

Cal-SOAP Data Project Update

Report to CSAC - January 2021

WestEd is assisting the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) in the creation of a statewide evaluation and accountability system for the California Student Opportunity and Access Program (Cal-SOAP). The proposed system is aimed to document Cal-SOAP programs' impact on participating students and institutions. As part of the initial work, WestEd conducted 45-60-minute interviews with all 16 Cal-SOAP program directors over the course of three weeks in fall 2020 to understand the activities and measures that are being used for program delivery across the state. Additional interviews were held with Consortium leaders, the developer of Lacai, a CSAC Commissioner and several CSAC staff. This document summarizes findings from those interviews within five key takeaways and associated recommendations, and provides plans for the project in early 2021 based on what we learned.

The COVID-19 pandemic is having, and will continue to have, a tremendous impact on students' abilities to transition to and complete college, which are two major focal areas of Cal-SOAP's work. The work of CSAC and its grantees to effectively target and serve students within the current economic and social context is more critical than ever. For example, directors reported declines in FAFSA completion for the class of 2021 with one of the Cal-SOAP high schools having only 64 completed FAFSAs (as of mid-November 2020) out of a senior class of over 450—a dramatic decline from past years.

This document highlights the critical topics WestEd heard and analyzed from directors and synthesizes into four major work areas that align to recommendations for the next phase of the project:

- 1) developing shared key measures
- 2) creating or leveraging technology solutions
- 3) building the data capacity of the consortia and
- 4) supporting the partnership and policies that could foster improved student success in the future.

Key Takeaway 1: Measures are fairly consistent despite a wide array of variables affecting data access and use.

Despite the varied program models and access to data across consortia, **student data elements are quite stable**. Although CSAC does not require student-level data for reporting purposes, the majority of programs are gathering student data to help identify and track progress at the local level in addition to what is required by CSAC. Typically LEAs are sharing (both informally and through structured data sharing agreements or MOUs) a list of seniors along with contact information and a few additional elements. The directors then match this information with data in Webgrants and create a shared spreadsheet—with access given to high schools and Cal-SOAP staff—that includes ongoing addition of program activities. A few programs have consistent access to select student outcome data (college attendance, completion, transfer) but in a more piecemeal fashion than they would prefer. For instance, UC or CSU-hosted programs have access to enrollment data for those universities, or LEAs may share data from seniors' self reported post-secondary plans, but the information is incomplete or requires verification. Directors report that they are uploading program data to a proprietary system (i.e., Lacai) or to a cloud option (i.e., Google Docs) where it is housed and accessed as needed. Several directors said they use grant funds to purchase occasional National Clearinghouse data to better understand students' college outcomes, but report that effective data matching poses challenges without a central data system or internal data capacity to maximize the investment.

Access to student data is informed by a few central factors, the most prominent being the consortia's fiscal agent. Directors who are housed with a LEA reported greater access to student-level data while those who were within nonprofit organizations, community colleges, or 4-year universities struggled to regularly access it. It appears there are benefits to being an employee of a LEA that ease data access issues. The majority of programs who were not housed within LEAs, reported they have had to develop multiple methods to get access to student data, such as through networking or informal agreements, most of which would be a challenge to sustain should the director transition out of their role. Directors reported that recent changes in CSAC and consortium leadership have helped increase data access for LEAs, making data a stronger expectation when entering into a Cal-SOAP partnership.

Recommendations:

- **Co-create a consistent set of program measures**—that includes both student level and programmatic activities—with **clear data definitions, collection processes and uses**. Within a shared program measures document, define the data elements that each partner will be responsible for collecting and sharing to reduce the time grantees are spending on gaining access to data. Several Consortium directors

are interested in focusing on this work with WestEd, but CSAC should help inform the process for the development of these measures to determine the best approach. Having Cal-SOAP data consistently defined and aligned to better identify CSAC objectives and collected in an operational system (not just for reporting) could improve consistency, data analysis and practice.

