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Student Changemakers:
A guide to establishing
a postsecondary
education policy
advocacy program
led by student fellows



Students are at the forefront of impact. From the federal level to the institutional level, the policy decisions agreed upon at the table directly impact students and more often than not, students are not considered or invited to participate. Student-led advocacy is a powerful way to leverage the important work an organization does. But lasting social change is not possible without students. Students are the experts and the changemakers. By providing students with tools and practice to activate and expand their advocacy skills, we create a ripple effect of young leaders working towards equity.

The responsibilities of your organization are to attract and invest staff who have deep ties to the communities they represent and care about. Staff must curate space for students to rightfully critique policy, understand the interconnected systems of power, collaborate on policy solutions and most importantly, allow students to show up as they are. Staff is responsible for producing programming that is critical, collaborative, challenging, and authentic to the young people occupying the space.

The most crucial responsibility and challenge for organizations is to get out of the way. **Student-led advocacy is about students.** It is not to satisfy staff, leadership, partners, or board members. This can present its sets of challenges like tolerance for controversy and trust issues that require addressing power, unlearning the status quo, and teaching equity.

We should not be satisfied with business as usual. Tangible and sustainable systemic change requires new, tenacious student leaders whose ideas and approaches design better solutions to the challenges they face every day. For your organization, advocacy is an opportunity and student-led advocacy is the expectation.

*Karina Arango
Director of Advocacy with The
Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis*

Postsecondary access and success organizations are increasingly understanding the importance of systems and policy change in order to boost access and attainment for significant numbers of students. In order to understand the barriers and opportunities that students face, students must directly engage in policy development conversations. While many organizations find they only have the capacity to provide space for students to share their experiences with legislators, some organizations are creating fellow programs that directly engage students in crafting their own advocacy agenda.

This guide will share the experiences of established student advocacy fellow programs that equip and train students, or other directly affected community members, to develop a policy agenda that reflects their needs, experiences and expertise. Developing such a program is not easy. This guide offers logistical tips for determining if/when/how to develop such a program.

Through this guide, colleagues from four programs will share their learnings and best practices from developing student-led policy fellowships at their organizations. They will begin with framing questions to consider when deciding if/how to develop a program and then will provide concrete tips and examples on key components:

- Definitions/core components
- Considerations before beginning
- Recruiting strategies
- Day-to-day logistics of programming
- Curriculum development and fellow training
- Developing success metrics
- Budget line items

What is a student-led policy fellow program?

Many non-profit organizations supporting students in their postsecondary attainment journeys realize the importance of federal, state and higher education institutional-level policies for eliminating barriers and opening opportunities for students. They are increasingly designating staff positions to policy advocacy and often bring students to specific legislative events to share their experiences. This can provide powerful context for policymakers.

But some organizations are going beyond this dynamic to empower, train and equip a cohort of students to develop their own policy agendas. This model of centering students brings the power of agenda-setting to the individuals at the heart of the conversation. Specifically, components include:

- Policy agenda created by the fellows, not pre-determined by staff, partners or the organization board
- Fellows lead the work, with coordination by a staff member who supports them and trains them
- Fellows are not called in just to lend their stories. They are engaged in all aspects of agenda-setting
- Developing a pipeline for the next generation of changemakers and policy leaders
- Crafting intentional intersections with your organization's existing programs; fellows should learn from and inform your programming, not exist siloed from it
- Fellow cohorts are an intentionally crafted community; this differs from traditional internship programs

"Authentic student agenda building process: Issue research, idea testing, and consensus processes will result in a different agenda than one-directional 'training' on a pre-set agenda and talking points. You will learn and the field needs to learn - not just the students."—Faith Sandler, Executive Director, The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis

Should we develop a student-policy fellow program?

