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**California Student Aid Commission Executive Director leaves a lasting legacy as she heads into retirement**

*"My focus has been improving student educational equity"*

Sacramento, Calif., June 27, 2023 – Today, after a distinguished career in public service, Marlene Garcia retired as the Executive Director of the California Student Aid Commission after five years leading the agency. Under Director Garcia's leadership, the Commission has adapted to a rapidly changing landscape and innovated in how it uplifts and meets the needs of the students of California.

Director Garcia joined the Commission in May 2019, when students not only faced rising tuition costs, but a severe basic needs crisis that was only exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Director Garcia took lead of the Commission to re-imagine Cal Grant, the state's premier financial aid entitlement program, to better address the needs of students today. In collaboration with students, higher education segments, policymakers, and advocates, the Cal Grant Equity Framework was designed to reform the program to remove equity barriers and help simplify and streamline access to financial aid. Since the Cal Grant Equity Framework was created, Cal Grants were expanded to include an entitlement program for community college students, enabling over additional 172,000 students to receive the Cal Grant. The Framework was codified into state law in the 2022-23 State Budget, and the Commission continues to work with partners to secure funding for the full its full implementation.

Director Garcia's leadership and dedication to student success led the Commission to utilize its data to better inform policymakers and leaders about the comprehensive needs of students through efforts such as the biannual Student Expenses and Resources Survey. The Commission also leveraged its data and a broad range of stakeholders to identify barriers faced by undocumented students and students seeking support through the CalFresh program, along with recommendations to inform policy and practice. These solutions have been translated into direct action, including:

- State policies making annual data available on college student access to CalFresh and ensure that institutions of higher education inform students of their potential eligibility.
- Enhancements to the California Dream Act Application to make it easier for students and families to apply for financial aid, including integration of the forms students submit to be eligible for exemptions from non-resident tuition via AB 1540.

In addition to utilizing data to help students, Director Garcia continued to position the Commission to be student-centered in all its activity and initiatives, such as:

- Advocacy for and implementation of AB 469, the state law that requires all K-12 districts to confirm that high school seniors completed the FAFSA or the CA Dream Act Application, unless they formally opt out. This led to the Commission's ~~All In for FAFSA~~ ~~CA Dream Act~~ campaign to support K-12 school and districts and a record high of aid applications from the class of 2023 during the first year of implementation.
- Creation of a new two-way, AI-powered chatbot to help high school seniors complete their FAFSA or CA Dream Act applications for the 2024-2025 academic year.
- Establish authority for CSAC to partner with philanthropic entities and receipt of \$3 million in external funding to augment the work of the Commission.
- Creation of the Golden State Teacher Grant Program and the Dreamer Incentive Service Grant, as well as expansion of Middle Class Scholarship to help students address the total cost of attendance.

“My focus has been improving student educational equity and using governmental levers to make it possible for more students to benefit from education and training beyond high school despite where they started in life,” said Director Garcia. “For this Latina, starting my educational journey in Pico Rivera, a working class, low-income community, I benefited tremendously from the Master Plan for Higher Education by enrolling at Rio Hondo Community College, transferring to UCLA and eventually receiving my master’s degree from Claremont Graduate School. Moreover, my education would not have been possible without financial aid; I was a Cal Grant and Pell Grant recipient. This lived experience has informed my vision, focus and passion for pursuing what is possible for students from all walks of life to succeed in college.”

“I cannot thank Director Garcia enough for her enormous contributions to expanding access to financial aid and making higher education affordable for hundreds of thousands of students,” said Catalina Cifuentes, Chair of the Commission. “Under her leadership, the Commission has continuously adapted to a shifting landscape and changing student needs, from the challenges brought by the pandemic to the historic transition this year to new aid applications. Amid these changes, the Commission also adapted to expand its research capacity, engage students through new platforms, and deepen partnerships with philanthropic and community organizations. Among many groundbreaking policies, Director Garcia and the Commission were instrumental to California

adopting and successfully implementing a systemic policy to ensure that our high school seniors apply for aid, resulting in unprecedented numbers of students applying for aid. She has had a profound career, and her strong leadership has made a lasting mark on the Commission. I wish her a happy and healthy retirement and promise to carry her legacy of supporting student success forward.”

The Commission looks forward to welcoming Dr. Daisy Gonzales as its next Executive Director starting on July 15 to continue leading groundbreaking work on behalf of California students. The Commission is grateful for the leadership and dedication of Director Garcia, and it remains committed to using a student-centered approach as it pursues all policy goals, programmatic changes, and financial aid initiatives.

Additional statements from state leaders congratulating Director Garcia on her retirement can be [found here \(linked\)](#).

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*The [California Student Aid Commission](#) currently serves over 400,000 students and administers the state's \$3 billion portfolio of student financial aid programs and services, including the Cal Grant, the Middle Class Scholarship, and the California Dream Act Application. The Commission serves as a resource for policymakers and the public on college affordability and financing issues, and advocates for policy changes to eliminate cost as a barrier to any qualified California student pursuing a higher education. Visit our website at [www.csac.ca.gov](http://www.csac.ca.gov) or follow us on social media by clicking on our [Link Tree](#).*