

The Foundation Review

Volume 2
Issue 3 *Open Access*

2011

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Recommended Citation

Jarosewich, T., & Mir, N. (2011). The Quest for Quality: Lessons From a Certification Pilot Project for College Access Providers. *The Foundation Review*, 2(3). <https://doi.org/10.4087/FOUNDATIONREVIEW-D-10-00011>

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The Quest for Quality: Lessons From a Certification Pilot Project for College Access Providers

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Key Points

- Certification programs can provide a way for non-profits to ensure adherence to generally accepted standards.
- The KH2GO Certification Pilot Project, supported by the Lumina Foundations, developed a set of standards for high-quality college access services, including standards for programming, operations, and organizational effectiveness.
- The project was implemented in two states with an evaluation designed to assess the quality of the assessment tools and the ease and rigor of implementation.
- The more clarity that applicants had about the goals of the process, potential benefits, and details about procedures, the more benefits they perceived.
- Many applicants felt that the self-assessment improved their work and could be more beneficial if certification resulted in additional prestige and funding.
- Lessons for funders include developing a clear scoring rubric, being thoughtful about who should lead the effort, and including partners in the development of the standards and assessment protocols.

Introduction

This article describes an effort to create and pilot a certification process for college access providers that was embedded within a large foundation program. We include a review of research related to certification in the nonprofit sector, describe

the certification process and the methods used to study its effectiveness, and report findings and lessons learned to contribute to the knowledge base surrounding certification efforts.

Certification in Nonprofit Organizations

The nonprofit sector's attempts at self-regulation by creating voluntary standards or certification processes through which organizations show adherence to a set of standards are generally undertaken to improve the effectiveness of nonprofit activity or avoid federal and state regulation by improving credibility (Bailis & Sokatch, 2006; Bothwell, 2000; Gugerty and Prakash, 2009; Sidel, 2005). Certification programs have the potential to identify higher-quality organizations by setting high standards and rigorously verifying compliance (Gugerty, 2009). The number of organizations that have developed standard or certification systems is growing, with the Independent Sector compiling a list of more than 100 standards, codes, and principles developed by external review organizations, membership organizations, and public charities.¹ Accountability frameworks range from external review by organizations such as the Better Business Bureau or Charity Navigator to standards for internal use, such as those used by the United Way, and standards created by membership organizations or organizations with affiliates and accrediting bodies. Certification systems can include review of organizations' adherence to standards with or without

¹ (http://www.independentsector.org/compendium_of_standards).

ongoing monitoring and may include sanctions for noncompliance (Mendel, 2005; Schnupp, 2009; Sidel, 2005). Certification programs that use compliance-monitoring mechanisms are more effective for creating organizational change than voluntary systems that do not include oversight or verification (Gugerty, 2009).

Typically, the only sanctions for noncompliance with voluntary standards are donor perception and possibly governmental intervention. Therefore, these systems of voluntary standards or certifications are more effective for supporting organizational improvement than for ensuring rigorous accountability (Mendel, 2005; Sidel, 2005; Sloan, 2009). Even in the absence of any sanctions, however, a study has shown that organizations that apply to meet standards meet a greater number of standards than organizations that do not apply (Maryland Standards of Excellence – Self-Study, 2002), which suggests a correlation between organizations' functioning and participation in a certification process. This study also noted that standards systems seemed easily exported to new states with few substantive changes, that state organizations facilitating the standards found the process to be helpful for their own work, and that certification and replication were more resource intensive and slower than had been anticipated. Other studies show evidence that greater accountability correlates with greater public confidence and that donors are willing to support with additional funding those organizations that meet standards (Sloan, 2009). However, as donors are unwilling to engage in extensive research to analyze organizations' strengths, foundations interested in highlighting high-performing nonprofits should create an easily understandable system to report on effective charities (Neighbor, Ulrich, Millikan, & Meeret, 2010; Preston, 2010).

The research about certification in nonprofit organizations suggests the following set of lessons:

- The purpose and desired impact of a certification system and ways to measure benefits and impact must be clear.

