

California Student Aid Commission

Item 10 (Information/Action)

FAFSA and California Dream Act Completion Initiative

SUMMARY:

This item provides an update on implementing an initiative to support increasing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and California Dream Act Application (CADAA) completion rates among all California high schools. The Commission's WebGrants platform can be used to promote FAFSA and CADAA completion to enable all students to apply for federal and state financial aid. The Commission staff recommend developing a FAFSA/CADAA Dashboard (Dashboard) as a tool to report progress on application submissions, and support teachers, counselors, and other administrators as they identify strategies to help develop effective methods to reach all students.

The Dashboard will be on the CSAC homepage for the general public to view the application submission data and is intended to provide automatically generated progress. Commission staff will work towards implementing a FAFSA/CADAA Dashboard for the 2018-19 financial aid application period that begins on October 1, 2017.

Meetings will be scheduled for the FAFSA/CADAA Completion Initiative ad hoc committee members to discuss the requirements and monitor the progress of the Dashboard.

RECOMMENDATION:

The FAFSA/CADAA Completion Initiative ad hoc committee recommends staff develop a dashboard containing FAFSA and CADAA completion data to allow high schools, districts, county offices of education, and other stakeholders to monitor the progress of their students' financial aid application submissions.

BRIEF HISTORY OF KEY ISSUE(S):

The 2017-18 early FAFSA initiative was implemented by the United States Department of Education (US DOE) as a way to simplify and improve the FAFSA process. The 2017-18 FAFSA period began on October 1, 2016, rather than January 1, 2017 for the 2016-17 academic year. To align with the early FAFSA, the Commission also released the CADAA on October 1, 2016. With an earlier application, students now have more time to identify and explore their college options and make informed decisions. To achieve the benefits of the early FAFSA/CADAA, it was necessary to change and update the Commission's awarding process.

Changes made to the FAFSA in 2016 included changing the date to begin filing the application from January 1 to October 1, and using prior, prior year tax information. These two changes have simplified the application process for students and their families. In addition to those changes, California Education Code 69432.9 requires all California public high schools to submit their incoming senior grade point average (GPA) scores to the Commission by October 1. This allows the Commission to begin processing early Cal Grant award offers for those students who have both the FAFSA/CADAA and GPA submitted.

The California Student Aid Commission collects more than 1.7 million federal applications and approximately half a million GPA data used to award \$2 billion in state Cal Grant financial aid. Many

California high schools and communities across the state are implementing FAFSA/CADAA completion programs to increase the number of financial aid applicants. Some high school districts and county offices of education have designed tools to measure the number of FAFSA/CADAA applications among their high schools, which have been successful in challenging schools to encourage students and families to file the application.

Table 1 shows the FAFSA and CADAA completion data for high school seniors during the last four academic years and the upcoming 2017-18 year.

Table 1
High School Seniors FAFSA and CADAA Completion Data
Data as of 5/10/2017

Academic Year	Total FAFSA Applications	Total CADAA Applications	Total Combined Applications	Reported CDE Senior Enrollment	Total FAFSA/CADAA Completion %
2017-18	267,993	6,237	274,230	484,169	56.64%
2016-17	271,412	7,460	278,872	492,835	56.59%
2015-16	278,431	6,952	285,383	496,901	57.43%
2014-15	283,080	6,473	289,553	498,403	58.10%
2013-14	278,322	6,054	284,376	499,275	56.96%

Notes:

- *"Completed" applications were those not rejected by Federal Student Aid or the Grant Delivery System and ready for the determination of financial aid.*
- *On-time applications are those that met the March 2nd priority deadline.*
- *Total FAFSA and CADAA applications are applications through December of that year, which includes the on-time applicants.*
- *California Department of Education (CDE) senior enrollment counts were obtained through the CDE's DataQuest enrollment reports which do not distinguish undocumented students separately.*
- *FAFSA counts were obtained through the Grant Delivery System using a first time freshmen and age proxy.*
- *Data for the 2016-17 and 2017-18 AY are not final numbers.*
- *FAFSA completion percentages are not comparable to other publications because these include CADAA counts.*

As anticipated with the earlier opening of the FAFSA on October 1, 2017, there was an increase in the numbers of on-time 2017-18 FAFSA applications. With the opening of the earlier GPA window, high schools and district offices began to electronically submit GPAs in time for processing early Cal Grant award offers in November. The early Cal Grant awards addressed the US DOE's objectives of an earlier, easier and more efficient application process to allow for earlier availability of important financial eligibility information to prospective college freshmen.

