

Item 5

(Information Item)

Executive Director's report



Executive Director's Report September 2023

Dear Commissioners,

This is back to school season and the California Student Aid Commission (Commission) is as busy as ever. Staff at the Commission are ramping up for a big financial aid year, including implementation of the Better FAFSA and enhanced California Dream Act Application, along with several new programs.

John Burton Champion Award. First, let's start with great news. The Commission has been selected to be the recipient of the 2023 John Burton Champion award, which will be presented on Thursday, December 14, 2023, in San Francisco. This is an incredible honor for the Commission. The Commission was selected by the Board of Directors of the John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY) because of its deep commitment to improving the lives of California's Youth who have experienced foster care or homelessness.

The Commission has worked closely with JBAY for almost a decade, expanding access to the Chafee Education and Training Voucher, streamlining financial aid access for foster youth and increasing rates of completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the California Dream Act Application. Previous winners of this esteemed award include Assemblymember Phil Ting, former state Controller Betty Yee and Senator John Laird, each of whom have led notable reforms to support higher education access for foster and unhoused youth.

California Student Aid Commission

This work could not have been accomplished without the hard work and dedication of Commission staff, including Brian Regan, Libby Rafferty, and Tony Corison, Gabbie Fajardo and the Commissioners' unwavering support for foster youth.

Update on FAFSA and CA Dream Act Applications. This is a landmark year for financial aid due to the many changes surrounding the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the California Dream Act Application.

The Commission has just closed out the financial aid filing period on September 2 for the 2023-24 academic year. The final data look terrific. The FAFSA/CADAA completions reached 72.5 percent. There are also several bright spots in the state.

Top 5 districts with the largest year over year changes as of March 2nd:

School_District	2022	2023	yoy_pct	yoy_tot
Los Angeles Unified	28,311	31,394	10.9	3,083
Kern High	5,158	5,988	16.1	830
Chaffey Joint Union High	3,236	3,896	20.4	660
Capistrano Unified	2,149	2,745	27.7	596
Corona-Norco Unified	2,546	3,051	19.8	505

Top 5 districts with the largest year over year changes as of June 30th:

School_District	2022	2023	yoy_pct	yoy_tot
Los Angeles Unified	28,311	33,844	19.5	5,533
Kern High	5,158	6,952	34.8	1,794
Capistrano Unified	2,149	3,295	53.3	1,146
Chaffey Joint Union High	3,236	4,286	32.4	1,050
San Diego Unified	4,785	5,734	19.8	949

LAUSD and Kern HS District had some of the largest gains year-over-year by percentage and numerical growth.

The latest year-over-year application completion growth for community college students is 10 percent as of August 27. This is a significant reversal after several years of decline. Another critical gain in completion rates is among students with 0 Estimated Family Contribution (EFC), which grew year-over-year by almost 7 percent. Again, during Covid, the lowest income students were the ones not returning to college or not filing a FAFSA or a CA Dream Act Application. This trend is very promising.

Unfortunately, California Dream Act Applications has continued to decline by -4.4 percent. Commission staff are working hard to reverse this trend among undocumented students.

By race/ethnicity, overall applications are up across every race/ethnicity category with the highest increases posted among Hispanic students at 7.6 percent.

California Student Aid Commission

As you can tell, this year's numbers are growing significantly in most key categories over the previous year. We still have our work cut out for us among demographic groups that continue to face persistent gaps in financial aid completions. These groups will be the focus on deeper communications, research and implementation of strategic marketing and outreach efforts.

Better FAFSA and Enhanced CA Dream Act Application. Commission staff have been deeply involved in preparing for the roll-out of the new, Better FAFSA and subsequent enhancement of the CA Dream Act Application.

For the first time in 40 years, the U.S. Department of Education has completely redesigned the FAFSA. The Commission will implement corresponding changes to the CA Dream Act Application. While this significant change is causing anxiety across the country among high school counselors, educators, parents and students, it will provide for a better overall experience. The new application is easier and quicker to complete for most students and families. The application will prepopulate IRS data for families that file tax returns. These families will answer fewer questions and more students will be eligible for financial aid.

The CA Dream Act Application will be enhanced to reflect federal changes, but not all. The CA Dream Act will also implement many of the improvements recommended by the Commission's Undocumented Student Affordability Work Group.

One major change to the Better FAFSA now requires all guardians (or contributors as they are referred to) to complete a federal student aid ID (FSAID). This will present significant challenges for some students from mixed immigration status families or students whose guardians or parents are not willing to create an FSAID. Commission staff are building the statewide infrastructure to provide students with one-on-one support, especially for students who are struggling to have their guardian create an FSAID.

