

Item 13

(Information Item)

Outreach and Cash for College in the 2021-22 financial aid application cycle

SUMMARY:

This item provides an update on the Commission's Outreach and Cash for College programs for the upcoming 2021-22 financial aid application season and its plans to support increasing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the California Dream Act Application (CADAA) completion rates.

RECOMMENDATION:

This is an information item; no action is required.

BACKGROUND:

The Commission administers two outreach programs and partners with their organizers/project directors to increase FAFSA/CADAA completion among low-income, first generation students and to provide financial aid information for college planning and making informed decisions. The two Commission outreach programs include:

- Cash for College Workshops that are organized with community partners, K-12 and higher education administrators to help students and families complete their FAFSA or CADAA applications; and,
- Cal-SOAP Consortia who operate in 16 different underserved communities throughout the state.

Prior to COVID-19, each financial aid application season, the Commission supported and partnered with Cash for College Regional Coordinating Organizations to provide up to 1,000 in-person financial aid workshops across the state. Educators and community groups volunteered to assist in organizing workshops to provide hands-on assistance to students and families in completing the FAFSA and CADAA. These workshops are critical to marginalized communities to help educate families about the availability of financial aid resources for their students and to increase the chances for them to enroll and persist in college. Each year, Cash for College workshops assist over 30,000 low-income students and families in completing the financial aid application process.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world overnight and the way we manage our customer services. Many of our outreach platforms must now be converted to virtual environments to reach students and families and continue our work to increase FAFSA/CADAA completion. As students adjust to a virtual learning environment during an economic downturn many more families are

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concerned about how they will cover the costs of an education beyond high school. The Commission's outreach programs, and community partnerships are critical in assisting these families to fill in the financial gaps needed to cover their student's cost of attendance. To support these families struggling with financial need even more than ever, staff have made the Outreach and Cash for College programs a priority, especially in this catastrophic environment caused by COVID-19. Staff are working to identify new and innovative ways to continue our efforts in hosting Cash for College workshops in a virtual environment and partnering with Cal SOAP project directors, community organizations and other many other stakeholders to increase FAFSA/CADAA applications.

One of the Commission's overarching goals for the 2021-2022 financial aid application season is to strategically target outreach efforts to inform students of financial aid opportunities and drive greater FAFSA/CADAA completion. Staff will focus on targeting students and families who are less inclined to participate in Cash for College workshops because of limited information and support. Plans include the following:

- Redesign Cash for College workshops using virtual strategies and technologies to reach targeted students and families in need of financial aid support.
- Target outreach in Black, Latinx, Asian Pacific Islander, and Native American communities to organize Cash for College workshops.
- Develop Cash for College workshops designed specifically for use at community college campuses.
- Develop a Train the Trainer Program and create Financial Aid Training Certifications to recruit partners that will join ranks with the Commission to convene Cash for College workshops for low-income communities.
- Create a robust and strategic outreach and communications campaign for students and families that supplements and complements the Commission's outreach efforts.

Commission staff will continue to pursue new opportunities to create and implement a robust and strategic outreach and communications campaign for students and families. These outreach campaigns will focus on the financial aid needs of low-income communities where students are at risk of losing the opportunity to pursue a college education. Our goal is to establish new community partners to expand our reach in assisting low-income families throughout the state in order to equalize educational opportunity for all.

RESPONSIBLE PERSON(S):

Catalina Mistler, Interim Chief Deputy Director
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