

# Show Us the Money

*Low-income students, families,  
and financial aid*





Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis

The Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis (CHEPA) brings a multidisciplinary perspective to complex social, political, and economic issues in higher education. Located within the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California, the Center's director is William G. Tierney. Conducting theoretically informed research with real-world applicability, the Center has a broad focus on three areas of higher education—improving urban postsecondary education, strengthening school-university partnerships, and understanding international education, with a particular focus on the Pacific Rim.

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# **Show Us the Money**

*Low-income students, families, and financial aid*

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**CENTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY ANALYSIS**

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA**

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## Introduction

*“We lose many students who would otherwise go to college based on the money.”*

—COLLEGE COUNSELOR

*Without financial assistance few urban low-income families will be able to pay for college on their own.*

FOR MANY URBAN LOW-INCOME STUDENTS, going to college may not seem feasible for various reasons. A primary reason for low participation is a lack of financial resources to pay for higher education<sup>1</sup> and a lack of information about the availability of financial aid. When students have families who view college as financially out of reach, access to accurate financial aid information is vital to convince them otherwise. An in-depth look at the ways in which financial aid information is disseminated in nine public and two private high schools in southern California reveals that there are various school- and community-based efforts being performed to provide students and their families with a range of financial aid-related information. Yet, frequently this information does not reach those most in need. The goal of these efforts is often to help urban low-income students and their families gain a better understanding of the different resources available to help fund a student’s college education. Without financial assistance in the form of loans, grants, scholarships, or work-study, few urban low-income families will be able to pay for college on their own. California is used as an example insofar as it offers some of the most extensive financial aid services in the United States.

<sup>1</sup> Flint, T.A. (1992). Parental and planning influences on the formation of student college choice sets. *Research in Higher Education*, 33 (6), 689-708.

Flint, T.A. (1993). Early awareness of college financial aid: Does it expand choice? *The Review of Higher Education*, 16 (3), 309-327.

St. John, E.P., & Noell, J. (1989). The effects of student financial aid on access to higher education: An analysis of progress with special consideration of minority enrollment. *Research in Higher Education*, 30 (6), 563-581.



*Family income is used to determine the amount of aid a student will receive and the amount of money their parents will be asked to contribute.*

**F**INANCIAL AID FOR COLLEGE comes in multiple forms including loans, grants, scholarships, work-study, and fee-waivers. College students use financial aid to pay for tuition, books, housing expenses (if a student lives away from home during college), and other college-related expenses. Postsecondary institutions offer all of these forms of aid to their students; however, grants allocated by the state and federal governments, loans, and work-study make up the majority of the financial aid available.<sup>2</sup> Eligibility for these funds is determined by the information included in the student's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Cal Grant G.P.A. Information Release Form.<sup>3</sup> Family income is the primary piece of information used to determine the amount of aid a student will receive and the amount of money their parents will be asked to contribute. Some colleges require students to complete the College Scholarship Service (CSS) Financial Aid PROFILE. Colleges and universities use the information from the FAFSA and CSS Financial Aid PROFILE to allocate school-based aid such as additional loans, grants and scholarships, and employment

<sup>2</sup> In the state of California, students are eligible for state aid in the form of State Work-Study or Cal Grants, of which there are three types offered. Eligibility for Cal Grants depends on a student's financial need and/or academic qualifications. Federal aid is also available in the form of Federal Pell Grants, Federal Perkins Loans, and Federal Work-Study.

<sup>3</sup> Students with a Grade Point Average of 2.0 or above are eligible to receive a Cal Grant.

*How do students and families find out about the resources that are available to them?*

opportunities to students. In most instances financial aid offices work with college billing departments to ensure that tuition and housing costs are paid first. Students may receive a refund check if there is money left over from their financial aid package once their college costs have been paid. Colleges and universities rarely monitor how students spend their credit balance, yet they assume students will use these remaining funds to pay for the other costs of college attendance, such as books. The following section will briefly describe the various forms of aid of available.

Many students are awarded “gift aid” to pay for college expenses in the form of grants and/or scholarships. Grants are financial awards given to students by an institution or by the state and/or federal governments that do not have to be repaid. Eligibility for these awards is typically based on a student’s family income. Public and private citizens and organizations also offer a variety of scholarships to help students who fit particular criteria pay for college. Scholarship awards can range from a few hundred to tens of thousands of dollars and, like grants, do not have to be repaid. Eligibility for scholarships may be based on a variety of factors including student need, academic achievement, and students’ interests. Student loans operate similarly to other loans to the extent that they must eventually be repaid. There are two types of student loans available through the state/federal governments and through institutions of higher education: 1) subsidized, which do not accrue interest while the student is in college; and 2) unsubsidized loans, which accrue interest while the student is in college. Students and/or their parents may also take out bank loans to pay for college expenses. Some students are eligible to earn money for college through a work-study job. A work-study program allows selected students to hold student-worker positions on their college campus that are designated specifically for such students. These positions provide students with an opportunity to earn money for college and to get job experience that will make them more marketable upon graduation. In addition to aid offered by the state and federal governments, school-based aid is also avail-

able. Clearly, various forms of financial assistance for college exist. The question is: How do students and families find out about the resources that are available to them? The discussion to follow aims to answer this question. (See pp. 9–10 for college and financial aid terms.)

## FINANCIAL AID TERMS

**Free Application For Federal Student Aid (FAFSA):** To apply for federal student financial aid, and to apply for many state student aid programs, students must complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The information provided on the FAFSA determines a student's eligibility for state and federal financial aid and sometimes institutional aid as well.

**Loans:** Federal programs are the single largest source of education loans. Private education loans are also available from a variety of sources to provide supplemental funding when other financial aid does not cover costs.

**Grants:** Grants are available to students through the state and federal governments. They are typically awarded to students based on financial need or academic indicators such as a student's grade point average. Unlike loans, grants are monetary awards that the student does not have to pay back.

**Scholarships:** Scholarships are another good source of aid for college because, like grants, they do not need to be repaid. Scholarships are offered by many organizations, including government, businesses, and nonprofit organizations. They may be based on academics, achievements, hobbies, talents, organizational affiliations, and career aspirations.

**Work-study:** Work-study is another form of aid provided to help students subsidize their college costs. Work-study positions are limited to college students and provide them with employment opportunities on or off campus.

## APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS AND TESTING TERMS

### *About Classes:*

**A-G requirements:** Since the bulk of our work occurs in California, we are most familiar with California requirements. This term refers to the list of courses that are necessary for eligibility for admission to University of California (UC) and many California State University (CSU) campuses. Each high school should have a list of UC eligible courses available to students. Practitioners from other states should verify college requirements with local universities or State Departments of Education.

**Advanced placement courses (AP classes):** Advanced placement refers to honors-level classes offered to high school students who seek the most rigorous possible academic preparation and potential college credit upon passing a national exam (see AP tests). The AP Program currently offers 34 courses in 19 subject areas. Different high schools offer different classes. Each course is developed by a committee composed of college faculty and AP teachers, and covers the breadth of information, skills, and assignments found in the corresponding college course.

### *About Exams:*

**Advanced Placement tests (AP tests):** Advanced placement tests are the final component of AP classes. The AP Examinations are administered each year in May and represent the culmination of college-level work in a given discipline in a secondary school setting. Students who receive a passing score of 3-5 on the AP test earn college credit for that particular subject area.

**American College Test (ACT):** This test is a standardized test that some universities accept in addition to, or in place of the SAT test (see definition below). The ACT Assessment is designed to assess high school students' general educational development their ability to complete college-level work. The test covers four skill areas: English, mathematics, reading, and science.

**Preliminary SAT (PSAT):** The PSAT/NMSQT (Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test) is a program co-sponsored by the College Board and National Merit Scholarship Corporation. This test assesses skills developed in a wide range of courses as well as through experiences outside the classroom. The PSAT/NMSQT has three parts: Critical Reading, Math, and Writing Skills.

**Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT):** The SAT is a test that measures verbal, mathematical and reasoning skills. Many colleges and universities use the SAT as an indicator of a students' readiness to do college-level work. SAT scores can be used as a basis for awarding merit-based financial aid. The SAT is typically taken by high school juniors and seniors and is administered several times each year.



**I**N THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA, financial aid-related information is typically made available to students and their families through three primary venues. These include 1) the high school; 2) the postsecondary institution or agency-sponsored events; and 3) community, government, and loan agencies.

High schools, colleges, universities, and community or government agencies primarily distribute financial aid information between the months of October and February and target high school juniors and seniors. Services are offered at these times due to the college and financial aid application cycles (see p. 40). In high schools in which student retention is extremely low, few students will attend high school long enough to receive this information. Several of the large urban high schools examined have 9th grade classes consisting of approximately 2,000 students, while their 12th grade classes consist of fewer than 600 students. Of the population of students who are retained, less than 10% will go on to college.

*Communicative Vehicles.* Opportunities for state and federal financial aid as well as publicly and privately funded scholarships are communicated year-round through the media and on the Internet. Information about financial aid and scholarships can reach students through eight primary means of communication, including:

- 1) daily announcements at school;
- 2) at their school's college counseling office;
- 3) counselor-produced newsletters;
- 4) flyer postings around school or in the community;

- 5) classroom or after-school presentations by individuals from the school or community;
- 6) presentations at community- or university-sponsored events;
- 7) periodicals or television commercials; and
- 8) on informational financial aid- or scholarship-related websites.

*Some large urban high schools can have a college counselor to student ratio of up to 1:5,000.*

The individuals and organizations that produce and/or disseminate financial aid and scholarship information vary widely depending upon the communicative vehicle. For example, at the high school level, the kinds of information available and to whom it is distributed is dependent upon existing resources. A well-informed counseling staff that possesses the necessary knowledge about college is essential for reaching a large number of students with college and financial aid information. Given that some large urban high schools can have a college counselor to student ratio of up to 1:5,000, a guidance counselor to student ratio of up to 1:800, and a limited number of AP (Advanced Placement)/honors courses and college preparation programs, it is unlikely that all students will be adequately informed about college requirements and financial aid availability.

Strong relationships between high schools and local colleges and universities can help facilitate the dissemination of information to more students. Still, in most instances when students have been made aware of the availability of financial aid and scholarships, they have received the information from a counselor or a teacher at their high school. In California, organizations such as the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC), EdFund, the Hispanic Scholarship Fund (HSF), and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) make financial aid information available through school- and community-based workshops and on the Internet. Websites with links to scholarship information are also made accessible free of cost by many non-profit and government agencies and for a fee by for-profit organizations.

Due to the variety of locations where financial aid information is distributed, the multitude of means by which this information is made available, and the many individuals and organizations distributing financial aid and scholarship information, the remainder of this discussion sheds light on the following:

- The types of financial aid and scholarship information available;
- How this information is disseminated;
- Who produces and distributes this information; and
- To whom this information is made available.

This discussion begins with the modes of financial aid information dissemination used in large urban high schools. Then, the various attempts by postsecondary institutions, community and government-sponsored agencies to provide students and families with financial aid information are described. (See Figure 1 for a summary of services provided through each venue.) The challenges these groups confront as they engage in their efforts are also delineated. Finally, college preparatory and financial aid activities at large urban public schools are compared with those at smaller affluent private schools to demonstrate existing disparities and the need for further research and policy shifts in this area.

*Figure 1. Financial Aid Services Offered By Venue*

VENUE	ACTIVITIES CONDUCTED	INFORMATION DISSEMINATED
<p><b>HIGH SCHOOL</b> (College Counseling Office)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ One-on-one college counseling</li> <li>■ Classroom presentations on college and financial aid</li> <li>■ After-school presentations for students and families on college and financial aid</li> <li>■ Informational announcements about events, testing, deadlines, and applications</li> <li>■ Assistance with college, financial aid, and scholarship applications</li> <li>■ Line-by-line FAFSA workshops</li> <li>■ Interpretation of the Student Aid Report</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Monthly newsletters informing students about upcoming college-related events, tests, deadlines, and applications</li> <li>■ Fact sheets outlining college eligibility requirements for different types of postsecondary institutions</li> <li>■ College, financial aid, and scholarship applications</li> </ul>
<p><b>POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS AND AGENCIES</b> (College/University-Based Programs)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ One-on-one college counseling</li> <li>■ Classroom presentations on college and financial aid</li> <li>■ After-school presentations for students and families on college and financial aid</li> <li>■ College recruiter visits to provide eligible students with information about particular postsecondary institutions</li> <li>■ Periodic meetings with participants of the college preparation program</li> <li>■ Financial aid award letter evaluation workshops</li> <li>■ Financial planning workshops for families</li> <li>■ Collegiate money-management workshops for students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Websites containing college admissions and financial aid information</li> <li>■ Publications to help students prepare for college</li> </ul>
<p><b>COMMUNITY AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES</b> (MALDEF, CSAC, Cash for College)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Assist high schools by making classroom presentations about college and financial aid</li> <li>■ On/Off-site workshops and events for students and families about financial aid</li> <li>■ On/Off-site line-by-line FAFSA workshops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Websites containing college admissions and financial aid information</li> <li>■ General lists of scholarships for all students and for particular populations such as underdocumented and/or undocumented students</li> <li>■ Publications on how to acquire funding for college</li> </ul>

