

NASSGAP President Melanie Amrhein's Testimony
Advisory Committee for Student Financial Aid (ACSFA)

April 4, 2006

Good Afternoon,

I am Melanie Amrhein, Assistant Executive Director of the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance and President of the National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs. NASSGAP, as it is known, is a professional association whose membership is comprised of the states' designated grant agencies. That is, those agencies whose mission it is to administer government-sponsored assistance for their resident students attending institutions of higher education. Based on 2003-04 data, collectively the states administered \$ 6.2 billion in need and non-need based state funded student aid.

This aid, along with its federal Title IV counterparts, is helping to break down financial barriers for students. But we all know that more must be done. We must continue to convince congress to save financial programs that leverage state funds with federal funds, such as the LEAP and Special LEAP models. Based on Department of Education figures, \$65M in federal funds leveraged over \$530M from states in the form of need-based grants during the 2003-04 academic year. That's better than an 8 – 1 match! A pretty good bang for your buck.

Congress must be encouraged to really look at the buying power of the under funded Federal Pell Grant. When the average cost of attendance at a 4 year public school is over \$10,000 a year, even a full Pell Grant will not encourage a low-income student to attend. States and institutions have to fill in the gaps.

Housing and book costs subsidies must be explored for the most needy students at the federal, state and institutional level. All these things must be considered in making higher education affordable and accessible.

One of the focus points of your study will be early information on financial aid. The agencies represented by NASSGAP are dedicated to the efficient delivery of aid, the identification of those qualified to receive the aid, and dissemination of information about how to receive the aid. The latter is possibly the most challenging. How do we get young people to pay attention and become knowledgeable about opportunities for funding for post secondary education? They are the most "tuned-in" generation and have lived with "mixed media" since they were born, unlike most of us in this room. We have to reach them with a message that they will hear and in a format that they appreciate.

Our states have taken varied steps in accomplishing this. From 3rd grade story books in Louisiana, to Rap CDs in Minnesota; From colorful planning calendars in Maryland to bright, eye-catching magazines in Kentucky, the states are telling the story about how staying in school and preparing for higher education holds a promise to a bright future. Innovative, informative websites are too numerous to name, and several states still believe in the hands-on, personal approach.

As you have heard today, many states have active College Goal Sunday programs, and many NASSGAP state agencies are responsible for the administration within their state. In addition, some states have created other innovative programs that

personally reach out to students and families. Louisiana has created a peer-training program called Trailblazers. High Schools are asked each summer to send one rising senior to a 2 1/2 day summer camp on a college campus to receive in-depth training in federal and state financial aid programs. Agency staff, college financial aid and admissions officers conduct the training. These students then return to their high schools for their senior year equipped to assist their counselors in disseminating information to their classmates. Just ask the overworked counselors how much they appreciate this program.

The Louisiana Gear-Up program is mimicking this approach with a "Pathfinders" camp this summer for their 8th graders to prepare them for high school. Vermont runs a program called College Pathways. It is a FREE one-day conference for high school juniors and their parents offered on two different campuses in Vermont. Informational Sessions include everything from College Admissions topics, financial aid, and money management to career selection.

Oregon and Vermont serve as centralized administration sites to match their states private scholarships to recipients, another great service to students trying to find additional sources of aid. And Kentucky has actually "taken the show on the road" with their College Info Roadshow. This brightly colored RV is a mobile site equipped with laptop computers and all the financial and college access materials that students' need. It travels across the state and brings information throughout this rural area. An innovative pathway, indeed!

NASSGAP also recognizes existing programs such as GEAR-Up and TRIO programs that give students the coaching, mentoring and strong support services they need for success. Our advice is "Don't re-invent the wheel, let's make the wheel better".

NASSGAP states all recognize their roles in the programs and services they are tasked to administer.

However, philosophies dictated by each state's legislative authority differ widely. What works in one state may not be right for the populous in another. New York, PA, California and Texas are examples of states that have strong need-based state grants. Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and SC are putting state appropriations into Merit-based scholarships. At the state level, one size does not fit all. That's why important issues such as simplification of need analysis and the determination of "rigorous high school curriculum" can be problematic for states.

In summary, "Innovative Pathways" are a strong focus of the states and NASSGAP is very supportive of the direction that the Advisory Committee's focus group has given and we are anxious to work with you over the course of this study.