

Federal Investment in Grad Ed: Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need

August 2021

Policy Brief



The Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need Program

As the only grant aid program available through the Department of Education for graduate students, the Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need (GAANN) program is a critical source of support for academically talented graduate students, who would otherwise face financial barriers in accessing a master's or doctoral degree.

First established in 1988 through the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, GAANN seeks to strengthen graduate research, training, and scholarship by providing federal support to U.S. Institutions of Higher Education through a competitive grant process. Through funding awarded to academic departments, the GAANN program provides three-year fellowships to graduate students with demonstrated financial need. The awards support scholars pursuing the highest degree available in fields of study that, each application cycle, the program designates as areas of national interest[1]. For the 2021 award cycle, the areas of national need include: computer and information sciences; engineering; and teaching/research career plans for scholars in biology, psychology, or nursing fields[1]. Institutions that receive GAANN awards partner with the federal government to support their fellows by matching 25 percent of the award total.



GAANN Impacts Research, Innovation, and the Workforce

Graduate students are highly skilled individuals who conduct vital research that yields discoveries and leads to the development of innovative products and solutions. Following degree completion, GAANN recipients increase the number of highly skilled U.S. researchers and teachers in areas of national need and strengthen the U.S. economy as leaders in business, academia, and government. GAANN is vital to training a diverse set of future experts and leaders in a broad spectrum of fields that are essential to maintaining U.S. competitiveness. Federal investment in GAANN ensures a continued pipeline of skilled workers in crucial sectors of the economy and qualified professors who will mentor, teach, and conduct research in fields that directly relate to American prosperity.

The GAANN program identifies research fields that will produce America's future innovations across multiple industry sectors, including artificial intelligence and cybersecurity, and ensures access to health and social services. Serving as postdoctoral fellows at federal research agencies, scientists at companies, such as Pfizer, and faculty at U.S. Institutions of Higher Education, GAANN participants and alumni advance research and patents and protect America's future discoveries.

[1] Federal Register: Application for New Awards, Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need (2021). Retrieved from: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/01/15/2021-00766/applications-for-new-awards-graduate-assistance-in-areas-of-national-need>



Degree Completion and Diversity in Graduate Education

GAANN recipients are academically talented graduate students, whose pursuit of graduate degrees in critical scientific and technical fields directly supports U.S. economic growth and competitiveness. GAANN makes graduate education accessible to students who would not otherwise be able to achieve a terminal graduate degree. Historically, postsecondary students with high financial need take longer to complete their degrees and have a significantly higher attrition rate than the general student population. In GAANN’s first twelve years, however, the Department of Education found that GAANN fellows’ median time to complete a graduate degree was shorter than the department’s target and the national average. Hence, GAANN has played a significant role in matriculating outstanding students through graduate degree programs.

In addition to increasing diversity in graduate programs, GAANN’s fellowships prepare participants for careers in academia, government laboratories, and in the chemical and biotech industry, among other fields. The Department of Education’s latest publicly available [Performance Assessment of 2000-2001 Fellows](#) describes GAANN’s success in granting 41 percent of fellowships to women (See Figure 1); 24 percent to ethnic minorities; and 6.6 percent to African Americans, either meeting or exceeding the Department of Education’s targets for these measures[2] (See Figure 2). GAANN assists U.S. Institutions of Higher Education in matriculating a racially, gendered, and economically diverse group of students, preparing the next generation of researchers and faculty for the academic workforce.

[2] Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need: Performance Report (2006). Retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/gaann/funding.html>

Time to Degree

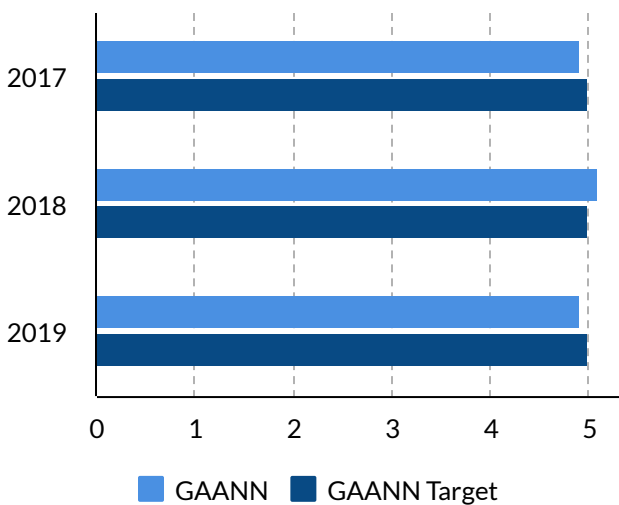


Figure 1. High Levels of Women Pursuing Graduate Degrees

The most recent report data for gender metrics of fellows are available through a 2006 Performance Report on the GAANN program[3].

