

Executive Summary

Financial aid can encourage students to enroll in college and increase their odds of academic success. While the California community colleges (CCCs) have very low fees, which are waived for most low-income students, the additional expenses of books, supplies, transportation, housing, food and childcare can create significant financial barriers to attending and staying in school. Federal and state grants, work-study funds, and loans can help community college students cover essential costs and focus on their studies. However, only 34 percent of CCC students apply for these valuable forms of aid, compared to 45 percent of community college students in the rest of the country.

While many CCC students miss out on the financial aid that could help them succeed in school, financial aid administrators face pressures that can limit their ability to address student needs. In addition to heavy paperwork requirements, they must contend with the inadequacy of aid available to community college students, and limited resources for financial aid office operations. Yet given these shared challenges, we found a wide range of office attitudes and approaches. The unofficial motto at one school's financial aid office is "When in doubt, give it out," while an aid director at another school said, "We are the police officers of Title IV funds."

Our findings and recommendations are based on visits to 21 colleges representing a broad cross-section of the CCC system, a review of the most recent available research, and interviews with experts on community colleges, financial aid and related fields. This report focuses on policies and practices that vary widely from college to college and can have a particularly significant effect on students' access to financial aid.

Key Findings

We found important differences in the ways that colleges balance two sometimes conflicting roles: providing information and assistance to students, and meeting complicated administrative demands. Some campus policies give students an encouraging “green light” and help them make the most of available aid. Other practices create obstacles and “red tape” for students seeking aid. While policies and practices may fall at either end of this spectrum, entire offices do not. We found both strengths and areas for improvement at all of the colleges we visited.

Fiscal and regulatory constraints can be difficult, if not impossible, for individual financial aid offices and administrators to control. However, we found that other, less-obvious factors shape how they use available resources and respond to student needs. These influential non-monetary factors include institutional attitudes, priorities, and management styles, as well as assumptions and past experiences that become part of the culture of the office or college as a whole. The resources available to a financial aid office do not necessarily predict how creative and student-centered its approach is.

Our complete findings cover many different aspects of financial aid office operations and how they affect student access to aid. This executive summary groups our most notable findings into three broad categories, with examples of “green light” and “red tape” policies and practices observed at different colleges.

Getting the Word Out

Fees represent only five percent of the estimated total cost of attending a CCC. While federal and state aid can help students afford textbooks, housing, and other necessities, they need first to know that aid is available. The way colleges present information affects how likely students are to get the message and act on it.

Green Lights	Red Tape
One college translates materials into each language commonly spoken by students...	while another has materials only in English, despite having a large Latino population.
Some colleges have developed communication strategies that recognize cultural differences in knowledge about financial aid...	while others use technical language that can intimidate even very knowledgeable students and parents.
Many financial aid offices collaborate with faculty and other student services to get information into students' hands...	while other financial aid offices do not even publicize their own office hours or contact information.
Some colleges tell part-time students about the benefits of full-time attendance, including increased financial aid awards...	while others focus more on getting students fee waivers than potentially more valuable federal and state grants.

Navigating the Application Process

Once they learn about available aid and decide to apply for it, most students will have questions about how to fill out the long and complicated Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA. Hands-on, personal assistance is effective in getting students to complete the application process, and is sometimes the only way to answer important questions. However, the help students actually get varies widely from college to college.

Green Lights	Red Tape
Some colleges put experienced staff on the front lines to answer student questions about financial aid...	while others put the most junior staff up front, which can increase errors and follow-up tasks for students.
The majority of financial aid offices are open multiple evenings to be accessible to part-time and working students...	while some have no evening office hours, even though many students take evening classes.
One financial aid office has a computer lab that is staffed at all times, so that students can always get personalized help...	while another offers no help completing a FAFSA because "college students should not need hand-holding."
A few colleges talk with students about the pros and cons of using federal loans to help cover college costs...	while others withhold information about federal loans, which can lead students to rely on credit cards or risky private loans.

Delivering Aid Dollars

Colleges have a considerable amount of discretion about when and how students receive their aid money. Some administrators and offices see their primary role as helping students get the aid they need, when they need it. At the other end of the spectrum, some see their role as protecting themselves and the aid system from risk, fraud and administrative burdens. These priorities and perceptions can significantly impede students' access to the aid they are entitled to, and which is likely to help them stay in school.

Green Lights	Red Tape
Some colleges ensure that aid recipients have money for textbooks by disbursing aid early or providing bookstore credit...	while others do not make aid available until weeks after the semester starts.
Many colleges only verify as many aid applications as are required by federal and state laws ...	while others increase the burden for students by requiring excessive verification and documentation from all applicants.
Some colleges have institutional aid programs to help students with emergency financial needs...	while others refuse to make allowed adjustments to a student's application, preventing them from getting needed aid.

Selected Recommendations

Access to financial aid affects students' ability to enroll and succeed in college, which means that financial aid offices have a tremendous opportunity to foster student achievement. They also risk creating barriers to aid because of the complexity of the aid system, and the very real constraints that aid offices face. From our scan of CCC financial aid offices, we found that there are changes in policy and practice that can - and should - occur today.

Recommendations for Colleges:

- Reevaluate the existing policies and procedures that may create unnecessary student barriers.
- Explore opportunities for collaboration throughout the college to maximize the chances for students to hear about financial aid and be encouraged to apply.
- Integrate student feedback and other data collection into the development and evaluation of office policies and practice.

There are also state and federal policies that stand in the way of student-centered financial aid practice, limiting student access to aid despite the best intentions of the college. To maximize the benefits of financial aid, policy changes should be made to eliminate barriers embedded in the aid process and programs themselves.

Recommendations for State and Federal Policymakers:

- The California legislature should increase financial aid administrative funding levels, and provide incentives for colleges to increase spending on financial aid administration from their general funds.
- The California legislature should increase and expand the Cal Grant B to provide a greater amount of state grant aid to a larger share of students.
- 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.