

# uAspire



uAspire, a national nonprofit organization with offices in Massachusetts, the San Francisco Bay Area, and New York City, ensures a future in which all young people have the financial information and resources necessary to find an affordable path to and through college.

Using a three-pronged approach, uAspire:

1. Supports students one-on-one to maximize financial aid, minimize loan debt, and make informed financial decisions about the best post-secondary option for them.
2. Provides professional development to school counselors and other practitioners so that they are equipped to guide students through the complex financial aid systems.
3. Improves financial aid systems so everyone, particularly first-generation college students and students from low-income backgrounds, has a chance to graduate with a degree they can afford.

In 2014, with support from the venture philanthropy firm The GreenLight Fund, uAspire expanded to the San Francisco Bay Area from their original Boston location. As part of this expansion, they launched their Afford and Summer College Connect Programs to address the gap in financial aid advising and financial aid technical expertise for 12th grade students and to overcome “summer melt,” the phenomenon that college-intending students fail to enroll in college at all in the fall following high school graduation.

In 2018, uAspire Bay Area expanded its services to include their Succeed Program. The Succeed Program supports students through text-based advising to help them persist through their first two years of college while gaining the knowledge and skills to help them afford to finish. The Succeed program advises students on FAFSA and Dream Act renewal, having plans to pay college bills, knowing their current and overall debt amounts, and monitoring their Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP). SAP is a policy in which students must maintain a minimum GPA and complete a certain percentage of credits attempted in order to remain eligible for Financial Aid.

In 2018-19, with their training program reaching professionals in 16 states, uAspire’s programs and policy projects impacted over 690,000 students nationwide, reaching 17,629 high school and college students with uAspire’s advising services. Of students advised, 81% were from low-income backgrounds and 78% were first-generation college students. uAspire students out-persisted the national average, 82% to 73%.

## Role and Background in uCANRise

As the only national team in our cohort, and the most technologically forward, uAspire brought unique strategies and approaches to the uCANRise collaborative. Attending members were three program experts, including the manager of the Succeed Program. Participating staff also had the potential to draw on the organization's data and policy expertise.

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As with many nonprofit organizations involved in long-term communities of practice, uAspire struggled with continuous staffing, including through significant changes in leadership in two pivotal stages of uCANRise: during the pre-convening planning stage of the community of practice and in the transitional period between the first and second years. However, two seasoned

staff members participated in the first year, and the executive director led the transition period and the second year, which allowed the organization to engage consistently throughout the full life of the uCANRise community of practice.

In the second, experimental year, uAspire proposed a focus on engaging students more fully in the organization's policy work, an activity that required the addition of a California policy director to their San Francisco Bay Area team. In a note about staffing in their transitional proposal, uAspire indicated that though they are a direct student-serving organization, they would require additional staff to build programming specific to California-led student advocacy. Prior to the launch of the experimental year, the organization had a three-person policy team, with two of those individuals in Philadelphia working on federal financial aid policy, and one in Massachusetts working on Massachusetts state financial aid policy. However, their focus in the experimental year would be on engaging students in California state-level policy. Therefore, they would require an additional policy staff member local to their San Francisco Bay Area office, and they proposed the addition of a California policy director to their uCANRise team in order to lead this work for uAspire.

## Approach and Findings

As they moved into the experimental year, uAspire reiterated their commitment to authentically empowering students to make a deep change and a lasting impact through student-led movements for educational equity. uAspire was excited to expand their capacity and expertise through experimentation with the Promising Practices, with a particular interest in unlocking their ability to integrate student-led practices into their direct service and policy-advocacy practices in the San Francisco Bay Area and California overall.

In alignment with the Promising Practices, they set out four main activities for the experimentation year:

1. Expand resources and opportunities for student-led advocacy and policy activities across California.
2. Inform students about local student advocacy programs on their campuses.
3. Craft a student-centered uAspire policy agenda.
4. Design and establish a college affordability advocacy fellowship for students.
5. Each activity was to include a number of Promising Practices and other themes from the uCANRise work, such as the theory of change, that would be leveraged in order to achieve the milestone.

### **Activity 1: Expand resources and opportunities for student-led advocacy and policy activities across California.**

uAspire envisioned onboarding a California Policy Director early enough in the experimental year that this new addition to their team could drive work expanding resources and opportunities for student-led advocacy and policy activities in the state of California. Unfortunately, a delay in this hire led to the necessity to back-burner experiments toward the realization of this activity until an appropriate new staff member was identified, though the remaining three activities in the transitional proposal went forward as planned.