## Information Resources

**F**inancial aid-related information is commonly disseminated to students through their high school in six particular ways. These include: 1) daily announcements; 2) counselor-produced newsletters; 3) flyer postings; 4) classroom presentations; 5) communications from the college counseling office; and 6) postings on the school website.

*Announcements.* Announcements inform students about available scholarships or about financial aid-related deadlines and activities and often are broadcast over a school's public announcement (P.A.) system. College- or financial aid-related announcements are also sometimes included in "home-room announcement sheets," which teachers are asked to read to their class during that period. P.A. announcements are sometimes inaudible and many college counselors contend that few teachers actually relay the information in the announcements to their classes. The frequency of these announcements varies given the sporadic nature of college, financial aid, and scholarship deadlines. During the college and financial aid application periods, announcements are made more often to inform students of application assistance opportunities and/or application deadlines.

*Newsletters and Flyers.* College counselor-produced newsletters are made available primarily to teachers who are responsible for either reading them to their classes or posting them somewhere in the classroom. These newsletters are also made available in the college counseling office and typically contain information for students about upcoming events and deadlines related to college and financial aid. Counselors also post flyers around the school to publicize financial aid-related activities and information such as application workshops and scholarship availability or deadlines. In schools with active parent groups, parents also produce newsletters that go out to students and families to inform them about college- and financial aid-related events and opportunities for families.

*During the college and financial aid application periods, announcements are made to inform students of application assistance opportunities and/or application deadlines.*

*Classroom Presentations.* Counselors and individuals from postsecondary institutions visit classrooms to make presentations about financial aid-related activities, applications, and deadlines. Students should begin their financial planning for college early, yet most counselors do not begin discussing financial aid with high school students until their senior year. Many high school counselors make an effort to reach all 12th grade students with information about applying for financial aid and scholarships. The presentations are most commonly made in the students' English, Government, or Economics classes because they are required courses for all 12th grade students. These students are often the only group provided with financial aid information. College counselors make college-related presentations to 11th grade students, but most include little, if any, information about financial aid. The rationale for this strategy is that the information is not relevant for juniors who should instead be thinking about where they intend to apply to college and what these applications entail. However, many scholarships have waiting lists or deadlines that do not necessarily correspond with college application deadlines, so students are ill-advised to wait until after they apply to college to begin exploring scholarship opportunities.

*College counseling office.* While counselors often make a considerable effort to reach out to students with financial aid information, one of the most effective ways for students in large urban high schools to learn about financial aid availability, eligibility, and deadlines is to visit their school's college counseling office themselves. These offices are typically places where students can find information about how to apply for financial aid, what forms they need to do so, and when the applications are due. A great deal of financial aid information is generally available in the college counseling office as most college counselors continually collect, update, and post scholarship applications and other financial aid opportunities. Some counselors maintain a "scholarship binder" or "scholarship board" where scholarship announcements and applications are kept. Consequently, students who regularly visit the college counseling office know

*The higher-achieving, savvier students who tend to visit the college counseling office more frequently are more likely to learn about scholarships than their peers.*

where to look for new scholarship information.

Teachers and counselors contend that the higher-achieving, savvier students who tend to visit the college counseling office more frequently are more likely to learn about scholarships than their peers. Counselors typically advise students to stop by the college counseling office at least once each week to check for any new scholarship information. Irrespective of the nature of a given scholarship, students are less likely to apply for a grant if the application requires an essay. Many students will apply only for scholarships that involve filling out an application form, and will opt out of those that ask them to write essays or get letters of recommendation. Students often feel overwhelmed already by the college application process and the essays and letters of recommendation the process requires. Consequently, students and counselors admit that many students are less inclined to complete scholarship applications that require a similar level of involvement.

Some counselors encourage students to create a scholarship binder or portfolio of their own to keep track of scholarships they have applied for. They also push students to get letters of recommendation early and to store copies of them in their binder so that they can later attach them to scholarship applications that require them.

### **Application assistance**

College counselors use the college counseling office to assist students with the financial aid application process. For California students, the financial aid application process involves completing two forms: the Federal Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the Cal Grant G.P.A. Information Release Form. Students who intend to apply to private and/or more competitive four-year institutions may also complete the CSS Financial Aid PROFILE.

Most college counselors offer at least two evening financial aid workshops for students and their families: one shortly after college applications are due (i.e., November-

December) to familiarize them with the FAFSA; and another session prior to the FAFSA deadline (i.e., January-February) to conduct line-by-line application assistance workshops. Another common practice for college counselors is to refer students to websites such as [www.fastweb.com](http://www.fastweb.com) and [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com), which students can consult to learn about scholarships. Verifying students' grade point averages (information that is required for the Cal Grant application) is another way in which counselors ensure that students are aware of their eligibility for financial aid. Counselors have various levels of success with this process. Once a student receives the Cal Grant application back from the counselor, it is the student's responsibility to mail it in. High schools that are able to can send this information to the California Student Aid Commission electronically.

### **Interpreting Financial Aid Eligibility and Awards**

Some counselors and postsecondary professionals also help students who visit the college counseling office interpret their Student Aid Report (SAR). The SAR is the document that students receive in response to their FAFSA; it informs students of their eligibility for the Federal Pell Grant and determines an estimated family contribution (EFC) based on the school(s) the students have indicated they are interested in attending. Many students find this form confusing. Yet, to make an informed decision about which college to attend, students and their families must clearly understand both the SAR and the financial aid award offer letter. For example, many institutions provide more gift aid for a student's first years of college but offer more loans for the later years. This information typically is not made explicit in the financial aid award offer letter so students must know to ask the right questions to determine the amount of debt they will incur at one institution versus another. If students are not aware of these differences, they may choose a school that they ultimately cannot afford to attend or that will require taking out more loans than they had anticipated.

