

# Item 5

(Information Item)

Executive Director's Report

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## Executive Director's Report March 2023

Dear Commissioners,

Each year, the March California Student Aid Commission (Commission) meeting takes place at a critical time when the Legislature and the Governor's Administration move into full gear to address major issues in the policy and budget hearings.

This year, the Commission will be convening an Advocacy Day on March 8. This will provide an opportunity for Commissioners to meet new legislators and offer input on key college affordability issues that are being heard before the Legislature and Administration.

Commission staff have been working hard to develop the details for a successful Advocacy Day. Staff have scheduled meetings with key legislators and staff and have developed informational materials that describe the mission and breadth of work conducted by California Student Aid Commission. The Commission has also planned a Legislative Reception following the Advocacy Day meetings at the California Museum, directly across the street from the Legislative Offices. At the reception, the Commission will be recognizing Legislative and student champions for change, who have played a critical role in helping address college affordability issues and moving the Cal Grant reform agenda close to the finish line.

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## Student Aid Champions of Change:

- Assemblymember Kevin McCarty, Chair, Assembly Budget Subcommittee on Education Finance
- Former Assemblymember Jose Medina, *former* Chair, Assembly Higher Education Committee
- Senator John Laird, Chair, Senate Budget Subcommittee on Education
- *Former* Senator Connie Leyva, *former* Chair, Senate Education Committee
- Jeanice Warden-Washington, Chief Consultant to Assembly Higher Education Committee
- Mark Martin, Higher Education Consultant to Assembly Budget Subcommittee on Education Finance Budget Subcommittee
- Olgalilia Ramirez, Principal Consultant to Senate Education Committee
- The Fix Financial Aid Coalition, Intersegmental Student Association Coalition

We will be celebrating the many financial aid accomplishments and recognizing that the job is not yet finished.

## All-In for FAFSA/CA Dream Act Completions

As you know, the Commission has engaged in extensive outreach to K-12 leaders throughout the state to expand the infrastructure and student support needed to meet the new Universal FAFSA/CA Dream Act Application requirement. This effort has laid a strong foundation in building stronger relationships and partnerships with the K-12 community at all levels.

The All-In for FAFSA and CA Dream Act Campaign is in full swing. There have been more than 1,200 Cash for College workshops held throughout the state, numerous college fair events and extensive disbursement of education materials to educators, students, parents, and community groups to support student completion of the FAFSA or the CA Dream Act application. The Commission has been working closely with the 16 Cal-SOAP Consortia and Regional Organizing Coordinators that have been pivotal in helping students complete their FAFSA or CA Dream Act applications before the first deadline on March 2.

There are three phases to the statewide All-In for FAFSA/CA Dream Act Campaign to increase financial aid completions. These phases will help the Commission focus communications and outreach on priority target audiences, as well as always urge all prospective students to apply for financial aid as early as possible.

The first phase starts October 1<sup>st</sup> and continues until the March 2<sup>nd</sup> deadline, which we just completed. Students applying for admission into four-year institution are required to meet this deadline in order to access financial aid resources, although all students are encouraged to apply early by this deadline.

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The second phase begins March 3<sup>rd</sup> and continues until the end of the school year for high school graduating seniors. These students would be applying for financial aid to attend a community college.

The third phase begins at the beginning of summer and continues through the September 2<sup>nd</sup> deadline for all students attending a community college. During this phase, the Commission's focus will be to target all students interested in attending a community college, especially adults interested in pursuing education and training to boost their career and job opportunities.

At the Commission meeting, staff will provide an update on the latest data for FAFSA/CA Dream Act application completions by the March 2<sup>nd</sup> deadline. Staff will provide year-over-year data, as well as provide a comparison with completion data during the last normal, pre-COVID application period in 2019-2020.

### **Delay Likely in Launching New simplified Federal FAFSA Application**

The U.S. Department of Education recently announced that it may not be ready to launch its redesigned and simplified FAFSA by the opening of the financial aid application season on October 1, 2023. This has raised numerous concerns among higher education stakeholders around the county about how this delay may negatively affect student access to financial aid. A delay is especially concerning for low-income, first-generation college students, who are less familiar with the financial aid application process and will have a shorter window to complete their applications.

The Education Department has committed to launch the application during the fourth quarter of 2023, which could be January 1, 2024. The Department is expected to provide a confirmed launch date by spring 2023.

Meanwhile, higher education financial aid leaders and advocates are working to mitigate the potential negative impacts on students when adjusting to the compressed time period for completing the FAFSA.

In California, students attending a four-year institution will have two months, January 2024 – March 2024, to complete the applications. There are early legislative discussions in California about whether to adopt a one-time application extension to April 2. This deadline delay would provide more time for students to apply for financial aid but will have implications for packaging financial aid in time for students to make informed decisions about the institution they would like to attend. We expect to hear a lot more about this issue in the coming months.