- Standards have to be strong enough to be credible yet reasonable enough that organizations are able and willing to meet them, and the process flexible enough to meet diverse members' needs (Bothell, 2000; Mendel, 2005; Sidel, 2005).
- An educational program must be in place if a goal of the process is to sustain the certification beyond the initial introduction period (Bothell, 2000).
- In order to compel nonprofits to meet standards and ensure their adherence, sanctions must be in place for noncompliance and tangible rewards for compliance with the codes (Bothell, 2000).

The number of organizations that have developed standard or certification systems is growing, with the Independent Sector compiling a list of more than 100 standards, codes, and principles developed by external review organizations, membership organizations, and public charities.

- The process for certification must be streamlined to ensure reasonable costs to manage the program (Bailis & Sokatch, 2006) and for smaller organizations to participate (Sidel, 2005). A self-certification process may be a cost-effective method (Bailis & Sokatch, 2006).
- Expectations about how many nonprofit organizations can be certified on an annual basis must be realistic given the requirements of certification and the costs associated with managing the process (Bailis & Sokatch, 2006).
- Donors themselves should have the primary responsibility to hold nonprofits to strict standards (Brody, 2001).

KH2GO Pilot Certification Project

This article describes a certification pilot project that was part of the Lumina Foundation’s KnowHow2GO (KH2GO) initiative, which was launched in January 2007 by the Lumina Foundation for Education, the Advertising Council, and the American Council on Education. The initiative began as a multimedia campaign of television and radio public service announcements, advertising, and an interactive website to raise awareness among low-income and first-generation students about the process of preparing for college and the steps necessary for college admission. In addition to the media component, KH2GO features a ground campaign in 15 states and one region comprised of networks of college-access organizations. Over the course of the project, the foundation realized that the overall impact of the initiative was affected by uneven delivery of services, organizational capacity, and focus on the four areas of KH2GO among the state networks.

The purpose of the KH2GO Certification Pilot Project was to develop a set of standards around high-quality college access services, KH2GO programming and operations, and organizational

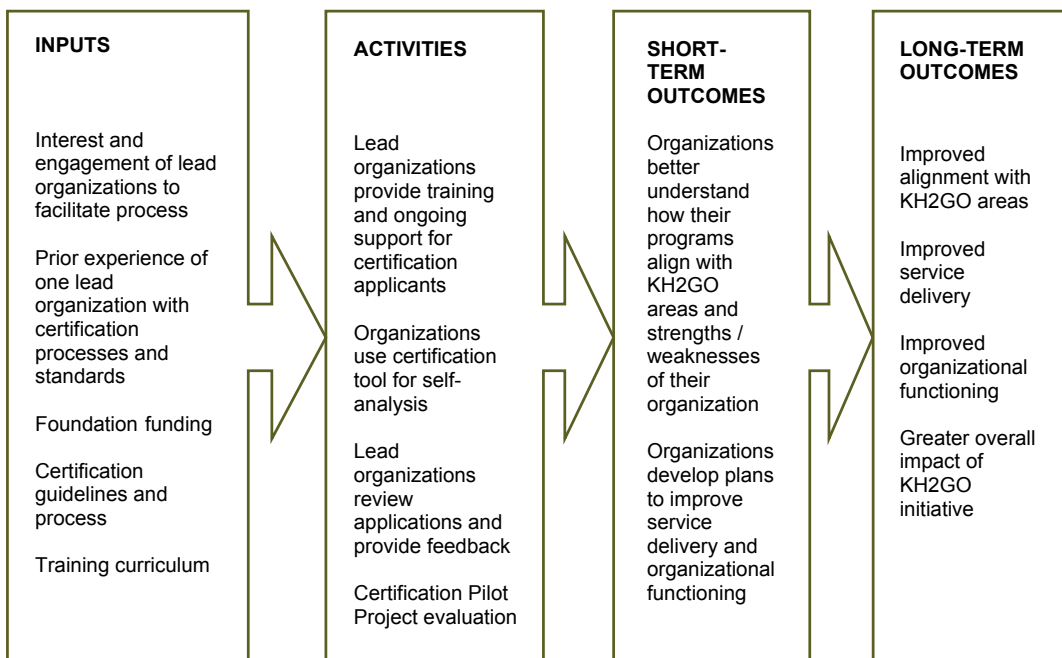
effectiveness. The logic model (Figure 1) emphasized organizational self-assessment as a learning activity that would lead to greater understanding of and alignment with the four KH2GO areas, improve service delivery and organizational functioning, and ultimately result in a greater initiative impact.

