



April 16, 2021

The Honorable Jose Medina
Chair, California State Assembly Higher Education Committee
State Capitol Room 2141
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: AB 1456 (Medina, McCarty, Leyva): SUPPORT AS AMENDED APRIL 12, 2021

Dear Chair Medina:

A diverse coalition of higher education advocacy, civil rights and social justice, business and workforce, and student leadership organizations united in strengthening state need-based financial aid so that all Californians can afford to successfully earn a higher education credential, **today we write in strong support of AB 1456 (Medina, McCarty, Leyva), the Cal Grant Reform Act, as amended April 12, 2021.** We also offer additional recommendations to strengthen the proposal as it moves forward through the legislative process. Our organizations are deeply committed to ensuring equitable, affordable college opportunity, and we are grateful for your leadership in the pursuit of a stronger Cal Grant program, so that low-income students' higher education success is not curtailed by unaffordable costs and burdensome debt.

The creation of the Cal Grant entitlement was a crowning achievement in its time and it remains a leading state grant program today. Yet the intervening two decades have also laid bare its structural limitations: eligible applicants outside of the “entitlement” window have had to compete for a very limited number of awards, and – without being pegged to a meaningful threshold – the value of students’ stipends for non-tuition costs has fallen dramatically. We are immensely appreciative that the amendments to AB 1456 aim to address both of these structural issues that have perpetuated inequities in college access and success for students at all types of colleges, and for those attending California community colleges (CCC) in particular.

Ensuring that all students receive the awards for which they are eligible remains an urgent priority and a key reform reflected in AB 1456. With less than ten percent of CCC students currently receiving a Cal Grant, the bill’s extension of the Cal Grant entitlement to the lowest income CCC students (those eligible for the maximum federal Pell Grant), regardless of age or prior academic merit, is a major policy milestone that ensures tens of thousands more Californians have access to financial resources they need to support them on their higher education paths.

Additionally, we are grateful for the recent amendment to protect the access award from dropping below the current maximum of \$1,656. This amount currently covers just nine percent of students’ non-tuition college costs, which can exceed \$20,000 annually for many students across all types of colleges, and maintaining the award’s value is a crucial step in moving towards covering students’ total college costs. We also appreciate the inclusion of a much-needed automatic annual growth factor by tying the Cal Grant 2 access award to the California Consumer Price Index to avoid the level of stagnation that the award has experienced over the years.

We applaud the steps that AB 1456 takes towards dismantling long standing structural issues that have kept too many students from receiving a Cal Grant, and we offer below key recommendations that would strengthen the proposal, further align it with stated intent, and ensure its equitable implementation:

1. Access Award. On [March 10, 2021](#), we noted that the bill as introduced would have cut CCC students’ Cal Grant access award amounts to \$1,250, worsening some students’ affordability struggles and reducing the share of non-tuition costs covered by a Cal Grant, and we strongly support the recent amendment that aims to protect the Cal Grant 2 from dropping below the current maximum of \$1,656. To meet the stated intent of this provision, legislative language should clarify that the access award is “*no less than the maximum per-student amount provided in the 2020-21 award year*” in section 70215(c)(1).

Moving forward, we also encourage consideration of an even stronger growth adjustment by tying the award to the actual changes in non-tuition college costs as identified by the

institutions.¹

2. Equitable Eligibility Phase-In. [Last month](#), we recommended addressing the disparity in financial eligibility thresholds between the proposed Cal Grant 2 and Cal Grant 4 programs by, at a minimum, articulating a policy goal of reaching equal standards over time. We appreciate that AB 1456 now includes intent language to phase-in eligibility so that all Pell Grant eligible students eventually receive a Cal Grant. Including a timeline for doing so in the intent language would help ensure that access to this important state financial aid program expands as intended and does not erode over the years. This is particularly important in light of recent amendments that restrict Cal Grant 4 eligibility by using lower federal poverty line thresholds than are used for Pell Grant eligibility. Without a clear timeline for full parity, this delinking may make Cal Grant 4 more vulnerable to further eligibility reductions, especially during economic downturns.

