Investing in Mission-Driven Advocacy

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Introduction

Philanthropy has a key role to play in policy advocacy. This is particularly true for policy issues that affect people supported by the non-profit community. The individuals receiving services, and those providing them, are both authentic and expert voices on the issues affecting them and the most effective solutions. However, many direct service nonprofits are not equipped or trained to do advocacy work. Furthermore, philanthropic leaders may wonder how to assess the effectiveness of advocacy investments.

Philanthropy can help ensure that advocates have the tools — not only funding, but also capacity and skills — to be successful. In order to understand where to invest and how to evaluate that investment, it is first important to understand the landscape in which the advocates will operate. For the National College Attainment Network (NCAN), this primarily is the U.S. Congress and federal law focused on higher education.

This article will explore how philanthropy can play a key role in public policy advocacy through both financial and capacity-building support. Using a group of recent NCAN grantees as an example, it will explore the atmosphere conducive to policy change, the supports NCAN provided to grantees, evaluation of grantee success, and an issue-area case study on the impact of the collective grantee cohort.

Background

The National College Attainment Network began advocacy funding in 2017. As a membership organization committed to empowering communities to close equity gaps in postsecondary attainment for all students, NCAN also frequently provides competitive grants to

Key Points

- Philanthropy has a significant role to play in public policy advocacy, both in involving the individuals they support in advocacy and ensuring that advocates have the tools to be successful — not only in funding, but also in robust capacity-building assistance.

- Looking at the work of the National College Attainment Network, this article explores how philanthropic investments can impact advocacy, in both financial and capacity-building support, through a recounting of a recent advocacy grantmaking initiative. It also details the key conditions conducive to policy change and the supports that were provided to grantees during the funding period.

- As philanthropic leaders consider how to make wise programmatic investments in the realm of advocacy and how to best evaluate that investment, this article also discusses conceptual assessment frameworks for effective advocacy investments elevated by scholars and practitioners, and puts forth an original set of practical evaluation guidelines that were used in the evaluation of its grantees' success. Also included is a specific issue-area case study on the impact of the collective grantee cohort.

members by leveraging investments from larger national foundations. From Fall 2017 through Fall 2019, NCAN supported its first set of advocacy grantees to great success.

This cohort of grantees included 17 NCAN member organizations, who were selected through a competitive process. (See Table 1.) The network evaluated prospective grantees based on their readiness to expand their policy work. The measure of "readiness" included the following requirements: a commitment for the board

TABLE 1 NCAN Member Advocacy Grantees

Organization Name	Grant for State Work	Grant for Federal Work	Service Area	State	Special Populations
10,000 Degrees	Yes	No	Multicounty, Bay Area	California	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color, Undocumented
Alabama Possible	Yes	No	Statewide	Alabama	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color, Rural
College Forward	Yes	Yes	Austin	Texas	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color
College Horizons Inc.	Yes	No	New Mexico and National	New Mexico	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color, Native American
College Now Greater Cleveland	Yes	No	Cleveland Metro Area	Ohio	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color
College Possible	No	Yes	Cohort-based program in several cities	Headquartered in Minnesota	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color, Multistate
College Success Arizona	No	Yes	Statewide	Arizona	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color
College Success Foundation	Yes	Yes	Statewide	Washington	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color
Florida College Access Network	Yes	Yes	Statewide	Florida	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color
Goddard Riverside Community Center–Options Center	Yes	No	New York City	New York	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color
Michigan College Access Network	Yes	No	Statewide	Michigan	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color
Montana College Access Network	Yes	No	Statewide	Montana	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color, Rural
Southern California College Access Network	Yes	No	Los Angeles County	California	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color, Undocumented
Tennessee College Access and Success Network	Yes	Yes	Statewide	Tennessee	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color, Rural
College Crusade of Rhode Island	No	Yes	Statewide	Rhode Island	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color
Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis	Yes	Yes	St. Louis Metro Area	Missouri	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color
uAspire, Inc.	No	Yes	Direct Service MA, CA / Online & Training multistate	Headquartered in Massachusetts	Low-Income, First-Generation, Students of Color, Multistate

Tools

of directors to spend staff time on policy/advocacy work, having already participated in some level of advocacy work in the past, and looking to expand the portion of staff time spent on policy/advocacy work. Additionally, applicants needed to contribute to the shared goals of the issues NCAN identified as being ripe for action and having large effect on the target population. Additionally, the grantees were geographically diverse, with several located in key congressional districts.

