



College Futures Foundation - May 3, 2016

A Bold Vision for Supporting Innovation in Higher Education

When Governor Jerry Brown earmarked \$50 million of his state's 2014 budget for the Awards for Innovation in Higher Education, it was a bold move, one that hadn't been tried before. The rationale for the awards was simple: rewarding state colleges, universities, and partnerships that were creatively tackling issues which prevent students from getting their bachelor's degrees in a timely manner.

The Innovation Awards were not grants for proposed projects that had yet to be actualized. Instead they were structured as a prize for work the applicants were already doing to increase the number of bachelor's degrees awarded, to reduce time to degree, or to ease transfers. "The governor has been frustrated with how challenging it is to get colleges to act and think differently," says Lande Ajose, executive director of California Competes. "Colleges are rarely offered resources with no strings attached."

Typically, the state government funds higher education institutions through centralized bodies like the University of California's Office of the President or the California State University Chancellor's Office, which allocate resources using a formula that ensures every school gets a little bit. This makes it harder to direct money to innovative endeavors.

Although other states have tried different approaches to tackle similar problems in higher education, California is unique because of its size and scope—which inspired Brown to try something new.

"It was a top priority for the governor," says Michael Cohen, director of the California Department of Finance. "We weren't necessarily getting what we wanted out of the higher education system as a whole...we were looking for ways to do things better."

The Innovation Awards were an attractive offer for the state's UCs, CSUs, and community colleges, many still struggling to cope with the 2008 recession-driven budget cuts. Over the last six years, the state slashed a fifth of its budget for higher education even though enrollment numbers have steadily increased.

To compensate, state colleges and universities were forced to think of creative ways to meet the needs of California's students, many of whom require remedial classes when they first enroll in college. Despite a tough fiscal situation, administrators and faculty rose to the challenge.

"It was a grand experiment," says Mayer, president of California Forward. "Nobody knew what was really out there. Who is moving the needle on what really matters? There are a lot of smart people trying to do the right thing within a system that doesn't allow for innovation and change."

"We had the sense that there was a lot of creative thinking going on across individual campuses and in individual regions," Cohen says. "We wanted others to bring the solutions to us instead of pretending we had all the answers."

Ultimately, on March 20, 2015, 13 colleges and universities won 14 awards, doled out in increments of \$2.5, \$3 and \$5 million dollars. (Click [here to view profiles](#) of the award winners.)

Innovative Models

There were no specific definitions for what comprised innovation, which allowed for a wide variety of applications from public higher education institutions. Some of the applications focused on collaborative efforts between the colleges and their surrounding communities or the private sector.

That's the case for the California State University San Bernardino, which has partnered with local K-12 leaders, community colleges, CSU Riverside and two economic development agencies to form a collective to better prepare students for college and increase the number who graduate with a degree. In total, the project includes 56 school districts and 11 community colleges in two of the largest counties in the country, Riverside and San Bernardino.

"We undertook an ambitious approach to change the region," says Tomás Morales, president of CSU San Bernardino. "These two large counties have extreme poverty and high unemployment. Only 18 percent of adults over the age of 25 have a BA in San Bernardino County."

Half of his school's new entrants are transfer students from local community colleges, which highlighted the need for a project that could aid the successful transfer of community college students into four-year degree programs—and ultimately, better prepare graduates to join Inland Southern California's workforce.

One of the biggest challenges, Morales emphasizes, is getting students up to speed on math skills. Which is why the collective is focused on developing a four-year math course for the surrounding school districts.

"Math is a major obstacle in the area of BA attainment," he says. "When students stop taking math after sophomore or junior year of high school, they lose those skills. National research shows that."

Math—a statewide challenge—was a familiar refrain in the batch of applications submitted for the Innovation Awards. Student retention was another. According to a report by Complete College America, over the last two decades more than 31 million college students have failed to earn a degree. Of the students who do graduate from public universities, less than 20 percent are able to finish college in four years.

"If it takes six years to get a four year degree, that's not good at all," Mayer emphasizes. "It decreases the chances that students will actually finish."

College preparedness is one of the greatest challenges higher education institutions face today. As employers increasingly require degrees, youth face more pressure to enroll in college in order to land jobs.

"Opportunities for people with high school-only education to be able to support their families has dramatically shrunk," Mayer says. "More people need to get post-secondary educations which means that more people need to be prepared for post-secondary education... We need to adopt programs to meet the needs of kids who are coming out of poor and tough neighborhoods."

Student retention was the main focus of California State University San Marcos, where more than half of the two thousand incoming freshman each year are first generation students hailing from underserved communities. The college won an Innovation Award for its "¡Si se puede!" project, designed to support students through their first year of college.

“The first year is critical,” explains Dawn Formo, the school’s undergraduate dean. “That’s where we lose the greatest percentage of students.”

The course is designed to introduce students to all of the resources on campus with modules that bring in faculty from the library, advising and career counseling offices. CSU San Marcos also hired a support person to ensure that students are enrolled in mandatory remedial classes that must be completed within the first year. “If they aren’t remediated by end of the first year, we have to let them go,” Formo explains.

Thus far, the results have been impressive. “Now we have first year retention rates that are solidly in the mid-80 percent range,” Formo says. “For campus of demographics like ours, this is a huge accomplishment.”

In addition to improving the school’s first year retention rates, Formo also points to their success at narrowing the gap between its “underserved and overserved” students. “The underserved students are just slightly outpacing the overserved students in terms of first year retention,” she says. “Usually Caucasian students outpace everyone else. That’s not the case at CSU San Marcos.”

An Investment in the Future

Since these were awards and not grants, there were very few restrictions on how and when the money could be used. Some schools wanted to replicate or scale up the programs that had garnered the awards whereas others wanted to try something altogether new, but still focused on student success, that would be difficult to do without such flexible funding.