Many organizations moving into policy work may not yet have the capacity to engage with student fellows. It is faster and easier for a full-time staff person to develop the policy agenda and only recruit students to provide a face to the story in public testimony. It is important for organizations to be honest and clear about their capacity to support and engage students in an authentic manner and to assess their capacity in the areas of:

- Trusting students and empowering them with direct agency over their policy agenda
 - Allow students to lead
 - View fellows as changemakers
- Organizational readiness (board awareness, tolerance for “controversy”, respect and trust with young leaders, ability to get out of the way)
- Leadership readiness (lived experience of staff and facilitator/leader of program, CEO capacity to sublimate ego and let someone else “represent”) and the will to learn and experience discomfort in the process of power-shifting
- Strong moral position on matters of policy (willingness to do the right thing even if it won’t “win”)
- Coordinator capacity to facilitate authentic conversations among students

Recruitment

Recruiting strategies are at the heart of implementing a robust, representative fellow cohort. How do you find students beyond the typical student leaders? Searching beyond student government organizations and other existing campus leaders is imperative. Including underrepresented voices in the policymaking process is a driving goal of a student policy fellow program.

- Include concrete details on the fellowship, such as what hours are expected on a weekly basis, setting fair and transparent expectations
- Center the compensation package in the materials
- Build flexibility into the program and communicate that flexibility in recruitment documents
- Specialized campus centers, such as cultural organizations and other affinity groups, can be great opportunities to recruit students. Reach out to the center leads to connect you to students
- Community-based organizations with existing student connections can begin with word-of-mouth recruiting among and from those students
- Humanize the interview process: listen to student stories and experiences holistically to identify skills without requiring them to have the existing knowledge of the exact wording for a skillset
 - Model less formal attire and language to make the process accessible
 - Use authentic language to promote comfort; don’t code-switch to “professional” verbiage
 - When writing interview questions, reflect on what questions and approach would resonate with you if you were a student; consult with colleagues to get their perspective
 - Establish a personal connection; share your own story and interest in the program to set the tone and begin to establish trust

The Education Trust’s Justice Fellows Policy Program is a vibrant, nurturing community of formerly incarcerated individuals who learn the skills and mechanisms of higher education advocacy and use their lived experience to inform and amplify Ed Trust’s policy recommendations for students who are justice-impacted. Like the program, our recruitment strategy is built on **trust, coalition-building, and authentic engagement**. We take care to center the perspectives of directly impacted students in our policy agenda. We worked in coalition with groups and communities led by directly impacted advocates to learn and advocate for the issues and solutions most important to the community. When we first conceived the fellowship, we convened an advisory board of scholars, leaders, and advocates with expertise at the nexus of higher education policy and the criminal legal system, most of whom are justice impacted. We rely on these board members and their networks for high-level guidance on our strategy for the fellowship, including recruiting applicants.

When we launched the application in 2020, we and our advisory board circulated the application to numerous listservs, newsletters, job boards, and other forums hosted by partners such as various coalitions, associations, higher ed in prison programs, reentry groups, bail funds, and other organizations in the community. This year we also emailed applicants who were not accepted last year and hosted a webinar to explain the fellowship and the application process; it was recorded and posted online for those who couldn’t attend live. With this approach, 423 applications were submitted for the first cohort and 530 were submitted for the second cohort. More than quantity, the quality of fit is a priority. Last year, there were over 100 initial applications with perfect or near perfect scores on our rubric. In all, an approach built on **trust and authenticity** will garner ample applicants who are right for your program.

Kayla C. Elliott, PhD, Director of higher education policy and William Freeman, Manager of Higher Education Justice Initiative at The Education Trust

When working with students, I've found that **care always needs to be at the center** of the approach taken in the day-to-day logistics of building and executing a student fellowship program. This can look like a number of different things, and as a coordinator, it is your duty to create an experience that explores ways to include the fellows in the **curation of their own learning**.

First and foremost, it is important to remember that the fellows are students, and in their academic lives apart from the fellowship they are likely juggling rigorous coursework, impending deadlines, and even the financial burden that comes with pursuing an undergraduate degree. With all of this in mind, don't let yourself be a barrier to their success in your program. If the goal is to ensure their success in your program, then it's your job to build a bridge and meet them halfway wherever and whenever you can.