KH2GO Pilot Certification Project Items and Scoring Rubric

The Lumina Foundation modeled the KH2GO certification on a state-level certification created by the Ohio College Access Network (OCAN). The foundation established a certification project team comprised of state partner representatives, evaluators, and other stakeholders to create the process and develop the certification application and scoring rubric. Two state organizations were selected and agreed to implement the pilot process. Twenty-seven organizations submitted certification applications, 14 from State A and 13 from State B.

The items of the final certification application are included in Table 1. The categories include an overall KH2GO category, the four KH2GO areas,

FIGURE 1 Certification Pilot Project Logic Model



and an organizational effectiveness category. Table 1 also includes the description of the requirements necessary to receive the highest rating for each item.

Certification Application Procedures and Systems

State A. In State A, the lead organization was the statewide college access network of which the 14 applicants were members. Applicants received an incentive to apply for certification – a \$500 stipend, two registrations for the state’s conference, additional materials, and the potential for additional funding. A number of other organizations in this state network decided not to submit an application. There were no negative repercussions for not engaging in the pilot certification process.

The introduction to the certification application in State A occurred during several regularly scheduled regional meetings that were focused on statewide college access issues, not specifically on the application process. No incentives to attend these meetings were offered. The introduction to the process included a review of the application items, an example of a previously submitted application, suggestions for how to compile evidence and collate an application, and a chance for applicants to ask questions. Applicants were encouraged to contact the state organization for additional guidance in compiling their application.

Applicants in State A submitted documentation in one or more binders to show adherence with each certification item. The organization leading the process in State A invited 14 reviewers with experience in certification or college access programming to analyze the applications. State A staff duplicated the applications and documentation and distributed these materials to the reviewers. Each reviewer was assigned multiple applications and each application was reviewed by multiple reviewers. Reviewers received clear instructions about the process, timelines, and system for returning all materials and final ratings. The review team held a telephone conference call, also attended by State A staff member, to re-

view findings, reconcile differences, and provide recommendations. State A provided an in-depth report to each organization about the applicant’s strengths and weaknesses. This reporting was not a part of the original plan, but added to the project by the lead organization to maximize applicants’ benefit by providing a summary of reviewer comments and suggestions for improvement.

State B. In state B, the lead organization was a state agency, which required its 13 program sites to submit a certification application. The applicants did not receive incentives.

The lead organization in State B developed and delivered college access-training modules to all interested organizations across the state over the course of a year. Attendees received a \$50 VISA gift card. The training focused on the four steps of the KH2GO initiative. Although the certification process was mentioned, this was not the primary purpose of the training, as had been expected. State B did not develop the online resource toolkit that it was to have created to support certification application.

As an introduction to the process, staff from State B’s lead organization made a site visit to each applicant that was intended to review the application and offer support and suggestions. However, at the time of application submission, the majority of State B’s applicants did not have the most recent version of the certification application, had not seen the scoring rubric, and had insufficient details about the project timelines, process, and expectations. Applicants from State B reported that they were instructed to only provide information in their applications related to the four KH2GO steps and that they were unaware of the items of the organizational effectiveness section. The instructions about what to include and how to compile their documentation were described as vague. The timeline for application submission and also for application review was delayed in State B. State B hired a consulting firm with college-access experience to assist with the review. One employee from that firm reviewed all of the applications and provided results to the state partner.

