAFSA in the state did not seem to gain traction, and that “FAFSA completion should be an indicator of progress, not a driver.” On the other hand, another interviewee suggested that by making FAFSA completion mandatory, the state would signal that the issue is a priority and would create accountability, positively impacting FAFSA completion rates and



postsecondary access. One interviewee said that “mandatory FAFSA is NCAN’s biggest opportunity right now” and that setting the stage for a conversation to connect states exploring the issue with states that have already established mandatory FAFSA could be extremely beneficial, similar to work NCAN had done on FAFSA simplification.

**“Mandatory FAFSA is NCAN’s biggest [state policy] opportunity right now.”**

## Access and Affordability for Undocumented Students

Another NCAN state policy issue area with split prioritization across states is access and affordability for undocumented students. States that identified this issue area as a lower priority or had no consensus expressed the population of undocumented students was relatively small (Ohio) or that the state had existing policies to support this student population (Florida, New York, Texas). Interviewees in multiple states identified supports for undocumented students as a high priority but expressed concerns regarding the political viability of such policies. Some states said this issue area is a perennial priority given the state’s large population of undocumented students. For example, interviewees in California expressed interest in improving and extending the state’s financial investment for undocumented students, though they acknowledged appreciation for the current system of supports.





## Two- to Four-Year Transfer Pathways

Several interviewees acknowledged the challenges students face transferring credits from community colleges to four-year institutions in pursuit of a bachelor's degree or higher. Interviewees in New York were particularly interested in exploring this policy area, with one interviewee commenting that transfer pathways have been in discussion for years, “but it hasn’t been adequately addressed by the state. Many students had to incur increased costs because some classes didn’t transfer. Oftentimes, they don’t make it over the finish line because of transfer hurdles.” Other interviewees indicated that their states had made meaningful progress in this policy area, including California and Ohio. Interviewees in Tennessee and Texas were split on this topic – with some organizations indicating satisfaction with state progress and others identifying a need for improvement.

## Equitable Free College

The states included in the interviews reside on a wide spectrum in terms of consideration or implementation of “free college” or promise programs. Members in California discussed the [California College Promise](#) program, which provides support for a variety of costs for students at community colleges. In Ohio and Texas, interviewees highlighted free-college programs that exist at the local level, but it is unclear to members whether there would be support at a larger level for a statewide program. Members in these states suggested that regional partnerships with community colleges may continue to be the source of free college for the time being. In other states (Florida, New York, Tennessee), members expressed concerns that free-college efforts may be susceptible to political challenges and would be unlikely to move forward. In those states, it was suggested that the label of “free” may be a hang-up. Some interviewees mentioned that policymakers may believe that free- or affordable-college opportunities are already being provided in their state, limiting the political will to expand such programs beyond community college or consider expanding aid available through current programs.

**“[Two- to four-year transfer] hasn’t been adequately addressed by the state. ... Oftentimes, [students] don’t make it over the finish line because of transfer hurdles.”**



## EMERGING ISSUES

No single issue or set of issues arose as common emerging issues across the states interviewed. This is most likely due to the varying stages of postsecondary access and attainment policy development across these six states, and the various interpretations of what it meant to have an “emerging” issue. Some states highlighted specific NCAN state priorities (discussed above) as emerging. For example, all three Ohio interviewees mentioned that mandatory FAFSA with supports was starting to be a larger discussion in the state. One interviewee specifically mentioned that the passage of this requirement in Louisiana was a catalyst for the conversation in Ohio. Equitable free college and higher education funding were identified as emerging issues in Texas, specifically examining funding structures, such as outcomes-based funding, and discussing funding sources, such as federal funding and increased state funding for higher education. In California, interviewees discussed a “second wave” of transfer policies. One interviewee mentioned that they need to revisit transfer policies in the state, due to California’s three systems of higher education.

In addition to discussing NCAN’s policy priorities, interviewees also discussed other pressing state-level issues related to postsecondary access and attainment. Across state interviews, two common issue areas emerged: **supporting students’ basic needs** and **workforce development**.