CSU San Marcos is using the award to launch an academic success center to measure the impact of its first year programming and how best to support students through the remaining three years. “We’re looking at data to identify student groups who need attention,” Formo says. “We’re retaining students after the first year but between the third semester and fifth semester, we’re still losing a significant amount of students.”

The academic support center can offer the kind of institutional support that middle classmen need. By anticipating issues through a data-driven process, the school hopes to develop new programs to move the dial on graduation and retention rates.

Meanwhile, CSU San Bernardino has placed its \$5 million into escrow in order to generate some interest while the school builds the foundation for its ambitious collective impact model. Building the infrastructure alone - to work with 56 school districts and 11 community colleges – is a huge task.

“This is such a massive project that involves two large regions, you have to develop the infrastructure,” Morales explains. “We can’t just start giving out the money. Five million goes very, very quickly.”

Thus far, CSU San Bernardino has piloted a successful residential summer bridge program and developed a four-year math initiative. They’re also working on developing a data portal to track every student who graduates from high school in Riverside & San Bernardino counties to see if and where they go to college - and if they actually earn a bachelor’s degree.

Morales is confident that the collaboration will continue to garner accolades and notes that there's been a lot of movement in the region in terms of improving educational attainment goals and student success rates. "In retrospect, we bit off a lot here," Morales admits. "This is going to be a marathon, not a sprint."

Ultimately, the collaboration aims to attract businesses to the region by offering an increasingly educated workforce. Doing so could turn the economic tide for the communities in the Inland Southern California.

Institutions Learning from Each Other

Although each institution is ultimately focused on meeting the unique needs of their student bodies, there are also a lot of lessons to share, and the Innovation Awards have spawned a dialogue about student success and best practices that is ongoing. Before the winners were announced, the majority of the award applicants presented their innovations to one another at a showcase in Sacramento put on by California Forward in spring of 2015. According to Mayer, the presenters were open about what they had tried and knew when they had failed because the data told them so, "so they changed what they were doing and were more successful. They were courageous enough to admit when something wasn't working."

The award winners were then invited by College Futures Foundation and the Education Delivery Institute to participate in an Innovation Leadership network; participants came together in January of 2016 for a kickoff planning retreat, where they were able to share information about their projects and end goals and get feedback from other awardees.

"Ideas were flying around the room," Formo recalls. "People were willing to share with each other because it was an award and not a grant. We weren't competing with each other. It was more of a collaborative experience based on what lessons we'd learned."

Another awardee, California State University Monterey Bay's Provost Bonnie Irwin agrees that the meetings and ongoing dialogue between campuses can only benefit higher education in California. "I'm learning from the other innovators about what they're doing and thinking of ways to implement it on our campus," she says. "For the state, that's a great investment. We're all getting ideas from each other."

Future network meetings are planned to stimulate ongoing innovation, identify challenges to scaling up, and support award winners in their communications efforts.

Just receiving the award has generated interested from other departments across campus as well as neighboring community colleges interested in partnering with CSU Monterey Bay. Two schools, CSU Los Angeles and CSU Dominguez Hills, have visited the school to check out its math program. Irwin says she's also fielded questions from out-of-state schools as well.

CSU Monterey Bay is using its award to pay salaries and provide workshops for local teachers. "It's bridge funding," Irwin says. "We can start something new quickly." She is counting on the money providing support for the next five years while the school replicates its computer science program with a second community college.

"When you do innovative work, you don't know where the path is going to lead you," she says. "The award allows us freedom to do what we wouldn't have been able to do otherwise."

What's Next?

Awardees are well aware that this was meant to be a one-time offer and are using the funds with a long-term vision in mind. The flexible timeline and freedom to use the funds any way they please has bolstered the spirits of award recipients. "It's nice to be acknowledged and trusted to try something new," Formo says. "It really is a gift that's respectful. An incredible opportunity to think outside the box about what our campus needs next."

Most would agree that the governor's Innovation Awards have shown that those on the ground and closest to the action know what works. Although success in higher education is typically ascribed to elitism and selectivity, the innovation awards operate on a different premise—one focused on expanding access to college for students who have largely been excluded because of a variety of obstacles and are not typically seen as college material.

As West Sacramento Mayor Christopher Cabaldon points out, the Innovation Awards align with Brown's top priorities. "The governor had a series of policy initiatives from the day he was sworn in about how to accelerate the time toward degrees," he says. "He placed a heavy emphasis on students facing poverty, language barriers, and challenges in their lives."

Ultimately, the state's strongest role is not to control, but to seed good practice and innovation. There are good ideas and approaches in the state's institutions that should be highlighted so that others can replicate or scale them up. Although traditional funding from the state doesn't enable or encourage innovation, awards such as these do.

Cohen noted that the governor has proposed an award for higher education innovation again this year—this time for community colleges. The focus is important, according to Lande Ajose, executive director of California Competes, as they are "the largest part of our education system in California and the least well-funded."

By targeting community colleges this time, the governor is redefining excellence in higher education as effectively reaching more students, including those who face many barriers. Cabaldon is hopeful that the proposed awards will be funded. "I'll be surprised if it doesn't make it in," he says. "As we saw from the Innovation Awards, community colleges were essential. It's where the greatest opportunities are because that's where the greatest gaps are."

"Inertia and bureaucracy [are] barriers to innovation," says Cabaldon. "It is important to shine a spotlight on change-makers within colleges. They put their whole career on the line to give it a shot. Those sorts of heroes often don't get celebrated. They're seen as the weirdos on campus. If you want systemic change, people like that need recognition & extra resources so innovation doesn't become a career killer on college campuses."

- Click [here to view profiles](#) of the 2015 Innovation Award winners.