- Consider streamlining data sharing by leveraging CSAC's role to upload LEA's CDE data directly, thus reducing the impact of data quality related to a fiscal agent's organization; rethink the agreements between CSAC and Cal-SOAP programs and Cal-SOAP programs and their LEA partners. (see more detail in Takeaway/Recommendation 4 on page 5)

Key Takeaway 2: Strong support within the Consortias for shared data collection, practices, and use.

Directors **communicated support for and a willingness to adopt a shared data system** that displays consistent, robust metrics for all Cal-SOAP programs across the state. Among the group, there is a consensus that current data are neither analyzed nor made actionable in useful ways. Some directors attribute this to their own lack of understanding around how to use the data, while others have a hard time understanding how CSAC expects the data to be used. The directors would like to increase engagement with their data and use it in more dynamic ways that could improve student outcomes. However, they mention that they are unable to do so because of infrequent data-focused professional development, confusion about data/collection and Cal-SOAP goal alignment, and minimal capacity for data analysis at the local level.

The directors would also like to see **CSAC organize and share Consortium data at the statewide level**, communicating a high level of interest among directors to learn about their differing programs' data practices in order to create or revise systems for data collection. One director noted, *"I'm not sure what others are doing [in other Cal SOAP programs] as it relates to data and it makes it hard to understand if I am doing it correctly"*. This director, like others, recognizes the data literacy gaps that exist within the group and hopes to learn from colleagues. Other directors noted that they collect a lot of data but they do not know what to do with it because they only use data elements required by CSAC reporting. The CSAC-sponsored system, even with its noted downsides, seemed helpful to many directors' to track students' progress and engagement. Again, there seems to be an appetite for a common system that also promotes a set of goals and practices related to data analysis.

Most directors voiced that they **lack capacity to dig deeper into and innovate around data analysis**. Though many see data as important, it takes a back seat to other priorities where staffing or expertise exists. There is a consensus that the group would benefit

from a shared system that includes data analysis support from CSAC. A number of directors proposed that CSAC could help their data efforts by providing a dedicated analyst and disseminating statewide aggregate results for the Cal-SOAP Consortium. This would also help some directors who feel they do have control over what data they have and what data they are able to collect—directors noted that fiscal agents control data and often dictate its use. A shared system with CSAC’s support for analysis could help Cal-SOAP consortia to uniformly prioritize the use of data.

Recommendations:

- **Create or leverage a central technology solution or system** to support ongoing data collect and use for all consortia and **invest in professional learning that focuses on inquiry and data use** to support learning and program improvements. A shared data system could also be a useful support for understanding the alignment between Cal-SOAP goals and data collection. All Cal-SOAP directors are clear on one data collection goal—a foundational data element of their work is the percentage of students who completed the FAFSA. However, there is inconsistency in their understanding of how other data collection relates to CSAC’s overall goals, and, more importantly, the outcomes of the students they are serving.
- **Develop the capacity for programs to gather and use qualitative evidence** to increase their shared understanding of what works for students in transitioning to and completing college. Directors shared their desire to gain deeper insight from students which quantitative data alone may not surface.

Key Takeaway 3: There is a collaborative environment among Consortium directors.

With many consortium directors holding positions for 10 years or more, **a highly collaborative environment exists** to support new directors, share best practices, and provide peer support which could be leveraged to improve data use. Those directors that highlight such an environment, recognize that relationships have formed and report instances where they meet monthly together, exchange resources, and tap into each other’s expertise and experiences. As one director noted, the collective and collaborative group serves as a “*strong unit*” to mutually back and benefit each other.

A particularly salient example of how these relationships provide mutual support has occurred as some consortium members seek to collect and align data using the Lacai database. While not all directors use or advocate for Lacai, many have been looking for a shared system that can standardize and capture meaningful program data both within and across regions. Long-time directors who previously used the system with programs such as TRIO, now use it to collect information for Cal-SOAP. These directors shared the resource with newer directors who sought their colleagues’ advice for data collection as part of a desire to collaborate, learn from, and interact with the

Consortium. This sharing and learning snowballed the system's use among members, though it remains to be seen if Lacai's elements can serve and be useful to all programs.