## Supporting Students' Basic Needs

Members in four states (California, New York, Ohio, Tennessee) identified better support for students' basic needs as a key state policy issue. When members discussed student basic needs, they included access to housing, food, transportation, and other supports necessary for postsecondary success outside of tuition and fees. Organizations considered the impact of a wide variety of student needs – from financial to social-emotional – on access and attainment outcomes. One member suggested that many access and attainment policies are “outdated and antiquated” and “don’t address the needs and wants of students today.” Another interviewee shared their belief that “students need to be at the table, with a voice, and with a vote” to ensure that more holistic supports are provided. Members across states highlighted policy efforts to support student mental health, assist with food, housing, and transportation, and ensure that students are retained throughout their postsecondary education because concerns about their basic needs are alleviated.

## Workforce Development

Members in three states (Florida, Ohio, Tennessee) identified workforce development as a key state policy issue. Interviewees signaled that, in some cases, attention at the state level may have even shifted away from postsecondary access and attainment issues toward workforce and economic issues, with rapid credentialing and certification programs on the rise, alongside partnerships between industry and postsecondary institutions. Organizations highlighted tensions between state approaches to four-year degrees and certification programs and are curious about the role each can play in bridging postsecondary education and workforce needs. States are also examining the specific needs and roles of various student populations (such as adult learners and students from low-income backgrounds) in postsecondary attainment and workforce outcomes.

**“Students need to be at the table, with a voice, and with a vote.”**



## Pandemic Policy Responses

When asked about policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic that interviewees believed should be made permanent, members discussed a variety of issues – from closing the digital divide (New York), to pausing institutional debt collection (Ohio), to a general “relaxing of policy around the ‘hoops’ students had to jump through” (Tennessee). At the institutional level, many interviewees mentioned the benefits of eliminating admissions-testing requirements, including members in California and Ohio. Members also mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic increased the funds made available for student basic needs and that they hoped this type of flexible funding would continue (California, New York, Ohio, Tennessee).

## NCAN SUPPORT

Members were also asked for their input on how NCAN can best advance state policy and advocacy efforts and the specific types of support from NCAN that they would find most helpful. The ECS research team identified five common areas of support from these discussions: state policy research, policy process engagement, across-state networks, within-state networks, and NCAN thought partnership. The table below displays the types of support NCAN could provide to strengthen state-level policy and advocacy efforts, by the states that prioritized each type of support. The most popular types of support among members interviewed were state policy research and policy process engagement.

Type of Support	States that Prioritized this Support
State Policy Research	CA, FL, NY, TN, TX
Policy Process Engagement	NY, OH, TN, TX
Across-State Networks	FL, NY
Within-State Networks	NY, OH
NCAN Thought Partnership	FL



## State Policy Research

Research support captures ideas that would help build the knowledge and awareness of local policy organizations and advocates. Examples include connecting states with policy experts, identifying examples of policies from other states, and providing supports directly related to the development or implementation of state policy.

One of the most mentioned types of state policy research support was providing state examples. California, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas discussed how state policy examples from other states would be useful as they design and implement their own state policies. In Tennessee, an interviewee mentioned constraints in time and capacity to research what other states are doing but that they value knowing how other states are thinking about and addressing postsecondary access and attainment issues.

California members also prioritized state policy research – interviewees discussed the benefits of being connected to state- and federal-level policy experts to help them develop policy. Other state policy research support examples include assistance in analyzing relevant data and support for tailoring research into state advocacy messaging.

## Policy Process Engagement

This type of requested support intends to help individuals navigate the state policy process. Ideas mentioned include helping members “get in the door” with state policy leaders, explaining how the policy process works at the state level, and providing training for more effective advocacy. Interviewees in California, New York, and Tennessee mentioned they would appreciate training on engaging in the policy process at the state level. Some of these interviewees expressed interest in training around the local governance model and who controls which policies in the postsecondary landscape. Ohio interviewees mentioned that they could use support identifying state legislative efforts in which they should become involved. In addition, many interviewees mentioned communications and messaging support as particularly helpful.



