

Innovations in American Government Award Winner Update

OACHE: A Government Program That Creates Hope

By the staff of The Government Innovators Network, Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation, John F. Kennedy School of Government

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The Ohio Appalachian Center for Higher Education (OACHE), winner of the Innovation in American Government Award in 2003, recently sponsored a field trip for 200 middle- and high-school students to visit a local college campus. OACHE officials were pleased to discover that their planned afternoon activity—a campus scavenger hunt—was a failure. The activity’s tasks, such as: “find out which building the financial aid office is in,” were too easy. The hunt’s failure revealed an underlying success; these students were already familiar with the campus and were looking forward to their college careers.

Revealing Potential

OACHE was created in 1993 to address the low college-going rates of students in Appalachian Ohio—then at 30 percent, half the national average. A study conducted that year revealed low self-esteem, poverty, and a lack of information as the primary causes for this region’s low achievement. Most of the region’s schools already possessed systems of access, providing information about funding and collegiate opportunity, yet these remedies only worked for those students already considering college. Officials at OACHE decided that in order to get more kids interested in college, their mission would be to “help children understand that they *can* go to college.”

To fulfill their mission, OACHE offers modest (\$8,000), competitive, two-year grants to local middle and high schools seeking to create an atmosphere where a college education is the expectation. In its twelfth year, having increased the average college-going rate to 46 percent, OACHE has proven that a powerful innovation can succeed without enormous capital investment, or extensive bureaucratic change.

Cultural Transformation

The key to the program’s thrift and efficiency is its system of accountability and reward. Upon reception of the initial grant, OACHE requires something they call “total school buy-in,” a school-wide cultural transformation that occurs through a series of small steps and daily reinforcement. From the administration to the bus drivers, OACHE expects all faculty and staff to cooperate in keeping the idea of college in front of their students.

While the grant money may be used for any number of activities, such as career explorations tools, field trips to businesses and college campuses, financial-aid information, guest speeches by recent graduates who are in college, and hallway displays that show seniors’ post-graduation plans, the school is inspected and held accountable for the “total school



Interim Director Jake Bapst with College-bound arts student Jennifer Kinney

buy-in” that will provide lasting positive change, long after the grant period has ended.

Educators are rewarded for participant success, measured by increased college attendance, with recognition in state and regional media, as well as at the yearly OACHE convention. This recognition is inexpensive for the State yet priceless to the educators who receive it. Pride and ownership of these results are powerful incentives – incentives that will help institutionalize the cultural transformation.

The Right People (Who Are Already) in the Right Places

Another important aspect of the program is its use of existing personnel. Grants are earmarked for student activities and not to be used for payroll. Yet officials at OACHE and programs modeled on OACHE are quick to ascribe each school’s success to the local coordinators. Sarita Gattuso, the director of a similar program in West Virginia (WVACHE) notes that success “depends on the individual at the school and their burning desire to help students,” and in order to achieve success, “it is just a matter of finding the leader in that building.”

For the overall success of OACHE--the continued funding, the applications from new schools year after year, and the multiple national awards--credit must go to the founding Executive Director Wayne White. His enthusiasm for the program, his long workdays, and his ability to maintain bipartisan government interest and support are legendary to educators throughout the region. Yet, perhaps his ability to identify local school leaders has been even more important to the program’s success.

Beyond choosing successful grant coordinators, White’s skill in recognizing and supporting regional leaders to drive OACHE’s replication has brought the program great success. Lecia Stubblefield, director of an OACHE replication in Mississippi describes her experience with him: “The support I have received from Wayne White in our replication effort has been astounding. He has traveled all over Mississippi with me...he has supported me personally from aiding in the completion of necessary reporting mechanisms to offering advice and sharing personal experiences to pass on to my school coordinators.” Now in nine states, covering the entire region from Maine to Mississippi, OACHE’s success in replication is evidence both of the primary innovation’s quality and the network of leadership that drives it.

A Life of Its Own

Since receiving the Innovations in American Government Award, OACHE has faced severe trials. Tuition increases in Ohio State schools have made it more difficult for OACHE’s students to attend. This fall, the Ohio legislature “bundled” the funding for all of the State’s access programs, making OACHE more vulnerable to budget cuts. And in September of 2004 Wayne White died suddenly. Interim Director Jake Bapst describes White’s death as “a major...disaster, we had two or three rough months, but we rebounded well, and while visiting the programs this spring everyone was doing what they were supposed to do, and doing it quite well.”

White’s efforts have paid off. So far, OACHE has received 21 applications for next year and they are also preparing for the next national convention. While Bapst says that ensuring funding is always a challenge, a program as inexpensive and successful as OACHE will likely maintain its bipartisan support.

This year, OACHE was invited to put up a booth at the National College Access Network convention in Las Vegas, NV. To this, Bapst quips: “why should we spend two to three thousand dollars to attend a convention when we can take 400 kids on a college tour somewhere?” If OACHE plans to maintain their current level of excellence in leadership, priorities and results, they will have to come up with a more difficult scavenger hunt.