

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 6, 2007

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California Community Colleges' Financial Aid Practices Vary Widely, Create Disparities in Students' Access to Aid, According to New Report

California's community college system offers a chance at equal opportunity for legions of low-income and first-generation students, but a new report finds that not all of the state's community colleges provide easy access to much-needed financial aid.

Green Lights & Red Tape, released today by the Institute for College Access & Success, examines policies and practices at financial aid offices in the California community colleges (CCCs). The report finds wide variation among individual colleges that can have a significant affect on students' access to aid. For example:

- Some colleges ensure that aid recipients have money for textbooks by disbursing aid early or providing bookstore credit; others do not make aid available until weeks after the semester starts.
- One college translates materials into each language commonly spoken by students; another has materials only in English, despite having a large Latino population.
- Many financial aid offices work with faculty and student services offices to ensure that students receive information about aid; others do not even post their office hours or contact information.
- The majority of financial aid offices are open several evenings a week in order to be accessible to part-time and working students, but some have no evening office hours, even though many students take evening classes.

Although CCCs have the lowest fees in the nation, fees only make up about four percent of the full cost of a college education. A typical community college student spends about \$15,000 a year on books, housing, transportation, and other education-related expenses. Financial aid can help cover these costs, allowing students to work less, focus on their studies, and succeed academically. But only 34 percent of community college students in the state apply for available grants, loans, and work-study aid, compared with 45 percent nationally.

“Low fees don't guarantee access to a college education in California,” said the report's author, Deborah Frankle Cochran. “No matter which college they attend, students should be able to find out about financial aid, get help applying for it, and receive it when they need it.”

The report includes recommendations for colleges, the CCC system, and state and federal policymakers to ensure that students' access to financial aid doesn't depend on which college they attend. Among them:

- Colleges should reevaluate policies and procedures that may create unnecessary barriers to financial aid.
- Colleges should explore opportunities for collaboration between the financial aid office and other offices and departments within their institutions in order to maximize the likelihood that students will learn about available financial aid and be encouraged to apply.
- The California legislature should increase and expand the Cal Grant B to provide a greater amount of state aid to a larger share of students.
- The California legislature should increase financial aid administrative funding levels, and provide incentives for colleges to increase spending on financial aid administration.
- Congress should continue to increase the federal Pell Grant, and revise the distributive formulas for federal campus-based aid programs.
- The U.S. Department of Education should simplify the federal aid application process.

Green Lights & Red Tape: Improving Access to Financial Aid at California's Community Colleges, is available online at: www.ticas.org/california

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An independent, nonprofit organization, the Institute for College Access & Success works to make higher education more available and affordable for people of all backgrounds. By conducting and supporting nonpartisan research, analysis, and advocacy, the Institute aims to improve the processes and public policies that can pave the way to successful educational outcomes for students and for society.