

COMMUNITY EQUITY RESEARCH CENTER

Community Learning ~ PAR ~ Grassroots Action

County Office of Education Alternative Education Program Navigating Financial Aid Application High School Graduation Requirement

By Devon L. Graves, PhD

California law requires high school districts to implement financial aid application submission as a graduation requirement starting in the 2022-2023 academic year.

Counselors in alternative education programs support small amounts of students in the financial aid process

The Law

California Assembly Bill 132¹
(2021-22) Postsecondary Education
Trailer Bill

The bill requires in the 2022-23 academic year that high school seniors and families provide proof of submission of an aid application or the completion of a waiver that relinquishes the students of the requirement.

Background and Context

Researchers have found that FAFSA completion is cumbersome, especially for low-income students and students of color.² Nationally, there is a constant trend of eligible students not applying for financial aid.³ FAFSA completion has become a part of a college-going culture, but researchers have negated the experiences of students attending alternative education programs.

Study Approach

In order to learn more about the impact of the financial aid application graduation requirement, I conducted a focus group with current high school counselors from a county Office of Education alternative education program. 11 counselors participated in an informational focus group which gathered data about their background, knowledge about the financial aid application graduation requirement, and their recommendations for implementation. The focus group was conducted in spring 2022 and lasted approximately 40 minutes.

Preliminary Results

New Graduation Requirement Not Widely-Known

In this specific program's case, the counseling staff and administrators overseeing the program were not familiar with the program. The lead administrator spent time engaging counterparts in other schools, districts, and county offices of education to see if they were aware of the new requirement.

Alternative Education Counselors Support Low Numbers of Students Pursuing Financial Aid

The participants shared that on average they serve five students in the financial aid process. The reasons vary,

Financial Aid in **ONE** word

Money

Cash

Painful

Parents' W2

Endless

Confusion

Privacy

Endless

Resistant

Focus Group Participant Responses

IDENTIFY RESEARCH PARTNER:
COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

FOCUS GROUP WITH
HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS

PRELIMINARY DATA
ANALYSIS

INDIVIDUAL COUNSELOR
INTERVIEWS & FINANCIAL AID
EVENT AT SENIOR NIGHT

FALL 2021

SPRING 2022

FALL 2022

but overall, their students enter and leave the alternative education programs at random times, and not many students pursue a higher education. One of the counselor participants shared, “There’s 60-some odd students, out of which 28 are seniors, and only five are actively pursuing, I think, and I mean financial aid.”

Anticipated Difficulties with Policy Implementation

Participants shared their concerns with potential difficulties with implementing the policy to fit their program’s context. One of the concerns dealt with the type of students that the program serves. Students who are adult learners may not have aspirations to pursue a higher education, and may not benefit from this policy. Another difficulty noted by participants is the aspect of the requirement being an unfunded mandate. The participants shared how though the requirement will be in effect, they do not anticipate additional resources or staffing to support these efforts. One administrator participant shared, “I haven’t seen any financial support for this mandate, so to speak. So, what I’m looking at is, we just increase the workload on our counselors to go after every single student on their caseload. I’m speaking for traditional and for the work we have to do. And I have seen no resources tied to this to hire additional counseling staff to do this work or bring on opportunities to do this work.”

Next Steps

In order to continue the inquiry into the topic, I plan to conduct individual interviews with counselors and participate in the college preparatory event that the program is hosting in the fall of 2022. I will interview individual counselors utilizing semi-structured interviews to learn more about their perspectives about the graduation requirement and to learn about the potential impact the policy may have on individual counseling responsibility. I will utilize the focus group and interviews to prepare an information presentation about financial aid applications at an upcoming senior college preparatory event that the program will host.

Footnotes

1. A.B. 132 bill text: https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB132
2. Campbell, C. A., Deil-Amen, R., & Rios-Aguilar, C. (2015). Do financial aid policies unintentionally punish the poor, and what can we do about it? *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 172, DOI: 10.1002/cc.20164.
3. Page, L. C., & Scott-Clayton, J. (2016). Improving college access in the United States: Barriers and policy responses. *Economics of Education Review*, 51, 4-22.