US DOE FAFSA Completion Initiative

As part of the US DOE's FAFSA Completion Initiative, state student grant agencies may provide participating secondary schools, school districts, and certain designated entities with limited data about

students' progress in competing and filing the FAFSA. The Commission has a Student Aid Internet Gateway (SAIG) agreement with US DOE and provides information to high school districts and high schools on FAFSA completion for students whose GPAs were submitted for Cal Grant consideration. The Commission currently provides FAFSA/CADAA reports to high schools and districts through WebGrants reports.

The US DOE launched the FAFSA Completion initiative to increase its high school graduation and college completion rates, especially among students from low-income families. Because the timely completion of a FAFSA is an essential step for many families in obtaining financial aid to pursue a postsecondary education, the FAFSA Completion initiative will enable state student grant agencies and their school and district partners to identify those student who have not filed a FAFSA and to better target counseling, filing help, and other resources to those students. FAFSA completion is essential for receiving federal financial aid. Identifying such students can promote college access and success by ensuring students, particularly low income students, have access to financial aid to fund their higher education.

ANALYSIS: FAFSA/CADAA Dashboard Project

For many high school students, going to college is not part of their plan after high school. Many high school seniors do not start the process of pursuing education after high school because they believe their families cannot afford it. In an effort to encourage students to apply for financial aid, many California high school districts have implemented programs to challenge their high schools to increase the FAFSA and CADAA submissions. These tools track the students' application submissions and identify the application completion data within their districts. The goal of these FAFSA/CADAA tools is to achieve an increased completion rate among high school seniors from year to year.

The goal of a centralized Commission Dashboard is to provide statewide information to motivate counselors, teachers, and other school administrators to reach out to students and help them complete the financial aid process.

While students across California use the Commission's WebGrants platform to manage their Cal Grant, Chafee and Middle Class Scholarship awards, the Dashboard is intended to provide automatically generated progress of the following data by high school, school district and county.

- FAFSA/CADAA completion and submission
- Number of students eligible for Cal Grants
- Number of Cal Grant applications submitted and completed
- Number of Cal Grants awarded

The Dashboard project will be developed in phases with the first release to include statewide FAFSA/CADAA completion and submission data. A future phase will include Cal Grant information.

The Dashboard will be a tool that will allow high schools, school districts, counties, the State of California, and organizations the ability to track student financial aid application and awarding, by academic year, leading up to the Cal Grant March 2 deadline.

The Dashboard has the potential to support efforts to encourage students to submit the applications and continue increasing the FAFSA/CADAA numbers. The ultimate goal for this initiative is to close the gaps in financial aid and funding for all Californians in pursuit of a higher education. Partnering with K-12, higher education segments and other community organizations through this initiative could significantly impact the goal of providing financial accessibility to more eligible students.

Communication and Outreach Plan

The Commission staff will engage in a communications plan to disseminate information and request action steps and calls to action by educational leaders that encourage FAFSA/CADAA completion among the state's graduating seniors.

Beginning in July 2017, the Commission staff will begin a series of communications to the following organizations (including Associations that represent underrepresented students) to build partnerships intended to increase FAFSA/CADAA completion rates statewide:

- California Department of Education
- California School Boards Association
 - California Latino School Boards Association
- Association of California School Administrators
 - California Association of African-American Superintendents and Administrators
 - California Association of Latino Superintendents and Administrators
- California County Superintendents Educational Services Association
- Association of California Urban School Districts
- Small School District Association

The Commission staff will communicate with students and parents using printed material, texts, robo calls, website messaging, and other efforts. In addition, the Commission staff will utilize its own network of workshops and webinars to engage and encourage campus level participation in the Dashboard project:

- High School Counselor Workshops
- Cash for College Workshops
- Cal SOAP partners

The Commission staff will develop a monthly calendar beginning with July 2017 and continue until the March 2, 2018 deadline, and contain a sampling of suggested message content for Social Media engagement that will include using Hashtags and Tags:

Instagram
Twitter
Facebook
Snap Chat (filters)

Commission staff will provide updates on the progress of the Dashboard in upcoming Commission meetings. The goal is to launch the Dashboard for the 2018-19 application year beginning on October 1, 2017.

RESPONSIBLE PERSON(S):

Devon Graves, Interim Vice Chair
Catalina Cifuentes, Commissioner