DC Tuition Assistance Grant 2020 Annual Performance Report

Introduction

The District of Columbia Tuition Assistance Grant (DCTAG) is a federally funded program that provides DC residents with up to $10,000 per year toward the difference between in-state and out-of-state tuition at public colleges and universities nationwide. The program also provides up to $2,500 toward tuition at private nonprofit colleges and universities in the Washington, DC area and private Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) nationwide. The DCTAG program is operated by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).

A 2018 audit by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recommended that the DCTAG program release an annual report using a performance management framework that relates program performance to DCTAG's established program goals and objectives, in addition to the Annual Data Report that provides descriptive statistics about the students served. As such, DCTAG created the Annual Performance report in 2018 to outline DCTAG's goal and objectives and provide baseline metrics tied to these objectives. The 2020 report provides 2018, 2019, 2020 performance metrics, building to an annual report that provides three-year trends over time. This report should be viewed in conjunction with the newly expanded DCTAG Annual Data Report, available here.

Goal and Objectives

As established by DCTAG's authorizing legislation, the goal of DCTAG is to be a program that "enables college-bound residents of the District of Columbia to have greater choices among institutions of higher education." To achieve this goal, DCTAG has four key objectives:
1. Ensure DC residents are aware of DCTAG.[1]
2. Enable DC residents to apply to the program with minimum burden.
3. Ensure that the program meets its financial obligations through a payment process with sufficient checks and balances.
4. Help students make smarter college choices.

This report dives deeper into DCTAG's work to meet each of the current objectives, including 2018, 2019 and 2020 performance metrics. Unless otherwise noted, performance data and targets reflect the calendar year (January – December). Acknowledging that the program has changed over time, in early 2021, the program staff reviewed and revised the

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[1] Note: This objective was originally, "Ensure residents are aware of and apply to DCTAG." To clarify the distinction between Objectives 1 and 2 for stakeholders, it has been slightly modified.

program goals to build upon progress made over the past three years. These revised goals for 2021 onward are detailed in the last section of this report.

Objective 1: Ensure DC residents are aware of DCTAG

Each year, DCTAG staff conduct extensive outreach to students and families in order to meet this objective. Efforts to build awareness are grouped into two key categories: communications and direct outreach. Direct outreach includes presentations, tables at college fairs, workshops, interviews and virtual outreach sessions. DCTAG events were held in all eight wards of DC.

Communications:
In 2020, DCTAG renewed the contract with Campbell and Company DC to run a media campaign with a smaller scope and a focus on improving DCTAG's social media metrics. In the 2020 campaign, there were 636,008 total media impressions across four targeted media outlets through November 2020. Other methods of outreach included displaying posters in every District public high school, conducting social media outreach, distributing giveaway materials such as pens and flash drives, distributing brochures, and conducting email outreach.

Outreach:
In addition to media outreach, the DCTAG team conducts trainings with high school counselors, college financial aid offices and other stakeholders that support student college acceptance, enrollment and persistence. This year trainings were held for counselors affiliated with local education agencies (LEAs), non-profits, College Board and disability services.

Table 1 provides information on metrics related to Objective 1.

Table 1: 2018-2020 Performance for Objective 1

Metric	2018	2019	2020
General outreach sessions	67	68	70
Students/parents reached at general outreach sessions	5,383	6,497	4,174
Spring Blitz events (public and public charter schools)*	30	28	0
Students assisted at Spring Blitz events*	310	406	0
Trainings for college counselors and support staff	N/A	N/A	6
TAG Talk newsletter/notifications issues sent to students, guardians and parents	3	3	3

*Spring Blitz event was cancelled in 2020 due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) public health emergency.

Objective 2: Enable DC residents to apply to the program with minimum burden

This objective speaks to ensuring that the application process is straightforward for students and families, since complicated applications can discourage students from applying for financial aid. In 2020, OSSE continued to build on the improvements that the new, streamlined DC OneApp provided when launched in 2016.

The 2020-21 academic-year application included enhancements that allow students, parents and guardians to upload documents into the online application. Additionally, DC OneApp application updates were completed prior to the application opening publicly and focused on enhancing application functionality. DCTAG applicants lived in all eight wards. Staff continue to work to improve the application, related to payment and college transfer. DCTAG staff aim to increase the overall number of applicants, as well as the number and percentage of applicants deemed eligible, while limiting the number of incomplete applications. While the 2020 award year saw a decline in the number of submitted and eligible applicants, the percentage of applicants deemed eligible increased, and the number of incomplete applications decreased last year.

