

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 6141

As of February 3, 2020

Title: An act relating to expanding access to higher education.

Brief Description: Expanding access to higher education.

Sponsors: Senators Randall, Hasegawa, Keiser, Stanford, Frockt, Wilson, C. and Sheldon; by request of Lieutenant Governor.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Higher Education & Workforce Development: 1/16/20.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) to develop a financial aid calculator to provide estimates of federal and state aid.
- Directs WSAC, in collaboration with the Council of Presidents, to develop clear and consistent standards for financial aid award letters.
- Establishes requirements for a financial aid advising day for all school districts with a high school.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Staff: Alicia Kinne-Clawson (786-7407)

Background: Prior to each year of college, students may apply for financial aid by filling out the federal Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA). Colleges use the data provided in the financial aid application to determine a student's eligibility for aid. A student's financial need, as determined by the college, is the difference between the amount it will cost the student to go to school—the Cost of Attendance—and the family's Expected Family Contribution (EFC). The EFC takes into consideration family income, assets, family size, and number of family members in college.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

In 2019, the Legislature adopted changes to the High School and Beyond Plans including a requirement that students receive specific information about federal and state financial aid programs that provide financial assistance for postsecondary education.

Summary of Bill: The bill as referred to committee not considered.

Summary of Bill (Proposed Substitute): Financial Aid Calculator. WSAC must develop an online calculator for all public four-year higher education institutions in Washington. The tool must:

- provide estimates of federal Pell Grant and Washington College Grant awards based on student and family circumstances;
- be published on a website managed by WSAC; and
- make clear that the tool is only an estimate and not a guarantee of state aid.

Financial Aid Award Letters. WSAC, in collaboration with the Council of Presidents, must develop clear and consistent standards for financial aid award letters. By July 1, 2021, all public higher education institutions and all independent colleges in Washington State must adopt uniform terminology and a standardized template for financial aid awards.

School District Requirements for Financial Aid Advising Day. Beginning in the 2020-21 school year, all districts with a high school must provide both a financial aid advising day and notification of financial aid opportunities at the beginning of the school year to parents and guardians of any student entering the twelfth grade. The notification must include:

- eligibility requirements of the Washington College Grant;
- requirements of the financial aid advising day;
- the process for opting out of financial aid advising day; and
- any community-based resources available to assist parents or guardians in completing FAFSA or WASFA.

The Washington State School Director's Association, with assistance from the Office of the Superintendent for Public Instruction (OSPI) and WSAC must develop a model policy and procedure for financial aid advising day.

Financial Aid Advising Day. Beginning with the 2020-21 school year and within existing resources, OSPI must coordinate a financial aid advising day for all districts with a high school. Financial aid advising day must take place between September 1st and December 1st of each year and include:

- distribution of information to twelfth grade students about the FAFSA and WASFA;
- assistance in completing an aid application when possible; and
- information about the Washington College Grant and the financial aid calculator.

Students and educational staff may not be assessed on the basis of or penalized for failing to complete a financial aid application.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony on Proposed Substitute: PRO: These policies are ideas that can remove non-financial barriers to higher education and create equitable privilege. They have all been tested in other states. This bill creates an online calculator which helps students estimate their actual cost of education. This bill also helps students and families access and complete the FAFSA. As a student who recently went through this process I was afraid to file the FAFSA because because of my families history of negative experiences with federal agencies. This legislation is one evidence based step in supporting students to file for aid. This builds on the great investment in the Washington College Grant and other changes made last year to the high school and beyond plan. We do not have adequate staffing at our schools to provide the support necessary to fully implement this bill. This bill aims to streamline the tools for applying for aid as well as the follow-up students receive after applying. We see this as anti-poverty work in helping students access postsecondary education. Partners are in agreement that the financial aid calculator is helpful. We want to work with partners on how we get this information to students without putting too many burdens on schools.

OTHER: With last sessions big expansion in aid we want to ensure that students know how to access that aid. WSAC is doing some work to increase FAFSA filing through text messages and train the trainer work so that local school districts have support. We think the aid calculator is important to give clarity to students and families about what aid they are eligible for. The community and technical colleges have been suing a standardized award template for several years. Many schools are already doing this work. This does not come with additional staff and we are cautious about what these new requirements will mean to schools.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Emily Randall, Prime Sponsor; Simone Boe, Washington Education Association; Cyrus Habib, Office of the Lieutenant Governor; Mary Chikwinya, Director of Higher Education, Office of the Lieutenant Governor; Spencer Lively, Director of Legislative Affairs, Associated Students of the University of Washington; Wendy Holcomb, Foundation for Tacoma Students; Lori Parrish, Metropolitan Development Council; Katherine Mahoney, Office of the Superintendent for Public Instruction; Juliette Schindler Kelly, College Success Foundation.

OTHER: Heather Hudson, Washington Student Achievement Council; Scott Copeland, Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges; Roz Thompson, Association of Washington School Principals.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.