The **collaboration under way serves members much like it does in a community of practice** model, an approach where cooperation leverages collective knowledge, patronage, and assistance. Regardless of whether the various Cal-SOAP programs adopt Lacai or not, the directors' willingness to seek support and council from each other speaks to the establishment of a culture of support. As one director noted, "*each program is just as important to us as our own, and we're [consortium members] our best resource when it comes to sharing data or sharing a challenge and getting some ideas on how to overcome these challenges.*"

The directors' interests in learning from one another also attests to a desire to grow programmatically with many **underscoring opportunities to share best practices together**. In particular, members express a desire to workshop around innovations and strategies, and to leverage data capacity in ways that offer more dialogue among Cal-SOAP directors as a team, with CSAC contributing in discussions and through horizontal leadership.

Recommendation:

- **CSAC can support the Consortium to further collaborate and leverage data experiences as a community of practice.** Harnessing the Cal-SOAP directors' mutual interests to learn from each other as a community of practice can provide opportunities to share best practices around data collection and grow capacity for data use. It can also lead to innovation that expands Cal-SOAP efforts and work, as well as leadership at different programmatic levels. Strategies and approaches CSAC might adopt towards this end can take the form of topical data discussions, professional development workshops, or consultancy sessions.

Key Takeaway 4: Directors shared a desire for CSAC to strengthen their leadership in improving data collection and use.

The interviews revealed there is an untapped opportunity for CSAC to partner more deeply with Cal-SOAP directors. Directors would welcome such a collaboration, particularly one that provides more support to collect aligned data, and improve the data collection process, program practices, collaboration, and program identity.

Directors generally believe that CSAC is positioned as a state agency to **support efficient data collection**, including data sharing agreements with other state agencies (CDE, CCCCCO, CSU, etc.) and matching student data to better understand outcomes. CSAC could leverage its position to get access to data, especially outcomes data such as

college attendance, persistence, and graduation through the National Student Clearinghouse. Additional outcomes data could include the impact of college students working for Cal-SOAP and how many of those students Cal-SOAP is helping with college persistence. Understanding these data can improve overall understanding and impact of Cal-SOAP.

Beyond a strategic role in data collection, directors believe that CSAC can **provide a more defined role, direct leadership and presence for Cal-SOAP and the Consortium**. For example, since CSAC receives the Consortia data and reports, some directors believe CSAC is well positioned to assess primary outcomes and services and share key takeaways with Consortia. If regions do not receive feedback on their data, they feel they are unable to act on it for program improvements. While some directors have maintained informal networks to learn from each other about what works, having a clear picture from each consortia would help to improve practices. *“I would like to know what other programs are doing and who to connect with,”* said a director. Another director stated, *“program directors meet monthly to share resources and feel united, but feel something is missing, connections with CSAC...CSAC can make a huge stride in helping us.”*

Additionally, directors believe there are greater **opportunities to collaborate** with CSAC. For example we heard from one director, *“[Directors] would like to see greater collaboration before data is out. We should not be sitting in meeting with Commissioners without knowing in advance what it means to us”*. A way of increasing collaboration entails receiving regular feedback from CSAC on the data that is reported from different Consortia. For example, Directors would like to receive a year-end Cal-SOAP report from CSAC to disseminate to the community and highlight their collective effort as well as to inform their practice.

Directors also believe **CSAC can increase collaboration with Cal-SOAP directors to define a clearer Cal-SOAP identity**. While directors appreciate the flexibility CSAC offers regions, they also referred to this flexibility as a *“double-edge”* sword. Often, Consortia collect different data points and focus on priorities that align with their regional needs, which may not show up in data that Consortia collect and report to CSAC.