Regularly scheduled check-ins outside of the program activities should be a weekly or biweekly occurrence; not only does this allow you to remain updated on a consistent schedule with the responsibilities that each fellow juggles in their own lives, but it creates a **safe space** over time for the fellows to engage in meaningful conversations that might shed light on their struggles in the program and even outside of it. Given that their success in the program is the number one priority, it's important to collaboratively find ways to address where you can offer **grace and understanding** as the coordinator.

*Simona Gabriela Harry,
Policy Leaders of Texas Program
Coordinator, Every Texan*

For an example curriculum, here is a guide developed by The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis.

https://sfstl.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/SLA_Guide.pdf

Programmatic logistics

For a successful program, supports for fellows and flexibility should be built into the structure. Fellows will be juggling multiple commitments, including work, studies and family responsibilities. The coordinator will need the expertise to adapt the programming while supporting students to thrive in the structures of the legislative environment.

- Full-time staff coordinator role needed
- "Coordinating with care" essential to supporting students
- Scheduling: be prepared to meet nights and weekends to accommodate fellow schedules at school and work
- Build in extra dates in case some sessions have to be canceled for unforeseen circumstances
- In-person sessions can be longer; Zoom sessions should be shorter and can occur more frequently to account for the shorter time period
- Incorporate the program into the broader work of the organization
- Consider transportation needs of students
- Always serve snacks
- Coordinator should intentionally build community among fellows as a cohort and with the full-time staff
- Check in regularly on fellows about their families, school and workload. Care about their personal needs and adjust programming as needed to be supportive
- Provide support and care for the coordinator as well, as the process of supporting students may revisit their own past experiences and/or raise secondary trauma. Confronting entrenched power dynamics and harmful policies that personally affect the fellows can take an emotional toll and the coordinator may need intentional space to process and recharge

Curriculum development and fellow training

The policymaker environment has a specific set of tools, structures and norms. The fellow curriculum will need to bring students up to speed on a variety of resources as quickly as possible.

- Ground your fellowship in the way your legislature works in your state
- Never make assumptions about what fellows come in understanding; flatten the learning down to assume everyone is starting at zero
- Provide fellows with extensive training to develop a policy platform
- Provide specific term definition and training on policy tools, such as Texas Legislature Online, and on the structure of the legislative bodies and roles
- Discuss specifics of institutional/systemic racism in your context
- Offer public speaking training specific to giving testimony in hearings



Developing success metrics

Determining outcomes of policy advocacy can be challenging; the ability to determine direct cause and effect is limited. Tracking metrics to determine program success may include specific fellow deliverables. It may also include measuring the fellows' understanding of the legislative process. In addition, success may include the ability of the program to center student voice in the conversation—particularly the voice of communities without historic representation in policy conversations.

For fellow programs, success metrics may include:

- Development of policy agenda
- # of policy work products created by the fellows: op-eds, infographics, news-letter articles, hearing testimonies, issue briefs, legislative visits conducted, etc.
- Professional development activities completed: attending readings, panels, hearings, trainings on giving testimony, etc.
- # of trainings, info sessions and presentations led by fellows to teach their peers and other partners of the organization
- Pre-test/post-test on legislative or issue-specific content knowledge
- Pre-test/post-test on student confidence in engaging in policy change conversations
- Student demographics—to center perspectives of specific communities. May include recruitment, application and final selection data. Focus populations may include race/ethnicity, gender, first-generation, adult learners, parenting students, justice system-impacted, etc.

“Outcomes should include deeper engagement with democratic process, less isolation or marginalization for certain student demographics, and ownership of the data and recommendations by the students directly affected.” —*Karissa Anderson, National Organizer, Students & Youth, Children’s Defense Fund, and inaugural lead of The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis policy fellows program from 2015-2021*

Developing a program budget

In so many instances, students are expected to share their lived experiences and expertise for free. It is imperative that fellows receive significant compensation for their time as a sign of respect and value and also as a means to provide a more diverse set of applicants with access to the positions. **Student/community fellows should be compensated!**

Policymakers need to hear the experiences of working learners, parenting adults, and others who do not have the capacity in their schedules to take on an unpaid fellowship. Compensation should reflect the professionalism of the role; minimum wage would not be appropriate.

