

# Item 5

(Information Item)

Executive Director's report

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## Executive Director's Report November 2023

Dear Commissioners,

Welcome to the final California Student Aid Commission (Commission) meeting for 2023. This has been a big year for the Commission as we prepare to launch the Better Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Better CA Dream Act Application (CADAA) by December 31, 2023, and reach more students than ever in accessing financial aid. The Commission has actively engaged with the field in conducting extensive training and support as students and stakeholders prepare for these changes. Additionally, California students have completed their FAFSA or CA Dream Act Applications in record numbers this year. In September, the Commission proudly announced that CA finished first in the nation in growth of financial aid applications from high school seniors compared to other states. Governor Newsom offered a quote about the impact of this work; Chair Cifuentes and I also had an op-ed featured in *EdSource*. Our goal is to keep this momentum for the next application cycle.

We are pleased to welcome three new Commissioners to the California Student Aid Commission rounding out the full 15-member Commission. The new Governor appointments include:

**Evashalem “Eva” Robinson** of Sacramento. Eva has numerous years’ experience in state government as an Information Technology expert. She currently is the EDDNext Assistant Project Controller for the Employment Development Department. Robinson is a member of the Asian Pacific State Employees

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Association and the Asian Pacific Islander American Public Affairs Association, where she is President of the Greater Sacramento Chapter.

**Dr. Chao Vang**, of Sacramento has served as Assistant Vice President for Educational Equity Programs and Student Success at California State University, Sacramento since 2023, where he was Director for Educational Equity Access and Equity Strategist from 2018 to 2023. Vang is a member of Asian Resources Inc., OCA-Asian Pacific Advocates, the Cal Expo Cultural Advisory Council and the Council of Asian Pacific Islanders Together for Advocacy and Leadership.

**Anahi-Marcella Sandoval Araiza**, of El Centro is a student at the University of California, Berkeley. She has been a Student Researcher for the Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley School of Law and a Honduras Program Intern for the Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective since 2023. She is also active with the UC Associated Student Association and is the Chair of the Association's Fund the U.C. Campaign from 2022 to 2023.

**Commissioner Hal Geiogoue**, after 11 years on the Commission, decided to not seek reappointment to the Commission choosing to create an opportunity for others to serve. Commissioner Geiogoue was appointed in November 2012 and is currently the longest serving member on the Commission. Commissioner Geiogoue's leadership over the years has steered the Commission's work in making college affordable for hundreds and thousands of students each year. The Commission will be acknowledging Commissioner Geiogoue's years of service at the November 30<sup>th</sup> full Commission meeting.

### 4<sup>th</sup> Annual California College Affordability Summit

The Commission, along with the Riverside County Office of Education, the California Department of Education and the Education Trust West co-hosted the 4<sup>th</sup> California College Affordability Summit on November 7-8, 2023, at the Riverside Convention Center. Close to 600 participants attended the day and a half convening.

The Summit offered valuable and timely information, best practices, and inspiring stories for all attendees. The pre-conference provided in-depth workshops on understanding the Better FAFSA/Better CADAA and College Student Basic needs.

The morning General Session kicked off the Summit featuring a freshman student, **Maria Estrada**, who described her college journey moving from K-12 to the University of Riverside and K-12 and higher education leaders. **Commissioner Vice Chair Charles Nies**, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, moderated the panel

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building off Maria's story and framing the conversation for five segmental education leaders to discuss how they are bridging the transition for high school seniors moving on to college. **Commissioner Patrick Day** and Marmaduke K-12 high school Counselor of the Year winner, **Paula Riesenbeck**, among the other segments added great insights during the panel discussion.

A highlight of the Summit was hearing from award-winning journalist, documentarian, speaker, author, and philanthropist **Soledad O'Brien**. O'Brien shared remarks about her personal journey as a journalist and how she became empowered to tell authentic stories of everyday people and of a range of social issues, including her award-winning documentary uplifting the crisis of college student hunger in America. I had the opportunity to ask Ms. O'Brien several questions as well as field questions from the audience.

Winners of the 2023 Race to Submit FAFSA and CA Dream Act Applications were honored on stage and presented with Race to Submit Banners acknowledging their schools strong financial aid application completion rates. These schools represent the most active districts in the state who are making a difference in supporting their students to complete financial aid applications and qualify for federal and state aid.

