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Effective Collaboration and Coordination: Lessons from Research and Practice

The College Access Challenge Grant (CACG) program is a federal formula grant that aims to encourage partnerships among federal, state, and local governments and philanthropic entities to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. Created by the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007, the initial CACG program allocated \$66 million per year for two years to be distributed to states based on the size of their low-income populations. The passage of the Healthcare and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010 expanded the program for an additional five years and increased annual funding to \$150 million.

Currently, the likelihood of the program receiving additional funding beyond its scheduled end in FY 2014 (which funds grants through August 2015) is small. Additionally, many states are not currently receiving funding due to maintenance-of-effort provisions that require states maintain funding levels for public higher education institutions at a level equal to the average of the five previous years, as well as similarly maintaining funding for financial aid at private institutions. If states do not meet these requirements, they are ineligible to receive CACG funds without receiving a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education.

Collaborating with diverse college access stakeholders is an emerging strategy that has the potential to improve service delivery to the target population, but can also help sustain activities funded under the CACG. This issue of *Western Policy Exchanges* summarizes research on building successful collaborative efforts and highlights examples from across the country that can potentially serve as models for those overseeing college access programs.

The College Access Challenge Grant (CACG) statutory language requires states receiving the funds to attempt to coordinate grant activities with other stakeholders in the state working to increase postsecondary access and success for low-income students.¹ The extent to which the U.S. Department of Education has monitored and enforced (or even could monitor and enforce) this part of the law remains unclear, but beyond statutory compliance, there are many valid reasons for coordinating efforts: leveraging limited grant funds to have a broader impact, improving potential program sustainability, and developing partnerships that can better serve low-income students, just to name a few.

This brief provides examples and research that can help states use remaining CACG funding to improve coordination of the diverse stakeholders working to promote postsecondary access and success. By examining compelling examples of collaboration between diverse partners, this brief informs those who are interested in forging new relationships and strengthening current partnerships so that their efforts can be more effective in serving low-income students. The

brief begins with a look at general research on the coordinated delivery of public services to identify some of the common characteristics of highly effective collaborations. Then it focuses on examples relevant to those working to increase access and success for low-income students. Included are examples from a CACG-funded consortium to increase degree attainment by adults in Georgia, as well as from two non-CACG initiatives: a citywide effort to increase degree attainment in Louisville by 2020; and a healthcare collaborative designed to meet workforce needs in the Cincinnati area.

With future funding for CACG programs uncertain (due both to maintenance-of-effort requirements and the anticipated end of federal funding in FY 2014), improving coordination with other entities is a strategy for leveraging funds and building program sustainability.² Whether or not the grant continues, the federal government, states, cities, foundations, community- and faith-based organizations, workforce agencies, the private sector, and others will undoubtedly continue to work toward increasing postsecondary access and success. The need to develop and implement effective mechanisms to coordinate programs and policy will remain.

Research on Coordination and Collaboration

Recently, there has been significant research into coordination and collaboration under the “collective impact” banner. As a concept, it involves broad collaborative efforts to address significant social challenges. Research identifies a wide range of examples where such cooperation has helped address problems in education, environmental degradation, economic development, and community health.³ Researchers from Stanford University looking at successful examples of collective impact have identified five necessary commonalities:

- ▶ **A common agenda:** Participating entities must share a common view of the problem and the steps necessary to solve it.
- ▶ **Shared metrics:** Related to the common agenda, effective collaborative efforts must have a common method of measuring and evaluating progress.
- ▶ **Mutually reinforcing activities:** The different entities in a collective effort should undertake complementary activities playing to their own strengths, while taking care to avoid redundant or competitive efforts.

- ▶ **Continuous communication:** All those participating in collective efforts must develop trust and appreciation for the others involved. Effective initiatives require frequent, regular, formal interaction, as well as the informal communications between partners.
- ▶ **Backbone support organizations:** Effective collective efforts require an organizing entity to undertake the work necessary to provide facilitation and cooperative planning among all partners. This entity serves as the hub that manages the flow of information, including measurement data, between partners.⁴

In addition to these commonalities, researchers find that there are three crucial precursors to successful collective impact efforts: garnering the support of highly influential champions, securing financial resources necessary for two to three years of operation, and developing an argument that urgent change is needed.⁵

This research also suggests a progressive, three-stage approach to developing collaborative efforts across many partners: initiating, organizing, and sustaining.⁶ During the initiation phase, research suggests focusing on making an argument for why the change sought is important. During the second phase, partners must unite around the shared goals and metrics. The final phase emphasizes undertaking sustainable actions and setting up processes to track progress towards the ultimate goals of the effort.

