



During California's 2017-18 legislative cycle, 75 introduced bills mentioned the Cal Grant program – evidence of lawmakers' strong interest in the state's free college aid program.¹ Unfortunately, the majority of the bills that would have made the most significant changes for low-income and vulnerable students did not become law.

The Cal Grant was designed to ensure that eligible students with financial need can attend any California postsecondary institution they choose,² but today's college affordability crisis has denied many students this opportunity. California voters recently elected a new Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and a slate of new lawmakers. As those leaders work with existing policymakers and stakeholders to improve the state's need-based aid program, it is crucial that they prioritize equity by focusing program improvements on the very students most often marginalized by rising tuition and non-tuition costs. To make college more accessible and affordable for more low-income Californians and students of color, lawmakers should tackle three main fixes to the Cal Grant program:

1. Fully fund and guarantee access to the Cal Grant program;
2. Adjust the Cal Grant to address non-tuition expenses; and
3. Expand the Cal Grant to support student transitions from high school to college.

This Equity Alert provides an overview of why each of these issues are critical to address, describing current limitations of the Cal Grant program and providing recommendations that state policymakers can immediately advance. The California Student Aid Commission took an important step forward when it passed a motion directing staff to work with legislators to address each of these fixes. Now, it's up to legislators and other state leaders to make these equity-centered policy reforms a reality. Working together on these improvements, the Cal Grant program can help all qualified students access and succeed in our colleges and universities.

WHAT ARE THE MOST SIGNIFICANT EQUITY CONCERNS WITH THE CAL GRANT, AND HOW DO WE FIX THEM?

1. *Addressing Overall Funding & Guaranteeing Access to the Cal Grant Program*

Over the past ten years, California has denied Cal Grants to an increasing number of eligible low-income students. Currently, the Cal Grant program is not fully funded to accommodate all eligible students who are more than one year out of high school or who missed the March 2nd application deadline. In 2017-18 alone, over 300,000 eligible students applied for just 25,750 Competitive Cal Grant awards.³ The students turned away include some of the lowest income students in the state and those who completed all the requirements for college admission.⁴

What Can Be Done?

The state Legislature should increase the number of Competitive Cal Grant awards to accommodate all qualified applicants, including those who do not transition directly from high school to college. To do this, it is necessary for lawmakers to fully fund the program.

2. *Adjusting the Cal Grant to Address Non-Tuition Expenses*

The total cost of college in California encompasses far more than tuition and includes costs for textbooks, transportation, food, and housing. Unfortunately, the maximum Cal Grant B Access Award -- which helps students pay for these non-tuition costs -- covers less than one-quarter of basic housing and food costs in two of California's

most expensive regions, even when combined with the state’s version of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, CalFresh.⁵ Additionally, in 2015-16, the Cal Grant B Access Award was just one-quarter the amount of what the award would have been if it had kept up with inflation.⁶ Insufficient student aid to address these costs is one of the reasons for the growing homelessness and food insecurity crisis at colleges up and down the state. In a recent survey, 20 percent of community college students in Los Angeles, along with 11 percent of CSU students across California, and 5 percent of UC students throughout the state reported being homeless.⁷ Racial disparities also exist among students experiencing food insecurity and homelessness. In the CSUs, for example, Black students who were first generation reported the highest rates – nearly two out of every three students -- of food insecurity.⁸

What Can Be Done?

Policymakers must increase the Cal Grant B Access Award so that low-income students have access to financial aid to cover non-tuition costs such as books, room and board, and transportation. Doing so will help more students cover the full cost of college and reduce their chances of working long hours, enrolling part-time, or delaying time to graduation.⁹

3. Expanding the Cal Grant to Support Student Transitions from High School to College

Every year, thousands of students graduate from high school fully intending to start college the next fall but never actually enroll, a phenomenon known as “summer melt.” Nationally, between 10 and 40 percent of college-intending students never step foot on a college campus after high school graduation.¹⁰ (Due to inadequate intersegmental education data, California does not have comparable state-level information.) Summer melt is even more pronounced among students from low-income communities.¹¹ While the reasons for summer melt vary, one major reason is that students lack access to resources that higher education institutions provide during the critical summer months between high school graduation and the first semester of college.¹²

What Can Be Done?

Nationally, many colleges are exploring ways to combat summer melt and keep students engaged from the point of receiving a student’s application to matriculation through programs and resources such as orientation, summer bridge programs, or academic coursework.¹³ In addition to campus efforts, the state can step in and leverage the Cal Grant to help mitigate summer melt. As it is currently structured, students are unable to utilize their aid until the fall,¹⁴ making it nearly impossible for students who could benefit from arriving on campus sooner to do so.

