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

Tennessee

OVERVIEW

Three organizations (a total of four individuals) participated in interviews regarding postsecondary access and attainment policy in Tennessee. Each of the interviewees identified Tennessee Promise as the centerpiece of postsecondary affordability conversations within the state. Some interviewees articulated an ongoing need to improve affordability, including through equitable free college and need-based aid, while others felt that most major affordability concerns were addressed through Tennessee Promise and other state financial aid. Members also identified access and affordability for undocumented students as a policy priority, while noting the state’s challenging political context for this topic. Interviewees expressed a desire for more support from NCAN around state policy research and policy process engagement, including assistance analyzing data and building reports and messages to share with state policymakers.

STATE POLICY CONTEXT

In the 2021 legislative session, Tennessee enacted four bills related to postsecondary financial aid, affordability, and finance (SB 1521; SB 912; SB 322; and SB 229), out of a total of nine bills proposed on this topic. Two bills have been introduced related to credit award and transfer, but none have been enacted. Finally, one bill related to postsecondary completion and attainment has been enacted (SB 229), out of a total of three proposed.

Interviewees consistently identified Tennessee Promise as the hallmark piece of postsecondary policy in the state. The program, created through the Tennessee Promise Scholarship Act of 2014, provides recent high school graduates with financial support (covering tuition and mandatory fees) to earn an associate degree. The scholarship program is one component of the state’s larger Drive to 55 initiative, which aims for 55% of Tennesseans to achieve a postsecondary credential by 2025. According to an analysis from the Tennessee Comptroller’s Office of Research and Education Accountability, the state’s “credential attainment rate rose from 33.8 percent in 2013 to 45.2 percent in 2018,” the most recent data available.

Some interviewees celebrated Tennessee Promise’s success, stating that it “is doing a great job with affordability,” while others focused on gaps in the scholarship’s design that may be limiting the program’s success. In particular, one interviewee cited that 60% of Promise funds went to students from households with annual incomes over $80,000, demonstrating a gap in reaching students who may most need the support. In addition, all interviewees identified a need to better support attainment...
for Promise recipients, as about 75% of Promise students at community colleges did not earn a credential in the five semesters covered by the scholarship. As such, one interviewee expressed frustration with the lack of support for four-year institutions and the focus on community colleges, saying “community college is not the answer to everything.”

There was a common observation that the state’s attention has shifted from higher education policy to workforce issues. One interviewee expressed that state leaders believe access and affordability issues have been solved, saying, “It is checked off their box. It is really hard to get folks to rally around anything on the affordability piece.” Another interviewee expressed that perhaps, as a result, postsecondary policy in the state is currently “at a lull” after the push in recent years to create Tennessee Promise.

**POLICY PRIORITIES**

Interviewees expressed strong consensus on two topics: relatively strong FAFSA completion rates in the state and, therefore, less of a focus on a mandatory FAFSA policy, and that the state should focus on access and affordability for undocumented students, although each interviewee expressed concerns that undocumented students are not likely to gain support in the current state political landscape. As one interviewee said, “We need a broad level of support and a big voice. However, we have strong voices in opposition in the state. That makes that very hard for us to address [this issue].”

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<tr>
<th>HIGHER-PRIORITY ISSUES</th>
<th>LOWER-PRIORITY ISSUES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Access and Affordability for Undocumented Students</td>
<td>Mandatory FAFSA with Supports</td>
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Some leaders urged prioritization around affordability issues — including equitable free college and need-based aid — to better serve students with the true cost of college. Other leaders expressed a sense that Tennessee had tackled the most pressing issues regarding affordability. Similarly, some interviewees expressed the state had made meaningful progress on transfer pathways, although more work could be done in the space. One interviewee identified transfer pathways as a potentially fruitful space for local policy advocacy, because it is “popular enough, harmless enough, and makes sense to everyone on both sides of the aisle.” Higher education funding received fewer mentions, although at least one interviewee expressed less confidence in understanding the funding landscape.

**EMERGING ISSUES**

Interviewees identified two emerging issues within state policy dialogues: recent prioritization on workforce development and a growing understanding of the need for more holistic student support to boost postsecondary completion. A strong consensus emerged across interviews that workforce development issues are gaining steam within the state and that, perhaps, postsecondary attainment as a broader goal (such as Drive to 55) is losing attention. Within workforce development, interviewees mentioned some promising results from partnerships between industry and postsecondary institutions, particularly in rural communities, while also citing concerns that state policymakers are not invested in supporting all students, especially historically excluded student groups, to consider a four-year degree.
Interviewees expressed that there may be a growing understanding of the challenges that prevent many students from completing a degree or certificate, including the cost of books, transportation, and housing, as well as meeting scholarship-program requirements, such as mentoring meetings for Promise recipients. Interviewees expressed interest in reforming financial aid programs to better support students, as well as reform institutions to provide better, more holistic support.

“We need a broad level of support and a big voice.”
—SURVEY PARTICIPANT

**NCAN SUPPORT**

Leaders in Tennessee agreed that NCAN could aid state policy efforts by providing state policy research and supporting policy process engagement:

**State Policy Research:** Interviewees expressed that their capacity to conduct research and prepare reports specific to Tennessee’s context is limited. Interviewees indicated that having reports ready to share with policymakers and experts available to speak to local advocates would boost advocacy efforts in the state. Interviewees also brought up their appreciation for NCAN’s role, sharing examples of promising policies in other states, particularly those that may resonate with local policymakers as “peers.” Interviewees found these model state policy examples to be particularly beneficial if paired with data or research regarding the impact of the policy.

**Policy Process Engagement:** Interviewees expressed a range in their understanding of the governance structure and basics of effective advocacy at the state policy level, but all agreed that NCAN could boost local work by providing some common training on how to effectively advocate for policy change. Interviewees also mentioned the need for communications support, noting that talking points and ideas for messaging campaigns are particularly useful.

In addition, some interviewees raised an interest in NCAN convening organizations in Tennessee, although others felt sufficiently supported by existing networks. Each interviewee expressed appreciation for connections with other states, although some stated caution regarding the possible political implications of being grouped with states that do not resonate with the average policymaker in Tennessee. One interviewee suggested that a network within the SREB states could be a valuable approach.

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