TABLE 1 KH2GO Certification Categories and Items

Certification Items	Highest Rubric Rating
Overall KnowHow2GO	
Services for first-generation/low-income	Over 75 percent minority, first-generation, and/or low-income students.
Services aligned with four KH2GO steps	Brokers/offers services consistent with KnowHow2GO framework related to all KnowHow2GO steps
Be a Pain! Provide/broker services and awareness sessions about importance of college aspirations and need for identifying supportive adults.	
Community workshops on college access-related topics	Offers/co-sponsors/brokers more than 10 workshops annually on topics focused on KnowHow2GO messages.
Services for PK-9 students	Provides/brokers early awareness activities to students and families in grades pre-K-9.
Strong, long-term mentoring relationships	System supports long-term mentoring relationships; majority of advising/mentoring relationships last one year or longer.
Effective recruiting/sustaining advisors/mentors	Clear, feasible written plan to recruit and sustain advisors/mentors – retains productive and skilled advisors/mentors and tracks and addresses reasons for turnover and low satisfaction. Strong collaborations with many higher education institutions and/or community-based organizations.
Adequate number of advisors/mentors	Meets the needs of all interested students and could offer advising/mentoring to additional students.
Services for parents/guardians	Proactive about marketing its services to parents/guardians. Offers service at central location. Advisors work with parents/guardians regularly to review financial aid information, college application processes, college entrance exams, and issues of college matriculation/success.
Training for mentors/advisors	Each advisor offered more than 30 hours of training annually with some professional development focused on KH2GO. Leadership and advisors/mentors involved in student financial aid associations and like organizations.
Push Yourself! Advocate for awareness programs and policies that ensure students are academically prepared to attend college.	
Mentoring to steer students toward higher education	Offers/brokers extensive structured mentoring and motivational activities – academic enrichment and support.
Advocacy for college-ready high school curricula	Offers awareness/efficacy activities beginning in at least middle school to promote college-ready high school course-taking; and communicates with middle schools, high schools, community organizations, businesses, and policymakers with tailored messages to foster awareness of/appreciation for the need for all students to pursue college-ready high school curriculum.
Awareness sessions, courses, financial support for college admissions tests	Brokers /sponsors awareness sessions and preparation courses for college admissions tests and provides students with fee waivers or directs students to organizations that offer fee waivers.
Programs for parent/student awareness of academic pathways to college	Distributes academic pathway awareness materials throughout the community through electronic, print, and over-the-air PSAs; ensures KnowHow2GO website/URL/contact information widely advertised.

TABLE 1 Continued

Certification Items	Highest Rubric Rating
Programs about college-ready high school curricula	Fosters awareness of/appreciation for college-ready high school course-taking. Provides materials, group programs, individual support, resources to high school students and parents to increase understanding of college requirements and appreciation for college-ready curriculum. Holds awareness sessions and offers resources for parents/guardians of middle school children.
Find the Right Fit! Offer/broker student services related to awareness of career and postsecondary options.	
Enrichment to help students find right academic fit for aptitudes/interests/goals	Seeks funding for summer programs/academic enrichment camps and maximizes student participation opportunities.
Access/support for career-awareness systems and their interpretation	Ensures communitywide posting of electronic and print resources for career-awareness systems; directions on where/how/why to access systems; follow-up to relate profiles to postsecondary options.
Supplies resources, online career information, course planners, college applications	Resources readily accessible to target student populations; maintains virtual and physical resource locations; and guides students through connecting information to postsecondary education options.
Meaningful college visits	Offers/collaborates to offer college visits with detailed agendas with meaningful activities (meetings with key college personnel, discussions with current students, opportunities to visit classrooms, information about potential internship and service opportunities, etc.).
Information about differences among postsecondary options	Offers and ensures widespread awareness of differences among postsecondary options and offers/directs students to one-on-one follow-up opportunities for deciding among options.
Put Your Hands on Some Cash! Provide/broker services and awareness sessions to students and families related the cost of college attendance, financial aid resources, and financial literacy.	
Information about grants/scholarships renewable for multiple years	Organization/partner provides information about multiyear grants and scholarships renewable based on ongoing financial need and performance, and tracks students' awards through school.
Advocacy on behalf of students for cumulatively added grants/scholarships	Organization/partner communicates with financial aid and enrollment offices regularly to advocate on behalf of students to obtain matching funds or enhance aid packages.
Scholarships/access to need-based financial assistance	Operates/partners to provide need-based scholarships to all students in service area that meet financial eligibility.
Financial literacy services regarding postsecondary attendance/completion	Offers/brokers financial literacy workshops tailored children's ages to ensure awareness of importance and feasibility of early financial planning for college, college savings plans, financial aid forecasters. Has strong marketing campaign among target population. Offers/directs individuals to follow-up advising.
Access to updated lists of financial aid resources	Uses electronic system to organize, update, and share lists of financial aid resources. Information on where and how to access a variety of financial aid resources are widely publicized.
The Long Haul – Organizational Stability. Demonstrate high-quality service delivery; current recruiting, fundraising, and marketing plans; strong financial stability; clear benchmarks of success and monitoring; clear evaluation systems; human resources policies; and methods for advocating for policies that increase college access and retention.	
Strong financial stability	Diversified income, strong debt to equity ratio, revenues exceeding or meeting expenses for three-year period, sustainable revenue-generating activities. Organization regularly reviews financial status.

