Advancing Equity in College Attainment
Strategically Designing Scholarship and Support Programs
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*By Colette Hadley, National College Attainment Network
and Liz Newman, John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities*

We start with a question: *When can a scholarship program be a force for community change?*

We offer a simple answer: *When it advances equity in college attainment.*

This requires a strategic approach at many levels – for a region, for a foundation, for young people in the community. Let's unpack what it means to be strategic at these three levels, in the case of community foundations that design and implement need-based scholarship programs with meaningful awards and accompanying student support services.

- *For a Region*: Disparities in college completion rates are the result of complex systemic issues as well as a lack of supports for students to succeed, including but not limited to financial resources. Designing a need-based scholarship program in a way that engages the community to understand the experiences of underrepresented students, including students of color and those who are the first in their families to attend college, can be used as a lever to impact systemic issues well beyond the confines of a scholarship program. It can deepen regional understanding about the lack of resources for local students and their families, illuminate barriers to equitable educational attainment, and spotlight challenges to regional economic development. This advances equity in college attainment.

- *For a Community Foundation*: Community foundations are uniquely positioned as critical leaders and partners in efforts to address the systems, conditions, financial resources, and other supports necessary to advance solutions for a variety of critical societal issues, including increasing college completion rates for students from low-income backgrounds. There are ways in which the model of a carefully planned scholarship program can strengthen local partnerships and increase engagement and awareness among board members, donors, and regional stakeholders about gaps in resources and solutions to address those gaps. Foundations may experience increased visibility, credibility, and capacity while becoming advocates and experts in ways that increase college degree completion. This advances equity in college attainment.

- *For Students*: It is not uncommon to find scholarship funds at community foundations that target students with high GPAs from low-income backgrounds. These scholarships provide some limited financial support to those who have demonstrated both need and academic achievement. But there are a tremendous number of students from low- to modest-income

working families who are college-ready and have met and exceeded the admission requirements for four-year colleges but do not have any opportunities to receive scholarships for their potential postsecondary journey. While perhaps not in the top 10% of their high school class, these students have completed a portfolio of college prep coursework, are often deeply involved in their schools and communities, assist with family obligations and hold summer jobs, and express aspirations about attending college. Scholarship programs that are targeted to provide financial resources and support services to this large and deserving group of "students in the middle" make a significant difference with college enrollment through degree completion and maybe the best human capital investment opportunity for the region. This advances equity in college attainment.

Data, Inquiry, and Best Practices

Designing and implementing a need-based scholarship program with student supports that meets strategic objectives and advances equity in regional college attainment can be achieved by foundations when they:
- Strengthen their knowledge of the regional educational landscape.
- Map their processes with data that illuminate program strategies, outcomes, and opportunities for improvement.
- Engage partners and stakeholders in inquiry that leads to program improvement and shared goals.
- Tailor the program to embed best practices in ways that reflect the unique conditions of the community.

Data and inquiry can be used to build an understanding of what is needed and by whom. Data and inquiry can also illuminate how providing a program that addresses what is needed for those who need it can support outcomes for students. Data that are disaggregated to illuminate disparities used as part of an inquiry process can illuminate needs and opportunities and support the strategic development of programs to advance equitable college attainment for the target student populations, which in turn has implications for settings and system (https://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/publications/tools-strategies-equitable-college-attainment-using-contextual-knowledge-collective). Combining data and inquiry with a deep knowledge of best practices from other settings that can inform local program development offers a path to developing programs that achieve strategic objectives at the individual, setting, and system levels.

Core Components

While organizations, funders, and communities are driven by distinct priorities, resources, and opportunities, we have identified four basic approaches that community foundations can use to transform their scholarship programs to ensure that they are responsive to student needs and designed to advance equity in college attainment. These approaches include:

1. **Understanding the college preparatory and degree completion data** for students in the region, parsed by categories including income levels, gender, racial/ethnic designations, and district and school profiles. This includes benchmarking against other local, state, or national rates of high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment at two-year and four-year colleges,

enrollment in college-level classes, and postsecondary degree completion for young people from low-income households. Building a strong understanding of student needs and resource gaps allows foundations to develop responsive, effective, and strategic scholarship programming.

2. **Conducting an assessment of the foundation's current scholarship program**. Being intentional about program design and/or modification starts with building a deep understanding of student experiences and program processes. For example, an analysis of application design and processes for determination of financial need, including the role of financial need in relation to award amounts, might uncover barriers to students from low-income backgrounds. An assessment of the committees or volunteers involved in scholarship selection, and how scoring rubrics or evaluations are developed might illuminate opportunities for changes to policies, processes, and technology used to manage the scholarship program. Similarly, this assessment could inform the establishment of, or modifications to, partnerships with support service providers; or it could inform the ways award recipients apply, are selected, receive scholarship payments, and are tracked.

3. **Educating and informing current and prospective donors** about what can be done to increase postsecondary attainment, why it matters, and about the opportunity to invest in local talent. To truly impact regional equity in college attainment, foundations have a responsibility to educate their donors with a proactive effort. Donors are hungry for knowledge and want their giving to make a big difference, and foundations with deep knowledge of their scholarship and support programs are well positioned to answer this call.

