

Item 4

(Information Item)

Executive Director's Report



Executive Director's Report July 2020

Dear Commissioners,

A year has now passed since I began my journey with the California Student Aid Commission. I am grateful for the opportunity to do meaningful work that makes college more affordable for students, especially for our highest-need students.

This work has developed even greater urgency in the wake of COVID-19. As we learn more about the hardship students are facing and their growing sense of uncertainty and confusion, we know our job is even more important. We are trying to maintain a pulse of what students need most during this global pandemic.

Spring 2020 COVID-19 Student Survey Released

In this spirit, Commission staff, in partnership with the UC Davis California Education Lab, conducted one of the largest COVID-19 Student Surveys in the nation. There were close to 80,000 student respondents who provided key insights about their experience navigating the COVID-19 crisis in Spring 2020 and their views on issues related to college enrollment plans for the Summer and Fall terms.

On July 8, 2020, the Commission held a statewide public webinar to discuss the results of the COVID-19 Student Survey. The data was compelling and heart-wrenching. The research team presented the survey findings which revealed just how much students are struggling during this tumultuous time. Striking findings include:

California Student Aid Commission

- Over 70% of current students lost some or all of their sources of income as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Almost half of all students had their living arrangements disrupted in Spring 2020.
- A quarter dropped one or more courses when COVID-19 hit.

At the webinar, we featured four students who talked about the impact COVID-19 is having in their personal lives. They talked about having to move back home mid-semester to continue their online classes under less than ideal conditions for learning. One student with underlying health conditions lost three part-time jobs and had to move 600 miles to live with his mother. He has been scrambling to access the medication he desperately needs. Another student responded, "...keeping everything positive even if it is tough" when asked how educators can help students. In other words, we all need to keep the faith and know there will be brighter days.

The biggest take-away from the Student Survey was that the data tells part of the story, and the student voices help us understand and feel the depths of their fear, anxiety and uncertainty about what the future holds for them.

CSAC Staff Resiliency

The CSAC staff have been amazing. CSAC staff work at the Student Aid Commission because they believe in the mission to make college affordable for students. They realize that they are the safety net for hundreds and thousands of students who need financial aid to succeed in college.

We continue to receive feedback that staff overall are adjusting well to telework. They find it to be efficient, but many miss the camaraderie of fellow workers. We convene a monthly All Staff meeting (versus the previous twice a year schedule) to provide critical updates and open the floor for discussion. In addition, I have been hosting smaller meetings with individual divisions and units to have the opportunity to engage in more informal discussions.

I would like to highlight the extraordinary work performed by the Fiscal Administration and Services Division (FASD) team this past quarter to close out the year-end fiscal deadlines. Under the leadership of Lilly Myers, our new FASD Chief, the staff managed their virtual work reality and have met every deadline. They have provided new protocols to simplify and clarify the process for all staff going forward. Special thank you to: Lilly Myers, Rhonda Pascual, Deena Sena, Jennifer Donoho, Sandy Melching, Roisin Menorca, Erica Elias, Cindy Fong, Tina Ghidotti, Yoon Hahn, Manvir Kaur, Lucas Lopez-Gill, Rebecca Medina, Aliza Montelongo, Charles Moorehead, Kelly Obrecht, Meghan Ohlson, Teresa Stroschein, Diane Watkins and Pauline Xie.

2020-21 Goals and Priorities

COVID-19 has pushed us to reflect and reevaluate our goals and priorities for how we meet the financial aid needs of the students we serve. Our mission has always been student-focused, but now more than ever, we are searching deep to meet students where they are to help them persevere during this pandemic.

As we begin making plans for the 2020-21 fiscal year, I would like to highlight five priority goals that will help sharpen our focus on what matters most for students, while allowing us to be nimble in

California Student Aid Commission

responding to the unique needs of this moment as they unfold. Each goal includes a list of actionable initiatives we plan to pursue in the upcoming year.

Goal 1: Improve CSAC operations and enhance CSAC's capacity to delivery of Cal Grants and state financial aid smoothly and efficiently.

- *Because of COVID-19, the current economic downturn has hit right at a time when students need financial support more than ever. The Commission is committed to running a smooth and efficient operation that prioritizes quality service to the students and other key constituents. The Commission is seeking outside expertise to evaluate current business practices and determine where we can streamline and automate our business practices to better serve students and allow staff to focus on higher order responsibilities.*
- *The Commission continues to prioritize the completion of the Grant Delivery System Modernization (GDSM) project. The California 2020-21 State Budget Act includes the \$5.3 million in new funding for the first year of maintenance and operations for the GDSM project. The GDSM framework will be completed by November of 2020 with additional refinements made through the first half of 2021. Once fully operational, the system will make it easier to manage and modify the grant program and provide a better experience for students and institution. Our goal is to retire the legacy GDS system by the end of this year.*

Goal 2: Strategically target outreach efforts to inform students of financial aid opportunities and drive greater FAFSA/CADAA completion.