## Across-State Networks

This type of requested support captures ideas to bring together peers from *other states* to discuss policy and advocacy initiatives, as well as for networking and collaboration. Interviewees in Florida and New York especially prioritized this type of support. Several interviewees remarked on the results of NCAN's national events, with one interviewee stating that a better understanding of the national policy landscape "can trickle down to the state." Another interviewee mentioned how identifying common issues areas across states can "elevate models for institutions and states." Several interviewees spoke about the benefits of connecting organizations doing similar work across states. When discussing across-state networks, some interviewees mentioned the importance of choosing "peer" states carefully, based on region and other characteristics.

## Within-State Networks

This support captures ideas from members about helping them to connect with other organizations *within their state* to identify shared policy priorities and coordinate state-level advocacy. Interviewees in New York and Ohio expressed enthusiasm about the role NCAN could play as a convener within their states, either to launch networks (and provide periodic support) or to act as a consistent convener and organizer. An interviewee in Ohio commented on a desire for more coordination, believing the state might make more progress "if it were structured, one voice, one approach." An interviewee in New York spoke about the importance of finding common ground across the state, noting a gap in coordination between organizations in New York City and the rest of the state. On the other hand, some interviewees in other states expressed feeling sufficiently supported by existing within-state networks and connections.

## NCAN Thought Partnership

Thought partnership captures support that NCAN likely already provides, including national-level meetups, policy support, and training (though not always necessarily specific to state policy). Members in Florida regarded NCAN's work in this space highly. They respect NCAN as a "sounding board" in exploring new policy ideas and issues and appreciate NCAN's honest feedback in the process. They also considered the concept of thought partnership as a two-way street, highlighting opportunities to work with other state leaders to further NCAN's stances on various policy issues.



## CONCLUSION

Although there were clear differences of opinion both within states and across states in ranking policy and support priorities, this project also revealed a strong consensus on several policy issues and NCAN's strengths and opportunities related to state policy engagement. A few actionable next steps emerged for NCAN to consider. Interviewees found much of NCAN's existing work to be extremely beneficial. They would like to continue to receive policy research and support from NCAN and peer states, with several organizations highlighting specific issues (mandatory FAFSA, need-based aid, and two- to four-year transfer pathways) where such policy support would be most helpful. NCAN can connect states looking to progress in those areas with states that have already implemented related policies. Overall, members see NCAN as well suited to use its national scope and capacity to advance access and attainment conversations across states.





# APPENDIX

**TABLE 1: NCAN Member Organizations Interviewed**

State	NCAN Member Organizations Interviewed	Total Number of Interviewees
California	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10,000 Degrees</li> <li>• Southern California College Access Network</li> <li>• Northern California College Promise Coalition</li> <li>• uAspire</li> </ul>	5
Florida	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Florida College Access Network</li> <li>• Broward County Public Schools</li> <li>• LEAP Tampa Bay College Access Network</li> </ul>	5
New York	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• College Access Consortium of New York</li> <li>• Goddard-Riverside Community Center</li> <li>• On Point for College</li> </ul>	6
Ohio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• College Now Greater Cleveland</li> <li>• I Know I Can</li> <li>• Learn to Earn Dayton</li> </ul>	7
Tennessee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Niswonger Foundation</li> <li>• Path to College Tennessee</li> <li>• Tennessee College Access &amp; Success Network</li> </ul>	4
Texas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic Success Program Dallas</li> <li>• Breakthrough Central Texas</li> <li>• College Forward</li> <li>• Restore Education</li> </ul>	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>32</b>

**Note from ECS:** To help construct the state policy context in state profiles, legislation trends related to postsecondary access and achievement are collected from Education Commission of the States' [Education Policy Tracker](#). Trends were pulled in late July 2021 and reflect introduced and enacted trends in four issue areas from January 2021 through July 2021: Postsecondary Affordability and Finance, Postsecondary Completion and Attainment, Postsecondary Credit Award and Transfer, and Postsecondary Financial Aid.



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