As organizations that have been invested for many years in meaningfully strengthening and equitably reforming state need-based financial aid, we are excited for the positive steps that AB 1456 takes to address long standing structural inequities within the Cal Grant program, which have long impacted our state's most vulnerable students and perpetuated disparities in college enrollment and completion. We are grateful to the authors and the California Student Aid Commission for their commitment to making college in California affordable and for championing Cal Grant reform that supports the needs of California's low-income, underrepresented, older, and non-traditional students across all types of colleges, and in particular community colleges which serve most of the state's low-income students and students of color. **We are pleased to support AB 1456**, and appreciate your consideration of our recommendations to fortify the bill and ensure its equitable implementation for Californians.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and for all that you do to ensure all Californians have the support they – and the state – need to thrive.

Sincerely,



Victoria "Nikki" Dominguez
Policy Director
Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Los
Angeles



Henry Bartholomay
Policy Manager
Bay Area Council

¹ For more on different approaches to maintaining and increasing the award's value, please see: TICAS. January 19, 2021. Memo. "Ensuring Cal Grant Reforms Support Meaningful Coverage of Students' Non-Tuition College Costs." <https://ticas.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/TICAS-Access-Award-Memo.pdf>.

Su Jin Gatlin Jez
Executive Director
California Competes

Brian Rivas
Senior Director of Policy and Government
Relations
The Education Trust – West

Zima Creason
Executive Director
California EDGE Coalition

Laura Szabo-Kubitz
California Affordability Program Director
The Institute for College Access & Success

Vince Stewart
Executive Director
California STEM Network

Debbie Raucher
Education Director
John Burton Advocates for Youth

Nicolas Riani
Statewide Board Chair
CALPIRG Students

Meredith Curry
Fellow
Northern California College Promise Coalition

Jessie Ryan
Executive Vice President
The Campaign for College Opportunity

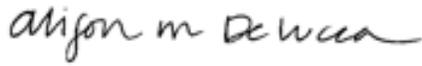
Sbeydeh Viveros-Walton
Director of Higher Education
Public Advocates

Robert Shireman
Director of Higher Education Excellence and
Senior Fellow
The Century Foundation

Leigh Phillips
Chief Executive Officer
SaverLife

Vince Stewart
Executive Director, California STEM
Network
Children Now

David Palter
Senior Director, Higher Education and
Workforce Development
Silicon Valley Leadership Group



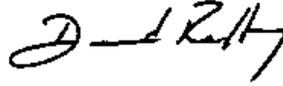
Alison De Lucca
Executive Director
Southern California College Access Network



Amalia Chamorro
Director of Education Policy
UnidosUS



Laura Keane
Chief Policy Officer
uAspire



David Rattray
President & CEO
UNITE-LA



Kristin McGuire
Western Region Director
Young Invincibles

CC: Assemblymember Kevin McCarty
Senator Connie M. Leyva
Jeanice Warden-Washington, Chief Consultant, California State Assembly Higher Education
Committee
Members, California State Assembly Higher Education Committee
Assemblymember Anthony Rendon, Speaker of the Assembly, California State Assembly
Senator Toni G. Atkins, President pro Tempore, California State Senate
Assemblymember Phil Y. Ting, Chair, California State Assembly Committee on Budget
Senator Nancy Skinner, Chair, California State Senate Budget and Fiscal Review Committee
Senator John Laird, Chair, California State Senate Budget and Fiscal Review Committee,
Subcommittee 1 on Education
Jennifer Pacella, Deputy Legislative Analyst, Legislative Analyst's Office
Lande Ajoose, Senior Policy Advisor for Higher Education, Office of Governor Gavin
Newsom
Chris Ferguson, Program Budget Manager, California Department of Finance
Marlene Garcia, Executive Director, California Student Aid Commission