4. **Effectively measuring and reporting the impact of the scholarship program**. There is a wealth of data that scholarship and college success program providers can collect to answer questions and share with donors and other stakeholders. For example, data can answer questions such as: Did scholarship recipients complete one year of postsecondary education in good standing? Did the award amount make a significant impact to keep the student enrolled? How many recipients have completed postsecondary education? What is the attrition rate and why? These types of basic data points are critical to transforming programs, engaging local partners, and attracting and retaining donors.

Community foundations that have implemented these approaches are experiencing success. In general, postsecondary completion initiatives have proven to be broadly popular and supported by people of all backgrounds and political ideologies across the nation. Educational equity issues are widely understood, have a moral urgency, and are attractive to potential contributors.

Stories of Transformation

While the core components are the same, what a strategic, need-based scholarship program looks like will vary by community and by foundation. It varies by internal priorities, capacity, and resources. It varies by community characteristics, history, and attitudes. We offer three examples of community foundations engaged in this work, advancing equitable college attainment in their regions. Each shares the core components, revealing themselves in unique programs suited to the priorities and capacities of the foundations themselves and the communities in which they are situated.

The **Stanislaus Community Foundation**, located in California's Central Valley, invited local leaders to conversations that centered data illustrating students' educational trajectories. These conversations focused on transition points and opportunities to increase and support progress through college graduation and highlighted the need for intersegmental and collective interrogation of data. They carefully crafted conversations with education partners to allow for listening and learning, to acknowledge what the data could (and could not) show, and to use the data to open lines of communication by respecting the expertise and commitment of the educators and institutions that "owned" the data.

The foundation also used data internally, with staff, program partners, board members, and donors, fostering an appreciation for the centrality of data to learning, improving, and understanding outcomes. The use of data to map the profile, paths, and experiences of students engaged in the program resulted in changes to scholarship eligibility criteria, donor communications, and fund design, in addition to messaging, recruitment, program components, and partner agreements that directly impacted student experience and engagement. By inviting program partners to be part of the inquiry process, all were engaged and accountable to one another, resulting in a more strategic program design.

Nearby, in the state's capital, the **Sacramento Region Community Foundation** engaged in a learning journey that included a deep look at regional needs, including but not limited to education data. Through this process, the foundation identified opportunity gaps and disparities in educational outcomes and recognized that boys and young men of color appeared to lack supports that would allow them to be successful on their trajectories to and through college. Building on that knowledge, the foundation developed strong partnerships with school-based programs and local community organizations that were uniquely situated to reach and support young men of color. Specifically, the foundation partnered with a local program whose work centered on this group of students, with programming that started in high school and continued to the college years. Thus, the foundation was able to increase the percentage of its scholarships and supports that went to young men of color.

The design and implementation of the scholarship and supports program – including the ways the foundation gathered, shared, and collectively analyzed data with partners – not only reflected an increased understanding of the students they hoped to reach, but also expanded opportunities for the foundation to act in community leadership roles. At the same time, these analyses and discussions illuminated equity issues and brought these issues to the forefront of internal and external dialogue. These discussions have allowed the foundation to engage its partners to reflect upon the program data for learning, improvement, and evaluation.

And in the state's southernmost county, **The San Diego Foundation** leveraged its robust, traditional scholarship program to develop a separate strategic, need-based program aimed at first-generation students, students of color, and students from low-income households. The foundation embedded data and inquiry into their program design, striving to understand their target student populations, what was needed to support those students, and the regional ecosystem of community-based organizations that were providing those supports. These efforts informed internal foundation conversations about equity and community needs, while simultaneously building community leadership and partnership. As one member of the foundation's program team shared, the work "... represented the evolution from a position of regional leadership in scholarship philanthropy to regional leadership in educational equity."

As the foundation developed its new scholarship program, it also welcomed new leadership in executive and board positions. These leaders brought expertise in higher education, along with a commitment to educational equity. The new scholarship program, combined with these changes in leadership and staffing, allowed the foundation to build on its earlier program impacts and affirm educational equity as a key priority. While many factors came into play, this shift was, in part, a result of the foundation's laser focus on the data and what it meant for scholarships to be strategic: "We really leaned into the definition of strategic, need-based scholarships, especially the part that links scholarship strategy setting to broader community outcomes. For us, the data was really critical in helping to draw that bold line between the design of a scholarship and how that does or does not connect to our regional needs and into a community strategy around college attainment and ultimately community well-being."

Reflection

Advancing equity in college attainment is a tall order, demanding dedicated action at many levels, by many partners, through many vehicles. Community partners can learn from program implementation and student outcomes data to ensure more equitable access to scholarship opportunities. We have explored this arc in relation to the possibilities inherent in community foundations' design and implementation of scholarship programs. We would suggest that the learnings gleaned from community foundations' efforts to advance educational equity through scholarship programs are in fact relevant for the broader college attainment field, including funders, organizations, institutions, and other partners.

Liz Newman is a Senior Community Engagement Associate at the John W. Gardner Center. Colette Hadley is Director of Consulting Services at the National College Attainment Network.