Policymakers should make Cal Grants available for the summer before freshman year so that more low-income students can take advantage of high school-to-college support without that impacting a student’s total program eligibility for Cal Grant benefits.

WHAT’S NEXT?

California once led the nation with our bold and progressive college affordability policies. We can and should lead the nation again. Our economic imperative is clear – if we want to continue our state’s prosperity, we must prioritize providing enough support for California students with the greatest financial need. Leaving hundreds of thousands of students on the sidelines is not equitable nor does it align with our California values. It is therefore crucial that policymakers make changes to the Cal Grant program, and that those changes be made, first and foremost, to serve and support Californians most disenfranchised by the current system.

HOW CAN YOU GET ENGAGED?

- To learn more about The Education Trust–West’s Cal Grant priorities and research agenda, please reach out to us at information@edtrustwest.org
- Weigh in on the State Budget through our Budget Committees beginning January 10th through June 15th. Find those calendared meetings here: Assembly - <https://abgt.assembly.ca.gov/> and Senate - <https://sbud.senate.ca.gov/>
- Share this Equity Alert with your neighbors, colleagues, and other equity champions in your community.
- Join the Ed Trust–West listserv to receive updates, resources, and to learn more about student-centered funding approaches and other equity issues: www.edtrustwest.org/join
- Contact your local elected representatives and offer your thoughts about California’s Cal Grant program: <http://findyourrep.legislature.ca.gov/>
- Attend and provide public comment at an upcoming California Student Aid Commission meeting: https://www.csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/calendardates_0.pdf
- Share this Equity Alert on social media using the hashtag #CAHigherEd and connect with us:



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¹ California Legislative Information, “Cal Grant, 2017-2018”, http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billSearchClient.xhtml?session_year=20172018&keyword=%22Cal%20Grant%22&house=Both&author=All&lawCode=All.

² University of California Office of the President, “Major Features of the California Master Plan for Higher Education,” (Oakland, CA: UCOP, 2007).

³ Amy Rose, “Demand for Cal Grants Among Nontraditional Students Far Exceeds Supply” (Sacramento, CA: California Budget & Policy Center, Aug. 2018), <https://calbudgetcenter.org/resources/demand-for-cal-grants-among-nontraditional-students-far-exceeds-supply/>.

⁴ Rose, “Demand for Cal Grants Among Nontraditional Students Far Exceeds Supply.”

⁵ Amy Rose, “Barriers to Higher Education Attainment: Students’ Unmet Basic Needs” (Sacramento, CA: California Budget & Policy Center, May 2018), <https://calbudgetcenter.org/resources/barriers-to-higher-education-attainment-students-unmet-basic-needs/>.

⁶ Californians for College Affordability, “How And Why To Improve Cal Grants: Key Facts and Recommendations,” (Californians for College Affordability, Spring 2016), https://ticas.org/sites/default/files/pub_files/how_and_why_to_improve_cal_grants.pdf.

⁷ California State Assembly, Speaker’s Office of Research and Floor Analysis, “College Ready, Hungry, and Homeless: An Overview of Basic Needs Insecurity in California’s Public Higher Education System,” (Sacramento, CA: California State Assembly, 2018).

⁸ The California State University, Basic Needs Initiative, “Study of Student Basic Needs,” (Long Beach, CA: CSU Office of the Chancellor, 2018).

⁹ Larry Gordon, “New Warnings About California Students Juggling College And Jobs,” *EdSource*, Oct. 14, 2018, <https://edsources.org/2018/new-warnings-about-california-students-juggling-college-and-jobs/603499>.

¹⁰ Benjamin Castleman and Lindsay Page, *Summer Melt: Supporting Low-Income Students through the Transition to College* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Education Press, 2014).

¹¹ Benjamin Castleman and Lindsay Page, “A Trickle or a Torrent? Understanding the Extent of Summer ‘Melt’ Among College-Intending High School Graduates,” *Social Science Quarterly* 95, no. 1 (March 2014): 202-220.

¹² Benjamin Castleman, Lindsay Page, and Ashley Snowdon, “Strategic Data Project Summer Melt Handbook: A Guide to Investigating and Responding to Summer Melt” (Cambridge, MA: Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University, 2013), <http://sdp.cepr.harvard.edu/files/cepr-sdp/files/sdp-summer-melt-handbook.pdf>.

¹³ The Education Trust–West, “The Majority Report: Supporting the Educational Success of Latino Students in California” (Oakland, CA: The Education Trust–West, Nov. 2017), https://29v0kg31gs803wndhe1sj1hd-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2017/11/ETW_TMR_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁴ California Student Aid Commission, “When Will I Receive My Cal Grant Funds?” (Rancho Cordova, CA: California Student Aid Commission, 2018).