Ethnic Minority Fellows Enrolled

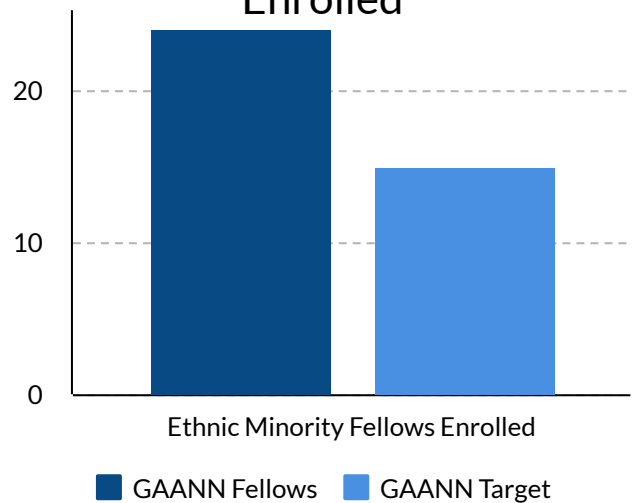


Figure 2. High Levels of Students of Color Pursuing Graduate Degrees

The most recent report data for race and ethnicity demographic metrics of fellows are available through a 2006 Performance Report on the GAANN program[3]. Races and ethnicities described as minority groups include Asian/Pacific Islander, Black Non-Hispanic, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and other.

[3] Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need: Performance Report (2006). Retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/gaann/funding.html>



GAANN as a Resource in COVID-19 Recovery

GAANN seeks to strengthen the U.S. economy, academia, and research enterprise by connecting top U.S. talent with careers in fields of national interest, including biological and engineering sciences, which will aid in advancements in science and technology. GAANN scholars will become scientists that further protect the U.S. from future pandemics through biological innovation and discovery and continue to progress our nation towards a more stable environment through advancements in engineering. The GAANN areas of national need focus on the vital industries that will lead the U.S. to recovery from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Investing in research and innovation is vital to a successful American recovery, and CGS encourages lawmakers to include funding for GAANN in future emergency relief legislation responding to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.**

GAANN Funding and Publicly Available Metrics

Since Fiscal Year 2011, federal funding for GAANN has decreased from \$30 million to \$23 million, threatening the scope of the program's benefits. During the same ten-year period, the number of GAANN awards has dropped from 176 to 88, a 50 percent decrease[4]. While fellowship stipends have remained roughly the same, ranging from \$30,000 to \$34,000, during this decade, the decline in the number of awards limits the program's scope and ability to support students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The impact of GAANN is integral to the U.S.'s commitment to diversify research and innovation, and CGS recommends Congress allocate the full level of funding at \$35 million in future funding bills.

Additionally, there is a gap in accessible, up-to-date information about the program, despite the program requirements for institutions to report program data to the Department of Education at the end of the grant cycle, which ranges three to five years, depending on grant extensions. The most recent public performance [report](#) on GAANN was published by the Department of Education in 2006. In addition to funding the GAANN program at \$35 million, CGS encourages the Department of Education to study and make cohort outcomes, degrees attained, and other program metrics available to the public on a more consistent basis.

[5] Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need: Funding Status. Retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/gaann/funding.html>

CGS Recommendations for the GAANN Program

Given the current status of funding and publicly available metrics on the GAANN program, CGS offers the following recommendations:

- 1** Increase annual funding for GAANN. Specifically, recommending that Congress allocate the full level of funding at \$35 million.
- 2** Include funding for GAANN in future COVID Emergency Funding legislation.
- 3** Publish current performance data. Specifically, requesting that the Department of Education create and publish performance data on the GAANN program, including metrics on cohort outcomes and demographic trends of fellows.