TABLE 1 Continued

Fundraising/sustainability plan with measurable benchmarks/monitoring	Comprehensive three- to five-year fundraising/sustainability plan that includes the current fiscal year. Organization shows progress toward plan's goals and objectives.
Certification Items	Highest Rubric Rating
Marketing plan to ensure awareness of college access services	Marketing plan addresses awareness and aspirations, uses several types of media, targets all students in service area.
Relationships with business community for financial sustainability and awareness of educational/employment needs	Business outreach includes reaching out for donations and gathering information on business work force readiness and employment needs. Board of directors/advisory board includes at least one member of business community.
Collaboration for comprehensive college access services	Formal, effective, codified partnerships with other service organizations with clear rationales for each partner contributes to the effective coordination of resources and delivery of college-access services.
Benchmarks for service delivery and evaluation of progress	Internal/external evaluations measure progress toward benchmarks and outcomes. Findings/ recommendations shared annually with stakeholders and inform service delivery/program development.
Minimal gaps/redundancies in college-access support in service area	Regular (annual or biannual) needs and services assessments to measure gaps and redundancies. Results tied to activities in strategic or work plan.
Use and promotion of electronic media /resources (e.g., KH2GO website)	Multiple strategies for using and promoting electronic media and resources.
Records demographics, services, attendance, student matriculation/post-secondary progress	Electronically collects student data; maintains records on demographic, academic, and financial information, student services, and student progress (postsecondary matriculation and completion); has plans for obtaining postsecondary matriculation and completion data; ties data to program impact.
Written human resources policies and background checks	Comprehensive, written human resources policies/procedures regularly reviewed; administers background checks on all staff and volunteers.
Multiyear plan with measurable benchmarks, monitoring, evaluation	Comprehensive three- to five-year strategic/work plan includes current fiscal year, identifies strategies and activities aligned with goals and measurable objectives, benchmarks, monitoring/evaluation.
Adherence to federal, state, and local privacy laws	Detailed data maintenance and confidentiality policy, annually reviewed and signed by staff, includes who has access; how data should be collected, maintained and destroyed; and other pertinent details.

Evaluation Methods

Data Sources

Interviews. The external evaluation team gathered data about the history and goals of the process and expectations about its use and impact through discussions with the Lumina Foundation project staff. Telephone interviews with the certification applicants offered information about the support they received, quality and relevance of training, and perceptions of the application. Thirteen of the 14 applicants from State A and 11 of the 13 applicants from State B participated in the interviews.

All 14 reviewers from State A and the one reviewer from State B participated in interviews about training, perceptions of the review process, the application and scoring rubric, and suggestions for improvements.

