

# FAFSA DOES NOT GUARANTEE PROTECTION FOR UNDOCUMENTED FAMILIES, BUT CALIFORNIA DOES

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There is no guarantee that the immigration status of families is secure and protected for those who file for federal financial aid, including the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), according to Mikki Johnson, the director of financial aid and scholarships at Fresno City College.

Scholarship application information is protected and handled internally at FCC, so there is no risk for undocumented families when applying for scholarships. And while Johnson is not aware of any instances where the Department of Education has used financial aid information to search for undocumented families and parents, she admitted that it could be a risk.

"We can't guarantee that by filling out the FAFSA that the [federal] administration won't be able to retrieve this information, because the Department of Education wouldn't guarantee that this data would be protected," Johnson said. "They [applicants] really can't opt out of anything when they're filling out the application, but they can opt out of just doing the application in general."

All state-level aid however, has protections in place for undocumented families. The California Dream Act and Cal Grant Programs are housed under the California Student Aid Commission, which protects the private information of undocumented families under Senate Bill No. 54 and Cal. Gov. Code Section 7284.8(a). According to the official California Student Aid Commission website, "Your information is never shared with the federal government or used for immigration enforcement."

The California Dream Act provides state-level financial aid to eligible undocumented students. It allows students whose

parents do not have legal immigration status to access grants and other funding opportunities to help pay for college.

The Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) and California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) also offer financial services to undocumented students.

For many, the benefits of federal financial aid outweigh the risks. According to Johnson, the maximum amount of aid awarded to any one student through FAFSA is over \$7,000. In the 2024-25 school year, approximately \$58 million was awarded through federal Pell Grant funds. The Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant and federal work study programs together generated \$3 million for students.

Padilla, a homestay mom and mother of a student at Fresno State, described her experience with FAFSA as challenging but necessary. She chose to only be identified by her last name.

"Right now, I'm mostly at home, helping my child with school. When we first started, we didn't know much about the program," Padilla said.

She added that getting additional guidance and support from other parents was crucial.

"I asked for information for parents, especially for those who are undocumented. It helped us understand the process, though sometimes it was overwhelming," she explained.

Padilla highlighted the importance of the California Dream Act, but admitted that

it didn't offer all the aid required for most.

"It provides grants and financial aid for students whose parents are undocumented immigrants. It's helpful, but it doesn't cover everything," she said.

Carlos Ramirez, a construction worker and father of a college-bound student, shared a similar perspective.

"At first, it was confusing. I didn't know much about how to apply or what programs were available," Ramirez said.

He noted that school counselors talk to other parents to make the process easier.

"The Dream Act programs gave my child access to grants that we otherwise wouldn't have," Ramirez said.

Both parents agreed that, despite the stress, these programs are invaluable.

"It's stressful at times, but it's worth it," Ramirez said.



A television on the top floor of the student services building outside of the Fresno City College financial aid office reads "So how do we protect your privacy?" on Nov. 21. Photo by Logan Payne.

## HOPE FOR THE HOLIDAYS

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Hope for the Holidays is a Fresno City College program that works to serve students in need for the holiday season by giving students a \$50 Save Mart gift card. This 36-year-long tradition put on by the Student Activities Center has helped thousands of students throughout the years.

The amount of gift cards given out this year was unclear, but it typically ranges from 180-350 students depending on the amount of donations received, according to Janice Wong, a senior program specialist.

Staff on the FCC campus receive an email in the beginning of October to nominate students. Students who are nominated enter a lottery system to receive the gift card on Dec. 4. Each student was allowed 10 nominations and those chosen will receive emails saying they were selected.

"Selection happens by faculty and staff, they will actually nominate students who they feel would benefit from the Hope for the Holidays program," Wong said.

Paul Torres, a senior program specialist, works in the Student Activities Center to put on events to boost student engagement. He is one of the leaders this year for the program. When he went to FCC in the 2000s, he was a student worker at the activities center and has seen the program's growth.

"It's not just one office, it's a campus-wide event that we do," Torres said. "We rely on everybody on campus to pull this off."



A graphic of the Save Mart gift card given out for the Hope for the Holidays Student Activities program inside a gift basket. Graphic by Miley Araujo.

There are more nominees on campus than donations received, so not everyone nominated is guaranteed to receive a donation.

"They [gift card receivers] are always very polite, very considerate, and they do thank our volunteers or individ-

Every year, the Hope for the Holidays event coordinators reach out to their community members and partnerships in August to receive and coordinate donations.

This year Student Activities has partnered with Reading Heart for book donations, ACD Distributions for board game donations, EECU, Save Mart and the FCC dental hygiene program for toothbrushes. They also receive community member donations that are always appreciated, no matter how much money is donated, according to Torres.

"We've built some good partnerships," Torres said. "Anyone can donate."

uals at the table, processing and providing them with the card," Wong said.

Student Activities want to keep students in college and help them finish strong. Hosting the Hope for the Holidays program is one way to make sure students don't have to worry about finding a meal and can focus on their classes.

"Hopefully this is a little step in helping them to make sure that that [education] is successful," Wong said.

While the program may have been around for 36 years, it used to look quite different. 15 years ago it was called "Holiday Baskets," and Student Activities would get baskets to donate canned food items, turkey and other staple items according to Wong.

Students who took public transportation or rode bikes had difficulties getting around, so they now use gift cards to be more efficient.

"If students are picking up their holiday baskets and they need to go to class, and then they're lugging a frozen turkey," Wong said. "You can just as easily put it in your wallet and you can still be able to go ahead."

The Student Activities Center has around 40 student employees that help run the events including the Hope for the Holiday program. The student employees help represent the student perspective of how the activities center could improve, according to Torres.

"We do have some great faculty and staff that are volunteering their time to be part of the day that we pass out these items," Torres said.

The Hope for the Holidays program is an extension of the Student Activities Center. The relationship that the staff at the Center has with students is crucial and they focus on encouragement according to Torres.

"Hope means everything, especially with the life that the students go through," Torres said. "Whether it's late night prep, early morning prep, some of the behind the scene type of work. I think what motivates us is just the love for our job and the love for students on campus."

## EVENT CALENDAR

- Dec. 3 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Fresno State University In Person Appointments (Transfer Center)
- Dec. 3 12-2:30 p.m. Wellness Wednesday(College Mall)
- Dec. 3 7:30 p.m. Winter Choir Concert (OAB Auditorium)
- Dec. 4 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Fresno Pacific University 1-on-1 Appointments (Transfer Center)
- Dec. 4 3-6 p.m. "I And You" Play Production Auditions (Studio Theater TA-105)
- Dec. 4 7:30 p.m. Rams Jams: Guitar Concert (OAB Auditorium)
- Dec. 5 1-3 p.m. "I And You" Play Production Auditions (Studio Theater TA-105)
- Dec. 5 7:30 p.m. Commercial Music: Ear Candy (Theater)
- Dec. 6 3 p.m. Fresno Community Concert Band-The Sounds Of The Season (Theater)
- Dec. 6 5- 8 p.m. Community Alliance Fundraiser Print Media Matters (OAB-251)
- Dec. 9 8:30 a.m.-12 p.m. Transfer Tuesday (University Mall)
- Dec. 9 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Fresno State University In Person Appointments (Transfer Center)
- Dec. 9 7:30 p.m. Symphonic Band Winter Concert (Theater)

Compiled by Christo Wiehl