New Communications Research. The Commission is committed to strengthening its communications to underserved students this upcoming financial aid cycle. Based on what the Commission heard and learned during this June Retreat meeting, the Commission is fortunate to be working with the [Wonder Strategies for Good](#), a communications research firm that will be generously supported from the Haas, Jr. Fund, to conduct research that helps the Commission understand what messaging interventions to use when communicating with underserved low-income, first-generation high school seniors, undocumented students, men of color and adult learners. This research will improve our upcoming communications strategy to ensure all students receive the information they need to complete their FAFSA or CA Dream Act Application. We will be working in close collaboration with key advisors with deep knowledge and relationships in the communities we are seeking to more effectively serve.

California Student Aid Commission

“Cali” K-12 Chat Bot. The Commission’s statewide K-12 Chat Bot named “Cali” is off to a great start. The official launch date is October 1. The Commission, in partnership with Val Verde Unified School District and Mainstay, hosted a statewide webinar to discuss how the K-12 districts are able to sign-up to participate in this pilot project. The webinar drew a large group of participants:

- 19 superintendents
- 40 school staff
- 32 school districts all across the state.
- 22 out of 58 counties were represented.

There is a lot of excitement about the possibilities of having the Cali chatbot help students navigate the FAFSA or CA Dream Act Application. Especially in a year like this when the FAFSA and CA Dream Act Application cycles are delayed, students will have an assistant to help them. This also helps reduce workload for high school counselors during the busy college application period by giving students access to Cali 24/7.

4th Annual College Affordability Summit. The 4th annual College Affordability Summit is now only months away. The Summit will be held November 7-8, 2023, at the Riverside Convention Center and is co-hosted by the Commission, Riverside County Office of Education, the California Department of Education and Education Trust West. The registration link is now live, generating significant interest across the state. This year’s Summit will highlight one of the most anticipated topics of the year: understanding the Better FAFSA and enhanced California Dream Act Application. At the Summit, the participants will be able to gain a first look at an online demo of the Better FAFSA. There will be more than 30 sessions covering a variety of topics addressing issues of importance to K-12 educators and higher education financial aid officers. The sessions will take a deep dive into topics for how to address issues for undocumented students, parents and highlight best practices and free resources to help student apply for financial aid.

Commission Goals and Activities for 2023-24. Finally, Commission staff have developed a set of goals and activities to guide and focus our work in the upcoming year. This year, Commission staff will focus on addressing three overarching goals:

- Build sustainable systems and structures to carry forward the work of CSAC.
- Focus on improving how the Commission communicates with and reaches all students by meeting them where they are.
- Simplify the financial aid process for students, parents and educators.

To achieve these goals, the following five action goals have been established.

Goal 1: Improve CSAC’s capacity to deliver Cal Grants and state financial aid smoothly and efficiently, particularly in light of the new FAFSA/CA Dream Act Application completion requirement and the Better FAFSA.

California Student Aid Commission

Goal 2: Strategically target outreach and marketing efforts to inform students of financial aid opportunities and drive greater FAFSA/CADAA completion, especially targeting hard to reach populations.

Goal 3: Strengthen policy and advocacy leadership to advance key issues that more effectively address the financial and basic needs of students, including Cal Grant reform, and leverage all resources to make postsecondary education accessible.

Goal 4: Leverage the Commission's student database to develop critical financial aid research that helps better inform Commission policies that serve the needs of today's students.

Goal 5: Continue building internal organizational finance and administrative infrastructure, increasing staff resources, improving automation of key agency functions and strengthening cyber security.

Beneath each goal are a set of activities that will drive expected deliverables by the end of the 2023-24 fiscal year. See attachment for list of 2023-2024 goals and activities.

Division Updates

The following highlights major activities and accomplishments by each Division.

Fiscal and Administrative Services Division

- In the early stages of intranet redesign with Information Technology (IT).
- Updating department-wide policies pertaining to Human Resources and Business Services.
- Developed BCP for FY 24-25.
- In the early stages of preparing for FY 21-22 Financial Audit.
- Working on purchasing video equipment to convert conference room into a video recording room.
- Completed an Executive Recruiter contract to strengthen outreach for Attorney positions.
- In the early stages of working with the CA state payroll project on the ERP transition.
- Working on Mentorship Program

Program Administration and Services Division

- Several CSAC staff attended a 2-day "Train-the Trainer" workshop in Washington D.C in July 2023. The training was hosted by the National College Attainment Network (NCAN), in conjunction with Federal Student Aid. Financial aid professionals from all 50 states were in attendance. The CSAC team will build out

California Student Aid Commission

a plan for training thousands of K-12 counselors, educators, higher education financial aid representatives and community-based organizations.