Recommendations:

- CSAC can **facilitate training on best practices based on synthesized regional Consortia data** or what they know about best practices in other regions to inform program practices. Facilitating and growing data understanding in this way provides the Consortium with more guidance and responds to requests for more defined leadership. At the same time, CSAC can provide horizontal leadership and increase collaboration with regions to capture key, uniform data and build a

stronger Cal-SOAP identity. One way to work towards refining an identity might be to partner with Consortiums on defining a more coherent Cal-SOAP theory of change and developing an inquiry cycle that can be owned by the programs themselves.

- **Explore the legal and regulatory processes to strengthen access of Cal-SOAP programs** to access student-level data; create internal capacity to support an efficient shared data system, and matching processes to support increased understanding of student outcomes.

Key Takeaway 5: Directors aspire to build a better bridge to college for all students.

Perhaps the greatest asset of the Cal-SOAP initiative are the program directors and staff. With combined experience that spans decades of supporting college access for low income students, the expertise of directors is a substantial resource. In every interview we heard of their leadership that went above and beyond the requirements of the grant-funded program. **The directors expressed concern for the pervasive gap of students who never make it to college and for how many of those who do, never reach graduation.** Although they were aware that many barriers students face were outside of their immediate control, all the directors sought to strengthen their leadership in ways that could help more students access and persist through college. Moreover, many believed that better data analysis and use could help accelerate this goal.

One example of the leadership of consortia was the introduction of the Race to Submit dashboard. The availability of this community-wide measure of FAFSA completion broadened the platform directors had to advocate for improved college-going culture and success for all students in their region, not only those being served by the Cal-SOAP program. Directors shared that through the dashboard, they were able to share their college knowledge to the community at-large by having data of all FAFSA completers within their community. **Cal-SOAP directors want better information to know not only how their students, but also all students are doing—particularly concerning their college attendance, degree completion, and post-secondary wages.** As recommended earlier in the document, the directors also want to have access to stories of impact from students to better understand what program elements have made a positive difference for them to complement quantitative information.

Another seemingly untapped source to understand the effectiveness of programs are the student workers employed by the consortia. With 30% of the budget dedicated to paying college students who provide day-to-day services, these workers, often called coaches, are former Cal-SOAP program participants and provide the majority of the direct service to students and also have a substantial role in reporting and entering program data. Directors highlight that the student workers are a unique program

element, and help with building mentorship and community rapport. Their insights are helpful for program improvements. And while many student workers assist with data collection and tracking, their support can be fleeting depending on an individual's data expertise or whether they remain employed after college graduation.

Recommendations:

- Consider **developing an equity framework to support increased access to services and grants** for target student populations, with associated metrics that could be used to measure equity impacts. Ideally, measures should capture high school to college application, enrollment, and transition information, emphasizing data that aligns with Cal-SOAP's aims. To respond to directors' desires to truly understand Cal-SOAP program success and supports, data sharing agreements with college partners might help provide data to capture Cal-SOAP students' college persistence, graduation, and degree/certification attainment.
- Encourage the engagement of **student workers in professional learning**, especially those focused on effective data collection and program effectiveness efforts through focus groups and professional development, etc.

Project Workstreams

We synthesized the key takeaways from the Cal-SOAP directors' interviews into four major work streams for the next phase of the project, each of which align to one or more of WestEd's recommendations. An overview of the streams is both provided below, and cross-walked with possible work strategies. The WestEd team anticipates further developing the work in collaboration with CSAC and the Consortium directors.

1. **Development of Shared Key Measures:** Beginning in early 2021, the WestEd team will help Cal-SOAP and directors with identifying and co-creating a set of shared metrics to measure student level and programmatic activities. The process should include creating clear data definitions and outlining data collection roles and responsibilities, all of which would assist in also developing directors' capacity for understanding, measuring, and putting programmatic data within context and use. Establishing mutual agreement on measures, will also help prime efforts to find a common technology data system or solution for the Consortium's use.
2. **Creating or Leveraging Technology Solutions:** Once shared measures have been created and documented (e.g., in a data measure glossary/manual, through agreed upon collection roles and responsibilities, etc.), CSAC and Consortium members will be able to focus on either creating or leveraging a shared, central data technology system and repository. WestEd has the capacity to build such a

system, and has experience with similar projects, including PITC database and the Cocoa application—both systems that were designed to support Early Childhood Education initiatives. The development would be informed by stakeholder feedback and a user-centered design approach to pilot and iterate on the platform. Currently, the Cal-SOAP programs are using various platforms with elements that may be leveraged to suit all stakeholders' needs. If instead of developing a new system, CSAC and Consortium directors decide to leverage one of these programs or the previous data system, the WestEd team suggests creating assessment and monitoring processes to track how the system is being used across programs for fidelity and utility as well as developing tools and training for shared use.