This is a straightforward model and provides a reasonable framework for developing collaborative approaches to difficult problems. The researchers suggest discrete steps for each of the five commonalities. For the common measures of success, for example, they suggest identifying and gathering baseline data as part of the initiation step; developing common metrics in the organization phase; and collecting the data and providing progress reports during the sustaining phase.⁷

Other research has taken note of the rise in networks as a common means for governments to deliver public services in recent years. While these networks can take many forms, they typically involve actors from multiple levels of government, and the nonprofit and private sectors.⁸ Understandably, research into the factors that can lead to effective collaborative networks has become an important topic for those studying government performance, as well as those looking into specific policy areas such as education, health, and the environment.

One review of the academic literature on collaborative networks looked at 92 separate studies of the factors that help determine their effectiveness.⁹ The findings echo some of the characteristics identified above. In particular, the literature shows the following factors are associated with positive outcomes for the target population:

- ▶ Having a central coordinating agency and stable, long-term leadership of the collaborative network.
- ▶ Developing a steering committee.
- ▶ Using common outcome measures.
- ▶ Establishing trust and cooperation among partners.
- ▶ Devoting time to joint planning activities involving staff of the multiple entities.
- ▶ Having network partners interacting with the target population.¹⁰

Additionally, this research has examined the factors associated with networks' sustainability and capacity to reach goals, which are important considerations for those looking to establish collaborative arrangements. Those factors include:

- ▶ Exhibiting strong leadership in establishing the network and its goals.
- ▶ Providing suitable financial resources.
- ▶ Devoting time to joint planning activities involving staff of the multiple entities.
- ▶ Using common outcome measures.
- ▶ Incorporating diverse community partners.
- ▶ Establishing trust and cooperation among partners.
- ▶ Providing technical assistance to network partners.¹¹

The overlap between these lists and the research cited earlier suggests several important considerations for those working to establish collaborative efforts to increase access and success for low-income students. Clearly, state higher education agencies are well-positioned to take a strong coordinating and leadership role in developing these networks. This process can start by establishing the ultimate goals for the collaborative effort, backed by data showing its urgency.

The importance of using common metrics is also clear. While college-going and completion rates seem to be a logical starting point for this type of collaboration, ensuring that there is commonality in the definitions

and metrics is not necessarily easy. As a hypothetical example, consider the definition of a "low-income student." Partners focused on the K-12 level may use eligibility for free and reduced lunch, while those working in postsecondary environments may focus on eligibility for state need-based financial aid or federal Pell grants. College progress and completion is another deceptively difficult metric to define continuously. The traditional federal definition, used by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), relies on full-time status, which leaves out those attending classes part-time. Given that a large proportion of low-income students fall into the part-time category, this is a significant concern.

Coordinating Whom?

Turning more specifically to college access and success programs, a first step in developing a successful collaborative network is to identify the numerous potential partners for coordinating college access efforts. Partnerships can include a variety of local, state, and national entities from the public, nonprofit, and private sectors. Examples of potential partners are listed in Table 1.

Clearly, the different entities working to promote college access and success are numerous, diverse, and have wildly different mandates and interests. Attempting to immediately engage all those working on access and success in a coordinated effort would likely result in an unwieldy effort that is too complex to focus on the necessary activities to accomplish its goals. It is important to recognize that coordination and cooperation are not cost-free activities. Staff time to initiate and attend meetings is substantial; involving more organizations and agencies can slow program development and implementation; and differing missions and goals can lead to complications. But carefully developing relationships that reduce overlaps, leverage resources, fill unmet needs, and lead to improved services and outcomes for students can be done with thoughtful and strategic planning. This investment of effort at the outset can help save time and resources in the long run.

