

## California wants to simplify its \$2 billion-a-year college aid programs

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California wants to find a simpler and less confusing way to distribute more than \$2 billion in Cal grants and other annual aid to about 400,000 students.

The state agency that administers the state's myriad aid programs recently started a search for a consultant to study the current system and come up with reform ideas. Students long have complained that they are baffled by the various forms of the grants and their eligibility rules.

Lupita Cortez Alcalá, executive director of the [California Student Aid Commission](#), said that the review will examine what changes might make the programs “more efficient, more easily understood by parents and students and easier to apply for.” The study, she said, will examine such things as the various levels of high school grades and family incomes needed to be eligible and whether aid should be calculated based on the full costs of college, including room and board, and not focus as much as it does now on just tuition in many cases.

Following a directive from the state Legislature, the commission is asking for ideas on how Cal Grants and several other programs could be “streamlined and consolidated into as few programs as is feasible, including the potential benefits and risks,” according to the new [proposal document](#). Any changes should “reduce current students’ cost of attendance” and their reliance on loans.

The scope of possible change is enormous given the amount of money distributed every year. The reforms potentially could affect, among others, the [various Cal Grants](#), the California Dream Act money for undocumented students, the Middle Class Scholarships and programs for foster youth and the children of law enforcement officers who are killed or disabled in the line of duty. (Those awards are separate from the many grants that come directly from UC, CSU, community colleges and private campuses.)

The “request for proposal” invites financial aid experts, agencies and consultants to bid by September 19 on a contract to develop reform proposals, with the winner to be chosen in late October. The aid commission is expected to send the resulting report to the Legislature by February, 2018. Officials say some changes then may be implemented without legislation and some will require approval by the state Legislature.

Over about 60 years, programs were added and changed without much coordination, Alcalá said. Now is a good time to examine whether the programs should continue in the same ways, she said.

The commission had briefly issued an earlier version of the bid proposal several months ago but withdrew it to add the new directive from the Legislature and to correct some technicalities, Alcalá said.

In March, Democratic Assembly leaders had proposed a vast expansion of student aid at California’s public colleges and universities but that plan did not win approval after Gov. Jerry Brown expressed concerns about costs. Still, legislators want to explore ways to better use current aid dollars and to examine expanding aid in the future. The state Legislative Analyst’s Office in 2015 raised [similar concerns](#).

Debbie Cochrane, vice president of the Institute for College Access & Success, an Oakland-based nonprofit that seeks to keep college affordable, said she welcomed the review of Cal grants and other programs. “I think it’s ripe for reassessment. The program is complicated. It’s possible the complexity is a hindrance for students and families,” she said. In addition she said she hoped the

review will help make aid more accessible to returning and older students, who now face more restrictions than students who start college directly from high school.

The contract to conduct the study will pay up to \$150,000. According to Alcalá, the commission does not have enough staff to conduct it in-house alone and, besides, independent analysis — “someone with fresh eyes” — is needed.

The proposal document said the analyst should cast a wide net and look at reforms in other states and nations and pay special attention to the technology barriers that the programs and students face.

Cal Grants vary depending on the school, the students’ income and their Grade Point Average (GPA). The maximum award in 2017-18 will be \$12,630 at a UC, \$9,084 at a private non-profit college, \$5,742 at a CSU and \$1,672 at a community college. (In some cases, for very low-income students at UC and CSU, an additional \$1,672 may be available for living expenses and books.) The overall average Cal Grant was about \$5,700 last year, according to the Student Aid Commission.

For students who are coming directly from high school, a 3.0 GPA, or B grade average, is needed to obtain the most common Cal Grant usable at UC. A 2.4 GPA, a C plus average, in college grades is needed for a transfer student from community colleges to obtain the aid for a four-year school. A 2.0 GPA, or a C average, in high school is the minimum to receive the type of grant usually awarded for Cal State and community colleges.

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