Building Momentum at the State Level: NCAN Members Share Policy Priorities

California

OVERVIEW

Four NCAN member organizations in California participated in interviews to discuss state postsecondary access and attainment policy. Interviewees expressed that they felt a strong connection to NCAN’s state policy priorities and that virtually all are a high priority in California, except for equitable free college. When asked what type of policy support from NCAN would be helpful for their organizations, interviewees most frequently identified the need for state policy research. Additionally, they mentioned greater coordination among peer organizations and assistance with policy process engagement. In seeking greater coordination among organizations, one interviewee said, “The more of an army we have talking about what students need, the better.”

STATE POLICY CONTEXT

Interviewees in California were largely on the same page about key policy issues and policy momentum in the state. Thus far in the 2021 legislative session, California has seen five bills related to postsecondary financial aid, affordability, and finance enacted (A.B. 86; A.B. 130; A.B. 161; S.B. 129; A.B. 164). Five bills related to credit award and transfer have been introduced, and two bills related to postsecondary completion and attainment have been introduced, but none have been enacted. A recently enacted bill will require FAFSA as a graduation requirement. One proposed bill would expand the state’s need-based aid system, Cal Grants. A recently enacted piece of legislation established a longitudinal education data system.

While interviewees generally agreed about key issues and policy momentum, there was an expressed sentiment that policy efforts were disjointed among organizations within the state. One interviewee posited that disjointed policy efforts were a result of the state’s large size and the number of different organizations involved in postsecondary access and attainment policy.

POLICY PRIORITIES

Three of the interviewed organizations mentioned that essentially all of NCAN’s policy priorities aligned with the issues in the state of California, indicating a strong connection between NCAN’s priorities and members’ understanding of priorities in California. Although interviewees spoke to similar policy priorities, organizations varied in whether they classified issues as a lower or higher priority when asked to make this type of indication. This was due, in large part, to differences in the interpretation of priority based on existing or pending policy. For example, one interviewee classified equitable free
college as a higher priority since it is available at the community college level but not for four-year institutions, while the three other interviewees listed this as a lower-priority issue for the same reason.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HIGHER-PRIORITY ISSUES</th>
<th>LOWER-PRIORITY ISSUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mandatory FAFSA with Supports</td>
<td>Equitable Free College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need-Based Aid</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access and Affordability for Undocumented Students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Across the interviews for California, three issues stand out as higher priorities: mandatory FAFSA with supports, need-based aid, and access and affordability for undocumented students. All four interviewed organizations identified need-based aid as a high priority, and two identified mandatory FAFSA with supports as a high priority. Interviewees mentioned that although all these issue areas had seen policy momentum in recent years, these issue areas remained high-priority because they required, or might require, the implementation of newly enacted policies. Two- to four-year transfer pathways and higher education funding did not bring forth a clear consensus. Some interviewees indicated that these were high-priority issues – including small changes such as common course-numbering systems and larger changes such as guaranteed course transfers – while others disagreed.

“’The more of an army we have talking about what students need, the better.’”
–SURVEY PARTICIPANT

EMERGING ISSUES

When asked about emerging issues, interviewees highlighted issues at both the policy development stage and the implementation stage.

Policies in development: Interviewees highlighted two areas they believed were emerging and likely to develop into policy change soon: college savings accounts and transfer policies. Two interviewees mentioned college savings accounts as a local tool helping college affordability and access but mentioned that a state-level plan may be underway. Three interviewees identified transfer policies, with one of the interviewees noting that the state was discussing a “second round” of transfer policies to help students move between institutions.

Policies under implementation: Members noted that they were thinking about how recently enacted and pending legislation would require implementation. Interviewees mentioned that the implementation
of the state longitudinal data system was a topic of discussion among their peers. Interviewees also noted that the pending Cal Grant reform would be beneficial for affordability and would improve postsecondary access.

Interviewees also mentioned temporary policy changes that occurred in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that they thought should be made permanent. Interviewees mentioned that benefits and benefit-eligibility requirements were made more flexible during the pandemic, including requirements for maintaining scholarship eligibility such as GPA minimums and satisfactory academic progress requirements, and that extending these flexibilities would be useful for students. Members interviewed also indicated that, at the institutional level, removing testing requirements for admissions would be beneficial to continue.

**NCAN SUPPORT**

Interviewees mostly agreed that state policy research would be the most beneficial type of support that NCAN could provide. Three of the four members interviewed discussed some type of state policy research support. Members also specifically brought up connections to state and federal policy experts as a useful way to develop policies related to postsecondary access and attainment. Interviewees also revealed that state examples would be especially useful to learn about what’s happening outside their state and to identify best practices to consider or adopt. Two of the four interviewees mentioned they would be interested in receiving state policy research support in one specific area: scholarship displacement.

Additionally, some interviewees discussed that policy process support, including training on distinctions between advocacy and lobbying, and within state network coordination would be useful.

---

*NCAN would like to thank the following member organizations for their insights and participation in this research: 10,000 Degrees; Northern California College Promise Coalition; Southern California College Access Network; and uAspire.*