## Fee-waivers

In addition to helping students obtain funding for college, many testing services such as the College Board are able to offer forms of financial assistance to help students while they are still in high school. A limited number of fee-waivers are made available to students through their high school's college counseling office to help them pay college application fees and registration fees for tests such as the PSAT, SAT I, SAT II, ACT, and Advanced Placement exams, many of which they must complete to be eligible for admission to competitive four-year institutions. Students who are able to demonstrate need<sup>4</sup> are eligible to receive fee-waivers. These waivers are helpful to the students who receive them. However, because students are allotted a limited number of fee-waivers, those interested in applying to multiple colleges and taking multiple tests are unlikely to receive a waiver for all of them. Students are limited to four fee-waivers for the University of California campuses, while fee-waivers for the PSAT and ACT are limited to juniors and fee-waivers for the SAT I and SAT II are limited to juniors and seniors. In addition, an individual student is typically eligible only for one or two fee-waivers per test. Yet, students are often advised to take certain tests up to three times to improve their scores, which means that students will have to pay out-of-pocket if they intend to take the tests more than twice. Registration fees for these tests can range from \$11 to \$30 or more, while college application fees are typically \$50 or more.

*Because students are allotted a limited number of fee-waivers, those interested in applying to multiple colleges and taking multiple tests are unlikely to receive a waiver for all of them.*

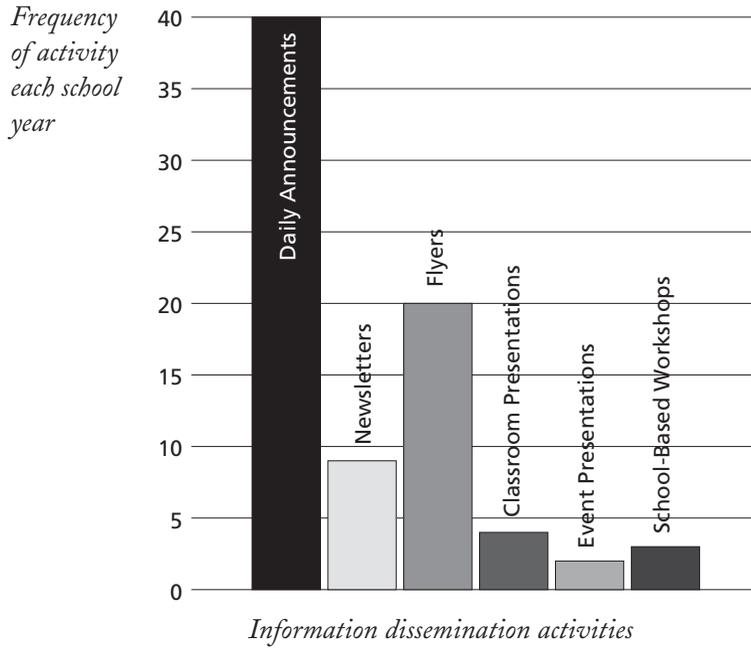
<sup>4</sup> "Need" for these programs is typically determined by whether or not a student qualifies for the state's "free or reduced price lunch program" and/or by family income.

## Dissemination of Financial Aid Information

Many schools are not able to effectively communicate with all students and their families about financial aid-related information in a systematic manner. Rather, students who take it upon themselves to visit their college counseling office (if their school has one) and speak to their school's college counselor (if their school has one) will receive the most information about federal/state aid and scholarships. As the following discussion demonstrates, some counselors attempt to reach all students with college and financial aid information, while others only target the highest achieving students or particular grade levels. Some counselors also make efforts to reach families with this information, while others do not. Those students and families who do not seek college and financial aid information and who are not targeted to receive this information are left to fend for themselves. As Figure 2 demonstrates, the frequency of financial aid information dissemination activities varies greatly, with small group and individual counseling activities occurring less frequently.

Figure 2.

### Frequency of Financial Aid Information Dissemination Activities



*Students who are most in need of guidance are those least likely to ask for help.*

*Targeting Students.* Guidance, track, or grade-level counselors often have caseloads of several hundred students. Their large caseloads make providing college- and financial aid-related information to all students difficult. As a result, the highest-achieving and/or most motivated students are the ones most likely to be provided with this information. These students may visit their guidance counselor and college counselor on several occasions during their junior and senior years, while the average student may meet with a counselor three times or less over the course of all their years in high school. Guidance counselors may see several students on a given day or in a given week, but they primarily meet with students to discuss disciplinary or scheduling issues rather than college preparation. As a result, students who go to their guidance counselor seeking college and financial aid information typically are advised to visit their school's college counseling office. Students who participate in smaller learning communities such as college preparation programs, AP/honors courses, or magnet/academy programs have an advantage over other students because such programs provide them with additional support. Moreover, given their higher GPA's and more rigorous course-taking patterns, students involved in such programs are also more likely to be targeted by counselors for college advisement.

The average student in the urban high schools examined for this paper may receive general information about financial aid, but this student is unlikely to be targeted for one-on-one financial aid counseling. Unfortunately, students who are most in need of guidance are those least likely to ask for help. This reality exists not because the average student has no interest in attending college, but more so because the student is unlikely to know what questions to ask if given the opportunity. Indeed, at the largest urban high schools, guidance counselors often have caseloads of up to 800 students each, making it difficult to provide even a small number of students with college counseling.

Some college counselors, however, make an effort to reach all students with information about college requirements regardless of their academic abilities. In contrast, many

of the college-based preparation and outreach programs that visit their schools target students solely based on grade point averages and course-taking patterns. As a result, these programs provide only a limited number of students with support. While efforts on the part of counselors to compensate for this disparity by providing college admissions-related information to all students is to be commended, it does little to remedy the existing information gap with regard to financial aid.

