



State of California

C2C
Cradle-to-Career
System

CALIFORNIA'S CRADLE-TO-CAREER SYSTEM

STUDENT EXPERIENCE AUDIT

In Collaboration with WestEd

FALL 2022

The California Cradle-to-Career Data System Act requires that The Office of Cradle-to-Career Data conduct an annual review process once every twelve months.

During October and November of 2022, The Office of Cradle-to-Career Data, in collaboration with WestEd, conducted its initial student experience audit. This student experience audit represents an early effort to surface the barriers that students face when transitioning from high school to life after high school.

Over the course of the upcoming twelve-month student experience audit cycle, The Office of Cradle-to-Career Data will build on the findings from this initial student experience audit to explore topics in depth and across wider audiences.

INTRODUCTION

The Office of Cradle-to-Career Data (C2C) seeks to advance equity by bringing together and aligning data across large, state-level institutions. The legislation that authorized the creation of the C2C Data System requires the Office of Cradle-to-Career Data to scale current operational tools, like CaliforniaColleges.edu, as well as future tools, to better serve educators, students, and families. As part of C2C's [Annual Work Plan](#), an annual student experience audit is required to ensure the work of C2C is aligned with the needs of students, families and providers and informs the future work of C2C. C2C's aim in conducting an annual student experience audit is to ensure that the work prioritized for each year remains closely tied to the lived experiences of students.

The initial audit in Fall 2022 focused on a key deliverable for 2022-23: scaling California College Guidance Initiative's (CCGI) website, [CaliforniaColleges.edu](#), which provides planning and application tools for students, families, and educators to streamline the college and financial aid processes and monitor student progress. The audit captured the expertise and perspectives of ten stakeholders which represent a broad selection of California's diverse student populations and experiences. These stakeholders were frontline college access providers and managers consisting of community college staff and administration, high school counselors and administrators, and community-based organization administrators. All interviewees have a role in increasing college access for minority-identified students, first generation college students, students from marginalized communities, and students with special custodial circumstances including, but not limited to, students who have been in foster care and undocumented students. All stakeholders interviewed serve in communities identified as urban, suburban and rural settings throughout the state of California.

The interviews focused on the pain points and opportunities that students experience during the process of applying for financial aid and requesting or sharing electronic transcripts. The findings reflect a summary of student experiences and illustrate the challenges and opportunities that exist in the context of sharing required information when applying to college and accessing post-secondary financial aid.

What's the relationship between C2C and CaliforniaColleges.edu?

The long-term goal is for CaliforniaColleges.edu to provide the infrastructure through which the Office of Cradle-to-Career Data will streamline the high school-to-college segment of the educational pipeline, as established in AB 132. CaliforniaColleges.edu is managed by the CCGI, which works closely with C2C on implementing the steps delineated in AB 132.

What are the current priorities of CaliforniaColleges.edu?

AB 132 outlines specific activities that must be undertaken in order to implement the C2C System and realize its objectives. These objectives include:

- » Making CaliforniaColleges.edu tools and services free to all California school districts serving 6th-12th grade students, with a goal of full participation by June 30, 2026.
- » Collaborating with the California Department of Education for CaliforniaColleges.edu to reach scale across the state.
- » Designating CaliforniaColleges.edu as the preferred starting point for all applications to California public colleges, along with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and California Dream Act Application (CADAA). This streamlines the process by ensuring:
 - » All applications can be launched and tracked from a single platform.
 - » Components of applications can be pre-populated using data from CaliforniaColleges.edu.
 - » Key data points, including pre-verified "a-g" course data, can be provided to ensure accurate and timely decisions about admissions, placement, and financial aid.

The findings from the student experience audit will inform iterations of CaliforniaColleges.edu, as well as other operational tools that are developed in the future.