Other line items may include:

- Travel
- Virtual meeting equipment for fellows’ home offices
- Professional development funds
- Program coordinator salary and benefits
- Indirect costs

The structure of the budget, programmatic activities, and internal structure should all reflect and enhance the prioritization of the fellows’ development, growth, wellbeing and leadership.

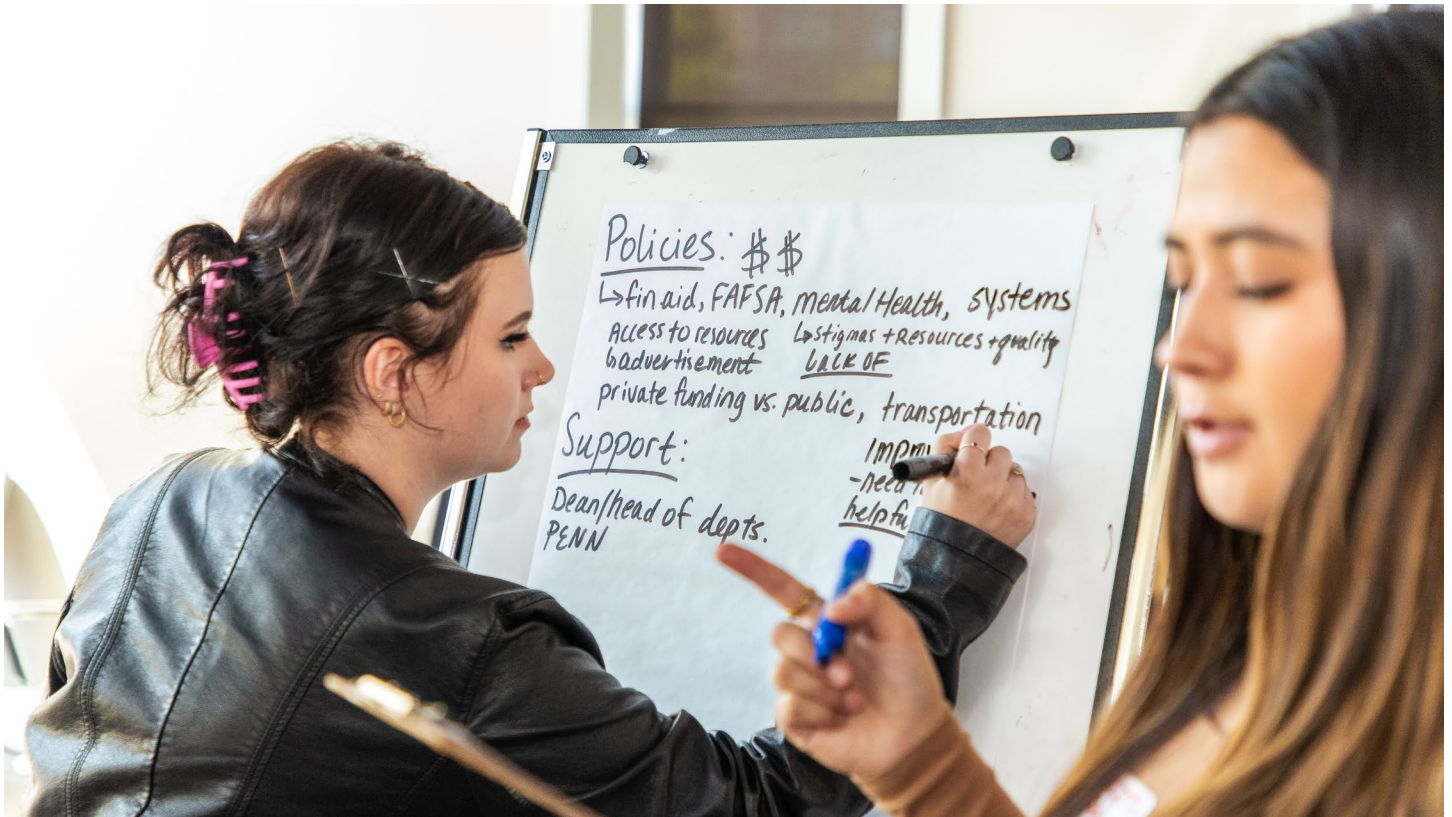
IDRA’s Education Policy Fellows Program has **several curricular goals**: to provide a rich historical context about education advocacy in the U.S. South in order to ground fellows’ understanding of their work; to grow fellows’ fluency in the procedures of policymaking and in the most pressing educational equity issues facing systemically-marginalized students; to expand fellows’ access to a network of other advocates and policymakers; and to support fellows’ real-world policy advocacy during state legislative sessions.