The grantee organizations all work directly with students to overcome barriers to entering, persisting in, and completing a postsecondary degree or certificate. Network members are increasingly prioritizing policy and advocacy work because they see that their students will not be successful in education beyond high school without systemic change. It is no longer enough to guide students around barriers; the barriers must be broken down.

This "on the ground" realization matches the definition of public policy advocacy set forth by Atlantic Philanthropies in 2008:

> As a general definition, "public policy advocacy" aims to bring about a change in public policy or the law, its interpretation or its application, typically with the objective of correcting a perceived injustice or achieving specific legislative, legal or other change. (Deutsch, 2008, p. 3)

For NCAN members, especially this cohort of advocacy grantees, the injustice is the inability of many students of color and students from low-income backgrounds to afford education beyond high school ("postsecondary" education), and the difficulty in navigating the system that does provide access to financial aid.

In order to break down barriers affecting students, NCAN grantees had to first learn the process that built this system and the strategies to change it.

Understanding the Policy Window

The policy process can be opaque to those outside of it. In his seminal book on the subject, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies,* scholar John W. Kingdon (1984) provided an influential framework to understanding the policy process. In Kingdon's theory, advocates and political actors prepare for the right moment when their agenda can be advanced, which he refers to as a "policy window." The policy window, i.e., the perfect moment for an issue to be addressed, opens when the three "policy streams of activity" align — the streams are that of problems, proposals, and politics.

The problem stream is understood when stakeholders realize that a particular issue is a problem and therefore elevate it on the agenda for action. In higher education, this could be coalescing of public opinion that college is not affordable for all (Marken, 2020). The proposal stream represents the process by which the experts in a particular field narrow the infinite number of policy solutions down to the ideas that are seen as achievable. For the college affordability example, the debate now focuses on increased public investment through a combination of increasing the Pell Grant, providing free college tuition, and/or match funding from the federal government to increase state investment in their public systems of higher education. The political stream is about building the will among policymakers to address the problem with the solutions offered by advocates. This could be impacted by, for example, campaigns led by advocacy groups to influence the decision-makers to address the issue. The affordability issue will be addressed when Congress finally tackles the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA). When these streams align, the policy window is open and the issue becomes a priority on the governmental agenda. (See Figure 1.)

The policy process is intuitive for effective advocates who are acutely aware of the need to prepare for the policy window. They employ a variety of tactics that follow these streams of policy activity, such as making a problem relevant

FIGURE 1 John W. Kingdon's Policy Window Framework
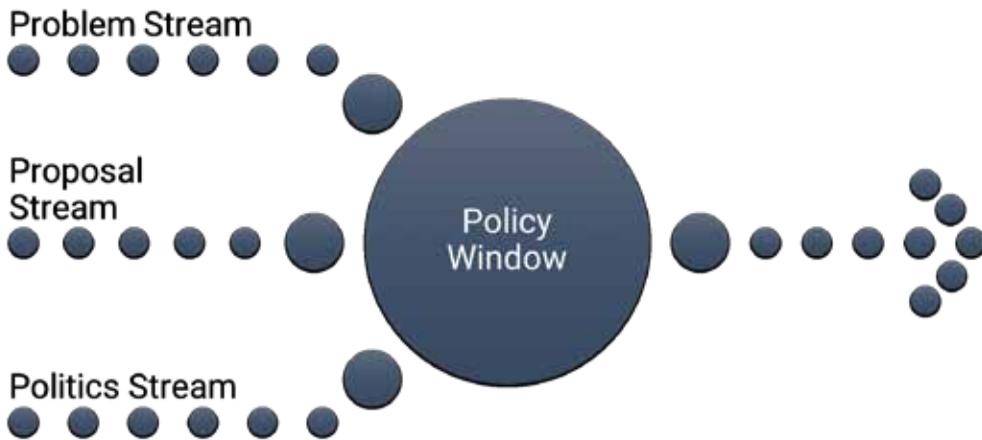
to stakeholders, developing and offering policy solutions, and motivating those central to the levers of power to act on their solutions. When advocates or political actors are unprepared for a policy window, it is unlikely that they will see favorable change for their issue of importance.

