

# Federal Financial Aid ADVOCACY FUND

## FEDERAL FINANCIAL AID CHANGES

Consensus has emerged around federal financial aid policy options that could increase college access and completion, such as simplification of the FAFSA and the current patchwork of loan programs and tax benefits.

With a growing likelihood that an overarching reauthorization of the Higher Education Act will take time, but smaller pieces of legislation may move forward, a presidential election cycle that is anything but routine, and the likelihood of significant changes in the policymaking bench on the horizon, now is the time to cultivate strategic advocacy for improvements to the federal financial aid system.

Policy options to redesign federal financial aid programs must be translated into messaging, materials and forums that effectively communicate good ideas to the general public, a broad array of stakeholders, and policymakers.

With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, HCM Strategists has launched a grant program to support innovative, timely advocacy activities that engage *new* stakeholders and partners in federal policymaking for financial aid.

## FEDERAL FINANCIAL AID ADVOCACY FUND (FFAA FUND)

- The FFAA Fund will support more than \$1 million in short-term grants to enable nonprofits and higher education systems to develop innovative, effective advocacy strategies that activate diverse stakeholders to advance federal financial aid changes.
- An expert Advisory Committee will review and vote on all applications, awarding grants in amounts no greater than \$200,000 across at least two primary rounds of competition. Rolling applications may also be considered to accommodate *timely* advocacy opportunities.
- Applicants must address one or more of the following strategies to improve student access and success:
  - **FAFSA and program simplification**
  - **Loan repayment**
  - **Institutional and student accountability**
  - **Tax benefit simplification**
  - **State and federal partnership for aid**
- Permissible uses of funds include tactical, one-time advocacy activities or a package of related activities, such as: communications strategies and social marketing; coalition building and issue advocacy campaigns; stakeholder engagement; advocacy training; public opinion research; advising candidates or policy makers; or convenings and facilitation.
- Funds may NOT be used to attempt to influence specific legislation, to lobby, to influence the outcome of any election, or to register voters. Funds are not intended to support the hiring of permanent staff, but can support current staff time.

### What is the goal of the FFAA Fund?

- The purpose of the FFAA Fund is to support innovative, timely advocacy activities that activate diverse stakeholders and advance federal policymaking for financial aid programs—helping those connected to higher education to harness the power of persuasion.
- Beyond creating effective messaging, materials, events and campaigns, the FFAA Fund aims to:
  - Build unconventional partnerships of complementary skills and common purpose;
  - Activate, amplify and empower new voices often missing from the debate; and
  - Seed creative approaches to building will for change—thinking beyond traditional briefings and “Hill Day” visits.

### What makes a strong application?

- A strong application is one that presents an innovative advocacy strategy that aligns to a clear window of political opportunity and engages unconventional partners and new voices.

### Who is considered a “new voice”?

- New voices are those that are not typically or sufficiently amplified in policymaking for federal financial aid, and may include, for example, student group leaders creating a common issue area, working adults, employers, college trustees, coalitions of system reforms, state leaders and others.
- Applicants may identify and explain other voices that should be elevated.

### What is the role of the Advisory Committee?

- Composed of bipartisan and nonpartisan experts in higher education and financial aid policy and advocacy, the Advisory Committee oversees the FFAA Fund’s operating framework, and reviews and votes on all applications received.
- Advisory Committee members will recuse themselves from voting on any proposals submitted by organizations with which they are affiliated.

### What is the role of HCM Strategists?

- HCM Strategists assembled and chairs the Advisory Committee and manages the mechanics of the FFAA Fund, from issuing the RFP, to compiling applications for committee review, to awarding and monitoring grants. HCM’s website hosts Fund materials.

### Who is eligible to apply?

- Eligible entities include tax-exempt nonprofit organizations (501(c)3), public charities, and public systems of higher education. Consortia are eligible and encouraged.
- Former grantees under the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Reimagining Aid Design and Delivery (RADD) project are encouraged to apply.
- For-profit entities are not eligible to apply at this time, but may be a subcontractor to a non-profit organization that applies.
- Existing projects may be eligible for funding if the funds are used to expand or create a unique or new element to the project.

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## What is the timeline for the fund and the work it supports?

- Awards for the first round are being made in May.
- **Applications for the second round of competition are due on Friday, June 24;** a third application period may be set for later in the year if funding has not been exhausted. Rolling applications may also be considered to accommodate timely advocacy opportunities occurring before the next deadline, depending on the number and quality of applications received during the primary rounds of competition. Such timely applications will receive early consideration and notification, unless HCM and the Advisory Committee determine that an application can be considered during the next primary round without jeopardizing the intended scope of work.
- Grantees are expected to complete their deliverables in a timely fashion within the grant period. Round 2 applicants must specify a project period of no longer than 3 months.

## How many grants will be awarded?

- The fund will support grants of up to \$200,000 each until the initial fund is exhausted. The number of grants awarded depends on the funding levels of successful applications.

## Should applicants focus on a subset of strategies or take a comprehensive approach?

- Applicants may propose to focus on one strategy in-depth or address multiple topics. Depending on the mix of proposals initially funded, subsequent awards may prioritize strategies that received less applicant interest.

## Is there any flexibility around the strategies, award size, project period, or permissible activities?

- Applicants are expected to adhere to the guidelines in the RFP. The Advisory Committee may consider exceptions on a case by case basis depending on the applicant pool, timing and nature of the request. An applicant with a strong justification for requesting an exception should contact HCM Strategists prior to the application deadline. All proposals must focus on federal financial aid.

## How will transparency be assured?

- Brief summaries of grants awarded will be posted on the FFAA Fund website.
- After grants are approved, HCM Strategists will publicly announce the grants on the Fund website. A summary of the funded activity, any subsequent materials and the final impact of the activity will be published upon completion of the work.

## How will impact be measured and evaluated?

- The Advisory Committee will approve an evaluation approach that includes specific reporting guidelines for grantees.
- After the final grants are complete, HCM Strategists will prepare and publicly release a summary of funded activity and impact.

## Will this opportunity be offered again?

- Grants will be awarded until the fund is exhausted. An analysis of funded activities' impact will inform consideration of any future funding opportunities.