To achieve these goals, IDRA developed a program curriculum that begins with two months of learning sessions led by IDRA staff, coalition partners, and even the fellows themselves. We structure the curriculum to mix themes of knowledge—education policy, movement advocacy, collective and personal care, and community engagement—and modes of instruction, including expert panels, reflection sessions, readings, and self-guided research and presentations from the fellows.

In developing the curriculum, we assume the fellows have limited knowledge about state policymaking processes and how to build the connections between policy work, advocacy, and engaging with communities. However, we also assume they have great knowledge from their professional interests and training, and passion for the communities from which they come. We carefully select our cohorts so that the fellows’ knowledge and lived experiences complement each other and drive the curriculum and multi-directional learning throughout the program.

The bulk of the fellowship involves real-world training, scaffolded by timely learning sessions. Each fellow chooses a policy priority area and is assigned a team of IDRA experts and an external mentor to assist them in developing a policy-advocacy agenda, including model policy language and an advocacy campaign plan with young people, families, teachers, and other experts. The fellows participate in the Texas and Georgia legislative sessions by writing articles, testifying at hearings, working with legislative offices to refine policy language, and coordinating with coalition partners.

Morgan Craven, National Director of Policy, Advocacy, and Community Engagement at IDRA



Afterword: HOPE

In the end, the most important qualification for those facilitating youth advocacy can be the hardest to achieve: hope. Suspend doom scrolling, look away from key stats, and check your words carefully.

Here's why: You dare not give the next generation an impossible task, an irreparably broken world. You may feel it's hopeless from time to time, but when you say so or act as though nothing will change then you contribute to a cumulative and contagious deadly despair.

For the sake of public mental health, the future of democracy, and the young people right in front of you, look instead toward the wins. When you wonder if this country's rugged individualism built on capitalism has completely poisoned the process of education and governance toward common good, then look into the eyes (hearts, minds) of the young leaders taking root in your midst. Each one embodies hope and will define the "wins" of their generation. Let them.

Your promise to yourself and them must be to gird your own hope and get out of the way.

Here's a handy reference for pocket or wallet:

Instead of saying...	Try...
Democracy is dead	What kind of government would you create?
That's never going to change.	What would it take to change that?
Money wins every time.	When have people without money built power?
The system guarantees some won't succeed.	I believe in YOU.

Faith Sandler, Executive Director, The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis

Photos: Photos in this report are provided courtesy of the Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis.

Authors

Jenny Achilles serves as the Senior Director and Chief Program Officer at Trellis Foundation. She joined Trellis Foundation (then Trellis Company/TG) in 2013 with nearly a decade of higher education service in various capacities, including student affairs and study abroad advising. Jenny serves on the Central Texas Education Funders Network steering committee and the Grantmakers for Education Learning, Evaluation and Data Impact Group. She previously served on the Membership Committee for the National Scholarship Providers Association from 2015-2017. She also leads the board of directors for a nonprofit dance and wellness studio in Austin. She earned a bachelor's of science in communication from Lamar University and master's degrees from the University of Texas at Austin in journalism and public policy, with a focus on nonprofit studies.