Research also suggests that the size of a network has an influence on its success and failure. The best guidance here, however, seems to approximate "Goldilocks and the Three Bears": the size of a network needs to be "just right" – big enough to take advantage of diverse partners and their resources and talents but not so big that it becomes unwieldy. Some researchers have found that effective networks cap their membership or establish strict criteria for participating to ensure a cohesive and effective operation.¹²

Table 1: Potential Collaborative Partners to Increase Low-income Access and Success

National/Multistate Level

- ▶ Federal agencies (Education, Labor, Health and Human Services departments)
- ▶ National foundations
- ▶ National access and success organizations
- ▶ National employers and employer organizations/associations
- ▶ Student support service providers
- ▶ Interstate organizations (regional higher education compacts, multistate partnerships)

State Level

- ▶ State agencies (K-12 education, labor, corrections, workforce, motor vehicles)
- ▶ Systems of higher education
- ▶ Governors and staff; state legislators and staff
- ▶ State P-16/20 councils
- ▶ Other federally-supported programs and statewide grants and initiatives (GEAR UP, TRIO, Complete College America)
- ▶ State-focused foundations
- ▶ Statewide employers

Local Level

- ▶ School districts
- ▶ Individual schools
- ▶ Institutions of higher education
- ▶ Mayors
- ▶ Regional government councils
- ▶ Local workforce investment boards
- ▶ Community-based nonprofits
- ▶ Local P-16/20 councils
- ▶ Chambers of commerce
- ▶ Employers
- ▶ Local foundations

There are numerous examples of effective collaboration among those working to promote increased educational attainment. While many CACG programs have worked to develop effective partnerships that would serve as excellent examples, this brief also includes non-CACG programs to encourage project leaders to draw on examples from other education efforts. The following three examples – one directly related to CACG – help illustrate the characteristics of strong networks.

Louisville, Kentucky: 55,000 Degrees

In 2008 Jerry Abramson, then-mayor of Louisville, brought together a group of civic leaders, presidents of higher education institutions, K-12 superintendents, and business leaders to develop a path to dramatically improving educational outcomes in the area. These leaders developed the Greater Louisville Education Commitment, which they signed in 2010.¹³ The commitment has five key objectives:

- ▶ Create and support a college-going culture.
- ▶ Use the business community's unique points of leverage to accelerate attainment.
- ▶ Prepare students for success in college, career, citizenship, and life.
- ▶ Make postsecondary education accessible and affordable.
- ▶ Increase educational persistence, performance, and progress.¹⁴

These leaders established a specific goal of increasing the number of working-age adults with postsecondary degrees by 55,000 by 2020. Achieving this goal would increase degree attainment in the Louisville metropolitan region from 33 percent to 50 percent. They established a public-private partnership (aptly named 55,000 Degrees) to spearhead the effort and are reporting progress towards the main goal, as well as data that measure the collaborative's efforts to accomplish the five key objectives. These intermediate metrics are an important piece that connects the broad, top-level goal with the activities and policy and practice changes that members of the collaborative are implementing to reach that goal.

Although the latest report from 55,000 Degrees shows that the effort is behind the pace necessary to reach this goal on a linear trajectory, collected data suggest that the effort is making progress. Overall degree production, including students in the traditional pipeline and adult students, has increased.¹⁵ This boost, however, has been offset by rising out-migration of residents with degrees, suggesting that the Louisville program will have to accelerate progress to meet its goals.¹⁶

Other data support the conclusion that 55,000 Degrees is making substantial progress on a number of intermediate indicators. Under the effort's first objective – creating and supporting a college-going culture – the initiative reports that Jefferson County's public high schools have increased the number of high school graduates by 18 percent and raised the number of graduates going on to postsecondary education by seven percent.¹⁷ These data represent changes from

academic year 2007-08 through 2012-13, so the metrics are beginning to capture data from after the beginning of the collaborative effort as students who began high school in 2008 have now been tracked through four years of high school.

College preparedness has also increased among K-12 students, with one measure of students who are college- and career-ready (defined as meeting state standards for English, math, and reading) increasing 20 percentage points from 2009-10 to 2012-13 due in part to aggressive interventions.¹⁸ Additionally, the effort is targeting the nearly 100,000 Louisville residents with some college credit but no degree to provide pathways for them to return to postsecondary education and complete a credential. This part of the effort has engaged local businesses to encourage employees who fall into this category to return to college and finish. The data show also that the number of working-age adults enrolled in postsecondary education – a key metric for the effort – has increased 24 percent between 2007 and 2012.¹⁹

The effort has benefited from a strong collaborative structure that shares many of the same characteristics identified above:

- ▶ **Strong backbone organization:** 55,000 Degrees coordinates the different components of the effort, helps share information, and provides data-driven reports on key metrics.
- ▶ **Shared outcome measures:** For each of the five objectives, there are common measures that partners can track and report.
- ▶ **Common agenda:** One strength of the effort is the relative simplicity of the overarching goal – producing 55,000 more working adults with a postsecondary degree. All of the signatories and project partners understand the goal and are motivated to work towards it.
- ▶ **Stable leadership:** Although the effort started under a previous administration, the current mayor, Greg Fischer, has continued to make it a priority. Establishing a separate public-private partnership organization has helped to ease the transition between administrations, but the current mayor's decision to make the effort a priority has helped its continued to growth.
- ▶ **Strong steering committee:** The board of 55,000 Degrees includes key representatives from the business community, presidents of higher education institutions, community foundations, and other key stakeholders who can provide effective guidance.

Georgia Adult Learning Consortium

With a portion of the state's CACG funds, the University System of Georgia launched its Adult Learning Consortium in 2008. This consortium works toward one of the three central goals of the state's overall CACG program: to increase the number of low-income adults with some college credit but no degree who return to finish a credential.²⁰ The effort represents a collaboration between the state system of higher education and public higher education institutions. Participation in the consortium is voluntary and the 13 institutions that are members joined at different times.

The effort has funded a broad outreach campaign to encourage adults with prior postsecondary credit to return to complete degrees. The university system operates a website with information for returning adults that links to programs at state institutions that have agreed to adopt specified policies, such as acceptance of credit for prior learning. The system also provides professional development and networking opportunities for staff and faculty.

Based on interim measures, the effort is showing promise. Adult enrollments in the state have increased significantly since the program began. To discover the impact of the initiative, project leaders compared adult enrollments at member institutions with those at institutions that are not members. Institutions that are consortium members have seen increases of almost 5 percent in adult enrollment, compared to a 1 percent increase in enrollment for nonmembers.²¹ Those institutions that have been members the longest have seen the largest increases in adult enrollment.

This effort also shows several of the characteristics of effective collaborative efforts identified above:

- ▶ **Strong backbone organization:** The University System of Georgia has led the effort from the outset, providing a strong backing organization while also acting as a partner to other participating institutions. Staff from a participating institution share leadership with system staff, creating a sense of dual ownership. The system leads the marketing campaign that undergirds the effort, maintains a statewide website, and organizes networking meetings of institutional staff and faculty.
- ▶ **Shared outcome measures:** The Adult Learner Consortium is focused on increasing adult degree attainment. The effort is measuring adult enrollments as an interim measure and will continue to track degrees granted in coming years.

- ▶ **Common agenda:** The consortium has a general agenda focused on achieving the goal established as part of the broader state CACG program, but the institutions that are part of the collaborative effort are also united behind the common adult-friendly practices that are required for membership.
- ▶ **Stable leadership:** Although the long-term funding picture for the CACG program is uncertain, this effort has had strong and consistent joint leadership by the university system and key institutional staff, who co-manage the consortium.
- ▶ **Continuous communication:** The consortium organizes opportunities to bring together key individuals from the institutions working to serve adult learners in an annual meeting. This not only provides professional development opportunities but allows the individuals to develop strong relationships and networks that can ultimately benefit the students they serve.

Cincinnati Health Careers Collaborative

The Cincinnati Health Careers Collaborative officially began in 2005 with a relatively modest grant from KnowledgeWorks foundation. This start-up funding allowed the collaborative to develop an effective model for developing a strong pipeline of well-educated and trained health care workers.²² The collaborative developed as a partnership between area medical care providers (particularly hospitals).

Through the collaborative, students can access a wide range of academic and career support services to help them persist to complete credentials. Data from the project show that participants have a credential completion rate of more than 80 percent, which is well above the national average for degree programs in the health field.²³ In addition to academic and career support, employers provide significant tuition assistance to participants, which contributes to the high completion rate. Analyses show a positive return on investment for these expenditures, suggesting that there is a strong business imperative behind the tuition assistance.²⁴ The main driver of the positive return on investment is in reduced recruiting costs, as employers can promote qualified employees from within as they complete more advanced credentials and degrees.²⁵ Strong partnerships with institutions of higher education have helped make the program successful.