- 3. Building Consortia's Data Capacity:** A priority on building consortia's capacity to collect, analyze, and use data to measure and inform program improvements should be integrated throughout all project workstreams. Program directors have expressed a keen desire to deepen collaboration and learning together as a community of practice. They also voice a need to truly understand how program data they are asked to collect aligns to Cal-SOAP's goals and identity. WestEd will support CSAC with identifying professional learning opportunities focused on inquiry and data use, and provide technical assistance support through data workshops, presentations, and tools.
- 4. Supporting Partnerships/Practices to Improve Student Success.** In addition to building the various consortia's data capacity, the Cal-SOAP program can benefit by helping directors strengthen partnerships with college and community partners. This is especially important for data collection activities. With more formalized strategies in place, such as developing data sharing MOUs, programs may be able to deepen their understanding of how Cal-SOAP impacts students throughout their high school to college trajectories. Programmatic practices can then be better tailored to address and track students success as Cal-SOAP participants move through various academic sectors and pipelines.

Table A. provides a high-level crosswalk to align the WestEd team’s project recommendations with the four workstreams and possible strategic approaches. It also provides a timeline for upcoming work and deliverables.

Table A. Cal-SOAP Project Recommendations and Future Work Strands

Recommendation	WORKSTREAMS				Deliverables/Strategies	Proposed Timeline
	Develop Metrics	Tech Solution	Data Capacity	Support Partners		
Co-create a consistent set of program measures for student level and programmatic activities	X		X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop data collection processes and protocols including roles and responsibilities, data definitions for key metrics, data flow models and annual processes and timelines Create an adoption plan to support full implementation that aligns technology solution with program measures 	Jan-March 2021 April 2021
Create/leverage a central technology solution or system		X	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop or use a pre-existing data system based on co-created, defined, and agreed-on measures Pilot & test system with several consortia, identify troubleshooting issues Provide training and scale to all sites, create online TA tools Explore supportive policies, practices and partnerships that can be leveraged to support data effectiveness 	March-Aug 2021 July-Dec 2021 Jan-June 2022 Jan-March 2021
Invest in professional learning focused on inquiry and data use			X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a series of workshops on data inquiry approaches and data use Develop qualitative data collection on implementation challenges and successes for consortia in adaptation to the new system Provide general and targeted technical assistance to consortia including monthly consortia calls 	Dec 2020-June 2022 April 2021 July 2021-June 2022
Support collaboration and data experiences as a community of practice			X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide opportunities for topical data discussions among consortia for regional directors to share experiences Develop and hold consultancy sessions and protocols to trouble-shoot data challenges Develop the capacity to create annual Cal-SOAP reports based on region data/reports 	Dec 2020-June 2022 Jan-June 2022 June 2021-June 2022
Facilitate training on best practices			X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer workshop or presentation opportunities for regional directors to share experiences Create best practices literacy and tools (e.g, self-assessments, reflection guides, evidence-based literature reviews) Develop qualitative data protocols to garner more student voice/experience in continuous improvement cycles 	Dec 2020-June 2022 Feb 2021-March 2022 March 2021-Dec 2022
Develop an equity framework to support increased access to services and grants.	X		X	X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote data sharing agreements and practices with college and community partners Develop an equity framework to support Cal-SOAPs evidence they reach (and impact) low income students in their college going journey Using National Student Clearinghouse data, complete an initial analysis of Cal-SOAP student 	Jan-March 2021 April 2021 TBD

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