

California Student Aid Commission
Student Impact, Outreach and Communications Committee

Item 8

(Information Item)

Program communications

SUMMARY:

This item provides information on the various communication methods utilized by California Student Aid Commission (Commission) staff to notify students, high school counselors and college financial aid administrators regarding critical information about Cal Grants and specialized financial aid

RECOMMENDATION:

This item is informational only. No action is required.

BACKGROUND:

Each academic year, Commission staff communicate directly with high school and college students, parents, high school counselors/principals and campus financial aid administrators about the need to respond to critical issues in order to finish their application and/or disburse financial aid awards.

Student communications include notification of

- Incomplete applications
- Preliminary awards
- Program changes and updates
- Program status: renewal, ineligible, withdrawn
- Reminders to take next steps for payment or completing a process
- Ineligibility

Although e-mail has been the primary method used to communicate with students, staff have begun utilizing additional processes to reach them. The summary below describes these communication methods:

- Web Grant System Generated E-mail Messages – The Commission’s Grant Delivery System (GDS) generates individual notices to hundreds of thousands of Cal Grant applicants and awardees annually. These include the initial Cal Grant Preliminary Award Letters and the California Aid Report.

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- System Generated Hard Copy Letters – While hard copies letters are much less utilized than in the previous years, Commission staff send hard copy letters only to students who do not provide an e-mail address.
- Mail Chimp Service – Mass emails are distributed to Cal Grant awardees, applicants, and recipients to guide them through the steps necessary to confirm their school of attendance, provide specified information to support their eligibility for specific programs, and general reminders.
- Post Cards – Created and mailed to remind students of specific events or next steps to complete the process. Post cards were recently sent to targeted students who had not completed their financial aid applications and invited them to Statewide Cash for College events to complete their applications.

Commission staff also generate communications to all participating institutions, high schools and other campus administrators to keep them apprised of key changes and deadlines. An electronic mail service is used to provide these communications to subscribers who register for any or all of the eight categories of alerts, notices, and updates. The two types of email communications include:

- Grant Special Alerts (GSA) – To provide training updates and opportunities, new program information, and policy changes.
- Grant Operation Memos (GOM) – To provide operational updates, and program administration reminders.

The launching of the new Grant Delivery System Modernization establishes a secured, modernized platform that will allow staff to enhance the system with new software programs that provide additional modes of communication. Some of the future communication initiatives include:

- ChatBots – A new version of the ChatBot that assists students with general information regarding the Commission's programs will continue to evolve using artificial intelligence and frequently asked questions. The ChatBot is expected to provide self-service options especially during off hours when the call center is closed.
- Text Messaging – Commission staff anticipates implementation of text messaging by this fall 2021.

The Commission completed a workplace assessment that is helping guide the agency's efforts to create more efficient external communications practices, automate numerous manual processes and prioritize key functions carried out by the Commission.

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As a result, the Commission is working to improve and coordinate all its external communications and messaging to students, schools, and to the general public. A Communications work group consisting of cross-divisional staff has started to evaluate and review the various communications listed in this exhibit with the goal to provide recommendations to the Executive Leadership team by the fall of this year.

RESPONSIBLE PERSON(S):

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ATTACHMENT(S):

Program communications presentation presented on June 23, 2021