While this may initially seem to be an unusual example to include in a brief about CACG-related partnerships,

it shows how initial seed funding can grow into a long-term sustainable collaborative effort. This collaboration has continued to attract external grant funds but the majority of current funding comes from private-sector partners who recognize the benefits of supporting this collaborative. While external seed funding from foundations or, as in the case of CACG programs, the federal government is crucial to launching large-scale collaborative efforts, building a sustainable funding source by demonstrating value to potential partners is necessary for long term success.

In relation to the promising strategies for the development of effective collaborations, the Cincinnati effort shows several important characteristics:

- ▶ **Common measures:** The collaborative tracks the number and type of postsecondary credentials completed and analyzes the return on investment for partner companies.
- ▶ **Common agenda:** The collaborative has a two-part agenda – helping employers meet workforce needs and helping individuals earn valuable postsecondary credentials that translate into job stability and higher incomes.
- ▶ **Backbone organization:** The collaborative has developed its own internal structure, funded by grants and partner contributions. This helps organize the collaboration between employers and higher education institutions, as well as the support services for students.
- ▶ **Strong steering committee:** The employer partners participate on a policy committee that helps steer the collaborative and continue its growth and development.

In addition to these examples, there are several other developing partnerships funded through the CACG program. One example: The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the City of San Antonio, and the local P-16 council have implemented the GradTX program to help low-income students access and succeed in postsecondary education. In addition, numerous states have used CACG funds to start or expand statewide college access networks. These efforts will hopefully bear fruit in the coming years.

Conclusion: Developing Effective Collaborative Education Efforts

With federal funding for CACG programs set to expire in FY 2014 (with grants ending in August 2015), there is likely a limited window for projects to develop a lasting network to increase postsecondary access and success for low-income students. As many

project leaders try to streamline activities and focus on sustaining what has proven to be effective, there is understandably limited appetite to embark on new paths. However, there are several compelling reasons to consider establishing a lasting network of collaborative partners.

As discussed in a previous edition of *Western Policy Exchanges*, building strong partnerships can be an effective strategy for sustaining project activities.²⁶ Identifying organizations and private-sector partners who have established goals for improving educational attainment can be a first step toward developing relationships where others sustain some of the activities initiated and developed by CACG programs.

Additionally, with CACG programs generally headquartered in stable state agencies with long track records of serving low-income students, it is possible to use the time remaining in the CACG program to fund the initiation of a collaborative effort, then use existing resources – particularly the strength of the agency as well as other organizational resources such as data collection and analysis – to support collaborative networks as a backbone organization. Demonstrating organizational strength and collaborative capacity can help attract sustainable funding from state legislators, community foundations, and even national partners. Further, most state agencies have strong data management capacities, so collecting baseline information, developing common metrics, and reporting on progress can be accomplished without significant commitment of new financial resources. The growth of state longitudinal data systems in the coming years could make this process even more productive.

With many diverse stakeholders around the country focused on increasing educational attainment, there are certainly opportunities to develop impactful collaborations relatively quickly. Using the remaining years of CACG funding to initiate this process could lead to long-lasting benefits for the low-income students the program aims to serve.

Endnotes

¹ The CACG section of the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007 (U.S. Code Title 20 § 1141) reads: “A grantee receiving a grant payment under this section shall attempt to coordinate the activities carried out with the grant payment with any existing activities that are similar to such activities, and with any other entities that support the existing activities in the State.”

² The maintenance-of-effort provision, included in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, requires states to maintain funding for higher education at the same level as the average of the previous five academic years; numerous states have been unable to meet this requirement and no longer receive the grant. FY 2014 is the last year for which funds have been authorized and appropriated for the CACG program. This funding will be distributed to states for the grant cycle running from August 2014 through August 2015.

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¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

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¹⁹ Ibid; 55,000 Degrees Data Warehouse, accessed 10 January 2013 from <dashboard.55000degrees.org/adult-undergraduate-enrollment.html>.

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²² "Mission Statement," Health Careers Collaborative of Greater Cincinnati, accessed 15 August 2013 from <www.healthcareerscollaborative.com/about-us/mission-statement>.

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²⁴ Joel Elvery and Christopher Spence, "Health Careers Collaborative of Greater Cincinnati Return on Investment Report: 2011," accessed 15 August 2013 from <www.healthcareerscollaborative.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/HCC-AnnualRpt_web.pdf>.

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