March 2nd: FAFSA Deadline Approaching

MYTH-BUSTING FINANCIAL AID FOR FOSTER YOUTH!

February is a critical month for youth in foster care who may want to attend college in the fall. It is the last month before the important March 2nd deadline for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in California. Despite their eligibility, many youth in foster care do not receive full financial aid because they are not aware of the importance of meeting the March 2nd FAFSA deadline. Financial aid is critical: a 2011 study found that foster youth who received it were 3% more likely to succeed in community college than those without it. Take a moment to read about four common myths that prevent foster youth from receiving the financial aid they require to be successful in college.

Myth #1: It doesn’t matter when the FAFSA is submitted. It just needs to be completed before the youth starts school.

FACT: It is extremely important to submit the FAFSA by the March 2nd deadline in California. Failure to complete the FAFSA by the March 2nd deadline is why less than 1 in 5 of foster youth who apply for financial aid receive a Cal Grant. By meeting the March 2nd deadline, eligible students are guaranteed to receive a Cal Grant, which covers fees up to $5,970 at CSUs, $12,192 at UCs and $9,223 toward tuition and fees at a private college. Up to $1,473 for books and living expenses is available for students attending community college. Failure to meet the March 2nd deadline places them in a competitive pool, where the odds of getting funding decrease to 1 in 13.

Myth #2: Youth shouldn’t complete a FAFSA if they aren’t sure whether or not they will be graduating high school and attending college.

FACT: If you are not sure whether the youth will attend college in the fall, or even if they will graduate from high school, it is better to complete a FAFSA now and keep the option for college attendance open. If the youth is not able to graduate or changes his or her plans about attending college, the information can be updated. No financial aid funds will be automatically issued to the youth. By simply completing the FAFSA you will not putting the youth at risk of financial aid debt.

Myth #3: Most foster youth get help with their FAFSA from their county Independent Living Skills Program.

FACT: While ILPs across the state offer valuable assistance with the FAFSA to thousands of youth annually, less than half of youth in foster care participate in this voluntary program, according to the most recently available data. That means that thousands more foster youth will not know about the deadline for the FAFSA if a social worker, attorney or other adult ally does not tell them about it and refer them to a financial aid workshop, either through ILP or the hundreds of workshops being offered by the California Student Aid Commission.

Myth #4: As low-income students, foster youth usually receive each of the three major forms of financial aid: a Chafee Grant, a federal Pell Grant and the Cal Grant.

FACT: Despite their eligibility, almost no foster youth receive all three major forms of financial aid. In 2009-10, just 4 percent of foster youth who were federal aid applicants in California received all three sources. Failure to complete the FAFSA in a timely manner is consistently cited as a primary reason why eligible foster youth do not receive the financial aid for which they are eligible.

For more information about how to ensure a youth in foster care receives the support they need to complete the FAFSA, go to www.cacollegepathways.org; Data is from Hopes to Hurdles by the Institute for College Access & Success and First Look by the Stuart Foundation.