

March 2 Deadline for College Financial Aid Looms



By Ed Coghlan

When you consider the damage done to California by the COVID-19 pandemic, look no further than public education. The inability for students and counselors to be in personal touch is taking a toll on our students in the classroom.

For high school seniors, there's been another challenge. Applying and paying for college. This year has been more challenging than most.

And that is part of what is driving an effort to get high school seniors signed up for California college financial aid by a March 2 deadline.

UNITE-LA's L.A. Cash for College program is working with partners to identify and assist students in making sure they meet that deadline. [Here's their marketing toolkit](#) for advocates to use to get the word out.

"This year's challenge is the lack of face-to-face interaction with counselors and students," said Maria Marquez Alvarez, L.A. Cash for College Senior Program Coordinator. "We've had to reinvent what we normally do to attract young people interested in going to college."

They turned their annual convention—Your Future LA—into a virtual campaign along with [support workshops](#) and events and are working closely with other groups and L.A. Unified counselors to get the word out before the March 2 deadline.

And remember, when you're filing for financial aid, it isn't simply filling out one form. In normal years, it can be a confusing process that often hampers access. This year, it's worse. And when you look at the [California figures here](#), you can see things are lagging. In L.A. Unified, less than half of the eligible students have filed for aid.

We need to do better.



When we spoke with Los Angeles High School counselor Heather Brown, she explained that her students have been adversely affected by COVID with schools not being open.

“The simple stuff like being able to print the forms and making sure they are properly signed are easier to monitor when you see the students every day,” she explained. “Now with the lack of technical access in their homes and at the libraries, families being displaced and living arrangements being impacted, it is much more complex and time consuming.”

And let's not forget why this is important.

“UNITE-LA works to create a society where a quality college education is accessible to all to help ensure that historically disenfranchised and vulnerable youth can thrive equitably,” said David Rattray, UNITE-LA President & CEO. “We simply cannot afford to leave these young people behind.”

L.A. High School's Brown said that the school district has adapted well to the COVID emergency in trying to reach more students this year, and she thanked UNITE-LA and other partners who are assisting in building awareness about the March 2 deadline.

In addition to UNITE-LA, another partner, the [Southern California College Access Network](#) (SoCal CAN) has activated a network of college students to help improve registration.

For Ariana Lopez Torres, a microbiology major at Pasadena City College who plans to become a physician, this work is personal.

“As a first-generation college student, I remember that I didn't know how to do this when I was in high school,” she said. “Increasing access to education is so important, and any help I can give to students is important to me. I'm helping my community.”

In addition, her organization, SoCal CAN, is sponsoring a social media campaign that is rewarding the best promotional posts on Instagram. Three students are being awarded \$500 prizes each day between now and March 1, and on March 1, the post judged the best will receive \$5,000!

“To create and sustain real change to benefit millions of underserved Californians, we must intensify our approach to creating and adopting policies that can bring about those needed changes,” said Rattray. “More people attending and completing post-secondary education is a way to build a bridge from poverty to prosperity.”

A long-time supporter of the L.A. Cash for College program is [Edgar Sotelo](#), a well-known Los Angeles radio personality who is currently developing a nationally syndicated program.

A native of Mexico, Edgar became the first in his family to go to college, an experience he found so valuable that he went to earn a master’s degree in organizational leadership from Azusa Pacific.

“College allowed me to expand beyond what I grew up knowing and allowed me to grow my God-given gifts,” he said. “I encourage everyone who can to go to college to do it. You won’t regret it.”

For more information about L.A. Cash for College, contact [Maria Marquez Alvarez](#).