

Item 5

(Information Item)

Executive Director's Report



Executive Director's Report March 2021

Dear Commissioners,

Upon reaching the March 2nd deadline for submitting 2021-22 the FAFSA/CADAA applications, there is significant interest in analyzing the impact COVID-19 is having on student submission rates over the prior year. FAFSA and CADAA completion data are a strong barametor of the fall 2021 academic year enrollment trends as students contemplate their college futures while still grappling with the ongoing effects of COVID-19.

Several news stories have covered this issue raising concerns of a deep decline in student FAFSA/CADAA submissions in California and a decline in FAFSA completions throughout the country.

In California, the story is complex. Commission staff are analyzing the data disaggregated by different demographcs. Preliminary anlaysis show declines in California are among students from lower income subgroup demographics and not across the board.

The Commission's analysis, as of February 21, 2021, shows that overall there is a 3 percent uptick on all FAFSA/CADAA completions. However, this does not tell the full story. Students applying to graduate school reflect a significant new cohort of students completing FAFSA applications. This may be because graduate students are being

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advised to complete a FAFSA to access federal and institutional COVID-19 emergency aid. When disaggregating the data further, a different picture emerges:

- Among incoming first-time students, high school and others are **down 7 percent year-over-year**;
- Among incoming first-time students out of high school are **down 9 percent**;
- Among all CADAA completers, applications are **down 11 percent**;
- First-time community college FAFSA/CADAA completions are **down 26 percent**;
- First-time CSU FAFSA/CADAA completions are **down 10 percent**, while UC completions are **up 15 percent**; and
- First-time Private-Independent college FAFSA/CADAA completions are **up 5 percent** and For-Profit college FAFSA/CADAA completions are **up 9 percent**.

The Commission will receive a full report and analysis on FAFSA/CADAA completion trendlines as of the March 2nd deadline. The research and data staff have created a new FAFSA/CADAA completion tracker that provides a deeper look at important disaggregated trendlines. Thank you to Ryan Fuller, Research Data Specialist, for developing this new data tracker.

Special shout out to the Training and Outreach teams for implementing a full-scale set of virtual activities to connect with as many students as possible amid concerns that students are opting out of attending college because of deep financial insecurity. The team has worked relentlessly to organize statewide Cash for College workshops, Steps to College fair in partnership with the Consulate General of Mexico in Sacramento, the Black College Expos in California hosted by the National College Resources Foundation, and many others.

The team will continue this work past the March 2nd deadline now focusing attention on community college student completion of the FAFSA or CADAA.

Cal Grant Modernization hit a major milestone with the introduction of AB1456 (Medina, McCarty, Leyva), the Cal Grant Modernization Act of 2021. Assemblymembers Jose Medina and Kevin McCarty, along with students, social justice advocates, business representatives and CSAC, participated in a press event that generated positive press about the proposed historic expansion and simplification of the Cal Grant program [LAT EdSource](#) [InsideHigherEd](#). The measure is building support leading into budget and policy committee hearings. The Commission will receive an update at the Commission meeting.

CSAC continues to convene its CalFresh Working Group. The work group has met four times and is making significant progress in identifying key short-term and long-term solutions. In response to the need to increase college student access to CalFresh benefits, the Legislature and Governor recently approved an early action Budget package that included several million dollars to each of the public higher ed segments to facilitate outreach to students about the new pathway to CalFresh access for \$0 EFC students and Federal Work Study students. The package also included more resources

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for counties to process increased numbers of applications. The CSAC CalFresh workgroup's input was instrumental in uplifting this issue.

CSAC is also working with budget staff to determine how the Commission can leverage its Call Center to help target outreach to students who have a 0 EFC, receive TANF or have Federal Work Study, and new classifications that make college students eligible for CalFresh benefits.

The Commission also has been keeping busy addressing other critical issues. Below is a summary of major activities from each of the agency divisions.

Program Administration and Services Division (PASD) Updates:

- The Customer Assistance and Processing Unit welcomed the new manager, Leslie Glover, on February 8. Leslie comes from the Employment Development Department (EDD) where she has been a vital member of the EDD team since 2009. She brings a wide array of Call Center, management, and team lead experience.
- Leading up to the March 2nd Cal Grant deadline, Commission staff have extended our Call Center hours to 7 p.m., Monday through Friday, and on Saturdays, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., to better assist students and families.
- Specialized staff are working diligently to distribute Chafee funds to Foster Youth students, as well as other specialized programs, while launching the newly created Golden State Teacher Grant Program and the Child Savings Account Grant programs.
- The Institutional Support Unit recently welcomed Amy Eberhardt as a new program analyst, and is currently providing support to high schools and higher education institutions submitting 2021-22 Cal Grant Grade Point Averages (GPAs) to meet the March 2 deadline.
- As of February 8, 2021, the Commission has received 94 percent of expected GPAs from public high schools, and 58 percent of expected GPAs from private schools.
- Institutional Support team members will be conducting User Acceptance validation in preparation for the launch of the next phase of the Grant Delivery System Modernization project.
- The Training and Outreach Units are currently busy participating at numerous virtual financial aid outreach event. The training team has provided:
 - Over 15 virtual Financial Aid Workshops that have served over 4,000 high school counselors and educators with 87 percent of participants rating the

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workshop as Excellent or Above Average.