Surveys. Foundation staff, the certification team, and applicants responded to an online survey to rate the relevance of the application. Of the possible 40 respondents, 27 (68 percent) responded to the survey.

TABLE 2 Evaluation Questions

Evaluation Question
Certification Rubric
1. To what extent does the certification measure relevant components?
2. To what extent does the rubric clearly communicate directions for certification requirements?
Training
3. To what extent was training helpful for organizations?
Certification Process
4. What procedures and systems did the two states implement? What aspects of each state's model were most effective?
Certification Attainment
5. What benefits, if any, did organizations derive from the certification process?
6. How attainable was the certification? What factors supported or inhibited application and successful certification?
7. What is the community perception of the certification?
Certification Implementation
8. What recommendations can be made about the rubric, training, and the process?

Evaluation Questions

Table 2 lists the questions that guided the external evaluation.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics described the survey results. The external evaluation team used NVIVO8 to manage and code the qualitative data collected through document review and interviews. Using grounded theory, the team developed category codes, identified consistencies and differences among the codes, and created broader categories to describe issues and patterns in the data.

Evaluation Results

Helpfulness of Rubric and List of Required Documents

Overall, feedback from the reviewers and applicants indicated that the materials clearly identified the components and documents necessary for meeting certification requirements. Suggestions for improving the application included listing required documents in the same order as the questions, listing specific documents under each item, and having one document rather than a separate rubric and application.

Appropriateness of KH2GO Certification Guidelines

Applicants and reviewers from both states agreed that the certification guidelines measure the components of the KH2GO campaign. However, applicants expressed concern about their ability to demonstrate fully their work on the application and wished for an opportunity to provide information about programs that did not fall within the KH2GO campaign (e.g., college retention).

State A's applicants and reviewers agreed that the organizational effectiveness section of the application was appropriate, even though a number of items were redundant. Applicants and reviewers recommended retaining the most relevant items and removing redundant questions. One applicant stated, "I like the sustainability section. . . . [It's important to know] what [the applicant's] foresight is, what strategic planning they have done to make sure that when the funding is over, that the work will continue. Very thorough." Another applicant stated,

"I'm thinking are there fewer items that could be asked that are really, really critical. Some items are best practices and it would be good if the organization did these things, but are they the most important and critical to have . . . ? There might be key

things but I don't think that everything in here is of equal importance – some are critical but others might just be best practices that are good to have.”

The widely reported benefit of the certification application was the opportunity to review services and assess progress toward meeting organizational goals.

Another concern, primarily of reviewers, was that the questions focus on activities rather than outcomes. One reviewer stated, “I can count numbers. . . . I don't know what that means. Does this make any difference? Does giving PIN numbers to seniors mean that they end up on a college campus in the fall?” Another said,

“[This has] the activities, but the next time [also ask] what is the actual impact and measurable outcomes and goals. Now you're just asking to account numbers but it might be better to ask for outcomes, not “stuff that they are doing.”

Certification Training, Application Procedures, and Systems

State A. Respondents in State A described a clear process and effective support for compiling and submitting their applications. Applicants identified the training offered at the start of the project, access to support from staff, examples of previously submitted applications, and clear timelines as helpful.

According to applicants in State B, the process did not offer them enough information or support. Applicants were unsure of the goals of the certification process, timelines for submitting documentation, and the format in which they were to submit documentation. The majority had not seen the most recent version of the application or the scoring rubric. According to State B's reviewer, the applications were neither well organized nor comprehensive and applicants did not follow the rubric. State B's reviewer said that through her

work with these sites she knew that they provided effective services, but that the application documentation was insufficient to fully describe these services.

Benefits of Applying for KH2GO Certification

The widely reported benefit of the certification application, as described by 79 percent of applicants in State A and almost half (45 percent) of those in State B was the opportunity to review services and assess progress toward meeting organizational goals. In this regard, the pilot project met one of its goals, to provide participants a systematic opportunity for self-reflection and analyze their alignment with KH2GO. Applicants understood the need for a system of quality control and did not find the process to be overly intrusive or burdensome. Comments that applicants made about this benefit included the following:

“This process of going through certification was hard work but at the end of the day, we were able to say, ‘Look at all we're doing in this area but look at Finding the Right Fit.’ Are the things that we are doing enough and meaningful?”

