

# nassgap

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**national association of state student grant and aid programs**

September 29, 2000

Mr. Jerry Davis  
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Dear Jerry:

It was good talking with you about the National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs' (NASSGAP) Annual surveys. As one of the survey's founding fathers, you understand the important role it plays insofar as documenting state-funded grant, scholarship and loan programs. Thanks to you, Joseph Boyd and others, researchers nationwide use the survey as the definitive source of state funded financial aid data. I know, because as President of the organization this past year, I've received weekly requests from reporters wanting interpretations of what the data suggests, and researchers wanting to order copies of surveys from as far back as the 1980s. While the survey is the best of its kind, it has even greater potential. In short, given the opportunity and proper funding, NASSGAP can improve on the survey's usefulness, credibility, and accessibility. This letter invites the USA Group Foundation to assist us financially in improving the survey in ways that could include, but not be limited to, the categories listed below.

#### **Provide Accessibility to Survey Data History**

Supplying researchers with current year data is easy enough, and data for surveys since 1994-95 are posted on our web site, but providing them with a more complete history of NASSGAP Surveys is difficult and costly. One goal is to provide interested parties with a complete history of NASSGAP's Annual Survey data by way of CD-ROM technology. This would require scanning and indexing all Surveys up through at least 1994-95 and then burning the data on to a CD-ROM. Once scanned, older data then could also be posted to NASSGAP's website.

#### **Improve Data Collection Methods**

Just months ago NASSGAP released a piloted version of the survey online. I shared a glimpse of the online version with you a few weeks back. The purpose of the online survey is to improve the integrity of the data through improved collection methods, and to enable NASSGAP to publish the data earlier. I believe it has been thoughtfully developed and has enormous potential to improve the reporting of survey data.

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### **Increase Monitoring Efforts of Completed Surveys for Data Integrity Purposes**

As we explore ways to make the data collection process more efficient, we also need to explore ways to better evaluate the responses once they are received. We need to determine not just whether all the questions reported on the survey are answered by states, but also whether data reported by states are valid. For example, if in one year a state reports they awarded a million dollars for a part-time grant program, and the next year reports they awarded a \$100,000 for the same program, it is important to follow up to determine whether they entered an incorrect amount, or if the program's funding was really cut by \$900,000. If it were the latter, then it would be logical to ask why. These kinds of follow-up efforts although labor intensive would not only improve the integrity of the data but also help to identify and monitor policy trends.

### **Evaluation of the Current Data Collection Instrument – The Reasons; The Possibilities.**

It is time we examine the survey collection instrument to determine if we are asking the right kind of questions in the right way. Are the questions asked today as relevant as they were 15 years ago? Times have changed and so have the nature of state-funded student aid programs. As such, we need to recognize, chronicle and evaluate these changes in an effort to make the survey more meaningful and relevant.

Last week, I got a call from a reporter in West Virginia who asked if I could provide her with state-by-state breakdown of the number of students who received state grants who also received federal Pell grants and federal student loans. Her question was in response to NASSGAP's recently published Annual Survey. A few days ago, I got a call from a reporter from the New York Times (she may have called you as well) who asked questions related to the efficacy of need verses merit-based state aid programs insofar as retention and academic performance issues are concerned. Her questions were prompted by our survey. Today, in response to our survey data posted on our website, I received a request from an economist with the Federal Reserve Board of Governors who is trying to put together numbers for grant aid and scholarships over time. She asked if there was any relationship between NASSGAP's surveys data numbers and the figures published by the National Center for Education Statistics on scholarships and fellowships from public universities.

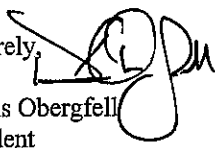
NASSGAP is not suggesting that its survey should be able to answer these specific questions. We're not suggesting NASSGAP's survey could or should track every aspect of state-funded higher education expenditures vis-à-vis all other sources and types of aid. However, we do think it is time we review whether the data we currently collect should be expanded in a manner that would give us a more complete picture of the roles states play in the broader scope of higher education financing, and perhaps even better understanding of the policies behind the programs states offer. In short, it is time to investigate how the survey could be expanded in ways that would improve its usefulness.

For example, it might be useful to get feedback from member states on how/whether they've used the survey as a tool in making policy decisions or when evaluating the pros and cons of implementing a new program. Perhaps the survey could explore if and how states are dealing with the need for providing financial aid to students enrolled in employment training programs such as Certified Network Engineer (CNE) courses that are offered by private companies who are not Title IV eligible.

Thus, on behalf on NASSGAP I am requesting a \$50,000 grant from the USA Group Foundation to assist NASSGAP with costs associated with taking NASSGAP's Annual Survey to another level. Such efforts would necessitate NASSGAP hiring an experienced researcher to assess how to improve the integrity and veracity of the data collected, and assist NASSGAP in enhancing the survey in ways that could make it more comprehensive and directive. There are also expenses tied to maintaining and refining the survey data collection instrument on the web so that it becomes the sole method of how NASSGAP collects data. This effort includes working with NASSGAP's web host provider to deal with any survey- related technical issues that may develop.

NASSGAP will work with you to identify the scope, costs and timelines associated with this initiative. The items mentioned above are some of the more significant tasks associated with undertaking a project of this significance. There may be others. Our goal of enhancing the survey for the reasons described above are consistent with the Foundation's goal to expand access to higher education nationally, by conducting and commissioning related research and by supporting grants for innovative programs that advance higher education access at a national level. We hope that the USA Group Foundations will consider NASSGAP's proposal and we would look forward to working with you to discuss this proposal in more detail.

Sincerely,

  
Dennis Obergfell  
President  
NASSGAP