APPROACH

WestEd developed an interview protocol to focus on key needs specific to streamlining the college and financial aid application processes and to monitor student progress toward completing required coursework and submitting applications. Interviewees were recruited by leveraging existing networks of WestEd staff, C2C Advisory Board members and related projects, resulting in interviews with a broad array of stakeholders who represented minority identified students, first generation college students, students from marginalized communities, and students with special custodial circumstances including but not limited to foster care and undocumented students. All interviews were a minimum of 30 minutes and were conducted, recorded and themed, resulting in the key findings below.

KEY FINDINGS

Pain Point 1: Lack of resources to support students with special custodial circumstances

Respondents expressed a common set of pain points experienced by students who had special or unique circumstances that created challenges in accessing information to apply for financial aid. **These students include but are not limited to undocumented youth, unaccompanied homeless youth, students with divorced or separated parents and foster youth.** Students in these situations have a difficult time accessing parental income information and often do not begin or complete the FAFSA or CADAA for this reason. A significant limitation is created when students cannot access parental or personal information needed to complete universal financial aid information. Additionally, these students are unaware of the resources available to them to support this process. One stakeholder interviewee shared insightful context that “if you are a student with special custodial circumstance and the FAFSA/CADAA is your introduction to higher education, it can be an unpleasant experience and builds mistrust in education or government institutions”.

The following table summarizes examples we heard of the special custodial circumstances and the associated student population impacted. The challenges students face in the far left column were those most commonly shared in the interviews, some of which could have a technical solution. Each scenario greatly benefited from individualized support where the student felt comfortable self-identifying their particular circumstances that made accessing post-secondary resources challenging.

TABLE 1

Special custodial circumstances and the associated student population impacted.

| | Unaccompanied homeless youth | Divorced parents/separated | Foster youth | Undocumented scenarios |
|--|------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------|------------------------|
| Physical address mismatch for Webgrants | X | | X | |
| Discovering the correct spelling of names | X | | X | X |
| Difficulty accessing tax information | X | X | X | X |
| Student support staff is only knowledgeable of FAFSA | | | X | X |
| Students not filling out all the applications | | | X | X |
| Students are citizens but parents are not | | | | X |
| Navigating income and family household, untaxed income | | | | X |

The interviewees highlighted the challenge with mismatching physical addresses for unaccompanied homeless and foster youth due to the transient nature of these students. The implication of this challenge of data matching can create additional barriers to access and acquiring financial aid for students in these populations. Additionally, the required information sharing for the financial aid process prompts forced conversations, creates family tension and ruffles family dynamics for students and families with special custodial circumstances. Interviewees shared the often immense emotional toll and strain on family dynamics for families that have marital separation or divorce, or those students not living with their parents or legal guardians.

Lastly, this pain point illustrates that foster and undocumented students experience a disproportionate amount of challenge in the financial aid and college access process. The circumstances that impact the progress of application completion are often first encountered when the student needs to access personal and family information. For example, a student may learn of the official spelling of their name or the official marital status of their parents when they first view their birth certificate or 1040 tax form. Other students discover the correct spelling of their names or parent/guardian marital status at the time of a college or financial aid application. In addition to this circumstance, some college access providers that support students from this population are not aware of the nuances of CADAA, Chafee Grants or additional resources specific to the student need.

Promising practices associated with Pain Point 1

In cases of special custodial circumstances, students, families and educators are required to develop workaround solutions to systemic problems. There is a required resilience and persistence needed to access postsecondary education and financial resources for these students because of the plethora of challenges they face that other students do not. In specific regions or school sites we heard the following promising practices being used to support students who face these circumstances:

- » Developing and distributing specific application guides for FAFSA, CADAA, University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) applications tailored for counselors, parents and students to support the unique needs of undocumented students.
- » Encouraging students who have absent, divorced or separated parents to contact the financial aid office to access forms, processes and resources tailored to support their needs.
- » Offering private and individual support to increase trust for students who identify as foster youth, undocumented or unaccompanied minors.

