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

Texas

OVERVIEW

The Texas state profile consisted of interviews with five participants from four NCAN member organizations in the state. Common priorities identified by members included postsecondary affordability, need-based aid, and postsecondary funding. There was a strong consensus that the economic factors of the college-going process are limiting access and attainment in the state.

Interviewees were also asked about the types of support from NCAN that they would like to see in the future. Most interviewees indicated they would like guidance from NCAN on the policy process and support coordinating policy efforts among peer state organizations.

STATE POLICY CONTEXT

Texas has seen legislative movement in the access and attainment space, with mandatory FAFSA legislation passing in 2019 and with pending legislation on education and workforce alignment. Texas NCAN members discussed potential barriers to advancing access and attainment policy, including budgetary constraints, regional and political differences, and varied policy priorities across the state.

Education Commission of the States tracked a fair amount of legislative activity related to access and attainment in Texas in the 2021 legislative session, including 44 bills introduced on postsecondary financial aid, affordability, and finance (six enacted: S.B. 1; S.B. 1888; S.B. 959; S.B. 165; H.B. 1259; and S.B. 1230); six bills introduced related to credit award and transfer (one enacted: H.B. 33); and seven bills introduced on postsecondary completion and attainment (one enacted: H.B. 626). These legislative trends are reflected in NCAN member policy priorities and efforts.

“Any impact to be had on retention and graduation rates must include affordability.”

–SURVEY PARTICIPANT
POLICY PRIORITIES

NCAN members in Texas stressed the importance of postsecondary affordability as it relates to access and attainment, with one member stating that “any impact to be had on retention and graduation rates must include affordability.” For interviewees, a focus on affordability often meant ground-level advising of students about the true costs of a postsecondary education. It also meant providing additional supports and examining interconnected issues, such as transfer, to ensure that affordability was considered holistically throughout the postsecondary process.

Alongside postsecondary affordability, members noted that need-based aid is currently a higher priority in the state. One organization noted that “there are 50 four-year postsecondary institutions throughout the state of Texas, but it has been shown that only six of those are affordable to many low-income students.” Several members suggested that a conversation about shifting away from merit-based aid to more need-based aid is necessary to increase access and attainment at the state level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HIGHER-PRIORITY ISSUES</th>
<th>LOWER-PRIORITY ISSUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need-Based Aid</td>
<td>Access and Affordability for Undocumented Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postsecondary Affordability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All organizations discussed access and affordability for undocumented students in some way, given the state’s demographics. However, members stated that the issue is less of a focus at the moment, mainly because of the work that has already been done in the area, including providing in-state tuition rates for undocumented students. Members also highlighted political divides around the issue across the state.

EMERGING ISSUES

Members in Texas identified two key emerging issue areas: free college/promise programs and postsecondary finance. Three organizations mentioned movement around the establishment of free community college promise programs. Members pointed to regional partnerships with local community colleges — such as the Dallas County Promise program — as the main source of these programs. Members stated that the marketing of promise programs is helping them gain support but suggested that political barriers may prevent the passage of legislation seeking to establish such programs. Additionally, members cautioned an investment into free-college programs without providing additional guidance or supports to students.

NCAN members are also observing increased activity around a variety of funding methods or sources, including outcomes-based funding, increased higher education funding, and federal funding. Although more money was allotted to postsecondary education in the state budget, members believe there is still work to do to ensure that funding is benefiting the students who need it most.

NCAN SUPPORT
NCAN members in Texas identified key roles that NCAN could play in supporting state policy efforts, specifically in providing guidance and information sharing around the policy process and in facilitating state support and connections.

**Policy Process Engagement:** Members suggested that NCAN is well suited to provide guidance and support to organizations that may want to get involved with the policy process but aren’t quite sure how to begin. NCAN may seek to use its capacity to help in policy process engagement, including policy development and evaluation. Members mentioned that NCAN has served as an extremely useful sounding board, helping to troubleshoot and work through policy ideas.

**State Policy Research:** Members emphasized the importance of using NCAN partners at the state level to provide policy research and support. Providing research and state examples of best practices alleviates some of the barriers that organizations may face in trying to share policy ideas across all 50 states. NCAN’s vantage point as a national leader allows the organization to facilitate efforts on the ground.

Although there was not a consensus around other areas of support, a unique support request highlighted a need for data sharing. One organization noted that quality, useful data can help move the needle with policymakers and invested parties and stated that NCAN may be able to use data to tell a national story around access and attainment while also showing state-specific factors (i.e., demographic, budget, etc.).

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