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

New York

OVERVIEW

Three organizations and six individuals participated in interviews for New York state. The NCAN members interviewed in New York consistently identified two themes as top priorities: **affordability**, including a broader definition of the true cost of college and ongoing advocacy for sufficient state financial aid; and **holistic student supports**, including supporting basic needs, closing the digital divide and attention to student mental health. Interviewees were particularly interested in NCAN acting as a convener for organizations and advocates within the state, and in providing state policy research.

STATE POLICY CONTEXT

The interviewed NCAN members expressed that affordability is a long-standing policy priority in the state. This aligns with an examination of the state’s legislative activity: New York has introduced 85 bills related to postsecondary financial aid, affordability, and finance this session, of which four were enacted ([A 3000]; [S 2503]; [A 3006]; [S 2506]). Two bills have been introduced related to credit award and transfer, and four bills have been introduced related to postsecondary completion and attainment, but none have been enacted.

While state policy may currently offer many students substantial **financial support**, interviewees expressed feeling an almost constant pressure to advocate to the state legislature to fully fund and/or increase state financial aid programs. One interviewee expressed the sense that financial aid funding is “held hostage,” and that the annual need for advocacy on the topic may be depleting resources and political capital for advocacy on other postsecondary issues. As a result, one interviewee mentioned advocating for stability in financial aid as a top policy priority.

“We greatly need state-level help”
– SURVEY PARTICIPANT
POLICY PRIORITIES

Asked which of NCAN’s state policy areas are a current priority, interviewees in New York consistently mentioned two- to four-year transfer pathways as a high priority. Interviewees said the state has been working on this issue for years but has thus far been unable to get all the relevant stakeholders to agree on an aligned system that works for students. Interviewees mentioned that other organizations working in the state (such as EdTrust) may be interested in supporting improved transfer pathways.

Pursuit of a policy regarding mandatory FAFSA with supports emerged as a relatively low-priority issue in the state. One interviewee expressed concerns regarding this policy approach, mentioning a preferred strategy of holding schools accountable for FAFSA completion rather than students. Other interviewees did not focus on FAFSA completion as a current priority.

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<th>HIGHER-PRIORITY ISSUES</th>
<th>LOWER-PRIORITY ISSUES</th>
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<td>Transfer Pathways</td>
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Although every leader spoke about the importance of affordability, interviewees were split on the relative prioritization of equitable free college, need-based aid, and higher education funding. Some interviewees mentioned that state policymakers believe “free college” is already provided, leading advocates to prioritize building an understanding of the true cost of postsecondary. Other leaders suggested that the state’s support for need-based aid is solid, although it could always be improved.

Interviewees also expressed that access and affordability for undocumented students is a high-priority issue, although the state recently passed the Jose Peralta New York State DREAM Act, leading to less current policy activity on the topic.

EMERGING ISSUES

Interviewees in New York identified several emerging policy issues, many of which gained attention and urgency due to the pandemic. Interviewees identified supporting student mental health as a top concern, particularly given the far-reaching impacts of the pandemic. Also identified, as a policy initiative they hope will continue after the pandemic, was the need to address the digital divide and provide more support for affordable devices/internet access. In particular, interviewees hope that legislation to provide $15/month internet to families with low incomes could continue. (Such legislation, however, has faced legal challenges.)

Interviewees discussed growing attention to addressing students’ basic needs — such as food, housing, and transportation — as critical policy issues to support postsecondary attainment. Lastly, interviewees identified renewed interest from state policymakers in breaking down data silos to create a more comprehensive state longitudinal data system. An interviewee mentioned that organizations within the state are currently collaborating on this issue.
Interviewees in New York expressed appreciation for NCAN’s national policy work and eagerness for NCAN to engage with state policy. As one interviewee articulated, “we greatly need state-level help.”

**Across-State Networks:** Interviewees expressed appreciation for the knowledge and connections with other states gained at national NCAN events, including ideas from other states to implement locally. Members indicated an eagerness for these events to continue, with opportunities for state policy-focused conversations, either with peer states or peer organizations.

**Policy Process Engagement:** Responses ranged from interest in advocacy coaching, to training regarding the differences between federal and state policy work, to NCAN support coordinating days on the hill to ensure message alignment.

**Within-State Networks:** Several interviewees expressed a desire for connections with other organizations working in the state, particularly to create connections between upstate organizations and those based in New York City. Some interviewees mentioned other existing networks, such as the New York State Association for College Counseling and Admissions, cohorts of Gates Foundation grantees, and a network convened by EdTrust—though members interviewed indicated interest in NCAN acting as a convener within the state.

**State Policy Research:** Interviewees expressed a need for quality research and expertise to build the understanding of local organizations and advocates around postsecondary policy. Interviewees mentioned a desire for research about upcoming trends and promising practices in other states, including model legislation. One interviewee highlighted the power of having common research across states, mentioning that a national spotlight on an issue helps to push the conversation at the state level.

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