- » Using processes that do not require students or families to identify their citizenship status, as fears of deportation can interrupt the college application process.
- » Reducing stress and friction for applicants of financial support by evaluating the efficiency of application processes, then shifting the burden of verification from the student to the institution.
- » Training of school staff to support varied financial aid applications to prevent isolation or targeting of vulnerable students.

Current work of CaliforniaColleges.edu/C2C associated with Pain Point 1

1. Application Guides for California Community Colleges, California State Universities, and Universities of California

CaliforniaColleges.edu currently provides students with detailed checklists for how to fill out their applications to California Community Colleges, California State Universities, and Universities of California (available through content pages on the platform). In addition, the integration between CaliforniaColleges.edu and Cal State Apply—which allows students to import transcript data directly into their college application—streamlines the process, thereby reducing the confusion students experience in submitting that application

2. Application Guides for FAFSA and California Dream Act Application

CaliforniaColleges.edu's Financial Aid Tools currently provides students with a full curriculum of grade level-appropriate financial aid lessons for both the FAFSA and California Dream Act Application, as well as application integrations that allow students to track the status of their applications. The lessons include not only step-by-step guidance at every stage of the financial aid process, but also helpful checklists to ensure that students stay on track with financial aid-related tasks and deadlines.

3. Support for Students with Special Custodial Circumstances

In addition to individualized support, students with special custodial circumstances would benefit from a resource such as the Financial Aid Tools on CaliforniaColleges.edu.

The financial aid lessons, for instance, provide students with instructions to ensure that their school has their correct personal contact information (including their physical address). The lessons also help students understand why it's important to enter their information in the same way on the FAFSA or California Dream Act Application.

The financial aid lessons also ensure that students are aware of the different forms of support available to them if they are living with a special custodial circumstance, such as the Chafee Grant for foster youth, the California Dream Act Application for undocumented students, and guidance on how to fill out the FAFSA if they are a citizen but their parents are not.

4. Language Accessibility

All lessons and functionality on CaliforniaColleges.edu can be navigated in the user's language of choice, making it more accessible to students who have family members who are not fluent in English.

Opportunities for CaliforniaColleges.edu/C2C associated with Pain Point 1 moving forward

UC is working on improvements to its integration with CaliforniaColleges.edu to allow students to import courses from the platform to their UC Application, which will reduce confusion in their application process.

Pain Point 2: Deep-seated fear to complete any government-related form and a general mistrust of local and governmental institutions

Respondents also shared a set of challenges for students and families who have a general mistrust of governmental institutions and because of that mistrust are unwilling or hesitant to share the sensitive information needed to apply for financial aid. There were several core barriers shared that impact students and families in accessing financial aid:

- » Many families experience a general discomfort around sharing financial information with a government entity based on past experiences, historic mistreatment or injustice and/or the fear that the family's well being could be harmed by sharing information.
- » Parents/guardians who have had negative experiences with school districts, counties, or state entities may display hesitation to share sensitive information.
- » Dreamers and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students have an additional apprehension to disclose personal and family information because they fear legal action will be taken on their families, or their status has not yet been shared with them by family members.

Promising practices associated with Pain Point 2

Mistrust of government institutions is a complex challenge that needs to be addressed at a larger and more systemic scale. As a part of that effort and in the

context of planning for life after high school, stories shared during this student experience audit offer valuable insights. Practitioners supporting students and families have identified the following promising practices to support students and families who share a distrust of government entities:

- » Sharing resources and documentation to high schools in the region to increase awareness of existing policies and the legal rights of students.
- » Developing unified messaging for all the staff in foster students' lives. Essential resources, key deadlines and websites are shared with the foster families, social workers and case managers to ensure their support system is receiving consistent and accurate information from multiple sources.
- » Hosting financial aid workshops geared towards the parents'/guardians' knowledge, comfort and understanding held in locations that are comfortable and known to the families. This small group approach offers more time flexibility, child care options and direct knowledge sharing to the parent/family/guardian population.