COVID-19 Response:
The DCTAG team continuously monitored and adjusted the application process throughout the COVID-19 public health emergency to meet the changing post-secondary landscape. The application deadline was extended three times to allow families additional time to make informed postsecondary choices as colleges and universities revised their plans for the 2020-21 academic year. Additionally, as the DC Office of Tax and Revenue remained in a remote posture limiting applicants access to certified D-40 tax returns (a common document used to establish domicile) for much of the application season, the DCTAG program offered families the flexibility to submit uncertified D-40 returns for the 2020-21 application cycle, easing the burden of application during these unprecedented times.

Table 2 provides information on metrics related to Objective 2.

Table 2: 2018 -2020 Performance for Objective 2

Metric	2018	2019	2020
Applications submitted	6,961	6,367	5,610
Applicants deemed eligible[2]	5,378	5,033	4,515
Applicants deemed eligible (percent of applications submitted)	77%	79%	80%
Incomplete applications	1,302	1,334	1,002

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[2] Includes applicants with a status of "Eligible" or "Eligible – Ineligible Institution"

Objective 3: Ensure that the program meets its financial obligations through a payment process with sufficient checks and balances

Fraud Prevention and Monitoring
The DCTAG Office worked extensively with the DC Office of the Attorney General and OSSE's Residency Audit Unit to conduct investigations in cases where DC domicile was in question. The DCTAG staff also conducted reviews of DC government data systems and that of other states as well to aid in a detailed review of questionable cases.

Financial Efficiency
The DCTAG team has separated the roles of application approval and disbursement to institutions of higher education (IHEs) in an effort to add an additional check and balance to the disbursement process.

Table 3 provides information on metrics related to Objective 3. Because students receive their award in the year following their application on this table the performance in 2018 reflects the 2017-18 academic year, and the performance in 2019 reflects the 2018-19 academic year, and the performance in 2020 reflects the 2019-20 academic year.

Table 3: 2018 and 2019 Performance for Objective 3

Metric	2018	2019	2020
Total funds disbursed	$32,524,066	$31,402,075	$30,972,164
DCTAG/Accounting reconciliation meetings	14	12	12
Students receiving DCTAG awards	4,571	4,315	4,274
DC OneApp training and email reminders	100%	100%	100 %

Note: Funds disbursed is a point-in-time metric and may be updated if requested at a later date.

Objective 4: Help students make smarter college choices

The DCTAG program works with both internal and external stakeholders to help students make smarter college choices. If a student selects an institution that is a good fit, they are more likely to persist and complete college. DCTAG supports these choices both before students begin college and during students' college careers. Since DCTAG staff do not necessarily have pre-existing relationships with students and therefore do not know the full breadth of students' academic experience, DCTAG has focused on using professional development to help train those who are advising students throughout their college decision-making process including high school counselors, college access program staff and financial aid staff at IHEs.

In 2020, the DCTAG staff offered two "smarter college choices" workshops and panel presentations and published two "smarter college choices" articles through the National Association for *College* Admission Counseling (NACAC) titled *Building Your College Class Schedule* and *Seven Considerations to Make When Transferring School*. Additionally, DCTAG

staff hosted two workshops for high school counselors and college access program staff focused on student success and retention.

DCTAG continued to offer the Transfer Portal in the DC OneApp, so that students transferring mid-year (or those who attend a different university than the one listed in the DCTAG application) may update the institution in the DC OneApp system.

Revised Objectives for 2021

In the spirit of continuous improvement, the DCTAG program team chose to revisit the 2018 objectives with the aim of making those objectives more actionable. The following revised objectives are intended to guide targeted program improvement measures in the upcoming year.

1. Conduct outreach to expand awareness of DCTAG.
2. Assess and adjust program technology, policy and procedures to enable DC residents to apply to the program with minimum burden.
3. Maintain and strengthen responsible stewardship of financial resources through a payment process with sufficient checks and balances.
4. Support student college-going, persistence and completion.

These objectives build upon those established in 2018 and as such relevant historical metrics will be aligned with the appropriate new objectives where possible.