*Large urban schools tend to be diverse places with students from all over the world and thus require the provision of financial aid-related information in multiple languages.*

*Targeting Families.* Some college counselors offer financial aid-related services to families. These services are typically in the form of financial aid information and application assistance. However, the majority of the printed materials provided to students and sent home to families are only in English, which often impedes access to this information by families who speak other languages. Many schools also utilize automated phone-calling systems to invite families to financial aid-related workshops at the school, but again these messages generally are limited to English. Large urban schools tend to be diverse places with students from all over the world and thus require the provision of financial aid-related information in multiple languages. The purpose of sending materials out or making calls to the home is negated if families do not receive information that they can understand. Some counselors provide translators at financial aid-related events when requested by students or families. Typically, a bilingual parent or teacher will be brought in for this purpose. Still, if family members cannot understand the information notifying them of such activities, they are unlikely to attend.

## Postsecondary Institution, Community, and Government Sponsored Agencies

### Interventions and Support from Outside the High School

Fortunately, high schools are not alone in their efforts to provide their students with information and services related to financial aid. Financial aid personnel from local colleges and universities are often utilized by college counselors to conduct financial aid-related workshops or information sessions for students and families. Staff members from university-based college preparation programs may also be asked to assist with classroom presentations on financial aid. Some counselors do not feel qualified to conduct these sessions and prefer to bring in financial aid professionals whom they view as having the most up-to-date information. Individuals from these postsecondary-institution-based groups as well as from community and government agencies, typically provide five types of financial aid-related services, which include:

- 1) School- and community-based financial aid and scholarship information workshops for students and families;
- 2) Classroom presentations to students on financial aid and scholarship availability;
- 3) Line-by-line financial aid application workshops for students and families.
- 4) Financial aid award letter evaluation workshops; and
- 5) Collegiate money management workshops for students.

Community and government agencies that conduct high school and community-based financial aid workshops for students and families include the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC), EdFund, UniteLA, and the Mexican American Legal Defense & Education Fund (MALDEF). Most of these groups offer line-by-line FAFSA workshops, while MALDEF also provides informational services to undocumented students and their families to let them know about their particular financial aid options. Many of the high schools in Los Angeles participate in “Cash for College” (previously known as College Goal Sunday) workshops. These workshops are jointly offered by the City of Los Angeles Mayor’s Office and local high schools. They are held

at school sites throughout the city prior to the FAFSA deadline and entail multilanguage “line-by-line” FAFSA sessions to help students and families complete the forms. Observation of one of these sessions demonstrates that students and families have many questions about the financial aid application process and indicates that even with this type of assistance, many students and their families leave the session confused and with incomplete applications. The difficulties of filling out financial aid forms that are faced by first-generation college-goers and their families speak to the importance of opportunities for individualized assistance given that each student’s family’s financial information can differ greatly.

*Targeting Students and Families* University-sponsored events may target specific populations of students such as those who meet specific college-eligibility criteria. One example of a program that does targeted recruitment is the University of California’s Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP), which targets high school students with a 3.0 grade point average or higher, who are also enrolled in courses that meet the system’s eligibility requirements. Other college- and university-based groups that operate on high school campuses include MESA (Mathematics Engineering and Science Academy), Upward Bound and other TRIO programs. Students and their families may be invited to participate in these programs as early as the student’s 9th grade, but the level of their participation is largely determined by the amount of resources available at their school and the attention they are given by the sponsoring postsecondary institution.

In most instances, community-sponsored financial aid events are open to all students and their families. Information about these sessions is often disseminated through the high school’s college counseling office or through mailings sent to students’ homes. Despite the various efforts described to provide students and families with financial aid and scholarship information, one would be mistaken to assume that all students who are reached will apply for and receive the needed

*Students and families overestimate the costs of college and underestimate the availability of financial aid.*

funding for higher education. In fact, counselors concur that many students and their families are confused by the information they receive regarding financial aid. They are unsure about how to apply for aid and unaware of the different forms for state, federal, and school aid that are available. Common misconceptions are that all financial aid must be repaid or that no financial aid must be repaid. There is a lack of understanding about the difference between grants and loans. Students and families may overestimate the costs of college and underestimate the availability of financial aid. In addition, students and families are often led to believe that they will receive better information if they pay for it. As such, students and families may be taken advantage of by companies whom they pay to help them acquire financial aid, even though the same information is available at their child's high school for free.

#### **Published Materials**

Postsecondary, community and government agencies produce various college- and financial aid-related materials for students and families. Unlike those prepared by some high schools, these materials are often produced in multiple languages. The materials include everything from four-page pamphlets with a year-by-year schedule for high school course completion to detailed books with a variety of college admissions and financial aid information. Many publications are available for free at public libraries and at high schools in the college counseling offices, while others may be purchased in bookstores or online. (See p. 44 for a sampling of financial aid publications.)

## Print and Electronic Media

Television and periodical advertisements are places where students and families may find information about loans, scholarships, and student employment opportunities to help pay for college. However, few students mention these as places where they have acquired financial aid information. Financial aid information that is disseminated through many media outlets is not provided systematically and is sometimes inaccurate. Consequently, high school students are often advised by their counselors and teachers to search for college, financial aid, and scholarship information on the Internet. Students who generally are not well connected to school staff or peers who can advise them about college frequently utilize the Internet to acquire this information. Students who register with particular websites such as Fast Web or the College Board are regularly mailed updated college and scholarship information.

Several online companies currently offer services for a fee that have been identified by the Better Business Bureau and Federal Trade Commission as “scams.” Many of these groups are under investigation for charging families for services that were never provided. When students and families are not well informed about the availability of free college and financial aid services, they are more likely to fall victim to these scams. (See p. 29 for a list of free financial aid-related websites.)

## Internet Resources

The following are websites commonly used by high school students and staff and contain a great deal of valuable information about financial aid and scholarships to help students pay for college.

