

Item 5

(Information Item)

Executive Director's Report



Executive Director's Report September 2021

Dear Commissioners,

This has been an historic year for student equity and affordability. The 2021-22 State Budget Act invested millions of new resources to make college more affordable and help students graduate with low, or no debt. The budget expanded the number of community college students who will now be eligible to receive an entitlement Cal Grant without regard to time out of high school and age. More than 100,000 community college students are expected to receive a Cal Grant under this new framework.

The 2021-22 State Budget Act also approved substantial new funding for the Commission to expand and create new programs that address college affordability. The funding plan added two new programs to the Commission's portfolio -- the Education and Training Grant Program for displaced workers and the Learning Alliance Program that offers a career-rich internship experience that compensates students like work-study. It also provided new funding to expand several of the Commission's existing programs, such as more than doubling the funding for the Golden State Teacher Grant Program and adding Cal Grant foster youth to the group of Cal Grant students who are automatically eligible to receive a \$6,000 Access Grant. This was a banner year for the Commission in securing the funds needed to address college affordability and help mitigate the devastating affects the pandemic has had on college students.

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We are grateful to the Governor and the legislature, especially Assemblymembers McCarty and Medina and Senators Leyva and Laird for their steadfast commitment in elevating college financial aid as a top tier priority for the state to address in this year's budget.

In addition to this year's state budget actions, the legislature is still considering three of the Commission's major financial aid bills – AB 1456 (Medina) Cal Grant Equity Framework, AB 469 (Reyes) specifications for the FAFSA/CADAA completion requirement, and SB 737 (Limon) Cal-SOAP Modernization. Adoption of these three bills would align with the recent financial aid budget actions and would enhance the Commission's ability to effectively serve the affordability and equity needs of California students.

As we approach the end of session on September 10, our three priority bills are headed to their respective houses for a floor vote and then to the Governor's desk. We will keep you posted on their status.

Shout-out to our coalition partners. Commission staff have worked hand-in-hand with a wide coalition of supporters who have been critical partners in advocating for Cal Grant reform, FAFSA completion and Cal-SOAP modernization. We thank the coalition partners who never lost faith in this journey to address long-standing impediments to student equity and affordability.

While there are too many partners to name here, I would like to call attention to the students. The students have worked tirelessly to advance the college affordability agenda, especially on Cal Grant reform. Cal Grant reform changes would not have happened without the students' disciplined and focused support. The students took a statewide view of what's best for students in their advocacy. We will have the opportunity to hear from representatives from each of the student groups about their reflections on this year's advocacy and priorities for the upcoming year.

Looking to the Future and our BCP Request. The Commission will be reviewing the proposed Budget Change Proposals (BCP) information at its September Commission meeting. Staff will submit the BCPs to the Department of Finance after the meeting. This year's two BCPs focus on critical agency infrastructure needs.

The Commission has experienced vast program expansion in recent years, especially in this most recent budget. Earlier this year, leadership contracted with an outside consultant to conduct a thorough workplace audit that would assess staff resources and identify areas for increased efficiency and automation. This assessment provided critical insights that have helped us identify and address key gaps in our staffing and technology infrastructure. As such, the focus of the two BCPs for the 2022-23 fiscal year prioritize strategic investments in critical infrastructure that will position us to keep pace with the growing demands of the agency, our business and expansive service to students. The two BCPs address: 1) financial aid expansion and its impact on agency wide staffing, and 2) a Customer Relations Management system that provides a

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streamlined and automated system to effectively manage our customer caseload base. The two BCPs are based on the workplace assessment data and our analysis of key priorities to move the agency to the next level of service to our constituents.

October 1st FASFA and California Dream Act Application Kick-Off. Efforts are well-underway to launch the new financial aid application season. The Commission's Marketing and Outreach Unit are launching several promotional activities to raise awareness about applying for financial aid and gearing up to convene Cash for College and Train-the-Trainer workshops. The Commission will be as aggressive as possible, using paid ads and social media, to spread the word to students that they can apply now for financial aid to pay for college.

This year is also a pivotal transition year to gear up for the new FAFSA/CA Dream Act Application completion requirements that go into effect for the 2022-23 academic year. Beginning next fall, all school districts will be required to certify that all their high school seniors have completed a FAFSA or a CA Dream Act Application, unless they have formally opted out of this requirement. The Commission is working with partners up and down the state to build best practice models for full implementation of the FAFSA/CA Dream Act Application next fall.

