

prioritizing community voice leads to key policy win for Graduate Tacoma

Graduate Tacoma | Tacoma, Wash.



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“Surfacing the voices that are not in the room is critical. Pausing to acknowledge who couldn’t be there and why is important for lawmakers to hear, especially as we think through how to make policy and law a more equitable and open environment for all individuals to participate in.”

- Rosie Ayala, associate director of collective action at Graduate Tacoma and Tacoma College Support Network manager

Graduate Tacoma supported a major policy shift that will enable hundreds of students annually access to a scholarship that can make or break their ability to afford college. Here are some highlights:

- 1.** The new policy removes existing barriers that make application for the scholarship particularly difficult for students for whom English is not their first or home language, as well as for first-generation college-going students.
- 2.** Getting all the right voices in the room — including cross-sector partnerships and creating space for lived experience — was crucial to getting the policy passed.
- 3.** Without these technical barriers to scholarship application, Graduate Tacoma can now focus on cultural shifts to create a mindset where college is seen as a part of every student’s background, regardless of their race, place or level of income.

actions

In Tacoma, Washington, Graduate Tacoma has spent more than a decade working toward increasing sign-ups for the state-sponsored College Bound Scholarship, which provides financial aid that covers the cost of tuition, fees and books. Students sign a form in 7th or 8th grade with their guardian pledging to graduate with at least a C grade average, and without a felony conviction. If students meet those and other eligibility requirements — remaining in Washington state for postsecondary education, and family income falling below 65% of median state income — they can receive up to \$12,000 per year through this scholarship.

For students experiencing poverty, the College Bound Scholarship can make the difference in being able to afford the costs of postsecondary education. Data also shows that students who apply for the scholarship are more likely to complete high school — 75% of eighth grade students who completed the application in 2011 graduated from high school in 2015, while the graduation rate for students who did not complete the application was only 62%.

Graduate Tacoma’s collaborative action network, Tacoma College Support Network, has been able to successfully increase the application rate to 92% over the past three years. However, the application process is riddled with barriers to completion which make it particularly difficult for students for whom English is not their first or home language, as well as for first-generation college-going students. An unsubmitted guardian signature requirement, for example, causes more than 100 eligible Tacoma public school students to miss this opportunity every year. In order to eliminate this barrier, Graduate Tacoma has worked toward passing an automatic opt-in policy for middle school students who qualify for the College Bound Scholarship to ensure they’re able to finance their postsecondary education.



results

Thanks to effective community advocacy — and the Tacoma College Support Network's work — the opt-in policy was signed into law in April 2021. This policy shift removes the parent signature requirement for enrollment on the middle school pledge, thereby ensuring that all eligible students are automatically opted in to receive the scholarship. This change will positively impact the more than 10,000 students statewide who miss this opportunity annually. They are now able to shift their strategy to building a college-going culture rather than focusing on the technical

barriers inhibiting students of color and first-generation students from postsecondary opportunities, a “monumental shift” that was made possible thanks to the cross-collaborative efforts of all those involved, explained Rosie Ayala, associate director of collective action at Graduate Tacoma and Tacoma College Support Network manager.

takeaways

Enacting this policy change was not easy work, and there was plenty of opposition along the way. Here are some lessons Graduate Tacoma learned throughout the process.

Creating space for lived experience is critical to establishing equitable environments.

The Tacoma College Support Network made creating space for those with lived experience a priority, both in informing the work and in testifying for the policy change. They relied on middle school counselors and direct service providers to explain how the existing policy made complying not only difficult for students but also for those who serve them. Through their conversations with the Washington Student Achievement Council, they also learned that an automatic enrollment policy already existed as a way to support youth in the foster system — which made them question why the policy couldn't be expanded to support all youth.

In testifying, barriers like those preventing students from being able to enroll in the scholarship were also preventing families with lived experience from being able to share their stories. According to Ayala, “This surfaced the disparities behind what is highlighted as testimony and the ‘value’ of showing up.” Having students and families provide a combination of written and verbal testimony was crucial in getting their voices in the room.

Understanding the reasons behind opposition can help inform your own “why”s.

One of the challenges Ayala named was trying to understand the reasoning of those who opposed the policy change. In doing so, Graduate Tacoma recognized that many held a deep belief that not requiring students to take these additional steps meant they would not “have skin in the game.” This realization led to an understanding that the conversation about college needs to happen earlier in life for all students. Building an infrastructure that normalizes college as part of a student's future regardless of their background is a critical first step to creating a welcoming environment for equitable policies.

Expanding the definition of community is key to cross-collaborative efforts.

These shifts would not have been possible without the efforts of a diverse network of collaborators, Ayala explained. Though their partnership serves youth and the educational system, having policy and advocacy experts as well as direct service providers, students and families involved helped build upon their strengths. The policy win — and resulting shift in their priorities to building a college-going culture for all students — serves as testament to that collaboration.

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125 East Ninth Street
Second Floor
Cincinnati, OH 45202

513.929.1150
[StriveTogether.org](https://www.StriveTogether.org)

332 South Michigan Avenue
Ninth Floor
Chicago, IL 60604

