

New York State Higher Education Services Corporation Transparency Plan

I. Review of Agency/Authority's Current Public Engagement

A. Steps taken to review agency policies and procedures on transparency.

HESC's executive team assessed the agency's policies and procedures on transparency and determined that its policies and procedures adhere to federal and New York State rules, including ensuring that: persons with disabilities or individuals with language barriers can access all HESC programs and services; board meetings and meeting agendas, minutes, attendance and voting records and transcripts are timely made available to the public in accordance with the State's Open Meetings Law; the public can access digital data regarding grant and scholarship utilization through Open NY; and HESC customers can access agency records using Open FOIL NY.

B. Review of how the agency interacts with the public.

1. *What public meetings and hearings does the agency hold?*

Consistent with §652 of Education Law, HESC's Board of Trustees provide for the holding of regular meetings and any required special meetings at the call of the chair, as necessary.

2. *What opportunities exist for the public to participate in agency decision-making?*

HESC's statutory purpose is to:

a. Improve post-secondary educational opportunities of eligible students through the centralized administration of New York State financial aid and loan programs;

b. Coordinate the state's administrative effort in student financial aid and loan programs with those of other levels of government; and

c. Support the administration by the federal government, other states, and institutions of post-secondary education of the federal student aid programs established under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, or any successor statute.

Administration of Financial Aid Programs. HESC administers New York State grant and scholarship programs in accordance with their enabling statutes. The natural timing of Budget finalization (April 1, at the earliest) and the period during which students attend an educational institution (August 31, at the latest) inherently limits opportunities for public participation in agency decision-making

regarding implementation of financial aid programs. Where the State law authorizes HESC to establish rules or regulations, notification of proposed regulations and rulemaking activities are published in the New York State Register—providing opportunities for HESC to obtain public feedback.

Service Offerings. To better target and improve its services, HESC has traditionally relied on surveys; however, a positive outcome of the agency's COVID-related adjustments has been the increased utilization of focus groups to solicit input from customers. To date, HESC has invited student groups to openly share their experiences and frustrations with agency processes and services and is in the process of soliciting information from a cross-section of the State's financial aid community.

3. *What information does the agency make available on its website and in social media?*

Information regarding all HESC-administered programs and services are made available on the agency's public website. Additionally, HESC provides dedicated sites for foster youth, military members, college financial aid officials and high school guidance counselors.

HESC will be revamping its public website to be more intuitive, informative and engaging. Simultaneously, HESC is working to onboard a specialist to develop and maintain the agency's social media strategy to share timely information on events or activities to help New York State students succeed in their pursuit of a postsecondary education.

4. *What access does the public have to engaging with the agency leadership?*

HESC's size and culture allows for the public to directly contact agency leadership, including members of the Executive Team or Board Chair, via email or phone. While issues may ultimately be resolved by program staff, a member of HESC's agency leadership acknowledges all direct public contact.

5. *What are the information requests most commonly sought from the agency?*

Information requests most commonly sought center around an applicant's ineligibility for a grant or scholarship or the status of their financial aid application.

6. *What are the areas of greatest public interest in the agency's work?*

The areas of greatest public interest in the agency's work are the (a) status of financial aid applications/application process and (b) reasons for determining an applicant ineligible for a financial aid award.

7. *What does the agency do to solicit input from the public?*

Apart from the SAPA rulemaking process, HESC has begun to utilize focus groups to solicit input from its customers, in addition to surveys that are sent to customer groups such as guidance counselors or customers who call the agency's contact center.

II. Proposed Plan to Expand Transparency and Expected Timeline

This section can include information on the processes and policies your agency/authority has identified for improved transparency and public accountability.

A. *What plans does your agency have to improve transparency with respect to expanding information you make available to the public, filing timely reports with the legislature, complying with Project Sunlight, timely compliance with FOIL, compliance with Open Data NY, reducing costs for and easing access to for agency data and records, expanding agency participation in public and community events and increasing access to and public participation in meetings, hearings and decision-making?*

HESC's Strategic Plan centers around addressing the issues most commonly raised by its customer groups (students/families and schools), as previously outlined (see I-B-5). Specifically, HESC is in the process of modernizing its grant and scholarship application system to simplify the application process and provide applicants with real-time, self-service information regarding the status of their application and any required next steps. Simultaneously, HESC is revamping its public website to make it Millennial and Gen-Z friendly in the presentation of financial aid information. This includes ensuring that all information is mobile-friendly, offering 24-7 self-service options, as well as fully accessible personal assistance or AI options, and connecting with students through text messaging, social media, and videos that communicate critical information in shorter time spans.

HESC will continue to utilize video conferencing to increase opportunities for the public to participate in its service offerings. While HESC recognizes that barriers continue to exist for families who do not have internet access, the use of platforms like Zoom has greatly increased opportunities to simultaneously serve students from multiple school districts, to involve parents whose jobs or childcare situations previously prevented their participation, and to open events up to individuals with mobility barriers that would have prevented them from receiving information. Additionally, HESC is partnering with SED to directly message the availability of HESC grants, scholarships and services to parents through school district portals.

HESC will also be utilizing focus and advisory groups to solicit public input from its customer groups. Utilization of focus groups has already served to provide a mutual sense of understanding across participants and good will, even where changes cannot be made to fully rectify student or school concerns.

B. What is the timeline for implementation of those plans?

Contracted Services. With the support of the Chamber and Division of the Budget, HESC has already taken steps to ensure the release of an RFP to procure a state-of-the art grant and scholarship application processing system by April 2022. HESC is simultaneously working on technical requirements and engaging focus groups to assess requirements to be included in the State proposal. Over the next month, HESC will also be releasing its website redesign RFP.

Agency Staffing. HESC is in the process of hiring staff within its Communications Division who can improve the agency's social media strategy and establishing a performance unit that will analyze and produce reports on the outcomes of financial aid award recipients and programs/services designed to improve higher education outcomes among students.

Focus/Advisory Groups. HESC finds that focus groups and advisory groups allow its customers to openly and honestly express their concerns, criticisms and needs. For example, partnering with financial aid leaders from each college sector allowed HESC to understand the financial aid needs of schools and students during COVID pandemic, resulting in New York State providing protections that specifically targeted those students who were unsuccessful due to COVID. Balancing these forums with meetings open to the public will help ensure that agency leadership can access information needed to best serve the most current needs of New Yorkers.

C. What resources will you use to implement your plan?

HESC leadership is committed to and responsible for ensuring the implementation of the agency's strategic plan goals. HESC primarily works with the Chamber, Division of the Budget, ITS and Civil Service to ensure that resources are available to accomplish its goals.

III. Measures of Success and Long-term Monitoring

In this section, you can explain how your agency/authority intends to monitor and assess the changes implemented, including any metrics you will use, to ensure that your initiatives are serving to increase transparency and expanding opportunities for public access to information and participation in government meetings and decision-making.

Monitoring and assessment of changes will be achieved through the use of project management plans and routine Strategic Plan reviews. Specifically, a project plan timeline has been developed for the April 2022 project plan release and the lead project manager has been designated responsibility for ensuring that the project remains on track and for alerting executive management when project timelines are not being accomplished so that adjustments can be made to right-track the project. Quarterly reviews will be used to assess

the changes, as will reliance on established advisory groups. Lastly, HESC management and rank and file are informed of goals and are largely in support of the improvements being proposed. This across-the-board approach is expected to help ensure the agency's success.