As advocates prepare for the policy window, there are a number of political realities behind the legislative process to consider. The truth is that the policy window, as it pertains to Congress reauthorizing major legislation, is not frequently open. This means the policy process is unpredictable and that motivating prospects of a major change at the federal level is often a long slog for advocates.

One political reality is that in recent years, Congress is considering legislation less frequently than is historically the case, as seen in the declining number of congressional committee hearings (Policy Agendas Project, 2017). Another factor to consider is the documented polarization between the major political parties, where members of opposing parties are increasingly less likely to cooperate and find agreement on legislative efforts (Andris et al., 2015). These trends signal to advocates that the potential for policy windows are fewer and less frequent.

The primary law governing the federal role in postsecondary education is the HEA of 1965, which is the authorizing legislation for major federal programs (Hegji, 2014). The HEA was last reauthorized as the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008. Though Congress has occasionally tackled changes outside of an HEA reauthorization, evident in such laws as the College Cost Reduction and Access Act, the ability to pass a reauthorization along its intended timeline for expiration has proven difficult. The HEA is now several years overdue for reauthorization, remaining in effect by extension to the law.

This happens to be commonplace among major authorizing legislation. (See Table 2.) Though typically written with the intention to be renewed every five years, a decade can pass without a reauthorization to a central piece of legislation.

NCAN Advocacy Grantee Project: An Overview

Affecting policy change requires playing the long game of continued preparedness for the opening of the infrequent policy window. The desired results do not always fit neatly into a grant timeline or a strategic plan. Philanthropy should

TABLE 2 Examples of Last Reauthorizations of Major Legislation

Federal Legislation	Most Recent Reauthorization	Previous Reauthorization
Higher Education Act	2008	1998
Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act	2018	2006
Elementary and Secondary Education Act	2015	2002
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act	2015	2004
Workforce Investment Act	2014	1998

create a foundation that allows their grantees to succeed when the opportunity presents itself.

This support should both be monetary and content-based. Grantee staff time is necessary to do the work, so an appropriate level of financial funding is needed. But in addition, the individuals doing the work need the skills to monitor the policy window, contribute momentum toward it, and act quickly when it opens. In NCAN's experience, the capacity building provided to grantees in addition to direct funding is key to their ability to quickly capitalize on an opportunity.

Capacity Building

The National College Attainment Network provides capacity building to advocacy grantees through training, technical support, and a materials clearinghouse. Each of these items reduces the amount of time an organization must spend supporting their advocacy work and allows them to focus on the actual action items that make change happen: building relationships, collecting their data about effective strategies to make change, elevating authentic voices from the communities served, and providing feedback to policymakers.

Training for NCAN grantees and members happens in a variety of formats and throughout the year. In-person trainings happen twice a year: a Capitol Hill Day in early spring and the NCAN National Conference in the fall. The value of

these in-person convenings, with travel support for many provided, is profound. Members form relationships with each other that help them trade notes about building advocacy capacity within their direct service organizations.

Each in-person training includes an overview of the federal policy landscape for the relevant issue area, a "how to" session on how to have a meeting on Capitol Hill, and a storytelling workshop that teaches attendees to incorporate data and personal experience into their advocacy pitch. Finally, the trainings allow for ample time to rehearse their meetings. As NCAN's focus area is higher education, the audience for these trainings include college-access professionals as well as students with lived experience. The training is invaluable for allowing them to learn these new skills together, for providing time to practice their advocacy ask, and to reinforce that they are the experts of their experience with valuable information to share with elected officials.

In addition to these in-person trainings, NCAN also offers webinars to grantees year-round. This format offers a different avenue of support because it allows current grantees and member organizations alike to participate while also providing timely content that may not wait until the semiannual in-person meetings. Topics are wide-ranging. Some webinars focus specifically on advocacy training, such as legal and effective ways to interact with the campaign cycle, how to

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hold an in-district meeting during congressional work period, or using social media effectively to support advocacy goals. Other webinars focus on issues education, such as how the federal appropriations process works, historical overviews of how key policies came to be, or explainers about bills introduced. Specific topics for higher education include the history and workings of the Pell Grant program, background on the federal student loan system, and bills introduced to renew the long-overdue HEA.

