

Building Capacity for Change in Federal Financial Aid Advocacy

Mission

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Reimagining Aid Design and Delivery (RADD) initiative yielded important policy and seeded collaboration around federal financial aid improvement options. HCM Strategists (HCM) contributed analysis and original recommendations to this reform debate with a coalition report (American Dream 2.0), a technical report with original cost and impact modeling by the Urban Institute (Doing Better for More Students) and Hart Research and David Winston-led public opinion research (College is Worth It). But policy options need to be effectively communicated to and engage the public, stakeholders and policymakers to advance the debate. Against the backdrop of an unconventional election cycle and pending Higher Education Act reauthorization, the Gates Foundation and HCM recognized the need to support the higher education policy field in moving from *thinking* about change to *advocating* for change. With the Foundation's support, HCM developed the Federal Financial Aid Advocacy (FFAA) Fund, an innovative grant program to cultivate advocacy around and advance key federal financial aid reforms while activating diverse stakeholders and elevating new voices often missing from the federal debate.

Action

HCM designed and executed all aspects of the FFAA Fund, including recruiting an expert advisory committee, crafting grant competition parameters, and developing all outreach, application, review and evaluation materials. HCM supported the advisory committee in reviewing numerous applications across several rounds of competition, ultimately awarding and managing over \$1 million to 11 grantees, who advocated for critical federal financial aid reforms or built capacity to do so. Grantees reached a large and varied swath of people through short-term, targeted social media and communications, networking and organizing, policymaker education and stakeholder education/training. Stakeholders engaged included: students; congressional and agency leaders and staff; HBCU community members; college access and success advisors; student aid administrators; business, civil rights and education leaders; higher education and criminal justice reform communities; justice system-impacted youth; foster youth; state policymakers and leaders; and editorial boards in Washington, DC, among others.

Impact

The FFAA Fund energized grantees and supported the creation of effective messaging, materials, events and campaigns around federal financial aid reform. The Fund successfully activated diverse stakeholders and amplified new voices, engaging over 100 organizations representing a wide cross-section of people, with millions of social media impressions and tens of thousands of video, newsletter and website views, earned media in top publications, and numerous policymaker meetings, events and training opportunities. Collectively, the recommendations from the RADD investments can be found in the U.S. House of Representatives PROSPER Act, the U.S. Senate Democratic Caucus Higher Education Act Reauthorization Principles and in the U.S. Senate Health, Labor and Pensions full committee hearings on reauthorizing the Higher Education Act.