“A process like this could help people see the gaps in their services. . . . It's not just providing financial night programs, it's to be able to say for each student/family how they are providing a comprehensive four-area service delivery.”

A second benefit of certification application, identified by five respondents in State A (36 percent) and one in State B (9 percent), was the potential for additional future funding. For two applicants, the process helped to engage and inform board members and stakeholders in organizational planning and self-assessment.

In contrast to these positive statements, a number of respondents from State B who had not received clear information about certification goals and application preparation, or feedback about the outcomes, described the process as simply an exercise of gathering documents. The applicants did not see this as an opportunity to examine their service delivery and organizational functioning, and did not report benefits from the process.

Benefits to State Partners

A benefit identified by the state partner in State A was an increased knowledge of its service providers and their needs. The state partner identified areas in which applications were weaker regionally and across the state and began to tailor its technical assistance and training to address the areas of need.

Attainability of Certification

On average, State A organizations earned 73 percent of all possible points. The organization with the lowest overall rating received 46 percent of points. Eight organizations received 70 percent or more of the possible points and of those, five obtained 80 percent or more points. The use of multiple reviewers for each application, discussions among reviewers to address discrepancies and concerns, and careful attention in State A to the criteria for review appear to provide a valid picture of the relative strengths of each applicant.

The difference between the points obtained in each state is stark. State B applicants, even though they had not included any evidence for the organizational effectiveness section of the application (that is, for approximately 17 percent of the possible points), earned on average 90 percent of all possible points. The reviewer reported that she allotted points for information provided in the application, and also based on her previous knowledge of the organizations in cases where applicants had not provided evidence for a specific standard. Given the confusion in State B about how to compile applications and the lack of information for one of the six certification areas, it is likely that the universally high ratings and lack of variability in ratings in State B were not a true reflection of the programs' functioning.

In State B all but one and in State A more than half of applicants would have obtained certification if the cutoff for certification was 70 percent of all possible points, as is the criteria for the OCAN seals on which this process was modeled.

Almost one-half of applicants in both states reported feeling confident that they could meet the certification requirements. Those that were unsure cited concerns that their programs were not

comprehensive, the four components of KH2GO were not incorporated as strongly as they could have been, or that the organization had not effectively communicated program strengths.

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Project Team Perceptions of Application Items

Foundation staff, certification project team members, applicants, and reviewers all agreed that the application was too long and redundant. However, even though they indicated that the application was too long and redundant, when asked, few identified unimportant items.

Community Perception of Certification

Approximately one-third of interviewed applicants commented that the KH2GO campaign, as well as the KH2GO certification, needs additional exposure among funders and national organizations. Several were confident that because of the high standards, with increased visibility the certification program would be viewed positively by the funding community. One applicant stated,

"I see this as hallmark. It has a level of respect and because you're affiliated with it, it gives you credibility. It shows that there are standards that you have met and exceeded. Our board members have been asking us whether we have heard back about our application. . . . [This could be] on the level of NCATE and other certification systems."

Summary and Lessons Learned

Overall, project participants were positive about the KH2GO certification process. The more clarity that applicants had about the goals of the process, potential benefits, and details about procedures, the more benefits they perceived. Many applicants felt that the self-assessment improved their work and could be more beneficial if certification resulted in additional prestige and funding.

The time and capacity required to implement the project by the state-level teams were more than originally anticipated. The process of assisting applicants, soliciting reviewers, and facilitating the process required significant effort. A lack of capacity in one state negatively affected the experience of applicants. For the other state partner, the process helped them to plan services that would better meet their member organizations' needs. Although the organizations in the two states operate under different structures (independent organizations versus state-sponsored), both types of organizations found the certification items to be relevant and the certification process to be transferable across the states.

