

## Public and Private Sector Initiatives in Education

Forum 2007

Thursday, October 25

KRISTIN CONKLIN: I want to thank the College Board. I really do believe you are one of the finest organizations in the United States. You have been, as the country music song goes, "Leaders in K-16, when K-16 wasn't cool."

I'm honored to have been allowed to substitute for Under Secretary Sara Martinez Tucker, herself a national leader in college access and success, both at the U.S. Department of Education as the president's nominee to lead higher education for the U.S. Department of Education, but also as the former president of the Hispanic Scholarship Fund.

I'm pleased on behalf of Secretary Margaret Spellings to announce today the results of the first year of implementation of two new financial aid programs, the Academic Competitiveness Grant program, and the National SMART Grant programs. You have a handout that was left on your seats, and that is what is released today to the press.

Before I walk through it a little bit, and how I think it will be a good tool for you in your work, a little context. Ten years ago there were no "CrackBerry" addictions, not to diagnose, not to treat. The words "Google" and "blog" would be caught by spell check as misspelled words, and the Red Sox couldn't win a World Series.

Now, much has changed in a decade, but thankfully, so has the either/or nature of a debate that really kind of paralyzed our community, the notion that it was financial barriers or academic barriers that caused or continued the inequity in college success in our country.

There were dueling reports with fantastic numbers created that said it's one or the other. You at College Board always recognized that it was both, and that really has been accelerated under the leadership of Governor Caperton. Well, the President talked about in 2000 that we really should create in the Pell Grant program an opportunity to challenge and reward students who take the classes we know they need to be successful in college, and Congress did finally get it.

In creating the Academic Competitiveness and SMART Grant program in the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, they really copied state leaders in California, in Indiana, in Washington and Oklahoma, states that had already need-based financial aid programs tied to some condition of merit, such as rigorous course taking.

I'm here today to make sure that not only you see how ACG, but its sister program, the Junior/Senior Grant program of SMART, can be powerful tools to improve equity and support the high school transformation I know you're all about.

So what I ask of you are three things. One, I want you to know about these programs, and I particularly want you to know about what are the approved rigorous courses of studies in your state. I want you to accept the Department's challenge to double the number of students that receive either an Academic Competitiveness or a SMART Grant by 2010-11. And then I ask you to continue to advocate for low income students' access to rigor.

Let's start with the first challenge, knowing about this program. You'll see on the first page of the national profile some core qualities of this program. One, it is just for Pell eligible students, and it is for students enrolled full-time, and who are U.S. citizens. It is \$750 for freshmen; \$1,300 for sophomores; and it's \$4,000 a year for juniors and seniors. In this first year we gave \$450 million to 360,000 students.

Now, the other criteria, of course, if you're a high school student and you want that AC Grant, you need to have completed an approved course of study. How many of you know what your state's approved courses of study are? You are the nation's college access leaders. I beg you, when the state profile reports come out on Tuesday -- we've created one for every single state -- you download that from the Department of Education's website. You share it with your colleagues and know your rigorous courses of study.

In your state profiles, and you'll see this on the second page, we've provided for the nation, and we have this in your state, too. As the Governor said, I did come from NGA for six years, and my first love is states. Quite frankly, fomenting the state competition I think makes us better. What you see in the national profile for each of the programs is who are the top institutions that have been awarded AC and SMART Grants this first year. I hope you'll look to see, 'Is my campus a top performer?' 'Have we taken the steps that such innovative schools have to increase participation rates?' Check back on the Department's website in December to see data for every institution in your state for each of these programs. I think that healthy competition is only going to improve equity.

The second challenge, the second thing for today is the challenge to double the number of student that get an AC and SMART Grant. Congress has appropriated \$4.5 billion for this program, and it's mandatory spending. Congress doesn't have to fight about it every year. It doesn't have to get caught up in the messy Labor H bill that always gets caught up in politics, no matter what party controls the Congress or White House. This is mandatory money for our kids, and Congress right now is going to take away every single year the money we don't spend.

For instance, they estimated this year we'd spend about \$790 million. We spent 380. They're probably going to take that away. We have got to make sure that by 2010-11 Congress is not taking away this money, and we are spending all this money on our low income students.

So what you can see on the last page of your national profile is a table with each of the states. Here is your baseline. Alaska, you don't have far to reach. You gave 60 Academic Competitiveness Grants this year. I truly believe you can double the number of AC Grants next year, but I think every state can.

To help you do this, the Department of Education has heard from you and identified some of the common challenges in the first year of implementing this relatively complex program. We have in here outlined those challenges, and some real promising ways states and institutions have risen to meet those challenges.