The hiring of the new position was launched in Fall of 2019 and it took several rounds to identify the final candidate. Over the course of the hiring process, in order to keep the work moving forward, uAspire's Chief Policy Officer and Bay Area Regional Director continued to lead on engagement with current partners of the California Affordability Coalition to listen, learn, and identify ways to position its upcoming student-led advocacy efforts. During this time uAspire was also named to sit on the Practice and Operations Advisory Group for the California Data System (per the Cradle-to-Career Data Systems Act).

In March 2020, Tyler Wu joined uAspire as the incoming California Policy Director. Once Tyler is sufficiently on-boarded, the experiments identified in service of Activity 1 plus others will fall under his leadership and responsibility.

### **Activity 2: Inform students about local student advocacy programs on their campuses.**

- Practice #4: Build your advisors' advocacy competencies and pass those skills on to students.
- Practice #8: Mobilize students through technology.

Each day, through its Succeed Program, uAspire advisors help college students across the Bay Area and California understand information and navigate systems to access and keep their financial aid, while listening and learning from students

about the inequities in financial aid policy across federal, state, and institutional levels. They do this primarily through their two-way texting platform, which serves as uAspire's primary student advising tool for its Succeed work. Since 2013, uAspire has successfully demonstrated its ability to use virtual advising to deepen the impact and scope of their financial aid advising work and drive student success.

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Within the context and practices of the organization, and by leveraging two uCANRise Promising Practices, uAspire saw the opportunity for advisors to use their text-based relationships to educate students about the many ways to engage in advocacy on their campuses, while at the same time capturing knowledge and growing the capacity of uAspire advisors to serve as a bridge between students and student-led groups and resources. By working with students to build core knowledge (instead of researching on their own), advisors hoped to be able to catalyze student opportunities to get involved in advocacy activities on campus from the start rather than waiting until knowledge was accumulated and a resource guide produced.

To date, uAspire has identified and created an inventory of specific resources and programs located across the California Community College System — focusing specifically on Community College of San Francisco (CCSF) — the California

State University (CSU) system, and the University of California (UC) system. This inventory provides student-level opportunities to get involved in advocacy activities on campus and includes categories of student-led clubs and organizations by issues area. For example:

- **Healthcare:** Justice in Healthcare, CCSF; Community Health Outreach Project, Cal State East Bay
- **Students of Color:** Students Making a Change (SMAC), CCSF
- **Wrap-Around Supports:** Compassion into Action (CiA), CCSF; Pioneers of H.O.P.E., Cal State East Bay
- **Student Associations:** The Associated Students of the University of California; UC Advocacy Network; and Associated Students Incorporated (each CSU has their own on campus)
- **Cultural & Identify:** She's the First (UC Davis), Beyond the Stats (UC Davis), Beyond Dreams (UC Santa Cruz)

Currently, the resource lists over 50 organizations, with ongoing research and identification of additional resources by uAspire's Succeed program team. uAspire is learning that there is significant power in sharing information via text with students about how they can engage in advocacy opportunities at their colleges. Through uAspire's texting system, Signal Vine, their Succeed team can track the engagement metrics of students interested in learning more about these on-campus resources and advise students on ways to connect and engage.

For the fall semester of 2020, uAspire will release targeted messages to over 1,400 college students representing 99 schools in California and across the country, via its two-way texting platform, to share these resources. Students who demonstrate an interest in becoming more involved in student-led advocacy efforts will be able to engage with an advisor who can match their enthusiasm with interest and support for the steps taken to get engaged with campus resources and groups.

### **Activity 3: Craft a student-centered uAspire policy agenda.**

- Promising Practice #12: Listen to students and support their campaigns.

As uCANRise members verified in talking to students during the first year of the community of practice, from gun-violence to immigration, students are deeply and personally impacted by current social and political events. The unrealistic cost of a college degree remains at the forefront of their concerns. In fitting with their organizational knowledge and mission, uAspire chose Practice #12 to create the space and support for students to reflect on current financial aid policies and practices that have negative effects on their postsecondary educational goals. As a deliverable attached to this work, the organization set its sights on a student-centered policy agenda for college affordability.

As a format for engaging students and documenting their preferences and priorities, uAspire conducted a total of four focus groups at the end of 2018 and in early 2019, gathering critical understanding and information from 38 students on the affordability issues that students face and care most about. The main goals of the focus groups were:

1. To identify the obstacles that are most pressing in affording a college degree and what changes students wish to see to help them complete their degrees.
2. To uncover new information about how students connect financial aid issues and the growing cost of a college degree.
3. To learn about what other challenges to college affordability bring up for students, and to determine if they needed more affordability advising supports.