- The Student Support and School Support call centers are fully staffed and are keeping up with the increase in calls which accompany the start of the school year.
- Student communications are being revisited, with a focus on communications being clear and concise. A communications review team has been assembled to review and draft updated student communications with these goals in mind. A student communications calendar is being built to ensure communications are timely and in alignment with the major applications and awarding cycles.
- Scheduled nearly 60 in-person Annual Statewide Financial Aid Workshops throughout California in partnership with the California Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (CASFAA), the California Community Colleges Student Financial Aid Administrators Association (CCCSFAAA), and the Educational Credit Management Corporation (ECMC). Six workshops will be held virtually, with the last three focusing on FAFSA and CADAA updates in 2024. Over 7,000 participants have registered since the beginning of August. New and improved workbooks have been developed with emphasis on the updated FAFSA and CADAA.
- Received renewal documents from all 368 Cal Grant participating institutions for their new 2023-27 Cal Grant Institutional Participation Agreement (IPA). The IPA serves as the managing contract between institutions and the Commission and provides guidance regarding the administration of the Cal Grant program.

Information Technology Services Division

- Completed implementation of the external API for CSU
 - Facilitates changing schools instantly rather than taking 3 weeks per old methodology.
 - Incorporates secured transactions via automated end – to – end encryption.
 - Allows direct querying of Award details.
 - Establishing schedule to push out to all CSU campuses.
- Prioritizing strategy to fill critical IT vacancies.
 - In process of hiring 5 positions including all 3 vacant leadership positions.
- Continuing to prioritize work on major development projects, including:
 - Building out Cal Grant reform technology requirements.
 - Transition from old FAFSA to new FAFSA and Institutional Student Information Record (ISIR).
 - Conforming the CADAA to the new FAFSA and adding enhancements.
 - Supporting implementation of National Voting Rights Act requirements for the Commission.
- Participating in the California Department of Technology Cybersecurity audit.

California Student Aid Commission

Policy and Public Affairs Division

- Continued outreach and marketing efforts to increase financial aid applications for community college students prior to the September 2 deadline. This has included several activities:
 - Mailing of over 64,000 postcards to students that had not yet filed for financial aid, reminding them about the deadline and providing an opportunity to opt-in to receive text message updates.
 - Posting of five billboards located near Los Angeles and Orange County freeways urging students to apply for financial aid. These five billboards utilized different images and language and unique website links that will enable Commission staff to gauge their impact.
 - Creation of new September 2 deadline social media resources and other collateral that Commission staff are utilizing and sharing with local partners.
 - Filming and deployment of a new special video message from East Los Angeles College Basketball Head Coach John Mosley, who also stars in *Last Chance U: Basketball* on Netflix.
 - Hosting additional Cash for College workshops, including four virtual statewide webinars held in August, bringing the total for the cycle to nearly 1,500.
- Hosted an annual retreat for the California Student Opportunity and Access (Cal-SOAP) and Cash for College Regional Coordinating Organization (RCO) programs, where the discussion focused on collaboration and new marketing approaches to support financial aid application assistance in light of major forthcoming changes.
- The 2023-24 State Budget was finalized and enacted, including many new augmentations to the CSAC budget and financial aid programs, statutory language that extends the priority financial aid deadline to April 2 given the delayed launch of the FAFSA.
- Both of the Commission's sponsored bills, AB 1400 (Bryan) and AB 1540 (M. Fong), were passed unanimously by the Senate Education Committee and now await consideration by the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Data, Analysis and Research Team

- Received and analyzed 23,689 responses to the 2023 Food and Housing Survey. 43% of respondents attended a California Community College, 25% CSU, 10% UC, and 7% private. Results will be shared at the November Commission meeting.
- Updated the Student Expense Budget for 2024-25 using the Department of Finance's projected inflation rates for California.
- Presented findings from Cal SOAP data dashboard at Project Directors' retreat.
- Finalized the 16 data elements that CSAC will contribute annually to the Cradle-to-Career data system starting this October.

California Student Aid Commission

- Working with programs unit on how to use data analytics to determine outreach effectiveness.
- Partnered with UC Davis to survey recent high school graduates on applying for financial aid and college matriculation.
- Continued to work with external researchers on priority projects, such as CCC Entitlement, the FAFSA/CADAA All In campaign, and CADAA verification.

Best Regards,

Marlene L. Garcia

ATTACHMENT(S):

Commission Goals and Activities for 2023-24