

Item 13 (Information)

Update on the 2018-19 financial aid application period

SUMMARY:

This report provides an update on the 2018-19 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the California Dream Act Application (CADAA) filing period for Cal Grant consideration from October 1, 2017 to March 2, 2018. FAFSA submissions decreased by 2% and CADAA submissions increased by 5% in comparison to the prior year.

Following the opening of the FAFSA and the CADAA on October 1, 2017, the Commission began sending Cal Grant High School Entitlement award notifications to students on November 8, 2017. As of October 12, 2018, the Commission has offered over 164,613 new 2018-19 high school entitlement awards.

This item also provides an update on the status of the 2019-20 financial aid application season. On October 1, 2018, the Commission released the 2019-20 CADAA to continue to align with the opening of the FAFSA. As of October 15, 2018, the Commission has received 75% of the estimated total expected GPAs for the class of 2019. The initial 2019-20 Cal Grant High School Entitlement awards were processed in mid November 2018.

RECOMMENDATION:

Commission staff will continue to monitor and provide updates on the applications and GPA submissions as the 2019-20 award season progresses and will continue to work with institutions and other key stakeholders to ensure timely state financial aid consideration for California students.

BRIEF HISTORY OF KEY ISSUE(S):

Beginning with the 2017-18 academic year, the FAFSA application period begins on October 1 of each year and runs through June 30 of the following year (in prior years, the FAFSA opened on January 1). This timeframe allows students more time to evaluate their potential financial aid resources while applying to college.

Students report income information from an earlier tax year, minimizing the need for students to estimate and correct tax information. This also facilitates the utilization of the Internal Revenue Service's (IRS) Data Retrieval Tool to automatically import the tax information into the FAFSA.

The CADAA was launched during the 2013-14 Cal Grant application period following the passage of the California Dream Act in 2011, to allow undocumented students the ability to apply for state financial aid. The CADAA is administered by the California Student Aid Commission and follows the same filing timeline as the FAFSA for Cal Grants and other state financial aid programs. Over the last few years, legislation has expanded the scope of student eligibility, from early graduation at a California high school to California community college attendance and the attainment of an associate degree among others as specified in California Education Code § 68130.5.

Some of the unique financial aid challenges that Dream Act students face include: understanding their eligibility, filling the financial gap to cover educational costs since they do not qualify for federal financial aid, distinguishing between the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy and the

CADAA, and managing the uncertainty of providing parent or personal information that they fear could be used to compromise their immigration status.

The Commission continues to collaborate with campus financial aid administrators, segment offices, high school counselors and other advocates to assist and support Dream Act students in applying for state financial aid through the CADAA.

ANALYSIS:

See Attachment 13.1

RESPONSIBLE PERSON(S):

Catalina Mistler, Deputy Director
Program Administration and Services Division

ATTACHMENTS:

Description

- Attachment 13.1: Analysis of 2018-19 financial aid application period

ANALYSIS

2018-19 Cal Grant High School Entitlement Award Update

Financial Aid Applications

As shown on Charts 1 and 2, the Commission received 1,655,086 FAFSAs and 36,420 CADAAs by the March 2nd, 2018 deadline for the 2018-19 academic year, a 2% decrease and 5% increase, respectively as compared to the 2017-18 application year.