The time and capacity required to implement the project by the state-level teams were more than originally anticipated.

The findings of the current evaluation are consistent with the findings of previous research in that organizations that participated in the process by choice and those that decided to address issues before their engagement in the process found the process to be beneficial. Although the period of this study was too short to measure long-term outcomes, interview data suggested that organizations that engaged in a conscious and thorough self-evaluation benefited from the process.

The Certification Pilot Project Team, having reviewed the evaluation results, agreed that a set of standards is important for the college-access field and foundations that support work in the field. National standards could help funders make wise investments, demonstrate the outcomes of investments, offer guidelines about best practices, guide professional development, assist in analyzing service delivery gaps, assist in building provider networks, and align youth-serving organizations with college-access practices. The items created for this certification pilot project could provide a useful framework for such standards.

Partners that could lead this type of certification effort should have connections and capacities that would lead to wide acceptance of standards: influence within the provider community, connections with other national organizations, capacity for implementing a rollout, and commitment to sustaining a system of standards/quality assurance after foundation funding ends. State partners could offer certification for their member organizations or use the standards to plan technical assistance and training. Community foundations and local education foundations could convene technical assistance, particularly around the organizational effectiveness component of this certification process; supporting an outcomes-based view and continuous improvement among local organizations.

Successful aspects of the certification pilot project included outlining a set of standards that could help funders assess the success with which organizations provide comprehensive college-access services, providing a way to measure organizational effectiveness, and identifying a process that adequately supports applicants as they compile and submit materials. In this regard, the project was a successful step in helping the Lumina Foundation and the college-access field to strengthen service delivery and better meet the needs of students and parents who are customers of those services.

Practical Suggestions for Designing and Implementing Certification Programs

The findings of this study offer several practical suggestions for foundations that plan to be involved in establishing standards for high-quality programming as well as suggestions for future research.

- Develop a concrete action plan and logic model by identifying the goals, expected outcomes, and format of the system of standards. Ensure that the system includes all of the elements of the foundation's initiative/project and is consistent with the foundation's strategy.
- Set aside enough time and resources to develop a clear, well-written certification rubric, application materials, and other supporting

documents, and consider the following recommendations to make submission easier: (a) online submission or a submission on a CD; (b) an application that focuses on narrative rather than supporting documents; (c) all information related to standards published in one document rather than in a separate application and rubric; and (d) a focus on outcomes, not only activities.

- Gather feedback from partners about the appropriateness of the proposed model for their state, the support they would need to implement the model, and potential barriers to successful implementation.
 - Clarify expectations of the lead organization and ensure that it has the capacity to lead the project in a timely and efficient manner. Who is the right entity to lead the process? Is a foundation the right entity? What capacity is necessary to implement and monitor the process? What relationship should the lead organization have with potential applicants to best support applicants and provide training while providing an objective review process?
 - Develop a comprehensive training program to help nonprofits achieve and maintain the required standards. Training materials must clearly describe the certification goals, give clear directions for completing the process, and include technical assistance and support materials. Providers who are unaware of the service-delivery standards would benefit from longer-term training that is wider in scope. Applicants who are familiar with the initiative or who provide comprehensive services would find training specific to methods of submitting evidence of adherence to a set of standards as more helpful. Instructions that provide clear guidance for responding to the standards (e.g., reviewing the items, seeing a previously submitted application, having the opportunity to ask questions) and clear and realistic timelines should be included.
 - Enlist the help of existing or new partners to support training, network building, and organizational development for qualifying organizations, and to increase the recognition of the certification.
- Additional research is recommended in the following areas:
 - The most efficient process for application documentation (e.g., documentation review, narrative process, etc.) that helps applicants to engage in effective self-reflection.
 - The focus of certification processes on activities rather than outcomes.
 - The impact of certification on organizations.
 - The “readiness” of organizations to engage in a certification process.

The project was a successful step in helping the Lumina Foundation and the college-access field to strengthen service delivery and better meet the needs of students and parents who are customers of those services.

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