

Item 13

(Information Item)

Update on the Undocumented Workgroup and action plan for the Commission

SUMMARY:

The California Student Aid Commission (Commission) recently released the Undocumented Student Affordability Workgroup report, *Renewing the Dream – Improving Financial Aid and College Affordability for California’s Undocumented Students*. The report aims to inform stakeholders on systemic barriers the undocumented student population faces when trying to access financial aid and includes targeted recommendations for administrative action by the Commission, campus best practices, as well as state and federal policy.

This item will provide an update on the progress of the report’s release, an overview of the policy and programmatic enhancements underway by Commission staff to better support undocumented students, and guest speakers that will share their experience with the California Dream Act Application (CADAA) and financial aid more broadly.

RECOMMENDATION:

This is an information item; no action is required.

BACKGROUND:

California has the largest undocumented student population in the country. Over the years, California has enacted policies to help undocumented students pursue higher education. These policies include the nonresident tuition exemption (AB 540) and financial aid programs such as the California Dream Act and many more. Nonetheless, undocumented students continue to face barriers to financial aid.

As discussed in the report, high school students receive limited access to information about their financial aid options. This can lead to misinformation and discouragement from applying for financial aid or college altogether. If students do apply for aid through the California Dream Act Application (CADAA), they face confusion over questions due to their unique circumstances. CA Dream Act students must fill out additional paperwork to confirm their nonresident tuition exemption status, even after submitting a CADAA; this process varies across segments and between campuses, making it difficult for students to track. Such disparities are exacerbated by a growing number of students graduating high school without work authorization due to rescission of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in 2017. While neither undocumented students or those with DACA may access federal financial aid, those without work authorization can also not participate in employment opportunities to offset the cost of college.

California Student Aid Commission

These challenges highlight the need for solutions that can be implemented by a range of stakeholders that all serve these students. For example, the Commission administers the CADAA and can make enhancements to the application to remove barriers that may cause anxiety and confusion among students. The higher education segments play a large role in financial aid distribution and serve as a key access point as they have the most contact with students. Other groups such as immigrant rights advocates are key stakeholders to engage because of their close connections to students and families and role as a trusted source of information.

As more undocumented students graduate high school without DACA, it is imperative for policymakers to enact legislation that creates systematic changes to enhance college access and affordability for these students. At both the state and federal level, policies can be established that would address root causes of the inequities faced by undocumented students. At the federal level, this includes not only pathways to citizenship, but also the extension of eligibility for federal financial aid. At a state level, California policies can help offset gaps in financial aid, improve access to existing aid programs, and ensure students receive access to timely information about these opportunities.

In collaboration with The Raben Group, a public affairs and strategic communications firm, the Commission convened the Undocumented Student Affordability Workgroup from June through November 2022 to identify and discuss the challenges undocumented students face as they navigate the financial aid process. The diverse set of workgroup members and interview participants helped identify targeted solutions to streamline and expand financial aid opportunities for students throughout each step of the process.

With support from The Raben Group, in February 2023 the Commission published a report titled, *Renewing the Dream – Improving Financial Aid and College Affordability for California’s Undocumented Students*, that captures the findings and policy recommendations of the workgroup. Commission staff have already started working towards the administrative recommendations included in the report that calls on the Commission to enhance the CADAA by reevaluating the questions on the form and improving the application interface. Commission staff have worked with The Raben Group on an extensive communications strategy through a series of outreach and marketing activities, including engagement with policymakers, the media, and other key stakeholders.

RESPONSIBLE PERSON(S):

Jake Brymner, Deputy Director
Policy and Public Affairs Division

Tae Kang, Deputy Director
Program Administration and Services Division

ATTACHMENT(S):

Renewing the Dream – Improving Financial Aid and College Affordability for CA’s Undocumented Students