- *With limited to no access to in-person counseling and support, high school and college students may miss key deadlines and opportunities to optimize financial aid resources. The Commission is committed to launching a virtual coordinated effort this fall to target those students with the greatest financial aid need to attend college. This will involve using Zoom and other online communication platforms to host virtual Cash for College events that provide direct service to students and their families when completing their FAFSA or CADAA.*
- *Commission staff will strategically target key organizations to partner with those that serve Black, Latinx, Asian and Pacific Islander and Native American communities. Staff will develop a community-based model that provides ongoing support to students by providing information about how to take advantage of and apply for Cal Grants and other financial aid. Staff will develop a train-the-trainer model to help disperse critical and timely information about completing the FAFSA or CADAA.*
- *The Commission will host the second annual College Affordability Summit virtually in the fall. The event will provide another touch point to get the word out about the critical importance of high-need students completing the FAFSA or CADAA. The event will also include recognition of the winners of the Race to Submit competition.*

California Student Aid Commission

Goal 3: Advocate for structural changes in financial aid policies that more effectively address the financial needs of students and leverages every dollar possible to cover the full cost of attendance.

The Commission is committed to advocating for Cal Grant and other financial aid to support the total Cost of Attendance (COA) for students.

- *Earlier this year, the Commission submitted the Cal Grant Modernization report to the legislature that redesigns the Cal Grant program around cost of attendance and provides greater basic needs support. The legislature has asked Commission staff to consider submitting the policy proposal in the next legislative session to begin implementation of the policy framework without new funds. Commission staff are in the process of modeling this framework and will convene the Cal Grant Work Group in the fall to review plans.*
- *Commission staff are examining how to facilitate a more streamlined experience for high-need college student to access CalFresh resources.*
- *Commission staff will be establishing a Student Loan and Debt Service Review Work Group pursuant to the 2020-21 State Budget Act. The statute allocates \$250,000 to support the formation of the Work Group. The Executive Director has the authority to designate a lead for the Work Group, as well as three members of the public that will serve alongside representatives from the Commission, Department of Finance and the Scholarshare Investment Board. The Work Group is required to submit a report on its findings by September 1, 2021.*

Goal 4: Leverage the Commission's student data base to develop critical financial aid research that helps better understand and serve today's students.

- *To enhance our ability to analyze who is benefitting from state financial aid, Commission staff are in the process of completing an MOU with the California Department of Education to access K-12 ethnicity and race data to cross-match against our Cal Grant and state aid student data base. This data will provide meaningful information on how our current financial aid programs are addressing equity and serving historically underrepresented students.*
- *Commission staff will continue working with our UC Davis researcher partners to delve deeper into the COVID-19 Student Survey findings by: 1) matching internal survey data with cross-tabs by income levels (EFC), first generation, region, gender and Dreamers, and 2) match survey data with fall first census to determine where students actually enrolled.*
- *Commission staff will lead a major research project to understand Cal Grant “paid rates” and how to increase the financial aid take-up rates for awarded students, especially Cal Grant students with dependents.*

California Student Aid Commission

Goal 5: Expand CSAC's communications reach to inform students, families and the public about financial aid opportunities and how to plan for financing college costs utilizing a wide array of communications platforms, especially social media.

- *Fully implement the new logo and create consistent and recognizable branding every time the Commission puts information out to the public.*
- *Update the Commission's website to become the go-to site for any information needed about financial aid, critical policy updates, financial aid literacy and to learn more about the student experience in college vis-a-vis videos, testimonials and blogs.*
- *Develop targeted communications for specific audiences and demographic groups by leveraging the wide array of digital communications platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, digital newsletters and more.*

COVID-19 has not stopped our work. It has served to shine light on the significance of the work ahead. As we prepare for the upcoming academic year and the opening of the next FAFSA/CADAA application filing period, we are more determined than ever to serve the students hit hardest by the harsh realities of COVID-19. We are committed to ensuring that students have every opportunity to pursue their college aspirations unfettered by financial barriers.

With gratitude,

Marlene L. Garcia
Executive Director