

Item 5

(Information Item)

Executive Director's Report



Executive Director's Report September 2020

Dear Commissioners,

Welcome to our new Commissioners -- Isaac Alferos, Jessica Bartholow, and Steve Ngo!

We have now hit the six-month mark of having 100 percent of our CSAC employees work remotely from home. Staff largely adapted seamlessly to this new work arrangement. I have urged the leadership and management team to work closely with their staff to ensure they continue to support them in managing their work and life balance. This is especially important right now for parents with school-age students, who are helping their children transition to distance-learning education. We are living in extraordinary times which require extraordinary patience and flexibility.

We are also learning more about how to manage effectively in a virtual world. Staff have become experts at using various technology platforms to convene small and large Zoom meetings, statewide webinars, Powerpoint screen shares, and Teams chatrooms to stay connected. **Terry Artica**, Manager of the Institutional Support Unit, has stepped up to lead a staff employee group to develop virtual social activities to lighten up the work day and add a little fun to our work environment.

Staff are extremely busy preparing for our next financial aid cycle and application season, which opens October 1, 2020. All training workshops will be held virtually. Outreach and Training staff have already converted Statewide Educator Financial Aid training workshops to an online format, and current workshops are getting great response and participation. Registration is available on our website.

California Student Aid Commission

The following provides an update on key activities the Commission is engaged in to ensure students take full advantage of financial aid opportunities.

- **Call to Action: Train-the-Trainer Program to Expand Cash 4 College workshop opportunities.** The Commission is pulling out all the stops to continue offering virtual Cash 4 College (C4C) workshops statewide to low-income students. Last year, the Commission supported 1,008 local C4C workshops and reached more than 30,000 students. This year, the Commission is launching a Train-the-Trainer program to train hundreds of community partners throughout the state to expand the number of C4C workshops offered online. We are recruiting 250 community partners and training them to help students and families complete the FAFSA or CADAA. Each community partner (CP) will commit to hosting 10 C4C workshops and will strive to reach 30 students and families.

Goal: 250 CP x 10 C4C workshops x 30 participants = 75,000 students reached. This digital outreach approach has the potential to far exceed the number of students served last year and target remote and underserved communities. The Commission will be hosting a statewide Community Partners Call to Action Informational meeting on September 18, 2020 to recruit Community Partners and discuss how they can participate in the Train-the-Trainer program. We already have several Community Partners, including the 15 Cal-SOAP programs, our Regional Coordinating Organizations and many others. Train-the-trainer workshops will begin in October.
- **Child Savings Account Council.** The first Child Savings Account Council (Council) meeting was held September 4, 2020. The primary purpose of the meeting was to discuss the role of the Council and provide input on the Request for Applications for the Child Savings Account (CSA) Grants. Council members selected Kris Perry, Deputy Secretary for California Health and Human Services, as the Chair of the Council. The CSA grants will be made to support local governments and non-profit organizations that sponsor or collaborate with citywide or regional CSA programs. The Council will advise the Commission on strategies to facilitate the successful implementation of local CSA programs.
- **CSAC Statewide Policy Webinar Series: Empowering California Students.** In response to the global pandemic, the Commission has launched a webinar series to provide up-to-date policy and program updates. The topics have covered: 1) Executive Order Changes to Cal Grant in response to COVID-19; 2) Post COVID-19 Student Survey Data Release; and 3) Financial Aid Resources for Undocumented Students. On average, 400-500 individuals participated in these webinars. Upcoming webinars will include: Call to Action: Train-the-Trainer Program Information meeting, and a Post COVID-19 Student Survey Enrollment Update. Special shout out to **Judith Gutierrez**, who is the lead project manager for convening these webinars.
- **Leveraging CSAC's Rich Student Data Base.** The Commission manages a data base of more than a half million active student data records. Staff are building an infrastructure to leverage this data to help analyze financial aid trends and improve the uptake of state aid. Additionally, staff are working with the Department of Education to match race and ethnic

California Student Aid Commission

data with the Commission student records. For the first time, the Commission will have race and ethnicity data for all Cal Grant and state financial aid recipients and eligible non-recipients.

- **K-12 and Higher Education College Affordability Summit.** The Commission will be co-hosting the second annual K-12 and Higher Education College Affordability Summit with the Sacramento County Office of Education, Riverside County Office of Education, and U-Aspire on **November 17, 2020**. This will be a one-day virtual event. The morning will offer several general sessions that provide critical information about the challenges college students face in paying for basic college needs in light of the pandemic, and policies solutions to help students succeed in college. The afternoon will focus on hosting smaller, break-out sessions to address specific issues related to increasing the up-take of financial aid. We will also be recognizing this year's Race to Submit Winners.
- **Cal Grant Modernization 2.0.** As mentioned, members of the Legislature have asked the Commission to model what Cal Grant Modernization would look like without new funding. Staff have completed preliminary modeling to determine what structural policy changes can be implemented as an initial phase of Cal Grant Modernization. Staff will begin vetting various options and convene the Cal Grant Working Group one more time before the end of the year to seek input and guidance from the group. Our goal is to make gains in addressing equity and introduce a phase-in version of Cal Grant Modernization in January 2021.
- **Solution Oriented Policy Work Groups.** The Commission has embarked on convening three new policy work groups to address key issues and offer actionable policy solutions. The three new work groups include: 1) Student Loan and Debt Service Review Work Group; 2) Streamlining CalFresh for College Students; and 3) Expanding Financial Aid Access for Undocumented Students. The goal is for each of these workgroups to identify policy recommendations that can be acted upon in 2021.
- **Technology and Automation updates.** The Information Technology and Services Division (ITSD) has been busy at work improving the agency's productivity, service and effectiveness. We are nearing completion of the Grant Delivery System Modernization (GDSM), student and institution portals and base infrastructure this November. This is a major milestone that enhances system reliability, security and the user experience. There are still new improvements planned for the future. GDSM will continue adding business enhancements that make it easier for institutions to interact with the Commission and reduce the time needed to serve students. Additionally, the ITSD is working on other new technology advancements that will help us in serving students, such as adding chatbots to the call-center to handle basic caller questions and freeing up time for staff to address complex issues for students. The Commission is exploring how to use Customer Relations Management systems to more effectively manage customer case-loads. We have also hired a consultant to conduct a workplace assessemnt to determine where we can automate current manual processes to be more reliable and effective.

California Student Aid Commission

- **New and Improved Website.** Digital communications has been one of the most vital elements of keeping people informed during the global pandemic. The Commission, and virtually every other organization, has had to convert all critical information online. For the Commission, this entailed making all financial aid brochures and materials digitally accessible from our website. It also means that our website is the conduit to everything we do. We are in the process of updating the website with our new logo and brand. But more importantly, we are curating and reorganizing how our information is displayed and retrieved. The website will be student-centered, featuring many student stories, photos and videos. We hope to have the first iteration of the website updated by the end of September.

As you can see, the Commission is busy addressing numerous substantive issues and working to improve financial aid access for students. The staff and I are committed to using this moment of deep disruption to re-imagine the effective delivery of financial aid, reach historically underrepresented students and use data to drive policy discussions and solutions that will help students succeed in college.

Best Regards,

Marlene L. Garcia