Several other Commissioners were on hand to moderate various breakout sessions and support the work of the Summit, including **Commissioners Angel Rodriquez, Juanita Doplemore, Debra Maxi, Alexis Takagi, and Audrey Dow**.

I would like to give a special thank you to **Commission Chair Catalina Cifuentes** and her team who worked tirelessly on the Summit, along with the Commission staff including **Brenda Vue, Catalina Mistler, Tae Kang, Jake Brymner, Victoria Viksne, Jon Waldrep, Jason Marti, Suzanne Cieri, Michael Lemus, Synequeen Alasa-as, Jessica Moldoff, Kimberly Liaz, Komal Singh and Shelveen Ratnam**.

### Commission Recognized for its Work with Foster Youth College Students

The John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY) Champion of the Year will be honoring the California Student Aid Commission as a recipient of the 2023 Burton Champion Award to be presented at its annual Gala on December 14, 2023. The Commission was selected by the Board of Directors of JBAY because of its deep commitment to improving the lives of California's youth who have experienced foster care or homelessness. JBAY has worked closely with the Commission 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 FAFSA and CA Dream Act Application among foster youth. The Commission is honored to receive this recognition.

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## Growing Philanthropic Support for the Commission

The Commission continues to work with philanthropic partners to advance the mission of making college affordable for all students in California interested in pursuing education and training beyond high school. This year alone the Commission has received more than \$1.1 million in philanthropic funds to extend its work in serving students.

Most recently, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation approved a grant of \$750,000 to the Commission to help educate community partners on Cal Grant reform and to fund placement of a Fellow at the Commission from the Strategic Data Project (SDP) at Harvard University's Center for Education Policy Research. The Harvard SDP fellow will work at the Commission for two years to strengthen the agency's overall data collection and its analytical capacity, to develop a major research project determining the return on investment for Cal Grants and other financial aid program and to support the Commission's work with the California Cradle-to-Career Data System.

The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund also awarded the Commission a grant of \$125,000 to enhance our work on the All-In! campaign by supporting strategic public opinion research and implementing the findings to reach deeper into student communities that have persistent gaps in completing a FAFSA or a CA Dream Act Application.

Earlier this year, the College Futures Foundation provided \$390,000 to help support development of the Commission's Student Food and Housing Survey, develop a community college financial aid data dashboard and launch an AI chatbot to help community college freshman students access financial aid and basic needs resources, such as CalFresh, food pantries and other services.

## "Cali" Chatbot ready to help California Students with Better FAFSA/Better CADAA

The Commission, in collaboration with Val Verde Unified School District and Mainstay are poised to launch "Cali," our innovative, two-way chatbot to help students apply for financial aid in time for the release of the Better FAFSA/Better CA Dream Act Application in December of this year. More than a dozen school districts across the state are currently in the process of onboarding to join this initiative. Once the financial aid season officially opens, Cali will proactively engage students via text message twice a week to increase engagement, drive action, build connection, and help students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or California Dream Act Application (CADAA).

## Division Updates

The success the Commission has experienced would not be possible without the commitment and hard work of every division. The following highlights major activities and accomplishments for the last quarter by each Division.

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## Fiscal and Administrative Services Division

### General

- Colleague Congratulatory Awards continue monthly, which is a peer appreciation award.
- In the early stages of intranet redesign with Information Technology. Created new Employee Resources on the Intranet.
- Updating department-wide policies pertaining to Human Resources and Business Services and Accounting.
- Identification of risks for Statewide Leadership Accountability Act

### Budgets

- Continued work on integrating fiscal detail information into OpenGov, a new software platform designed to manage revenue & expenditure forecasts for governments.
- State operations forecast for next fiscal year to be presented end of Oct/early Nov.
- Fall budget building drills continue.

### Accounting

- In the early stages of preparing for FY 21-22 Financial Audit. No changes.
- Continued development of a travel manual for employees that travel for the state.

### Business Services/Contracts

- Signage for the building should be installed by late Nov/Dec.
- New office for Executive Director should be finalized by end of Dec/Jan
- Working on contract and procurement overview for the department
- Renewing lease for downtown space

### Human Resources/EEO

- Working on workshop content to educate staff on hiring process and identifying areas to improve upon.
- Finalizing Employee Orientation workshop to be presented starting end of Nov/early Dec.
- Working on Mentorship Program and DISC assessment profiles throughout the department.
- HR attended its first job recruitment fair on 10/27.