Karina Arango (she/her/ella) currently serves as the Director of Advocacy with The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis. As the daughter of a mother who once was undocumented, Karina knows what it feels like to be hurt and to be helped. She is a social justice strategist, advocate, and educator with a calling to uplift our most forgotten students. Karina earned a bachelor's in communication from Fontbonne University and a master's in education from Loyola University Chicago, where her work focused on cultural and educational policy. Her career spans across nonprofit settings, advocacy, and education, and includes roles in teaching, direct service, and leadership. In 2016, she was a featured advocate in the documentary, "Show Me Democracy" which premiered nationally on Fuse Network. Karina has worked with the Scholarship Foundation since 2014, when she joined the first class of interns engaged as policy advocates and remains committed to the cause.

Simona Gabriela Harry, Policy Leaders of Texas Program Coordinator, Every Texan, joined Every Texan as the Higher Education Policy and Advocacy Intern in the summer of 2020. During that time, she worked on a project to launch the pilot policy initiative to aid college students in entering and championing public policy and policy advocacy in Texas. After developing the community-centered curriculum for the fellowship, she joined the Every Texan team as the fellowship coordinator. She has previously interned for Annie's List as a Programs department intern and taught first and second-grade students at a non-profit learning center in East Austin. She has a bachelor's degree in English and Black Studies from the University of Texas at Austin.

Contributors

Morgan Craven, J.D., is IDRA's National Director of Policy, Advocacy and Community Engagement. She supports the integration and coordination of national and state policy reform efforts impacting school finance, school discipline and safety, education for emergent bilingual students, preparation and access to higher education, and community-led, culturally-sustaining schools. Morgan received a bachelor's degree in International Relations from Stanford University, with a secondary focus in African and African American Studies. She received a law degree from Harvard Law School. Previously, Morgan directed Texas Appleseed's School-to-Prison Pipeline Project. Prior to her work

at Texas Appleseed, Morgan served as a briefing attorney for Chief Justice Wallace Jefferson at the Supreme Court of Texas and as a staff attorney at Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid, where she represented students with disabilities in school discipline and court cases, and individuals and families in housing and public benefits cases.

Kayla C. Elliott, Ph.D. is Director of higher education policy at The Education Trust, where she leads the team and agenda on promoting access, accountability, and affordability for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Before taking on a leadership role, Kayla was a policy analyst on the team, focusing on state and federal accountability policies such as student protections, resource equity, and outcomes-based funding. Kayla holds a master's degree from the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy and has worked with a range of nonprofit education organizations, including Lumina Foundation, the Southern Education Foundation, and Teach For America. A proud HBCU alumna and advocate, Kayla earned a B.S. in business administration from Fisk University, where her experience serving as a student representative on the university's board of trustees piqued her interest in higher education advocacy.

William Freeman III, Manager of Higher Education Justice Initiative, leads and manages the Justice Policy Fellowship at The Education Trust, where he works with the policy team to provide an equity perspective on higher education in prison issues. Prior to joining The Education Trust, William served as an inaugural Justice Policy Fellow. Before that, William worked part-time with Prison to Professional as a program coordinator, where he recruited program participants, tracked attendance and assignments, and organized a virtual job fair. William also works with Dr. Stanely Andrisse as a research assistant. A native of New York, William grew up in Baltimore, where one wrong decision after another landed him in prison with a life sentence. During his incarceration, he got involved in the Goucher Prison Education Partnership (GPEP). He reentered society after serving 21 years in prison with 73 transferable college credits. He transferred onto Goucher's main campus, where he completed his bachelor's degree in Sociology/Anthropology and was selected to deliver the commencement for his graduating class.

Faith Sandler is Executive Director of The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis, a position she has held since 1989. From 2009-2015 she also served as founding co-chair of St. Louis Graduates (where she continued for five more years as chair of advocacy). Prior, Faith was staff lead on a committee appointed by the federal court under the metropolitan desegregation plan to evaluate programs in St. Louis Public Schools. Faith taught nonprofit ethics and accountability at Washington University and has served on boards and committees regionally and nationally. Faith currently serves on the vestry of Trinity Episcopal Church in St. Louis and volunteers to provide harm reduction support for opioid users in the parish. Her bachelor's degree is from the University of Redlands and her master's from Washington University.