There are two places in doubling the number of AC and SMART Grant recipients that College Board members are natural leaders. The first is to recognize that the Secretary of Education, in regulation, has automatically approved anyone, any student, who has taken two AP courses and received a passing score. It's an automatic qualification. In this first year, five percent of our AC Grant recipients received their AC award because they had completed and scored on the AP exam.

The easiest way for any state to double its numbers is to work on this particular option. It's great for private and home-schooled students. It's easy for institutions to identify. They're just looking for AP pass rates. It's information the College Board makes available. It's very possible, I believe, that in the next couple of years instead of five percent of AC recipients nationwide walking around with extra money, it's 25 percent that are walking around with extra money because they took your courses and passed the exams.

As you know, and we were doing it at NGA, we're looking for ways to motivate low income students to take the AP courses, and most importantly, to sit for the exams. We give them money. We even pay their teachers. Isn't a scholarship worth \$2,000 over two years a more powerful incentive? I challenge you to work with every AP teacher to market this program as early as seventh, eighth, ninth grade, when you're identifying who has AP potential. At a minimum, make sure the students enrolled in your classes know about this program.

You also can lead both your high school counselors and your college counselors on this challenge. At the high school, these rigorous program courses of study are not federal requirements for eligibility. They are pathways to college success. They are rigorous curriculum that your state has said we believe will help students be college ready. Again, include this information in your earliest counseling.

Here's a trick. A lot of you run FAFSA workshops. A lot of you give one-on-one counseling on financial aid. Did you know that students have to actually self-select that they are FAFSA, when they complete that horrendously long 907 question form, that they think they're ACG eligible. So we not only make low income students fill out this horrid form, but we actually expect them to know what the ACG rigorous courses of study are, and that, yes, they think that they should be considered. But that's the only way institutions of higher education right now know that this is someone we think we should tell the federal government deserves some

money. So please make sure that they know in the process to check that box, even if they're not totally certain.

Then, also I ask for you to advocate at the state level to get the high school course-taking graduation requirements aligned to what are the ACG course requirements. So that the message you have to convey as high school guidance counselors is crystal clear to students, this is what it takes to graduate. This is what it takes to be college ready. This is what it takes to walk around with a whole lot more money from the federal government.

At the college level, college counselors, in promoting our SMART Grant, I want to convey again that it's \$4,000 a year. These are substantial grants that I think can help chip away at the gross inequities we have in this country in the amount of African-American, Hispanic, and Native American scientists and engineers we have contributing to the innovation economy we heard about today.

Third, I ask you to continue to advocate for the access to rigor. Despite the College Board's significant leadership, there are still 40 percent of high schools in America that do not offer one AP course. The Secretary likes to talk about this. She's very, very fond of the AP programs, and what they're able to accomplish for students.

In Fairfax, Virginia, not far from the U.S. Department of Education, there are 24 AP courses available to students, and that's a great thing. But right across the river in Ballou High School, six miles away, there are four AP courses available to students. All African-American, Hispanic, all low income.

I really ask you to redouble your efforts to continue to advocate for low income students' access to these courses. But just don't stop with AP. To be honest with you, half the states right now are revisiting their high school graduation course-taking requirements and saying, "Shouldn't you get a diploma that signifies, at a minimum, college readiness through course taking?" Well, if you're in a state that isn't seriously investigating this, course-taking requirements for graduation are low, or they're weakly defined, they just say, for instance, we want four years of math, but they're not specific what those math courses should be -- please advocate to change that.

Last, and it's not sexy, but it's critical, I ask you to advocate for changes in our data systems. I could not tell Margaret Spellings the percentage of low income kids that had access to the rigorous curriculum. I couldn't tell her how that varied by state or by high school. We know how powerful it is when there's data to shine light on gross inequities, and I don't have that data to give her, and you don't have that powerful messenger as a result. So what I ask you to do as your states are building your data systems, this is a very nit-picky little thing, but those data systems must have course taking completion data on them, because then we can quickly be able to assess by state, by district, by high school, where is their access to rigor.

Well, Sox fans had to wait actually more than a decade to win their World Series, but I know that we shouldn't have to wait a decade to see the number of low income students having access to as much federal aid as possible. While we have set the goal to double by 2010-11, there is one data point on the second page of your national profile, and it says 25 percent of the population that's eligible for this grant is getting it. These are Pell eligible students, full-time enrolled citizens. 25 percent of them are getting a grant. Don't we believe that every single low income student enrolled in college should be prepared to succeed? Shouldn't that number be 100 percent?

I encourage you to look at these little programs as powerful tools for you.