Beyond trainings, NCAN and partner consultants offer technical assistance to grantees as they tackle their own policy priorities. Grantees participated at a variety of intervals, at minimum quarterly and at most monthly. Each grantee was required to develop a specific work plan for the advocacy goals proposed in their grant application. The regular technical assistance supported them in refining their goals and focusing on achieving change through advocacy. Congress can be unpredictable; policymakers have their attention caught by current events. These shifts require a plan that is adaptable to take advantage of a moving target. Additionally, on-call technical assistance allows grantees to receive immediate feedback. Direct service providers frequently can identify the problem and the

solution, but the specific action that government must take to enact the solution is not always clear. Foundations who do not have employees with this skill set could consider hiring consultants to provide this support to grantees.

In addition to trainings and technical support, NCAN manages a repository of resources that grantees and members alike can access at any time. The materials, curated for grantees and now managed though an online advocacy calendar, spare the organizations from using their time to develop work from scratch. This includes templates and guides such as the aforementioned work plans, agendas for meeting with policymakers, and a recess meeting how-to toolkit. Beyond these materials that allow grantees to more effectively and efficiently execute their advocacy work, NCAN also tracks relevant federal legislation hosted through a platform that automatically integrates updates from Congress. gov. This grantee resource is also a time saver for NCAN staff. The materials are organized on an "action center" that is freely available on NCAN's website to grantees, members, and others interested in advocacy on the higher education policy issues (NCAN, n.d.).

Leverage of Funding

A key part of NCAN's strategy to build capacity among our members to do advocacy work is to combine the capacity building with funds that can be easily leveraged for further growth. The biggest challenge for direct service organizations in doing advocacy work is time. They need staff time to execute the work. NCAN's capacity support is designed to help them maximize their impact with limited time, but it was also designed to allow them to focus dollars on staffing rather than programming or direct costs like events or materials. Successful advocacy work requires people.

Two key results for NCAN grantees leveraging NCAN advocacy funding were developing a new staff position and expanding student advocacy programs. On the staffing side, NCAN grants were not large enough to fund a new staff person, but they gave several grantee organizations the capacity to prove what they could do with a

small amount of time and pitch to other funding sources what they could accomplish with another staff member. It also gave them the ability to have matching funds and demonstrate to other funders that they were worth the risk of investment. 10,000 Degrees and uAspire are two organizations that were able to add dedicated staff time for advocacy after participating in the NCAN grant project.

The second key part of investment in people that allowed for replication was the addition of student advocates. As direct service providers in the high school to college space, current college students are the best voices for the proposed changes NCAN grantees champion. The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis has a student advocate program and with support from another funder was able to share it with several fellow NCAN members, many of whom were grantees. Network grantee Southern California College Access Network learned from that work and was able to leverage its NCAN funding and training to raise additional dollars to support its own student advocates.

For any advocacy effort, authentic voices are still a crucial part of the process. Social service organizations should consider advocacy programming that leverages investment to involve and train those who are receiving services from the nonprofit. These individuals, often underrepresented in leading policy discussions, are the experts on their experience and most qualified to propose solutions facing their community. As this work takes time away from other responsibilities, such as requiring individuals to take time off from work, in NCAN's case it is a critical component that student advocates are paid for their time to participate. This should be considered generally in creating advocate programs, particularly those working with individuals from low-income backgrounds.

This combined support of capacity building and leverage of funding allowed grantees to have success on their policy goals, as detailed in the next section, and to join together on a key higher education advocacy priority, simplification of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid

(FAFSA) during the grant period and after the grant period had ended, and ultimately achieve a major win in this higher education policy area. The trainings, specifically the focus on drumbeat and relationship building, and the leveraged funding that allowed the work to continue post grant period, were necessary elements toward the outcomes achieved during this grantmaking and the significant policy win that is discussed in the case study that follows.

Evaluating the Outcomes

When investing in advocacy work, philanthropic leaders must consider whether an investment is likely to be effective and on what timeline. Put forth in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review,* Barkhorn, Huttner, and Blau (2013) establish an Advocacy Assessment Framework with nine essential conditions for successful advocacy investments. The authors' approach to "structured" evaluation in this assessment framework, among other evaluative models considered, was influential in NCAN's development of evaluation guidelines for the advocacy grantees.