### *General financial aid information:*

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U.S. Department of Education's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)	<a href="http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/index.htm">http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/index.htm</a>
CollegeBoard	<a href="http://www.collegeboard.com">http://www.collegeboard.com</a>
California Student Aid Commission	<a href="http://www.csac.ca.gov">http://www.csac.ca.gov</a>
The Smart Student Guide to Financial Aid	<a href="http://www.finaid.org">http://www.finaid.org</a>
529 Savings Plans	<a href="http://www.savingforcollege.com">http://www.savingforcollege.com</a>

### *Loan information:*

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SallieMae	<a href="http://www.salliemae.com/index.html">http://www.salliemae.com/index.html</a>
EdFund	<a href="http://www.edfund.org">http://www.edfund.org</a>
EdWise	<a href="http://www.edwise.org">http://www.edwise.org</a>

### *Scholarship information:*

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FastWeb	<a href="http://www.fastweb.com">http://www.fastweb.com</a>
CollegeBoard	<a href="http://www.collegeboard.com">http://www.collegeboard.com</a>
FinAid	<a href="http://www.finaid.org">http://www.finaid.org</a>



**T**he discussion here highlights the fact that when thinking about the challenges related to the dissemination of financial aid and scholarship information, it is important to direct one's attention to three key considerations. First, the practices college counselors and others utilize to disseminate financial aid-related information largely determine who receives information and the type of information they receive. If students are not perceived by counselors or college recruiters as being college-bound due to mediocre grades or lack of academic preparation, it is unlikely that they will be targeted by those who provide financial aid information. Second, many urban low-income students do not perceive themselves as college-bound due to their low family incomes. To reach these students and their families and make them aware of the financial resources available that can assist them in paying for college requires additional efforts. Last, the types of financial aid-related services that college counselors and recruiters provide are external to everyday schooling. Although students may receive information through classroom presentations done by college counselors or recruiters, the actual application processes for different forms of aid do not take place in the classroom. Students who seek assistance with financial aid and scholarship applications must acquire it through their school's college counseling office or through workshops that take place during non-class time, such as during lunch or after school. As the discussion to follow demonstrates, reaching all students in large urban high schools with financial aid information and providing them with the necessary assistance is incredibly difficult.

*College counselors at low-income urban high schools are often responsible for multiple duties in addition to college counseling.*

## **School Size**

**B**ecause many low-income urban schools are overcrowded, they often operate on a year-round or multi-track schedule. Multi-track schedules enable schools to serve more students than their school has space for over the period of the calendar year. In most instances, three or four tracks of students and teachers will be staggered throughout the year with no more than two tracks on campus at a given time. Many counselors contend that the multi-track schedule leaves most students at a disadvantage with regard to college and financial aid applications. For example, students may miss application deadlines or fail to receive information because they are off-track (i.e., not enrolled in school at a specific time). In a school operating on three or four tracks, some students will surely be off-track during the college application, financial aid application, and/or college-decision-making processes.

If students are not on campus during any one of these three process periods, they are less likely to receive the necessary advisement and guidance to complete them successfully and in a timely manner. When students are off-track, few college counselors have time to call the college-eligible off-track seniors to make sure they filled out their applications. Even when urban high schools operate on a traditional school year, they typically serve between 3,000 and 4,000 students at a time with only one college counselor, leaving many students uninformed about college and financial aid. In addition, these counselors may have other responsibilities.

## **Limited Counseling Staff**

**C**ollege counselors at low-income urban high schools are often responsible for multiple duties in addition to college counseling. These additional duties make reaching students other than seniors much more difficult. Some college counselors are not full-time counselors due to budgetary constraints. As a result of these limitations, in some instances information is disseminated through college preparation pro-

grams and guidance counselors. College counselors disagree about the utility of working with teachers and guidance counselors to disseminate information. Some prefer to do it on their own because they believe that teachers and guidance counselors are not well enough educated about financial aid. Many counselors also utilize the assistance of peer counselors. Peer counselors are high school students who have been trained to provide their peers with college-related information. In some high schools, peer counselors are given a caseload of students whose progress they are responsible for monitoring and with whom they are expected to meet on a regular basis to convey information on colleges and financial aid. Peer counselors may also do classroom presentations. In addition to school-based peers and adults, families ought to play a critical role in college preparation.

### **Lack of Familial Participation**

Many of the schools examined have low family turnout for college- and financial aid-related workshops. Although poor familial participation is not the case in all large urban high schools, it was found to be common enough to warrant attention. Indeed, some counselors no longer conduct college- or financial aid-related activities for families because they have received a poor response to them in the past. The fact that families do not attend school-sponsored events that aim to provide college and financial aid information raises the question: What can schools do to help families understand the importance of financial aid to their child's college education? Successful efforts to provide this information include financial planning workshops, scholarship information sessions, and line-by-line FAFSA workshops in multiple languages to assist students and families with financial aid applications. These events provide low-income students and families with the opportunity to ask questions about how to pay for college and provide them with valuable information about existing options. The difficulties that arise when schools and others attempt to reach low-income students and families with

financial aid information are further complicated when these groups are dealing with special circumstances, which will be discussed further in the section to follow.

### **Special Populations**

*In some school districts, undocumented students can account for 30-50% of a school's population.*

*Undocumented students.* Undocumented students are a growing population in the large urban high schools examined. In some school districts, undocumented students can account for 30-50% of a school's population. In fact, when asked about their biggest challenges with regard to financial aid, many counselors discuss the difficulties they face when working with undocumented students. Counselors are in the business of selling college, but they struggle with telling undocumented students that they should prepare for college when they know that the students may not be able to pay if they are admitted. Other counselors express similar frustration when having to inform undocumented students that they are not eligible for state or federal aid. Counselors provide accounts of many undocumented students who were admitted to some of our nation's most prestigious public and private universities as a result of years of hard work, but were devastated when they realized they would not be able to attend due to their ineligibility for financial aid.

Financial aid is complicated for undocumented students who, despite legislation such as California's Assembly Bill 540 and similar laws in other states allowing these students to pay in-state tuition, are often still unable to pay for college tuition. The argument can be made that undocumented students should consider themselves fortunate to have the opportunity to attend U.S. institutions of higher education and to be entitled to pay in-state tuition costs. Yet, what one may not realize is that these students have had to overcome numerous obstacles to become eligible for admission to college, to four-year universities in particular, including learning to read and write a second language. These students have also had to successfully navigate the U.S. educational system, which their families are largely unable to assist

them with. An ethical argument can be made that these students should not be penalized for their presence in this country, a reality over which they have had no control. Many undocumented students have attended school in some U.S. school districts for up to 10 years or more and during this time the districts have received money for the students, regardless of the students' citizenship status. These districts might consider providing some level of financial assistance to undocumented students given that they benefit financially from the students' presence in the district.

