

VIA EMAIL

San Diego Chicano/Latino Concilio on Higher Education  
San Diego, California

May 9, 2024

Dr. Lynn Neault, Chair  
San Diego-Imperial County Community College Association (SDCCCA)

Dear Dr. Neault:

The San Diego Chicano/Latino Concilio on Higher Education (SD Concilio) is a local organization that advocates for access and success among Chicanos/Latinos at San Diego's public colleges and universities. We write to you and your colleagues at SDICCA regarding the critical issue of financial aid for students in our local and regional community college districts. Our organization is deeply concerned that the administrative errors and faulty communication regarding the revised FAFSA form is resulting in a precipitous decline in enrollment among Chicanos/Latinos and other working-class students. We describe below our analysis of this issue and its effects.

**The Issue:**

The previous Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application period began in October and was postponed to late December 2023 with the promise of a new, "faster and easier" FAFSA. The new process reduced the number of questions from over 100 to approximately twenty, depending on the applicant. When the initial FAFSA roll out took place in December 2023, [numerous problems were detected](#) that included miscalculations in the review of the Student Aid Index (SAI), previously known as Expected Family Contribution (EFC), a critical number that financial aid departments at colleges and universities use to determine student aid offers. Based on the [National College Attainment Network's FAFSA tracker](#), California is now ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> in the country among states with a decrease in FAFSA completions compared to the previous year.

**The Impact on "Mixed Status" Families:**

Thousands of students are still unable to complete a FAFSA due to additional hurdles that elevate their anxiety, the result of a process that overlooked their experience as members of "mixed status" families. Families categorized as "mixed status" include students who are U.S. Citizens, with one or more parents without a social security number. Some reports calculate this to be roughly [100.00 California student aid applicants](#).

**Administrative and Institutional Response**

A “helpline” was arranged. However, it received a large volume of calls and added delays, further exemplifying the inadequacy of this process to support students that do not meet the “traditional” family makeup. Those students that complete the process, after long periods of time talking to an automated answering machine, meetings with high school guidance counselors, paperwork, and emails sent with parents’ personal information to confirm their identity, are considered the “lucky ones”. Thousands more remain without the initial ability to fully submit their FAFSA. Moreover, once a student’s Institutional Student Information Records (ISIR’s) are received by the college of the student’s choice, an internal verification process by the financial aid advisors and technicians may take additional months before students finally receive their financial aid award letters.

Our San Diego Concilio urges the leadership of colleges and universities to consider how this will affect thousands of first-generation college students in our region whose parents don’t have a social security number. Students in “mixed status” immigrant households are experiencing a very pronounced “othering” because of a federal student aid system that was never designed for them. It takes a special kind of resilience to overcome this experience on top of all the challenges that come with transitioning to college. Therefore, it is vital that our colleges and universities step up to ensure that these students receive our collective support to deal with these unprecedented challenges. The negligent miscalculations by the U.S. Department of Education have delayed and complicated the decision-making process for students and families that rely on schools’ student aid award offers to determine what schools to attend and how to pay for the cost of attendance.

While the [National Decision Day has been changed](#) from its traditional May 1<sup>st</sup> to May 15<sup>th</sup> for most universities in the CSU and UC systems (for some schools, June 1<sup>st</sup>), this is unlikely to be of any solace for students in “mixed status” families. Such families are still unable to process their FAFSA application, increasing the likelihood of what academic researchers have termed as [undermatching and summer melts](#), in which “Numerous first-generation college-bound, immigrant high school graduates do not continue their education at a college commensurate with their abilities and academic achievements.” Even when accepted to the university of their choice, many of these students may likely enroll in community colleges due to the uncertainty of their financial aid awards as their FAFSA application remains in limbo. Many will not attend at all.

We recognize and applaud the temporary workaround and short-term measure the California Student Aid Commission has implemented, [allowing FAFSA eligible students from mixed status families to submit the California Dream Act Application \(CADAA\)](#), for a review of state and institutional financial aid. Nonetheless, this still leaves out FAFSA eligible students of mixed status families from a review of critical federal student aid programs such as Pell Grants, Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, Federal Work Study programs for potential on-campus student employment and subsidized federal student loans. In addition, this new access to submit a CADAA application is likely to add future challenges and work overload issues to Dream Center coordinators,

counselors and staff at local colleges and universities that support the needs of undocumented students, and that will now need to distinguish who among CADAA applicants is considered an undocumented student.

The San Diego Concilio urges our local community colleges and universities to **launch a targeted financial aid outreach education campaign**, geared toward reassuring our “mixed status” students, their families, and their communities that our institutions are aware of the additional challenges they confront with the processing of their FAFSA. Additionally, that those institutions are working on efforts to support them and that a college education is still within their reach. A clear statement, with empathy and in solidarity with these students facing additional challenges, coupled with effective practices to support them in navigating these challenges and easing their college transition, will go a long way to alleviate their collective anxiety and meet our commitment to adequately serving our communities. Some suggestions we believe should be part of these efforts include:

- Local media campaigns that include Spanish speaking TV, radio and social media networks messaging our understanding of the additional challenges faced by mixed status families, our empathy and solidarity with them and our commitment to ensuring support to navigate the student aid process and college transition. This message should emphasize additional encouragement, reminding students not to give in to disillusionment or give up their dream to achieve a higher education degree, along with our outmost belief in their abilities to navigate these new challenges and achieve their goals.
- Community colleges and universities should collaborate on these efforts, with an **emphasis on financial aid educational outreach, regardless of student’s institution of choice**
- Support with staffing financial aid departments, in anticipation for an added volume of students with these needs seeking their expertise. This point is central. An educational campaign aiding students’ financial aid process and college transition without proper support to financial aid departments at our colleges and universities is likely to add further delays, not to mention the potential for additional [turnovers and staff shortages](#) already being faced nationwide in financial aid offices. These efforts should be in direct collaboration and include the voices and expertise of the financial aid staffs of colleges and universities.
- Train staff in outreach programs at our colleges and universities on the specific circumstances being faced by mixed status families, and to begin **targeted financial aid outreach sessions** at local high schools, libraries and community centers, with Spanish-language sessions included. While there are some [webinars](#) being offered by the California Student Aid

Commission, we argue that these efforts need to be more personalized and directly taken to students, for more effective results.

As we hope you can agree, this is a serious situation affecting thousands of students in the state of California and across the nation. At the same time, we are faced with an enormous opportunity for our local community colleges and universities to set the standards of support to these students, with an effective **targeted financial aid outreach campaign** that demonstrate a local commitment to serving students in our communities. For additional information regarding our analysis and recommendations, we encourage you to contact our SD Concilio member, Julio Soto, at [Julio.Soto@gcccd.edu](mailto:Julio.Soto@gcccd.edu).

Sinceramente,

Isidro Ortiz, Co-Chair  
SD Concilio

Patrick Velasquez, Co-Chair  
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