Chart 1

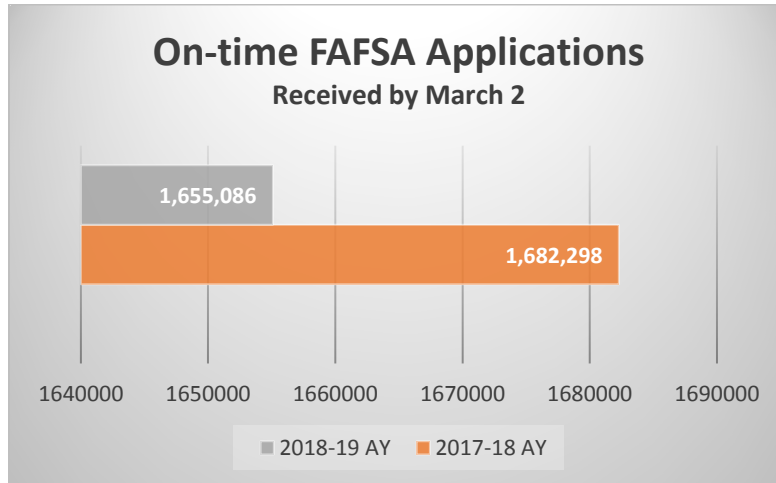
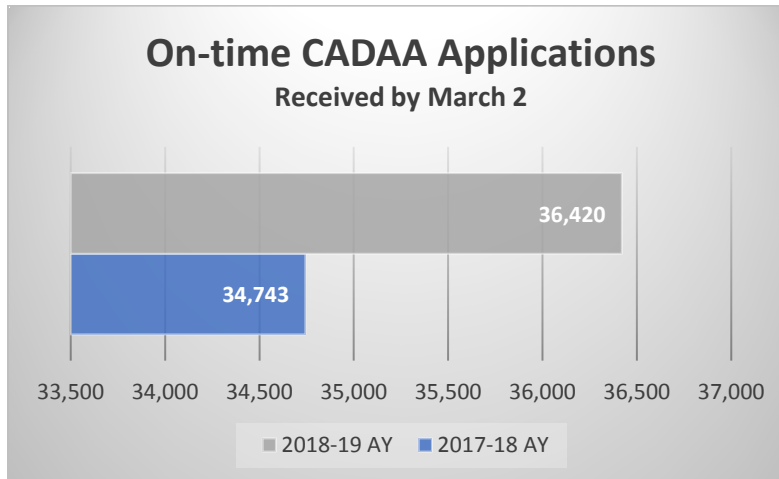


Chart 2



Grade Point Average (GPA) Data

Following the opening of the 2018-19 electronic GPA submission capability on May 24, 2017, school districts and high schools were encouraged to submit GPAs for their graduating seniors by the October 1, 2017 deadline. GPAs that were received through October 31 were matched to an available FAFSA/CADAA application and yielded the Commission’s initial Cal Grant Eligibility Notifications in November 2017.

Table 2 compares the number of GPAs received for the 2018-19 and 2017-18 application years. The percentage increased to 99% for public schools and increased to 69% for private schools due in part to efforts from Commission staff and other key partners in promoting the importance of submitting senior GPAs to the Commission by the October 1 deadline among high school counselors and school district and county administrators.

Table 2: Electronic GPA Submission
(As of October 12, 2018)

Type of School	Class of 2018		Class of 2017	
	GPAs Submitted	% of Graduating Seniors	GPAs Submitted	% of Graduating Seniors
Public	470,257	99%	457,126	92%
Private	20,710	69%	19,261	53%
Total GPAs (Public and Private)	490,967	98.3%	476,387	89.3%

Although private high schools are not mandated by law to submit senior GPAs, the Commission continues to encourage them to submit and communicate the benefits of receiving consideration for the Cal Grant and other financial aid programs.

Efforts to increase timely GPA submissions throughout the 2018-19 application period included, but were not limited to:

- Customer support to high schools, school districts and counties through phone and email.
- Training through live and recorded webinars, as well as in-person training. Commission staff held 23 live webinars since the opening of the 2018-19 GPA submission window on the following topics:
 - Web Grants Access
 - Calculate, Create and Upload Non-SSN GPAs
 - Non-SSN Reports and Matching

In addition to this, Commission staff hosted the annual High School Counselor Financial Aid Workshops series in partnership with the California Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (CASFAA). The 2017 series consisted of 35 half-day workshops throughout the State that took place between August 25, 2017 and October 17, 2017. Topics included updates to the FAFSA and CADAA, GPA uploading and the Cal Grant program.

- Communications through the Commission's List-Serv addressed to high school principals, counselors and district administrators. Several Grant Operations Memos and Grant Special Alerts were released throughout the 2018-19 application season. These communications included reminders on high school deadlines per California Education Code section 69432.9 related to GPA electronic submission, opt-out provision for students, high school graduation verification, as well as available trainings.

Attachment 13.1

Commission staff continued to partner with the California Department of Education (CDE) to release Cal Grant related communications to all district superintendents, principals, counselors and other school administrators and organizations.

Student Award Notifications

As part of the high school entitlement award process, selected students receive a paper Cal Grant Eligibility Notification that provides preliminary award information and directs them to create a Web Grants for Students (WG4S) account. This step is particularly important because the Commission's WG4S portal allows students to complete steps such as confirming the campus they will be attending, placing a leave of absence, updating their email and other demographic information, and completing other necessary steps to ensure their Cal Grant award payment can be processed timely at the institution they choose to attend.

