

September 16, 2003

Opinion Editorial

By Diana Fuentes-Michel

Executive Director, California Student Aid Commission

California's Commitment to College Financial Aid

For a decade California held the line on college fee increases. California students enjoy the greatest access to public colleges and universities of any state and perhaps the world. But this year Governor Gray Davis was faced with a budget shortfall and a Legislature that would not approve new revenues. That left the state's three public college and university systems with no choice but to increase student fees.

A sagging national economy that has crippled state budgets across the nation has led to college and university tuition increases, course cutbacks or enrollment caps in virtually every state. In other states, financial aid programs are drying up at the same time that fees are being increased. California students should know, however, that Governor Davis and the Legislature have maintained their commitment to affordability in higher education with guaranteed financial aid for needy students.

Students and families are understandably suffering from sticker shock as classes begin this fall. That's why it is so important that every campus spread the word about the good news – yes, there is some – contained in this year's budget for college students.

At the same time the Legislature and Governor made budget cuts that would lead to fee increases, *they also significantly increased financial aid so that needy students would not pay more.* And they included in the budget the most generous funding ever -- \$38 million – to improve financial aid programs and outreach to needy students at community colleges. This funding will ensure that bureaucratic roadblocks and overburdened financial aid offices won't stand in the way of any needy student going to college.

Under the Community College Board of Governors' fee waiver program, needy students will continue to pay no fees at all at community colleges, California's gateway to higher education and better job opportunities for thousands of students. More than half a million students have their fees waived under this program; that number is expected to rise as fees are increased.

Thanks to the most generous financial aid program in the nation, the Cal Grant guarantee program signed by Gov. Davis in 2000, *all* students who meet grade and eligibility requirements will continue to receive payment of full college and university fees, including fee increases, at the University of California and California State University.

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Additionally, students can access a myriad of institutional grants, scholarships and federal work-study aid available through colleges, community organizations, private businesses and more.

Today, over 240,000 students receive a Cal Grant award. California's taxpayers support this program at \$661 million a year which provides full fee coverage to needy students enrolled at our public universities as well as the opportunity to attend the state's private colleges. All students are encouraged to apply for this financial aid, because even in tough financial times, the Governor and Legislature are committed to making college possible for as many students as possible, regardless of their financial circumstances.

Even with the fee increases, California's colleges and universities remain among the most affordable in the nation. University of California fee levels are now comparable to other states' flagship public universities. The cost to attend a CSU is still a significant bargain, and community college fees remain the lowest in the nation by far. That's a commitment we intend to keep.