

September 20, 2021

The Honorable Gavin Newsom  
Governor of California  
1303 10th St., Suite 1173  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**Re: Assembly Bill 1456 (Medina, McCarty, Leyva)—Request for Signature**

Dear Governor Newsom:

On behalf of UnidosUS (formerly the National Council of La Raza), I write to urge you to sign AB 1456 (Medina, McCarty, Leyva), which would shift the Cal Grant program to a model based on student need. AB 1456 builds upon the recent historic budget investments that expand access to the Cal Grant program to create a more inclusive financial aid system by streamlining and simplifying the program, removing barriers to Cal Grant access based on GPA, and ensuring that California's least-resourced students continue to be supported.

UnidosUS, is the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization and has built a stronger country by creating opportunities for Latinos for more than 50 years. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an Affiliate Network of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers at the national and local levels. The UnidosUS California-based Affiliates include 62 community-based organizations that invest more than \$1.8 billion and employ more than 15,000 staff to provide direct services to approximately 1.8 million Californians annually. UnidosUS is headquartered in Washington, DC, and has an office in Los Angeles and staff in Sacramento. Through partnerships, community investments, and state research and advocacy on housing, health, and education, UnidosUS advances opportunities for the more than 15 million Latinos who call California home.

Higher education is a path toward economic and social mobility, which unfortunately remains out of reach for far too many Latino students. In California, nearly 55% of the K–12 student population is Latino, and 80% of Latino students are socioeconomically disadvantaged.<sup>1,i</sup> Since the 2000–2001 school year, Latinos' enrollment in California's public colleges and universities increased by 91%, yet they are still enrolling in college at lower rates than their White peers.<sup>ii</sup> For Latino students, choices on where to enroll are often influenced by their family's economic status; therefore, many of them make decisions about higher education based on cost and proximity to their parents' home to save on expenses. Although California has made substantial

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<sup>1</sup> Socioeconomically disadvantaged students are those for whom neither of their parents received a high school diploma and/or those who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

strides to increase Latino college enrollment rates, there is still room for improvement, and access to financial aid plays a key role.

The Cal Grant program was designed six decades ago to serve students throughout California; however, it has not kept up with the needs of our students. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, California college students were already struggling to pay for their basic needs, such as food and housing, because they lacked nontuition assistance through financial aid. According to an UnidosUS survey, by September 2020, 45% of current California Latino students with college loans relied increasingly on credit cards, 35% took additional loans to pay for unanticipated expenses, and 41% had to get a job to help family with basic living expenses.<sup>iii</sup> The lack of college affordability, combined with the impacts of the pandemic, has resulted in students being forced to find alternative ways to fund their education, which is likely to impact their academic and financial well-being.

Additionally, California's community colleges saw an average decrease of 11% to 12% in enrollment, and it is estimated that Black, Native American, and Latino students were the most impacted.<sup>iv</sup> Students of color have been among the hardest hit by the pandemic; therefore, it is critical that permanent structural changes are made that better support equitable education opportunities.

California's current approach to financial aid and investments in college affordability leaves too many students without state financial aid every year. The fiscal year 2021–22 state budget made historic investments toward Cal Grant expansion, which will greatly support more of our most vulnerable students, and AB 1456 takes critical steps to further that impact.

AB 1456 can greatly benefit Latino students, especially since the pandemic has hit the population particularly hard.<sup>v</sup> Additionally, Latino students are largely first-generation students, meaning they have more difficulty navigating the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and financial aid system and would benefit from a streamlined and simplified process. The current iteration of Cal Grants turns away hundreds of thousands of eligible low- and middle-income students, many of whom are Latino.<sup>vi</sup>

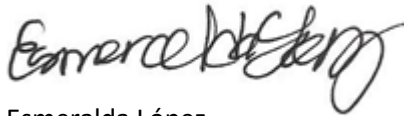
AB 1456 is needed because too many students are currently unable to complete their degrees. Only 22% of California's Latino community college students earn a degree, certificate, or transfer to a four-year university within six years.<sup>vii</sup> Latinos largely cite financial insecurity and a lack of help for ancillary college costs as the reason for dropping out or taking fewer courses per semester.

AB 1456 removes GPA limitation for the lowest income California community college students (those eligible for the maximum federal Pell Grant). Considering that California community colleges serve the majority of the state's students of color, making them accessible plays a critical role in closing racial and ethnic equity gaps. Additionally, it takes important steps to ensure that the access award (for nontuition costs) does not drop below the current maximum of \$1,656 and does not continue to lose its value by adding a much-needed automatic annual growth factor. Lastly, AB 1456 streamlines and simplifies the Cal Grant program to close racial

equity gaps. AB 1456 builds on the changes made in the recent budget investments to make the Cal Grant program easier to navigate and expand college affordability for thousands of Californians.

UnidosUS is pleased to support AB 1456 as it is critical to eliminating barriers and improving access to state financial aid, specifically for low-income students of color. For these reasons we support AB 1456 and respectfully request your signature when the bill comes before you. If you have any questions regarding our support, please contact Viviana Martin, Policy Analyst, Policy and Advocacy at [vmartin@unidosus.org](mailto:vmartin@unidosus.org).

Sincerely,



Esmeralda López  
California State Director  
Policy and Advocacy  
UnidosUS

cc: Assemblymember Jose Medina  
Assemblymember Kevin McCarty  
Senator Connie Leyva  
Joey Freeman, Chief Deputy Legislative Affairs Secretary, Office of the Governor  
Chris Ferguson, Program Budget Manager, California Department of Finance

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<sup>i</sup> UnidosUS, *California Latino Students & English Learners: Fast Facts 2020–21* (Washington, DC: UnidosUS, 2020), <http://publications.unidosus.org/handle/123456789/2098> (accessed September 15, 2021).

<sup>ii</sup> UnidosUS, *California Latino Students in Higher Education* (Washington, DC: UnidosUS, 2021), <http://publications.unidosus.org/handle/123456789/2151> (accessed September 15, 2021).

<sup>iii</sup> UnidosUS, “Student Loan Debt in California: Survey of Current and Former Student Borrowers” (Washington, DC: UnidosUS, 2020), <https://www.unidosus.org/publications/2083-student-loan-debt-in-california-survey-of-current-and-former-student-borrowers/> (accessed September 14, 2021).

<sup>iv</sup> Michael Burke and Louis Freedberg, *Enrollment declines at California’s community colleges far greater than earlier predictions* (Oakland, CA: EdSource, March 19, 2021), <https://edsources.org/2021/enrollment-at-californias-community-colleges-declined-more-last-fall-than-previously-estimated/651683> (accessed September 14, 2021).

<sup>v</sup> The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS), *The Impact of COVID-19 on California’s College Students* (Oakland, CA: TICAS, April 15, 2021), <https://ticas.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/The-Impact-of-COVID19-on-CA-College-Students.pdf> (accessed September 15, 2021)

<sup>vi</sup> Laura Szabo-Kubitz, “An Important, No-Cost Way to Improve Cal Grants,” (blog) The Institute for College Access & Success, October 21, 2019, <https://ticas.org/california/affordability/grant-aid/an-important-no-cost-way-to-improve-cal-grants/> (accessed September 14, 2021).

<sup>vii</sup> Grace Chen, “New Study: 70% of California Community College Students Fail,”(blog) Community College Review, September 8, 2021, <https://www.communitycollegereview.com/blog/new-study-70-of-california-community-college-students-fail> (accessed September 14, 2021).