The Commission is working closely with the National College Attainment Network (NCAN) and the National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs (NASSGAP) to mitigate any negative effects on student access to financial aid.

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## Renewing the Dream for Undocumented Student

The Commission is proud to release the *Renewing the Dream* report reflecting the findings and recommendations of the Undocumented Student Affordability Work Group. This important report identifies several policy and best practice recommendations to address the difficult barriers and challenges undocumented students face as they move through the financial aid process, and the impact these hurdles have on ultimately accessing state financial aid dollars to succeed in college.

We are grateful to Assemblymember Mike Fong, who has agreed to author AB 1540, one of the key recommendations in the report that would incorporate the student affidavit process into the California Dream Act Application. This change would greatly streamline and simplify the application process for students.

The Commission continues to be a national leader on issues that open college access and affordability to talented undocumented students in the state by building upon first-in-the-nation actions to adopt in-state tuition and access to financial aid. The Commission will have the opportunity to discuss the report and its findings at its March 9 meeting.

## Black Student Outreach Initiative

Late last year, the Commission launched the Black Student Outreach Initiative to more aggressively target how the Commission reaches deeper into the Black community to help students access financial aid to attend college. The Commission is committed to closing racial/equity gaps for Black students in accessing financial aid to pay for college.

In January, the Commission hosted its first Black Student Outreach Initiative roundtable event with Black leaders from across CA to identify how CSAC can better partner with community organizations to share information about financial aid, as well as learn about the key challenges in doing so. What we learned was that there are numerous resources at the community level to help Black students apply for financial aid to attend college. A key role the Commission can play is to connect the dots and support their financial aid outreach students. We also learned that messaging matters and we need to change the perception that financial aid is only for student pursuing a four-year degree. It is important to emphasize opportunities at community college and short-term career technical programs.

We will be following up to convene a second meeting to develop specific outreach details, materials and how we amplify the message of the availability of financial aid to Black students before the September 2 financial aid deadline. These best practices will also be integrated in the Commission's outreach for the new 2024-25 financial aid cycle.

The Commission will also look at convening a similar roundtable discussion with leaders and community partners from the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community,

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and other racial ethnic groups, later this year. The Commission is continuing its work to increase the number of Dreamer students who apply for financial aid.

## Submission of our Spring Finance letter for financial aid resources

The Commission issues more than 650,000 financial aid awards annually, an increase of more than 85 percent in the past 10 years. However, staffing during this period only increased by 34 percent (37 positions). This has put tremendous strain on the Agency to implement its growing number of programs.

Specifically, over the past two years, the Commission has been directed to implement or expand new and existing programs, including the Golden State Teacher Grant Program, the Learning-Aligned Employment Program, the Golden State Education and Training Program, expansion to the community college entitlement program and to the Middle-Class Scholarship program.

The Legislature and Governor approved several limited-term positions to help develop and implement these programs. However, these programs extend beyond the duration of the limited-term positions, which are needed to continue managing the programs. The Commission has submitted a Spring Finance Letter to the Department of Finance making a second request to convert 9 critical limited-term positions to permanent positions to maintain quality program implementation. The Commission also requested that the \$500,000 in one-time funding for Regional Coordinating Organizations be converted to ongoing funding to support the expansion of Cash for College workshops in support of the new financial aid requirement.

The following summarizes key updates from each division.

## Policy and Public Affairs Division

- Completed the *Renewing the Dream* report, and have engaged in numerous activities promoting and advancing the recommendations in the report, such as hosting a Capitol Briefing for legislative staff, public webinar, and introducing AB 1540 (M. Fong), a Commission sponsored bill that would incorporate the AB 540 Affidavit process into the California Dream Act Application.
- Introduced AB 1400 by Assemblymember Isaac Bryan, a measure that utilizes the College Access Tax Credit to provide grants to California Community College students who transfer to an Historically Black College or University (HBCU).
- Hosted its first “College Affordability Policy Bootcamp” for legislative staff in February to help provide background about financial aid and key challenges faced by students.
- Hosting an Advocacy Day to engage legislators as well as a *Student Aid Champions for Change* reception to recognize the outstanding work of legislative and student champions around Cal Grant reform.

