

MODERNIZING THE CALIFORNIA STUDENT OPPORTUNITY & ACCESS PROGRAM

SB 737 (SENATOR MONIQUE LIMÓN, D-SANTA BARBARA)

SUMMARY

This bill would update and modernize the functions and priorities of the California Student Opportunity and Access Program (Cal-SOAP), which serves historically underserved students pursuing higher education at over 400 middle and high school sites. Specifically, this bill would focus on improving financial aid literacy and access through completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the California Dream Act Application (CADAA) across all regional Cal-SOAP projects, to promote postsecondary opportunities for underserved students.

BACKGROUND

Created in 1978, Cal-SOAP consists of 16 regional consortia (or projects) administered by the California Student Aid Commission (Commission) with a statutory mandate to improve access to higher education by raising the academic achievement levels of underserved populations. While there are numerous government funded programs that are designed to increase the academic college eligibility of underserved students, few focus on helping students understand the true cost of attendance and supporting them through the financial aid application process. Due to the institutional knowledge and staff expertise at the Commission, many Cal-SOAP projects have made college financing assistance – such as filling out the FAFSA or CADAA – a priority. However, the governing statute has not been substantially updated in over 40 years.

The economic pressures of COVID-19 have discouraged many low-income and first-generation students from submitting their FAFSA or CADAA, or pursuing higher education altogether, magnifying the need for a financial aid-focused outreach program.

Complex Financial Aid Application Process

All of this comes at a time when knowing about, applying for, and receiving financial aid has become increasingly challenging. A U.S. Department of Education survey found that 15% of students did not complete the FAFSA because they did not know about it, while 23% did not have enough information about how to complete the form. The FAFSA and CADAA consist of complex questions that require multiple forms of documentation. Compounding the problem, a disproportionate number of historically underserved students have their financial aid awards delayed because they are required to provide further documentation in a process known as “financial aid verification,” often resulting in “summer melt,” where high school graduates do not complete the additional steps to receive aid and enroll in college in the fall. While many California students qualify for some form of aid, the complexity of the process discourages many from applying, resulting in an estimated \$550 million in state and federal financial aid forgone every year in California.

THIS BILL

Given the changing demographics of today’s student population and the existing barriers to financial aid, this bill would update the statutes governing Cal-SOAP to reflect a program designed to help students and families:

- **Understand the true costs of college;**
- **Understand their financing options (including grants, scholarships, student loans, and work opportunities) and to;**
- **Apply for financial aid using the FAFSA or CADAA**

The proposed statutory amendments also aim to make project evaluation and data collection key pillars of Cal-SOAP. More regular and consistent evaluation of data will allow the Commission to partner with Cal-SOAP projects more effectively to offer quality financial aid services and maximize the number of students served.

For more information or questions about this bill, please contact Daniela Rodriguez (Daniela.Rodriguez@csac.ca.gov).