In an effort to improve student award notifications that would prompt Cal Grant awardees to take timely action on their grant, the Commission partnered with the California Policy Lab at the University of California-Berkeley to pilot a new approach to the standard award letter beginning with the 2018-19 award year. Two "treatment" letters were created to replace the Commission's standard preliminary award notification letter for a randomly selected subset of high school entitlement awardees. The treatment letters were less visually cluttered, with fewer colors, graphics, and logos; were substantially shorter; used simpler language; and attempted to emphasize the student's deservingness of the award using insights from behavioral science. The two treatment letters and the baseline letter (standard award letter) were assigned a different URL to measure traffic generated to the WG4S portal. Preliminary evidence indicates that the alternate letters were more effective. Among those who were randomly selected to receive the treatment letters, the WG4S registration rate was as much as 8.5 percentage points higher.

In summary, the two treatment letters had better results than the baseline letter in prompting new Cal Grant awardees to complete the initial step of visiting the Commission's WG4S portal and creating their account. The effects remained even when measured at different points in time and persisted even 150 days after the letters were sent. There were also percentage point differences between the two treatment letters (*simplified language vs. simplified and belonging language*). Students who received the letter with the simplified and belonging language were 2.8 percentage points more likely to create accounts than those who received the simplified letter and 8.5 percentage points more likely than those who received the baseline letter.

Cal Grant High School Entitlement Awards

The Commission ran its initial High School Entitlement award cycle on November 8, 2017. As of October 13, 2018, new entitlement awards have been offered to 164,929 students.

Table 3 provides an overview of the number of 2018-19 high school entitlement award offers to FAFSA and CADAA applicants by the March 2 deadline and the number of additional offers made to date in comparison to the 2017-18 academic year. Cal Grant awards after the March 2 deadline come from students that finalize their on-time submitted applications but were missing a parent signature or needed corrections in order to generate a valid expected family contribution. Students also have the opportunity to appeal to receive Cal Grant award

consideration if circumstances beyond their control prevented them from completing their Cal Grant application (FAFSA/CADAA and GPA) by the March 2 deadline.

The number of total awards increased for both FAFSA and CADAA applicants in comparison with the prior year. This increase could be attributed in part to the increase in GPA submissions from public and private high schools as reflected in Table 2, and the continued outreach efforts from Commission staff and other key partners to increase awareness of the financial aid opportunities available to students in California. Outreach efforts include the increase in the Commission’s Cash for College workshops for students and their families and the high school financial aid workshops for counselors and school administrators.

Table 3: New Cal Grant High School Entitlement Awards
(As of October 13, 2018)

Award Offers	2018-19 AY		2017-18 AY	
	FAFSA Applicants	CADAA Applicants	FAFSA Applicants	CADAA Applicants
On or before March 2 nd	140,364	7,292	133,963	7,216
After March 2 nd	16,392	881	14,191	906
TOTAL	156,756	8,173	148,154	8,122

Outreach and Student Support

Cash for College Workshops

Cash for College (CFC) workshops provide hands-on assistance for low-income and first-generation students and parents to complete the FAFSA, CADAA, and Chafee Grant applications through partnerships with local and regional organizers. Cash for College Regional Coordinating Organizations and Commission staff conducted 1,068 workshops between October 1, 2017 and March 2, 2018.

While all students attending CFC workshops are asked to complete a brief survey to summarize their workshop experience, many students leave workshops without completing surveys. It is estimated that over 31,000 students were served throughout the 2018-19 application season and a total of 28,000 surveys were completed.

Student Support Call Center

The Customer Assistance and Processing Unit (Student Support) responds to student phone calls and emails. Table 4 shows the Student Support call center’s monthly phone contacts for October 1, 2017 through March 2, 2018. It also compares the call volume from 2017-18 and 2016-2017.

Historically our slowest month is December and our busiest month is February. As shown in Table 4, the last 2 days of the 2018-19 Cal Grant application period (March 1 and 2), equate to 27% of February’s total call volume (busiest month). Adequate student support service proves to be critical as students approach the March 2 Cal Grant deadline.