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- Hosted its first Black Student Outreach Initiative roundtable event with Black leaders from across CA to identify how CSAC can better partner with community organizations to share information about financial aid. There will be more information provided in the Black Student Outreach Initiative update item on March 9.
- Publicly released the PSA partnership with the Golden State Warriors through a variety of distribution channels, including on the Warrior's official community accounts and to those on CSAC's Grant Special Alerts and public affairs listserves.
- More than 1,200 Cash for College workshops have been officially registered. It is anticipated that this number will continue to grow between now and the September 2<sup>nd</sup> final deadline to apply for financial aid for the 2023-24 academic year.
- Participated in numerous financial aid completion events, including Black College Expos, the Mexican Consulate of Sacramento's annual Steps to College, and other college fair events in Merced, San Diego, Los Angeles, Monterrey, and Compton, among others.
- Cal-SOAP projects had recorded more than 150,000 instances of services for high school students using our new Lacai based data platform.

### Financial Administration and Services Division

- Completed the contract to secure the services of the Foundation for California Community Colleges to develop a statewide outreach effort to recruit students to the Golden State Education and Training Grant Program.
- Hired 10 college student assistants to work in the Call Center through University Enterprises.
- Worked with Commission staff to submit final Spring Finance letter requesting conversion of limited-term staff to permanent staff and other resources.
- Completed Quarterly forecast meetings with all division areas on current year operational budget.
- Completed setting up Virtual Card Accounts with DGS to allow for reservations of hotels without any out of pocket to the employee.
- Secured outdoor signage identifying the California Student Aid Commission property to the public.
- Collaborated with the Office of Digital Innovation to update the Commission's Job Opportunity website layout to enhance recruitment efforts.
- Subscribed to a premium LinkedIn account to broaden HR outreach and recruitment for key Commission positions. Also, completed an Executive Recruiter contract to expand pool of executive talent.

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## Program Administration and Services Division

- Processed more than 443,000 GPAs for high school seniors, representing 92% of public high schools and 56% of private high schools.
- In support of the All In for FAFSA/CA Dream Act campaign, implemented call-in office hours to provide 1 on 1 assistance to counselors and other k-12 administrators working with students through the financial aid application process.
- Produced a new educator video as a resource to k-12 counselors and administrators providing tips on helping students and why completing the FAFSA or CA Dream Act application is so important.
- Completed final testing to convert payments from paper check to electronic funds transfer (EFT) for the Chafee Grant Program. This allows the Commission to expedite the delivery of grant funds to current and former foster youth. The Commission anticipates transitioning to the EFT payment process in April 2023.
- Released updates to improve the user experience for institutional staff working with the Golden State Teacher Grant (GSTG) Program. The improvements include updated application status and eligibility options, enhanced status history screen, and an “export to Excel” function for the roster.
- Released the new 2022-23 Middle Class Scholarship (MCS) Handbook to provide UC and CSU financial aid administrators with pertinent information to successfully administer the program. This was developed in collaboration with UC and CSU.

## Data Analysis and Research Division

- Completed 2022-23 Offered Awardees and Average Income, GPA, Family Size, and Age by Segment reports. Updated Cal Grant Offered Awards dashboard for 2022-23 data.
- Further aligned weekly reports on FAFSA and CADAA counts with Race to Submit and national dashboards.
- Revamped Data and Reports website menu to better organize data offerings and clarify how external researchers can contact CSAC for collaborations.
- Presenting poster on CCC Entitlement at April RP Group conference for CCC institutional researchers.
- Continued work with UC Davis to identify patterns in low paid rates for CCC Entitlement students.
- Working with the segments to develop a Basic Needs supplemental SEARS survey to focus on food and housing needs.
- Continuing to update and improve the early version of the Cal-SOAP Tableau dashboard.

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## Legal Department

- Completed the Golden State Teacher Grant Program regulations, which became effective January 23, 2023.
- The California Community College Expanded Entitlement Program regulations were approved by OAL and endorsed by the Secretary of State on February 9, 2023. The regulations will be effective on April 1, 2023.
- Regulations for LAEP were developed in consultation with stakeholders and are being provided for Commission consideration this (March) meeting.
- In collaboration with PPAD and PASD, developed a detailed checklist of questions for all legislative and budget proposals to fully analyze the proposed impacts of these proposals.

## Information Technology and Services Division

- Completed first phase of New Texting Integration functionality in GDSM to capture the consent of the students to receive text message. More than 3,000 students have already opted into the texting program.
- Adding the training institutions to the Golden State Education and Training Program application.
- Completed enhancements to the Cal Grant Roster Data File for the WebGrants Delivery System.
- Added several enhancements and new functionalities to the Golden State Teacher Grant Program application.
- Made new Improvements to the WebGrants for Students portal for the Chafee Foster Youth Grant Application.
- Completed the backend technology for the 2023-24 California Military Department GI Bill Application.

There are a lot of great developments taking place at the Commission. I look forward to sharing more of the work being done to help students access financial aid to achieve college success.

Best,

Marlene L. Garcia