*In some of our nation's poorest schools, more than 40% of a school's student population may be living in foster care.*

*Students in foster care.* Students living in foster care are one of the most difficult populations to reach with college and financial aid information. Many of these students do not attend school regularly and often live in unstable home environments. In some of our nation's poorest schools, more than 40% of a school's student population may be living in foster care. Unlike the traditional image of the foster home where a single family takes in a child temporarily until the child returns to their biological parents or until a permanent home can be found, many low-income urban students live in foster or group homes where there may be several other foster children. In other instances, the foster home can be that of a family member or of a family friend who has agreed to allow the child to live in their home for an indefinite amount of time. Low-income urban students may be living in foster care for a variety of reasons including having parents who are incarcerated, having been victims of abuse or neglect, or having been mandated to live in a supervised setting outside of their birth family's home by social services or the juvenile justice system. Regardless of the foster care situation, reaching these students and their foster families with college and financial aid information is extremely difficult, particularly in the all-too-common instance where a child moves frequently from one foster home to another.



**D**ESPITE THEIR ATTEMPTS to disseminate financial aid information to all of their students, many large urban high schools are unable to systematically reach their students with even the most basic information about the types of aid available and how to apply for it. As discussed previously, providing students with financial aid information is especially difficult when one college counselor is charged with reaching 3,000-5,000 students.

Insight into the financial aid services described here was gathered through interviews and observations conducted by a team of five researchers at nine large urban high schools over the course of one school year. Four of the schools operate on a multi-track schedule, an indication of overcrowding. Two of these schools serve nearly 4,000 students, one serves 4,500 students, and the last school serves over 5,000 students. Of the remaining five schools, three serve approximately 3,000 students. The last two schools are magnet schools that serve less than 2,000 students. As explained, the average student at these high schools receives 0-3 financial aid-related messages per year; the effectiveness of those messages is hard to gauge insofar as information is frequently received in a passive manner and there is little systematic follow-up. As a result, many low-income students and their families continue to see higher education as financially inaccessible.

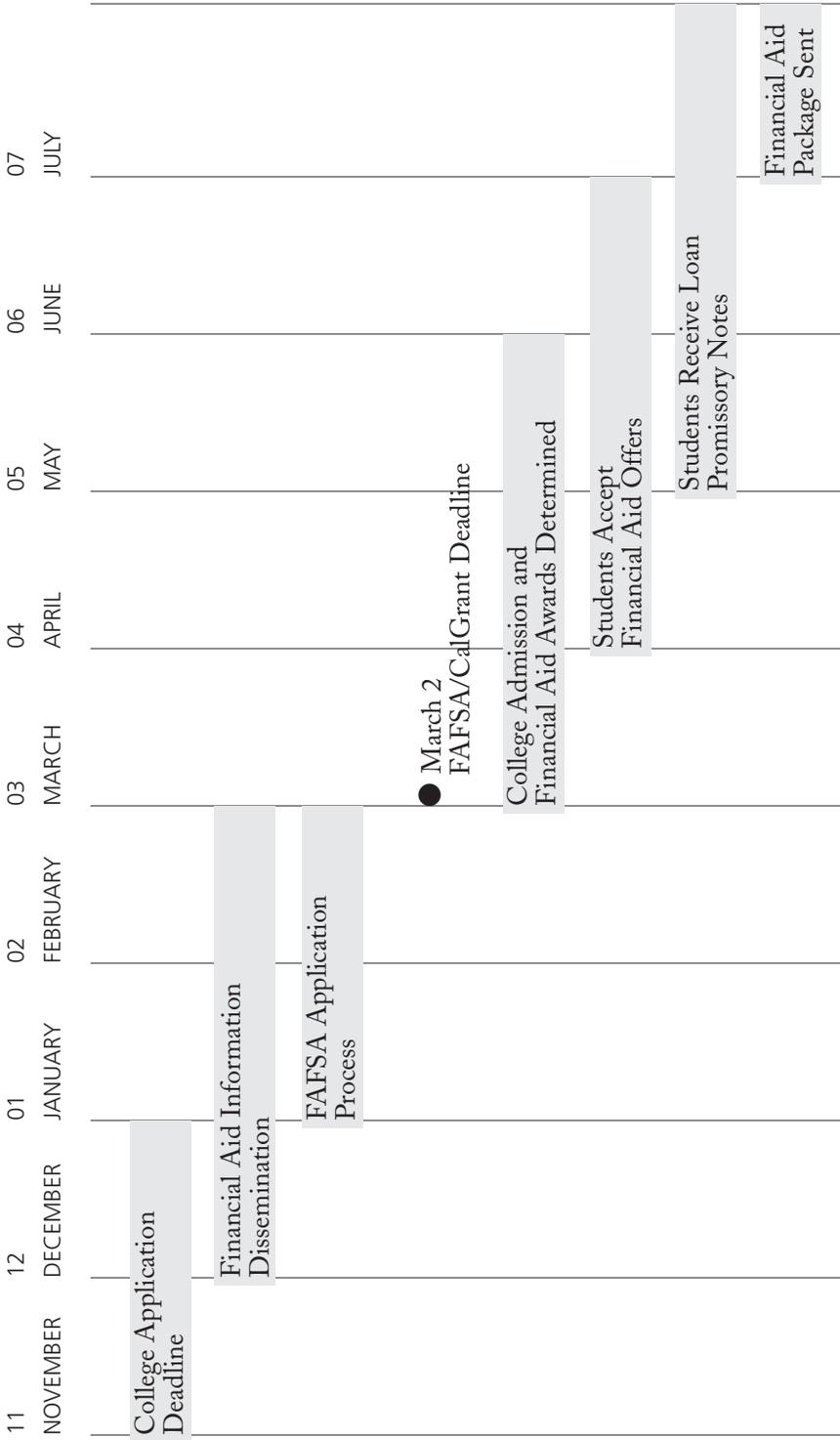
The tables on pp. 41-43, based on additional observations at two private high schools demonstrate that smaller, more affluent schools offer more personalized guidance to all students and families with regard to college preparation and financial aid, which leads to greater rates of college-going in comparison to large urban schools. These tables make clear

the disparity in the frequency and quality of individualized attention that students in one resource-poor large urban public high school receive versus that received by students who attend a more affluent private high school. Also noteworthy are the differences in timing for different activities (e.g., starting college information dissemination in 9th grade versus 11th or 12th grade). The information presented in these tables represents a synthesis of services offered at nine low-income urban high schools and two affluent private high schools to demonstrate the general college and financial aid preparation that students receive at the two school types. These tables and the findings discussed here indicate that further research is needed to determine how best to reach all low-income students and families with financial aid-related information that will help them understand that higher education is financially accessible.