- Completed a successful online 2020 Cal Grant Regional Training season that served over 1,300 college financial aid administrators with 93 percent of participants rating the training as Excellent or Above Average.
- Continues to offer monthly webinars on various topics and is currently developing a library of on-demand training modules to assist in the transition to the New Grant Delivery System.

Information Technology Services Division (ITSD) Updates:

- Completed 95 percent of application development for GDSM Web Grants, and will be undergoing multiple iterations of software testing and defect remediation leading up to the projected full launch in April 2021.
- Implemented advanced cloud-based security services to provide better protection from malicious hacking for student, institutional, and internal CSAC data.
- Migrated the Integrated Voice Response (IVR) call center platform to the cloud, increasing the number of incoming calls that can be handled.
- Implemented the initial Chatbot to provide self-service help and guidance to students on demand.

Fiscal Administrative and Services Division Updates:

- Exploring all lease facility options in the wake of the pandemic, which includes more permanent remote workers post-COVID. This involves reconfiguration of space needs, such as accommodating more hoteling space. Staff are currently updating records retention, purging unnecessary paper, files and selling excess furniture.
- Establishing quarterly communications with programs, as well as our contracted fiscal services partners, to drive a more efficient accounting and budgeting forecasting.
- Working full speed on all contracts and procurements.
- Overseeing workplace assessment efforts, including development of policies and procedures and workflows.

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Data And Research Team (DART) Updates:

- Staff are playing a critical role in Cal Grant Modernization by running numerous modeling scenarios to account for various possible fiscal options and for the new federally defined Pell and maximum Pell cutoffs created in the General Appropriations/FAFSA simplification bill in December 2020.
- Closely monitoring the status of FAFSA/CADAA submissions for the 2021-22 submissions cycle that began in October 2020. DART staff recently developed a new Tableau dashboard used to track FAFSA/CADAA submissions that allow for multiple demographic crosstabs; this new dashboard will be highlighted to the Commission at this meeting and should be publicly available soon.
- Commissioned WestEd to perform a deep-dive interview with the 15 Cal-SOAP grantees soliciting information about key data needed to strengthen targeted outreach efforts, and help assess student progress in applying for college and completing a FAFSA or CADAA. The report will be featured at the Commission meeting, along with recommendations on data and systems that could be used moving forward.
- Working with our research partners at the UC Davis Education Lab and summarizing the results of the Fall 2020 COVID Survey given to students. Student survey responses topped 100,000, even more than our previous COVID student survey in the Spring. Early results and themes of the responses will be highlighted at the Commission Meeting.

Government and External Relations Updates:

- The Legal Cal Grant modernization (AB1456) and our sponsored legislation to update the Cal SOAP program (SB 737) have both been officially introduced, along with a number of other relevant bills to CSAC and our priorities in college affordability.
- Both the Assembly and Senate Education Budget Subcommittees have heard the Governor's Budget proposals for CSAC, as well as Cal Grant modernization.
- The Government and External Relations team has been reaching out to newly elected members of the legislators and has conducted 16 introductory meetings to discuss CSAC's work and policy priorities for the upcoming year.
- CSAC drafted and organized a sign-on letter to the California Congressional delegation around the need to double the Pell Grant award, which featured the co-signatories from every segment of higher education and all three of the official student organizations.

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- CSAC staff worked with policymaker staff to craft a solution for students to still be allowed to apply for Cal Grant aid, despite not having an eligible GPA or test score to submit due to COVID-19. This statutory fix was included in an early action budget bill and will allow these students to apply and submit a certification form before May 16.

Legal Updates:

- The Legal Unit is working on dissolution of EdFund and distribution of EdFund assets. Once the full process is completed, the EdFund board will then convene and re-confirm its intent to dissolve. This meeting should be scheduled in conjunction with the June or September Commission meeting. CSAC staff anticipates that the dissolution will be complete before the end of December 2021.
- Retired Annuitant Mark Paxson has joined the legal team and will be providing coverage as acting General Counsel while current Counsel, Julia Blair, is on a reduced schedule through June.

Best Regards,

Marlene L. Garcia