While the framework may be more useful in longer-term and continued investments, NCAN's guidelines were established due to the need to evaluate the grantees' impact, and reflect the ability of grantees to effect change within a short and specific grant window. (See Table 3.) Specific to grantees, a demonstrable increase and ensured continuity of their capacity beyond the grant period were important measures of success for this grantmaking. As demonstrated through the included case study, success continues beyond the official grant window and evaluation process.

For NCAN to conduct evaluation, grantees were asked to complete midpoint and final grant reports, which roughly equated to annual reporting. Through grant reporting as well as the regular technical assistance calls with grantees, NCAN performed intake of grantee data and measured the progress attained by grantees during the grant period. For the reports and supporting documentation, in addition to other relevant information, NCAN requested data on grantees' outcomes achieved, their policy and advocacy capacity, and their ability to sustain

TABLE 3 Development of NCAN Grant Evaluation Guidelines

Advocacy Assessment Framework (Barkhorn, Huttner, & Blau, 2013)	NCAN Grant Evaluation Guidelines
• "Dynamic master plan: A pragmatic and flexible advocacy strategy and communications plan is ready for execution." • "Strong campaign leaders: Central advocates can assemble and lead the resources to execute the strategy and communications plan."	• Formalization and/or increase of internal policy and advocacy work
• "Strong campaign leaders: Central advocates can assemble and lead the resources to execute the strategy and communications plan."	• Leverage current funding to support future work.
• "Influential support coalition: Allies can sway needed decision-makers and help the campaign leader to pursue the solution."	• Recognition as expert and/or national leader on at least one core issue
• "Open policy window: Spur[ring] demand for the solution."	• Contribution to "drumbeat" efforts related to core issues

this capacity post-grant. Utilizing the grant reports and evaluation guidelines, the following outcomes data were collected.

Formalization of and/or Increase in Internal Policy and Advocacy Work

The majority of this grantee cohort had previously engaged in policy work, but had done so in an ad hoc manner. The work was not integrated into their overall strategic goals or the oversight of the board of directors, or was done in very small amounts. One measure of success during this first investment was whether organizations were able to formalize the role of policy and advocacy efforts and goals within their organization. Two examples of this transformation:

• In California's Marin County, the academic support nonprofit 10,000 Degrees said the grant "served as a framework to organize staff training on our organizational positions and assurance that it 'is O.K.' to be active in the advocacy space." The organization was also able to leverage this initial investment into additional funding, allowing it to add a dedicated staff member to manage policy and advocacy work. "Additionally," it reported, "the trainings and webinars have increased our familiarity

and ease with understanding and anticipating legislative opportunities to influence policy and policymakers."

• College Possible, headquartered in St. Paul, Minnesota, with locations nationwide, created a policy committee and developed the organization's first policy agenda. This structure allowed it to advocate for college affordability and FAFSA simplification. The nonprofit bolstered its efforts by gathering data and students' stories about the direct impacts of policy on student success to effectively educate policymakers, which is also an important drumbeat activity.

Leverage Current Funding to Support Future Work

The support of this project was twofold: 1) "Buy back" time to allow staff to focus on policy and advocacy work, and 2) Provide additional capacity-building supports so that staff were able to decrease the time the foundational building phase took and dive in sooner to fast-moving policy conversations. Some examples of grantees successfully leveraging their funding:

• College Now Greater Cleveland succeeded in formalizing its internal process: The

grant "heightened our awareness to important policy issues, created a need for more consistent cross-departmental communication, and has increased our comfort with being a part of important political conversations," it reported. This work, targeted at both federal and state college affordability, allowed the organization to receive additional funding to study students affected by past-due institutional balances, a major barrier to reenrollment in postsecondary education for non-completers.

- Working with a coalition, the Southern California College Access Network (SoCal CAN) actively engaged the new governor to prioritize postsecondary attainment, specifically advocating for the adoption of a state postsecondary attainment goal, the creation of a coordinating body to oversee the goal, and development of an improved data system to better serve students. SoCal CAN leveraged its first foray into policy work through this grant for additional funding to continue the work.

