

California Policy Priorities

Higher education is one of the most effective tools for advancing economic mobility, yet financial barriers continue to prevent many students from accessing and completing college. In California, we believe the following strategic steps are needed to strengthen financial aid while protecting students from harmful policies and practices.



Strengthen Access to FAFSA and CADAA

Every year, California students leave an estimated \$550 million in financial aid unclaimed due to incomplete or unsubmitted FAFSA and CADAA applications. Increasing financial aid application rates is critical to ensuring students do not leave money on the table. Particular attention must be given to improving application rates in California's community colleges, where financial aid completion rates remain disproportionately low. Policymakers should invest in outreach, technical assistance, and data-driven interventions to close this gap and maximize financial aid uptake.



Protect & Expand Financial Aid Resources for Students in California

As federal financial aid policies shift, California must take proactive measures to safeguard student financial resources. This includes developing a state-level backfill option for students who lose out on federal aid, protecting student data privacy, and ensuring California's financial aid system remains robust. uAspire continues to call for the strengthening of state-based resources through Cal Grant Reform, including to expand aid eligibility for asylum seekers and system-impacted students. Additionally, we aim to work on effective implementation of key recently enacted legislation such as AB 789 (Berman) and AB 2165 (Reyes) to ensure students are fully aware of their financial aid rights and available resources.



Standardize Financial Aid Offer Letters

The lack of consistency in financial aid offers leaves students struggling to understand the true cost of college. California must adopt standardized financial aid offers with clear and consistent terminology to improve transparency and empower students to make informed decisions. Research, including uAspire's 2018 report *Decoding the Cost of College* and the 2022 Government Accountability Office report on financial aid offers, underscores the need for standardization. By implementing best practices statewide, California can reduce confusion and support students in making financially sound educational choices.



Increase Access to Basic Needs Resources and Benefits

Many students rely on basic needs programs such as CalFresh and CalWORKS to support their educational journey. However, current policies often penalize students who receive scholarships, grants, emergency aid, or awards by reducing their eligibility for these critical benefits. Exempting these forms of aid from being counted as income will ensure students do not face unintended financial hardship. Additionally, California must improve coordination between financial aid offices, campus-based basic needs programs, and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to streamline access to essential benefits, ensuring students receive the full support they need to thrive.