Table 4: Student Support Call Center Accepted Calls During the FAFSA/CADAA application period

Academic Year	October	November	December	January	February	March 1 and 2
2018-19	5,660	5,765	4,596	6,814	13,949	3,783
2017-18	3,825	4,027	2,891	7,652	10,540	1,111
2016-17	4,961	2,396	1,940	3,518	5,925	1,291

The call volume beginning October 2017 through March 2018 was higher in comparison to the two prior years, likely due to the newer timeline for the FAFSA/CADAA application period and because the Student Support call center took responsibility for handling password reset and USER ID calls for students beginning in January 2017.

Commission staff has taken proactive steps to help as many students as possible prior to the March 2nd deadline:

- Hiring seasonal staff such as Youth Aids or Limited Term Management Services Technicians.
- Extending our business hours for two weeks prior to March 2nd by closing at 7 pm Monday through Friday and opening Saturdays 8:00 am to 1:00 pm.
- Contracting with a multiple language line provider to help non-English speakers

During the busiest season, Commission staff from various units assist call center staff as available to respond to as many calls and emails as possible before the March 2 deadline. The top five calls during the busy season are:

1. How do I submit my GPA prior to March 2nd?
2. How do I confirm my school?
3. How do I apply for a Cal Grant?
4. Password Reset / User ID / Opening a WGS account.
5. Inquiring about the Award Claiming Process.

2019-20 Financial Aid Application Period Update

Cal Grant Entitlement Awards

Commission staff is currently working with school districts, high schools, and other key partners to ensure timely completion of 2019-20 financial aid applications. The Commission has released several communication reminders to high school counselors, high school principals, and county and district superintendents on the following topics:

- Cal Grant GPA Opt-Out provision
- Opening of the 2019-20 Cal Grant GPA electronic submission and available training
- WebGrants system access for GPA submission
- Opening of California Cash for College Workshop registration
- 2019-20 Student Expense Budget and Income and Asset Ceilings

Attachment 13.1

- October 1 deadline for GPA submission
- High School Counselor Financial Aid Workshops
- 2019-20 Online California Dream Act Application

Commission staff recently concluded the 2018 High School Counselor Financial Aid Workshops series in partnership with CASFAA. This year, the statewide series consisted of 42 half-day workshops serving more than 6,000 counselors that took place between August 31, 2018 and October 19, 2018. Seven additional workshops were offered this year to reach counselors and educators in previously underserved areas and those with low-college going rates. Over 2,000 survey responses have been received to date with 90% of participants rating the training as excellent or above average.

Every year, staff tailors the workshop content taking into account the feedback provided on the participant survey. This year, the feedback was very positive with minor suggestions for improvement such as providing the training at more locations, increasing the time allotted for Q&A, and including more interactive segments. Many responded that the workshop was on point with no need for improvement. In the words of one participant: *“This is the best counselor workshop/training/professional development training that I attend every year. This is my 13th year as a counselor and I have attended every year. Thank you for the work that you do.”*

In partnership with the CDE and Superintendent Tom Torlakson, a CSAC-CDE joint letter was released in August 2018, to reiterate the October 1 GPA submission and other important deadlines. The 2019-20 Cal Grant GPA electronic submission opened on May 14, 2018, and commission staff have conducted 16 live webinars between May 17 and October 30, 2018, to assist high school counselors and school administrators with the Cal Grant GPA submission process.

As of October 15, 2018, the Commission has received 75% of the total expected senior GPAs for the class of 2019. A total of 14,052 FAFSAs and 2,019 CADAAAs have been submitted to date for the 2019-20 academic year. Commission staff ran the initial 2019-20 Cal Grant selection process for the High School Entitlement award cycle in mid-November 2018 and continue to process students for award consideration on a weekly basis.

Based on the preliminary successful results from the 2018-18 Cal Grant award treatment letters that were created by the California Policy Lab, Commission staff have requested the continuation of the pilot letters to further research the effectiveness of the preliminary award notifications in helping students make timelier and better-informed decisions regarding their financial aid and college-going options. For the 2019-20 award year, a total of 3 new treatment letters were created with a particular focus aimed at improving students' understanding of the net costs of various college options.

Cash for College

Registration for the Cash for College workshop season started June 13, 2018. To keep in accordance with the opening of the 2019-20 FAFSA and CADAA, CFC workshops will run from October 1, 2018 through the March 2, 2019 Cal Grant deadline. Commission staff have set a goal to exceed the number of workshops held last year. Currently, there are more than 700 workshops scheduled statewide.