Recognition as Expert or National Leader on a Core Issue

An important element to increasing the likelihood of policy and advocacy success is to have many, varied, respected voices recognizing the same problem and proposing similar solutions. Another measure of success for grantees was their ability to establish themselves as experts or national leaders on a core issue. Some examples of successful grantees:

- College Success Arizona credited the grant with its recognition as a national expert. "As a result of the increased exposure, we are now being asked to advise policymakers and other leaders more broadly on issues we care most about, including Pell Grant funding, FAFSA simplification, and student loan reform," it reported, noting those are "all issues that impact low-income and diverse Arizona students disproportionally." Beyond providing issues education advisement to policy leaders, it was also quoted in

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national publications such as *The Hechinger Report* and *The Hill*.

- Three grantees were invited to participate as witnesses to the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee as issue experts. Laura Keane, chief policy officer of uAspire, headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts, testified on the complicated nature of financial aid offers (Reauthorizing the HEA, 2018). Kristina Scott, executive director of Alabama Possible, and Michelle Scott Taylor, chief program officer for College Now Greater Cleveland, testified on the burdensome process called FAFSA verification (Reauthorizing the HEA, 2019).

- College Forward worked with Rep. Lloyd Doggett (D-Texas), a champion for FAFSA simplification, to help inform other members of Congress on students' barriers to completing the FAFSA. College Forward staff and student alumni joined Rep. Doggett at Akins High School in Austin, Texas, for a press conference announcing the Equitable Student Aid Access Act, which both would increase the number of students who qualify for the full Pell Grant and make it easier for those students to access aid.

Given that the policy window rarely opens for any one issue, it is paramount to success that advocates continue to remind policymakers of the problem faced and solutions available. Without this continued momentum, it is unlikely that a policy window alignment will ever occur, as the problem will no longer be forefront for policymakers.

Contribution to 'Drumbeat' Efforts on Core Issues

Given that the policy window rarely opens for any one issue, it is paramount to success that advocates continue to remind policymakers of the problem faced and solutions available. Without this continued momentum, it is unlikely that a policy window alignment will ever occur, as the problem will no longer be forefront for policymakers. While it may feel repetitious to philanthropic leaders and advocates alike, the high rate of turnover for elected officials and their staffs make a continued drumbeat key to success.

Grantees also conducted more than 200 meetings with policymakers, released policy briefs and research reports, created or revamped policy priorities one-pagers, published opinion pieces, and hosted advocacy days that leveraged the student voice in policy conversations with legislators and their staff. Some specific examples:

- The CEO of College Crusade of Rhode Island wrote an op-ed in the Providence Journal about the need to raise tax revenue to better fund higher education (Bramson, 2019).

- College Success Arizona trained students to be advocates and on how to interact most effectively with their representatives at the federal level on issues such as FAFSA completion and Pell Grants.

- The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis organized an advocacy conference, where students gathered for two days to build relationships and learn the issues and tools for advocacy work on state and federal policy.

Grantees achieved noteworthy success toward their policy goals during this period of grantmaking. Most notably, the demonstrable culmination of success is their ability to continue their advocacy functioning beyond the grant period and achieve a momentous policy win on a key higher education priority: simplification of the FAFSA. The following case study illustrates how grantees were able to quickly engage on a policy window that opened and required immediate advocacy, calling upon their skills-based training, relationships developed during the grant period, and the leveraged funding that ensured post-grant capacity.

CASE STUDY: FAFSA SIMPLIFICATION

The NCAN cohort of grantees discussed in this case study was active from December 2017 through September 2019. During that time, several grantees were consulted on legislation drafting and impact on students, served as witnesses for congressional panels, had policy wins at the state level, and were quoted in the media. All of these actions elevated their policy priorities. However, the policy window had yet to open for one of the collective top priorities: simplification of the FAFSA.

The problem, policy, and politics of FAFSA simplification finally aligned in December 2019. Leading up to this victory, advocates had spent years broadly championing FAFSA simplification and a full calendar year advocating for the specific policy solution that would shorten the application's financial section. The policy window finally opened with the politics aligned with the agreement on problem and policy.

In December 2018 the Faster Access to Federal Student Aid Act of 2018 (FAFSA Act of 2018) passed the Senate, but stalled in the House of Representatives. Ideally, the House would have attached the measure to must-pass legislation, most likely the then-undecided fiscal year 2019 appropriations package, but the stalemate between the House and President Trump led to the 115th Congress ending in a partial government shutdown.