## Program Administration and Services Division

- The Training Unit conducted its Annual Statewide financial workshops training counselors and educators on how to help students complete the Better FAFSA and Better CADAA. The team reached record numbers with over 13,000 registrations over the 70 in-person and virtual workshops.
- Staff implemented the Middle Class Scholarship (MCS) program foster youth expansion on October 30th, 2023. Foster youth MCS recipients are still subject to the same award-amount calculations (including consideration of self-help and other awards) but will not be subject to the proportionate reduction that occurs to MCS awards based on the annual budget allocation.

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- Staff completed the planning stage of Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT) for the Golden State Teacher Grant (GSTG) Program in partnership with the State Controller's Office. The much-anticipated enhancement is expected to go live in 2024, expediting the delivery of grant funds to California students enrolled in a professional preparation program approved by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing.
- The school support unit has worked diligently to assist stakeholders process their Grade Point Average (GPA) Uploads, which can be a tedious task, as well as help reconcile the 2022-23 academic year for Cal Grant and MCS.
- The Student Support team has reduced its average call handle time by 10% since September and has maintained that key performance indicator through the month of October effectively reducing student wait times. This can be attributed to the revamped weekly training that each member of the team receives along with the dedicated 1:1 call calibrations that have gone into effect with all staff members.

### Information Technology Services Division

- The original nine identified California State University campuses have been onboarded for the external School Change Application Programming Interface. The remaining campuses interested in participating will be onboarded in the Spring 2024.
- Continuing to prioritize critical Information Technology (IT) vacancies.
  - Two of the three IT leadership positions have been filled.
  - All three security positions have been filled, including welcoming Francesca Hensen back to the Commission Security Team.
- Completed the California Department of Technology Cybersecurity audit. The Commission ranked average in comparison to other state entities. Findings will be actively addressed in the coming months.
- Improved our infrastructure by decommissioning four Windows servers and migrating their functions to new servers.
- Continuing development for Better FAFSA and CADAA

### Policy and Public Affairs Division

- Both of the Commission's sponsored bills – AB 1400 (Bryan) and AB 1540 (M. Fong) – were signed into law by Governor Newsom. Three other bills supported by the Commission – AB 278 (Reyes), AB 928 (Rendon), and SB 633 (Gonzalez) – were also signed by the Governor.
- The Commission commenced a research collaboration with Wonder Strategies for Good and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research to gain insight into how young men of color, undocumented students, and their parents/guardians think about financial aid and higher education. The Commission is being assisted in this research by a team of community advisors with expertise in serving these student populations. This work has been underwritten by philanthropic support from the Haas Jr. Foundation.

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- The Commission hosted a roundtable with seven labor unions to discuss partnership opportunities to promote financial aid opportunities to their members and families. Commission staff have followed up to explore where and how we can adapt our materials to better serve union members and families.
- Social media channels, particularly those that serve a more student-oriented demographic, continue to see exceptional growth as Commission staff post more content about the Better FAFSA/CADAA launch – since November 2022, the Commission Instagram account has grown from 4,426 to over 20,000 followers while the Commission TikTok account has grown from 113 to over 17,000 followers.
- The Outreach and Marketing team has been hosting Train the Trainer events, webinars, and supporting in-person college and career fairs since September. Already the team has hosted 2 webinars, 2 Train the Trainer sessions (including one targeting legislative staff); and supported 11 in-person events reaching more than 3,000 students or parents.

### Data, Analysis and Research Team

- Worked with Lucas Public Affairs to design and publish the 2023 Food and Housing Survey on November 15<sup>th</sup>. Findings from the survey will be presented to at the November 30 full Commission meeting.
- At the end of October, submitted data spanning from 2009 to 2022 for 17 Commission programs to Cradle-to-Career (C2C).
- Presented to the Cradle-to-Career Governing Board on the Commission's plans to utilize the data available through C2C to identify program outcomes through a Gates Foundation grant to secure a Harvard Strategic Data Project Fellow starting in summer 2024.
- Completed the October Estimate for Budget Year 2024-25, including finalizing updated estimates for the Cal Grant Equity Framework.
- Continued to work with external researchers on priority projects, such as California Community College Entitlement, the FAFSA/CADAA All In campaign, and CADAA verification.
- Fulfilled internal and external data requests, including expanded data on Race to Submit.

I wish you all a safe and healthy holiday season filled with love, joy, and gratitude. I look forward to continuing our transformative work together through 2024.

In community,

Marlene L. Garcia