Current work of CaliforniaColleges.edu/C2C associated with Pain Point 2

CaliforniaColleges.edu supports students who experience distrust with submitting sensitive information to government agencies by providing them accessible, step-by-step guidance on how to complete their FAFSA or California Dream Act Application, whether independently or with their parents. Special circumstances are accounted for in all lessons. CaliforniaColleges.edu also protects students' privacy by not specifying in reports for educators whether students are filling out the FAFSA or CADAA—which would reveal whether students are undocumented. Reports only indicate the relevant status of completing the application to support any required interventions. And, as mentioned above, all lessons and functionality on CaliforniaColleges.edu can be navigated in the user's language of choice, making it more accessible to those families with non-native English speakers.

In addition, while there is never too much information for students and families about their rights and the policies impacting their options, content pages on CaliforniaColleges.edu provide students and families with information regarding many policies relevant to admissions, placement and financial aid, including those impacting students with special circumstances.

Opportunities moving forward

By further promoting the Financial Aid Tools on CaliforniaColleges.edu, C2C can raise student awareness about resources that allow them to take the financial aid process into their own hands and feel confident in their ability to complete the process independently and securely.

Pain Point 3: Lack of embedded guidance of post-application requirements

Lastly, interviewees shared a common pain point that students, families and school staff are unaware of the additional requirements to receive financial aid subsequent to completing the FAFSA/CADAA application. The requirements that need to occur after students have applied to postsecondary institutions include, but are not limited to: 1) completing the IRS non-filing form for students or parents; 2) navigating the income verification process at their 2-year or 4-year college; 3) a one-year waiting period prior to accessing funds after completing the Chafee Grant application; 4) confirming personal information on WebGrants for Students to access Cal Grants; and 5) submitting high school transcripts. Students who are not aware of these steps may experience frustration and may not continue their educational journey due to insufficient financial resources or lack of knowledge to navigate through the requirements.

As one respondent noted, “An additional barrier to accessing financial aid occurs after the FAFSA/CADAA submission. Low-income students are flagged at a disproportionate rate for income verification at the college level and often do not have the resources or knowledge to navigate this process. These students will pause or discontinue their academic journey due to the lack of resources.”

Promising practices associated with Pain Point 3

- » Widely distributing standardized college access checklists to increase transparency and validity for multiple stakeholders.
- » Requesting/sending transcripts independent of the need for high school counselors as brokers.
- » Viewing supplemental aid as an important retention strategy.

Current work of CaliforniaColleges.edu/C2C associated with Pain Point 3

Rather than requiring students to request transcripts from their schools, CaliforniaColleges.edu is working to automate provision of high school transcripts to public higher education in California. The goal of automation is to entirely remove from students the onus of requesting and sending transcripts.

CaliforniaColleges.edu sent more than 200,000 transcripts to the California community college system during the 2021-22 academic year. That same year, the CSU system received transcript data imported from CaliforniaColleges.edu as part of 122,327 applications from high school seniors. In addition, in summer 2022, CaliforniaColleges.edu piloted a process for providing end-of-year transcripts to CSU.

CaliforniaColleges.edu and C2C are also working to design an end-of-year transcript delivery automation process between CaliforniaColleges.edu and the nine undergraduate UC campuses, as they have implemented with the CSU system.

OPPORTUNITY FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

During the interview process stakeholders shared ideas for continuous improvement for the overall financial aid application and transcript delivery processes. Below are reflection questions about leveraging existing platforms and resources:

- » Can regional scholarship applications be embedded into FAFSA/CADAA?
- » Can funding opportunities be created for students who have severed ties with parents but are not legally emancipated?
- » Can students be provided with personalized, individual academic advising and support?
- » Can FAFSA/CADAA training and certification be required for student services staff?
- » Can a view be created in CaliforniaColleges.edu to track where transcripts are in the process?

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