Throughout the beginning of 2019, or the 116th Congress, the NCAN cohort continued to advocate for the importance of FAFSA simplification. Unfortunately, the FAFSA Act continued to sit on a shelf in Congress. The network continued to provide trainings in person and online as well as guidance about "drumbeat" — keeping the dialogue going without overwhelming elected officials. Grantees continued to share data, collect student stories, and remind their elected officials that students were still struggling every day to access the funding they needed to go to college. But as negotiations to reauthorize the HEA heated up, few members of Congress were willing to rock the boat and the FAFSA Act of 2018 was still not reintroduced.

From a funder's perspective, the official grant cohort ended in September 2019. But the work of NCAN's grantees continued, even as NCAN worked to select new grantees for the next cohort. In December 2019 the policy window opened, and it opened fast and wide because the politics aligned when policymakers combined this problem and policy solution with another time-sensitive problem: the recently expired funding for historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and minority serving institutions (MSIs). The House and the Senate disagreed on how to pay for this funding, but the merging of ideas provided the offset needed because the changes in the FAFSA Act of 2018 actually saves the federal government money through changes to federal student loan repayment. However, there were holdouts on this plan because of the implications to changes required by the IRS; in addition to the education committees, the tax committees in each chamber had to approve the legislation.

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To those observing from the outside this FAFSA simplification solution may have appeared brand new, when in fact advocates had been working on it for over a year. Network grantees were a key part of the conversation and were able to stay appropriately engaged due to the capacity building and training that NCAN provided. The work happened rapidly, by phone call and text message, and it relied heavily on relationships that had been built over the last two years advocating for the importance of FAFSA simplification. Network grantees would not have been able to seize this opportunity without training on maintaining relationships on Capitol Hill, continued data and story collection, and issue tracking. Specifically, Alabama Possible was able to work with Sen. Doug Jones (D-Ala.), a leading voice on both HBCU/MSI funding and FAFSA simplification. College Forward worked closely with Rep. Doggett, a member of the House Ways and Means Committee.

The National College Attainment Network believes philanthropy can be a significant force for impact through policy advocacy. The nonprofit community is in an opportune position to lead advocacy initiatives alongside the individuals they support. In context of policy, these actors bring in authentic voices with unique expertise on issues and solutions. Through NCAN's advocacy grantmaking, demonstrable results of these opportunities clearly show that direct service nonprofits, with financial and robust capacity-building support, can lead effective advocacy work.

Immediate advocacy for the importance of these priorities was necessary. In less than one week, advocates were able to convince lawmakers of the value of the changes to the FAFSA process as a way to both help all students and provide key funding for HBCUs and MSIs. On Dec. 19, 2019, the Fostering Undergraduate Talent by Unlocking Resources for Education (Future) Act became law. The network was able to update our former grantees and activate them quickly because they had the training and knew the issues. Due to the advocacy experience and relationships these organizations had built, NCAN was able mobilize them when the policy window

opened, helping to achieve a 20% reduction in the number of questions students must answer when completing the FAFSA.

Lessons Learned and Conclusion

The National College Attainment Network believes philanthropy can be a significant force for impact through policy advocacy. The nonprofit community is in an opportune position to lead advocacy initiatives alongside the individuals they support. In context of policy, these actors bring in authentic voices with unique expertise on issues and solutions. Through NCAN's advocacy grantmaking, demonstrable results of these opportunities clearly show that direct service nonprofits, with financial and robust capacity-building support, can lead effective advocacy work.

As philanthropic leaders consider mission-driven investments in advocacy, NCAN encourages funders to reflect on the success materialized through this grantmaking cohort and offers these important lessons learned to inform future funding of advocacy engagements:

1. Even when practitioners are constituents and experts in their field, advocacy work can be intimidating. Do not underestimate the time and effort necessary to help them understand that their voice matters and that this work has an impact even if they can't see it immediately.

2. Including the population directly affected by the problem to be solved — in this case, college students — brings the message to the next level. The message is authentic and therefore has a bigger impact. Further, direct service providers are more likely to engage in advocacy work when they see how it directly benefits the populations they are working to serve.

3. Small investments can go a long way in terms of buy back or staff release time. The investment is not about a dollar-for-dollar exchange for time, but rather signals that spending time on policy and advocacy is core to fulfilling the mission of the nonprofit.

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