Organizations/programs



Every Texan envisions a Texas where people of all backgrounds can fulfill their potential and contribute to our community. Every Texan offers knowledge, solutions, and tools to help you more easily and thoroughly understand, discuss, and make decisions about public policy.

Every Texan's **Policy Fellowship Program** provides selected students with the necessary resources, knowledge, and social justice framework to engage in and champion equitable higher education policies. Ten undergraduate students from across the state of Texas were selected to participate in the 2021-2022 fellowship cohort. Through the program tenets of empowerment, learning, and leadership development, fellows engage with and aid in the cultivation of their community through extensive policy training and participation in legislative briefings, hearings, grassroots advocacy events, and public forums. Fellows are also given the opportunity to work with Texas PACE, which consists of organizations from across Texas focused on improving equity in Texas higher education.



The **Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis**, a nonprofit organization founded in 1920, is based upon the conviction that an educated society is essential to a healthy democracy. The Scholarship Foundation provides access to postsecondary education to members of our community who otherwise would not have the financial means to fulfill their educational goals. The Foundation sees higher education as a catalyst, an agent of change for individuals, families, communities, and nations. We envision a community that recognizes the importance of educational attainment and assures positive educational outcomes are accessible to all regardless of economic circumstance. In our community, doors will not be closed to those who lack financial resources, and postsecondary education will be available to all with the potential to succeed.

The **League of Student Advocates** works for and with Black, Brown, undocumented, and low-income students to advance policies and practices that increase college access and affordability, as well as to mobilize against inequitable policies. Since 2014, Policy Fellows at The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis has researched and advocated at the state level for increased need-based aid, divestment from merit-based aid, and scholarship/tuition equity for undocumented students. In 2018, The League (then the Active Advocacy Coalition) began its federal policy agenda and during the 2020 annual meeting, laid the groundwork for a campus policy agenda.



The **Intercultural Development Research Association** (IDRA)'s mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by providing dynamic training; useful research, evaluation, and frameworks for action; timely policy analyses; and innovative materials and programs.

The IDRA Education **Policy Fellows Program** provides real-world training to advocates of color to influence state law in Texas. IDRA's inaugural fellow cohort operated from November 2020 through July 2021 and will serve as mentors for the second cohort of Texas fellows in 2022. Two of the fellows supported by the Trellis Foundation grant focused on developing and leading higher education and COVID-19-responsive policy agendas during the 2021 Texas legislative session. Fellows were supported by a network of experienced policy advocates to advance an equity-focused policy agenda and ensure that legislators and decisionmakers center the expertise and perspectives of people of color.



The Education Trust

The Education Trust is a national nonprofit that works to close opportunity gaps that disproportionately affect students of color and students from low-income families. Through research and advocacy, Ed Trust supports efforts that expand excellence and equity in education from preschool through college, increase college access and completion particularly for historically underserved students, engage diverse communities dedicated to education equity, and increase political and public will to act on equity issues.

The Education Trust's **Justice Fellows Policy Program** centers around a vibrant and nurturing community of directly impacted, formerly incarcerated individuals who have overcome the odds and attained their bachelor's or master's degree, created programs and organizations for the formerly incarcerated community, engaged in state legislative advocacy efforts, and more. Throughout this fellowship, the Justice Fellows use their lived experience to inform, review, amplify, and reflect on Ed Trust's policy recommendations for justice-impacted students. Additionally, Justice Fellows inform and guide Ed Trust's structured engagements and convenings at the intersection of higher education policy and the criminal legal system.



Trellis Foundation is a grant-making public charitable organization focused on improving postsecondary attainment for low-income students and students of color in Texas. The Foundation serves as a funding partner for these and other fellow programs.