Efforts to Increase Financial Aid Uptake for Community College Students. As you know, there has been a steep decline in community college FAFSA and CA Dream Act Applications submitted this past year. The Commission has initiated a conversation with Community College CEOs across the state to understand how we can work together to increase the number of FAFSA and CA Dream Act Applications submitted, as well as increase the paid rates for students. The stakes for financial aid are especially high given the new Cal Grant entitlement program for community college students which for the first time guarantees a student will receive a Cal Grant if the student meets the eligibility requirements. To date, Commission Chair, Catalina Cifuentes, former Vice Chair, Jamillah Moore, Chief Deputy Director, Catalina Mistler, and I have met with 45 number of Community College CEOs along with many of their financial aid officers. We walked through their campus financial aid data describing the uptake patterns on their campuses. These discussions have been extremely fruitful. We have learned more about their local needs, and they have learned how to utilize the Commission's support resources. These discussions also have led to us working closely with the California Community College Chancellor's Office to increase financial aid participation. We are contemplating co-chairing a community college financial aid work group to assess and implement strategic actions that can help increase financial aid uptake for community college students.

Commission staff are Busier and Better than ever. Staff are preparing for the new financial aid cycle, developing new programs, enhancing the GDSM functionality, and managing the overall business. Throughout the pandemic, the staff have been phenomenal in staying focused on their jobs to serve students. Staff continue to develop creative and innovative solutions to challenges in serving students and productivity continues to be at an all-time high.

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In recognition of the staff's incredible work and commitment to the mission of serving students, we will be hosting an **all-you-can-eat Taco Fest** at a local park, along with a special dessert. This event will be free to the staff and provide an opportunity to socialize with their colleagues while maintaining all safety protocols. Despite all the struggles and disruption to our lives, this will be an opportunity to show gratitude to each other for the work we do in service to students.

The following highlights major activities from each of the four divisions.

Program Administration and Services Division (PASD)

- The Golden State Teacher Grant Program was implemented and awarded \$7.3 million in grants to 500 teaching candidates for the 2020-21 award year.
- The Commission contract with CDSS was amended to include an additional \$6 million dollars in federal funds through 2021-22 for COVID-19 relief for Foster Youth.
- The CSAC Call Center is receiving record volume calls as the 2021-22 school year emerges with over 3,200 calls received the first week of August – second highest week of call volume this year.
- The Dream Act Service Incentive Grant Program was launched on July 1, 2021, which provides additional grant funds to eligible Cal Grant B students performing volunteer work. As of August 20, 2021, the first 10 applicants have been approved for the program.
- The 2021-22 Annual Statewide Financial Aid Workshops began on August 17, 2021, in partnership with the California Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (CASFAA), and the California Community Colleges Student Financial Aid Administrators Association (CCCSFAAA). The initial two virtual workshops served approximately 850 high school counselors and student advocates. As of August 20, there are 12 additional workshops scheduled through December 2021.

Fiscal and Administrative Services Division (FASD)

- HR received straight A's on their CalHR report card in the areas of timeliness and consistency of reporting, quality HR packages and overall attitude, communications, and responsiveness.
- FASD is leading Commission's facility move from the current Rancho Cordova headquarters to a new facility that more effectively accommodates CSAC's needs, including a new and improved space for Commission meetings.
- FASD is finalizing the Commission's Budget Change Proposal to be submitted to the Department of Finance following the Commission meeting.
- FASD convened several staff trainings and workshops to enhance staff knowledge in such areas as, sexual harassment, bullying and abusive conduct, accessibility issues and diversity and inclusion.

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Information Technology and Services Division (ITSD)

- The IT team has been busy at work developing the new programming code for the new Cal Grant Community College Entitlement changes for processing new awards for the 2021-22 academic year. This is a critical priority because the new changes went into effect immediately for the 2021-22 academic year.
- IT launched a new Student Landing Page for the CA Dream Act Application on August 31, 2021. This provides a more secure login process and now completes all the new student portal development as part of GDSM.
- The Division launched the CSV File Upload Functionality (GDSM V1.2 Enhancement) on August 31, 2021. This new functionality allows users to upload and convert Cal Grant, MCS and SB 70 enrollment, GPA, and payment files to a CSV format instead of the traditional text file. This is a lot more efficient and secure.

Executive Office

- This has been a banner year for government and external relations. The Legislature and Governor have approved record investments in college financial aid and are poised to adopt changes in legislation to streamline and modernize the Cal Grant program.
- The Legal Unit is gearing up to develop several new regulations in support of programs recently adopted in the 2021-22 State Budget Act, such as the Education and Training Grant Program.
- The Data, Analysis and Research Team led the Commission's Student Loan and Debt Service Review Workgroup. The Workgroup has now completed its final report, which includes numerous important and actionable policy recommendations.
- The Marketing and Outreach Unit is ready to launch a major digital and social media campaign by posting public service announcements about applying for financial aid, buying paid advertisements, sending postcards to every high school senior, sending a CSAC video to every high school about how to apply for financial aid, and convening numerous community college and K-12 Cash for College and Train-the-Trainer workshops.

As we prepare for the next financial aid cycle, we reflect on how the global pandemic has upended the lives of our constituents and our own. We will continue to innovate best practices to meet students where they are in their journey to pursue a college education.

Sincerely,

Marlene L. Garcia