# College and Financial Aid Application Cycle

The flow chart below assumes that students are not applying for Early Application/Decision



## College Preparation Activities Offered by School Type

<i>School Type</i>	<i>Activity Type</i>	<i>Frequency of Activity</i>	<i>Number of Students Served</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Targeted</i>	<i>Activity Required</i>	<i>Offered By</i>
<b>Urban Public High School</b> <i>Average School Size: 3,000-5,000 students</i>	Student/parent College Night	1-2x / year	100-200	Jrs/Srs	optional	College counselors	College counselors
	Student/parent Financial Aid Night	1x / year	20-100	Seniors	optional	College counselors, financial aid administrators from local colleges	College counselors, financial aid administrators from local colleges
	Student/parent line-by-line FAFSA workshops	1-2x / year	50-100	Seniors	optional	Financial aid administrators from local colleges, financial aid experts from local non-profits or government sponsored agencies	Financial aid administrators from local colleges, financial aid experts from local non-profits or government sponsored agencies
	Classroom presentations on college and financial aid	1-2x / year	400-500	Seniors	optional/ by invitation	College counselors, financial aid administrators from local colleges, college-based outreach staff	College counselors, financial aid administrators from local colleges, college-based outreach staff
<b>Affluent Private High School</b> <i>Average School Size: 500-2,000 students</i>	Student/parent Individual college preparation meeting	yearly	1,000	Freshman/ Juniors	mandatory	Guidance counselors, college counselors, and financial aid administrators.	Guidance counselors, college counselors, and financial aid administrators.
	Student/counselor Individual college preparation meeting	yearly	500+	Sophomores	mandatory	Guidance counselors	Guidance counselors
	Student/counselor college and financial aid planning meeting	yearly	500+	Seniors	mandatory	Guidance counselors	Guidance counselors

*\*The information included in the table above derives from an examination of the services offered by 9 large urban public high schools and 2 affluent private schools.*

# Comparison of College Preparation and Financial Aid Services Offered by School Type and Grade Level

*Urban High School*

## 9th Grade

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Presentations by college, guidance, and peer counselors to Life Skills classes about A-G requirements.

*Target Population:* All Freshman  
*Frequency of Activity:* 1x

## 10th Grade

---

Presentations by college, guidance, and peer counselors to English classes about college admissions requirements and application deadlines.

*Target Population:* All Juniors  
*Frequency of Activity:* 1x

Visits by college representatives to meet with students eligible to attend four-year institutions.

*Target Population:* Juniors w/ high G.P.A.'s and rigorous course-taking patterns  
*Frequency of Activity:* Varies

*Affluent Private High School*

Individual student/parent meetings with counselors to discuss college requirements and plan four-year course schedule.

*Target Population:* Freshman and their parents  
*Frequency of Activity:* 1x

Students meet with counselor individually or in small groups to re-visit college requirements.

*Target Population:* Sophomores  
*Frequency of Activity:* 1x

Students begin taking the PSAT.

*Target Population:* Sophomores  
*Frequency of Activity:* 1-2x

Individual student/parent meetings with counselors to discuss college and financial aid applications.

*Target Population:* Juniors and their parents  
*Frequency of Activity:* 1x

Students take the PSAT again.

*Target Population:* Juniors  
*Frequency of Activity:* 1-2x

Students take the SAT I/II.

*Target Population:* Juniors  
*Frequency of Activity:* 1x

*Urban High School*

**12th Grade**

---

Presentations by college, guidance, and peer counselors to English, Government, and Economics classes about college admissions and financial aid requirements and application deadlines.

*Target Population:* All Seniors

*Frequency of Activity:* 1-2x

---

Visits by college representatives to meet with students eligible to attend four-year institutions.

*Target Population:* Seniors w/ high G.P.A.'s and rigorous course-taking patterns

*Frequency of Activity:* Varies

---

After school college admissions workshops for students and families.

*Target Population:* All Seniors and their families.

*Frequency of Activity:* 1x

---

Evening financial aid information workshops for students and families.

*Target Population:* All Seniors and their families.

*Frequency of Activity:* 1x

---

Cash-4-College Workshops

*Target Population:* Varies but typically includes Seniors and their families

*Frequency of Activity:* 1x

---

Lunchtime workshops to help students fill out college and financial aid applications.

*Target Population:* Seniors

*Frequency of Activity:* 2-5x, but varies by school

*Affluent Private High School*

---

Students meet with their counselors individually to discuss college choices, applications, and financial aid.

*Target Population:* Seniors

*Frequency of Activity:* 2-5x, but varies by school

---

Evening financial aid information workshops for students and families.

*Target Population:* All Seniors and their families.

*Frequency of Activity:* 1-3x, but varies by school

---

Lunchtime workshops to help students fill out college and financial aid applications.

*Target Population:* Seniors

*Frequency of Activity:* 2-5x, but varies by school

---

Senior Assembly required for all students to discuss college and financial aid applications.

*Target Population:* Seniors

*Frequency of Activity:* 1x

*\* The information included in the table above derives from an examination of the services offered by 9 large urban public high schools and 2 affluent private schools.*

## Financial Aid Publications

### FREE PUBLICATIONS AND SPONSORING AGENCY:

California Student Aid Commission & EdFund:

*Fund Your Future Workbook: Grants, Scholarships, Loans  
and Other Financial Aid for College*

The Sallie Mae Fund & National Association  
for College Admission Counseling (NACAC):

*Mission Possible: The toolkit that helps you plan and pay for  
college*

University of California:

*University of California Financing Guide for Parents and  
Students; and University of California Financing Guide for  
Transfer Students*

### OTHER PUBLICATIONS, SPONSORING AGENCY, AND COST:

The College Board:

*College Handbook 2004 with Real Stuff* CD-ROM—\$27.95;

*College Cost and Financial Aid Handbook* — \$23.95

### SAMPLE OF PUBLICATIONS AVAILABLE THROUGH AMAZON.COM/BORDERS AND COST:

*College Cost & Financial Aid Handbook 2005* — \$16.77

*Don't Miss Out: The Ambitious Student's Guide to Financial  
Aid* — \$10.00

*Complete Idiot's Guide to Financial Aid for College*  
— \$29.20

*College Financial Aid Kit* — \$19.95

*Get a Jump: Financial Aid Answer Book* — \$14.95

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*chepea*

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