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

OVERVIEW

Three NCAN member organizations (a total of seven individuals) participated in interviews regarding postsecondary access and attainment policy in Ohio. Interviewees identified several policy priorities in the state—notably, FAFSA completion and college affordability. These policy issues and emerging trends aligned with NCAN’s state policy priorities. Interviewees were also asked what types of support from NCAN they would like to see in the future. All interviewees indicated that they’d like help in coordinating state policy efforts among state organizations.

STATE POLICY CONTEXT

During the interview process, interviewees indicated two major barriers to policy advocacy in Ohio: the state legislature and disjointed advocacy. Interviewees indicated that the primarily conservative legislature was largely nonrespondent to many of their policy ideas, leaving organizations feeling discouraged about pushing for access and attainment policies at the state level. These perceptions regarding the legislature seem to also be reflected in the lack of recent state legislation related to access and attainment. Education Commission of the States has tracked no legislation related to postsecondary completion/attainment and credit award/transfer in 2021. Ohio has enacted one bill related to postsecondary finance, affordability, and financial aid (H.B. 110)—out of four bills introduced.

Another concern of interviewees was that they did not feel aware of ongoing policy efforts among peer organizations in the state. Disjointed policy efforts appeared to be a key challenge that interviewees hoped to overcome to move forward with their policy agendas and to support postsecondary access and attainment. Interviewees also mentioned that the state had “bold goals” about college entrance (hoping to increase the rate by 20%), indicating there is support for improving postsecondary access. Although interviewees mentioned some coalitional support regarding specific efforts, they mentioned a feeling that they lacked a statewide coordinating effort.

Tension between workforce development and college programs feels like an “either-or” situation, rather than a “yes-and” system.
–SURVEY PARTICIPANT
POLICY PRIORITIES

A few policy issues were top of mind for interviewees asked about supporting postsecondary access and attainment. The two primary policy considerations were postsecondary affordability and mandatory FAFSA with supports. All three of the interviewees identified these two policy issues as “top of mind” policy concerns in Ohio. Interviewees highlighted that many legislators are confused about the relationship between grant supports for students and rising tuition rates. FAFSA completion was one policy tool that interviewees highlighted to increase affordability, but they also noted that additional policy supports could lead to affordability. One interviewee noted that Mike Duffey was the go-to person in the state advocating for mandatory FAFSA with supports.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HIGHER-PRIORITY ISSUES</th>
<th>LOWER-PRIORITY ISSUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mandatory FAFSA with Supports</td>
<td>Access and Affordability for Undocumented Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need-Based Aid</td>
<td>Two- to Four-Year Transfer Pathways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education Funding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Equitable free college lacked a clear consensus among interviewees. A couple of interviewees indicated that this policy would not be politically feasible at the state level, while another interviewee noted free-college programs at the local level might demonstrate some support for a statewide program. Two- to four-year transfer pathways were a lower priority issue for interviewees as they indicated that Ohio had passed legislation related to transfer pathways a few years ago, making the transfer pathway easy for students to navigate. Finally, access and affordability for undocumented students was consistently selected as a lower priority issue for Ohio since the state has a very small population of undocumented students and it is currently politically unpopular.

EMERGING ISSUES

Interviewees identified two emerging issues: mandatory FAFSA with supports and workforce development/certification programs. All interviewees identified FAFSA completion as an emerging issue in Ohio. Although all interviewees indicated that this was an emerging topic with a lot of discussion, some interviewees questioned the benefits of making this a graduation requirement. However, interviewees also recognized that this was an important tool for increasing postsecondary access and affordability for students attending college.

Two interviewees identified movements toward supporting stronger workforce development programs, with one interviewee specifically mentioning certification programs. One interviewee discussed the tension faced between workforce development programs and college programs, noting that it felt like an “either-or” situation, rather than a “yes-and” system that leverages all types of programs and certifications to support the needs of students and the workforce.

Interviewees also mentioned policy changes that occurred because of the COVID-19 pandemic that they believed would be beneficial for the state to continue. Interviewees most frequently discussed the need for more federal and state dollars to be used to support postsecondary students. Interviewees specified that supports during the COVID-19 pandemic were broader and supported students’
transportation and food needs. At the institutional level, interviewees mentioned the benefit of institutions removing admissions testing requirements.

**NCAN SUPPORT**

When asked what kind of support from NCAN that they would find most helpful, interviewees overwhelmingly stated they would like to see NCAN help organizations in the state work together to advocate for state-level policy priorities. Some interviewees revealed that they’d like to see OCAN resurface to provide this type of state-level expertise and support among organizations in Ohio. More generally, interviewees mentioned they’d like to have NCAN support coordination among organizations to help them identify which state policies to support and how to support them through the policy process.

**Within-State Network:** Throughout the conversation, interviewees mentioned that they felt the need for a within-state network to help organizations support one another in the hope that it would lead to a more effective policy process.

**Policy Process Engagement:** Interviewees also expressed a desire for support while they engage in the state policy process. Interviewees specifically mentioned that they would like help keeping track of relevant legislation in the state policy process.

_NCAN would like to thank the following member organizations for their insights and participation in this research: College Now Greater Cleveland; I Know I Can; and Learn to Earn Dayton._