Given its substantial experience advising students on issues of college affordability, while uAspire did not face significant challenges delivering on Practice #12 to create a student-centered and informed policy agenda, what did pose a challenge

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was recruiting students to the focus groups. Originally, uAspire imagined that focus groups would be convened in a traditional, face-to-face manner, and provided for both monetary and food incentives to ensure good attendance. However, they found that such a format did not attract the number of students they needed to engage in order to create a truly representative policy agenda.

As had been discussed many times during uCANRise convenings, first-generation and low-income students have a heavy load of responsibilities with school, work, jobs, and family, and squeezing in a few hours to contribute to a policy agenda was just not possible for many students invited to participate in the focus groups. In addressing this challenge, uAspire drew on the student-centered value on which they center all of their work:

*We focus above all else on the needs of our students. Our work with students requires flexibility so that we can effectively respond to their changing needs. We respect each student's unique situation and do our best to make their college aspirations affordable.*

In staying true to respecting each student's unique situation, uAspire committed to ensuring that their recruitment process for focus groups resulted in as broad of a variety of voices as possible were represented at the discussion, including a diversity of socioeconomic profiles and a wide range of experiences with college affordability. As the organization reflected on the gap between the

number of actual attendees at their initial face-to-face focus groups and the number of students they had designed and planned for, they realized that they needed to employ the same kind of thinking that informs their two-way texting platform — they needed to find ways to allow busy students to share their stories and lived experiences in a way that would not entail making hard choices about family, work, and school obligations — and thus used engaged students through an electronic survey. After a course correction, uAspire learned that creating virtual opportunities for students to engage in the focus groups, whether via a survey, video chat or other methods, made it easier for students to participate. Once the format was changed, they were able to engage a variety of students in developing the student-centered policy agenda. With their new California Policy Director now on staff, uAspire will implement the goals of this policy agenda in the upcoming months. With the successful creation of its student-centered policy agenda, uAspire is now able to imagine this process, with the resulting document and future activities, as a vehicle for moving California to a more equitable state on issues related to college affordability. Higher education can lead systems change by prioritizing student needs and the voices of underrepresented students impacted by state and institutional policy decisions.

#### **Activity 4. Design and establish a college affordability advocacy fellowship for students.**

- Practice #13: Take students to Sacramento.
- Practice #15: Inspire students to make enduring change through policy.
- Practice #18: Let them learn while they earn.

The launch of uAspire's Student Advocacy Fellowship on January 14, 2020 is directly connected to the goals and aims of Promising Practices #13, #15, and #18. uAspire's federally-focused policy team designed a fellowship aligned with empowerment theory as operationalized in the uCANRise Theory of Change in order to support students in increasing their outlook for building social capital and changing the trajectory of their engagement with postsecondary educational

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opportunities. The fellowship is designed for students who have experienced challenges navigating indirect expenses while pursuing their degree or credential, and has as its primary goal to create authentic learning opportunities for students to amplify their voices, ideas, and solutions for change.

Fellows will receive training and professional development on how to affect policy change, navigate government processes, prepare their stories, position themselves, and build relationships with influential people and policymakers. Program elements will include joining meetings with legislators (in Washington, D.C. and Sacramento) and influential leaders to share their stories and advocate for policy solutions. Participating fellows will receive a \$1,000 stipend, and all travel costs will be covered.

All 15 fellows from California, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania have been selected. Five of the 15 fellows are from California and attend Mills College, UC Santa Cruz, UC Berkeley, Cal State Sacramento, and Cal State Dominguez Hills. In coordination with the launch of a research paper uAspire is working on focused on indirect expenses, *Beyond the College Bill: The Hidden Hurdles of Indirect Expenses*, student fellows will engage in Capitol Hill visits at the end of March coupled with participation at a Congressional briefing of the soon to be published report. Additionally, in April and May 2020, uAspire's California-based fellows will engage in visits to Sacramento with the goal to build relationships with policy makers and representatives to advance student-centered solutions on the issue of college affordability.

## Takeaways and Next Steps

Despite challenges, uAspire was able to successfully test a number of Promising Practices over the course of the uCANRise year of experimentation. Key learnings include the following:

- Tying Promising Practices to a new hire can delay the work in ways that create missed opportunities for organizations that have interest in and momentum for supporting student-led advocacy. Future versions of the Promising Practices should address resource intensity, and provide approaches for integrating Promising Practices that do not rely on additional staffing or other resources.
- We often think that we can only have rich conversations in traditional, in-person formats, but uAspire learned they could attract more students to working on a student-centered policy agenda when they offered it virtually — either through videoconference or even as a chat. In future iterations of the uCANRise work, increasing attention to engaging students through virtual methods should be more fully explored and resourced.