

# Financial Aid for Undocumented Students in California – Detailed Frequently Asked Questions

If you are undocumented and live in California, there is financial aid to support your educational goals (college, university, or trade school).

The following are some of the most frequently asked questions by undocumented students about the financial aid process.



## 1. What is the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC)?

The California Student Aid Commission is a state government agency (*not* a federal agency) whose mission is to make higher education more accessible and affordable for people living in California. The Commission was created in 1955 and has a team of experts working every day to connect students and families with financial aid programs like Cal Grant.

## 2. I am undocumented and college is expensive. Is college even worth it?

Undocumented Californians like you are essential members of our communities. California's colleges and universities welcome students regardless of their immigration status! While it is true that the cost of tuition at colleges and universities has increased in recent years, so has the availability of financial aid to cover not only tuition but also rent, transportation, books, and supplies. In California, undocumented immigrants can start their own businesses and apply for professional licenses. By going to college, undocumented students have an opportunity to develop new skills, build career networks, and earn a college degree that can help you for the possibility of adjusting your immigration status in the future.

## 3. I am undocumented — is there financial aid available for me? Do I put myself at risk by applying?

If you are undocumented, you may feel nervous about completing a government application for financial aid. However, California has a financial aid application process designed to help and protect

undocumented students and families. The information you provide when you complete the California Dream Act Application is never shared with any federal agencies and is used to determine your eligibility for financial aid offered by the state and colleges in California.

## 4. What is the CA Dream Act Application (CADAA)? What is the difference between FAFSA and CADAA?

CADAA is California's state financial aid application operated by CSAC that allows undocumented students (read more on [FAQ #9](#)) to receive free financial aid such as: state and university grants, community college fee waivers, Cal Grants, and private scholarships. Additionally, the CADAA allows students to pay in-state tuition at any public college or university in California.

In comparison, the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) is a federal financial aid application for U.S. citizens, permanent residents ("green card" holders), T visa holders and other eligible non-citizens to apply for state and federal financial aid.

So, while undocumented students are not eligible for federal financial aid or the FAFSA, they *are* eligible for state financial aid through the CADAA.



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## 5. Is CADAA the same thing as DACA? What if I do not have DACA or a Social Security Number (SSN)?

CADAA and DACA are not the same thing despite sounding very similar.

- DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) is a federal program that allows certain non-citizens to receive a work permit, SSN, and protection from immigration enforcement.
- CADAA (California Dream Act Application) is California's state financial aid application that allows undocumented students to apply for and receive financial aid to pay for tuition, rent, books, supplies, and other costs. In California, students can apply for CADAA even if they do not have DACA status or a SSN as long as they meet the non-resident tuition exemption requirements (read more on [FAQ #9](#)). Students with DACA status should apply for CADAA instead of FAFSA.

## 6. Will applying for the CA Dream Act Application impact future opportunities to change my immigration status?

No, applying for or receiving state aid does not impact how you can change your immigration status. "Public charge" is a test that determines if an immigrant is likely to use public cash assistance or long-term institutional medical care. Financial aid is *not* considered public charge. Undocumented students can access free legal services at their California community college or university.

## 7. Is my information safe and protected?

Yes, it is safe to apply for CADAA. CSAC and the state of California are committed to protecting and serving all students and families. CSAC is a state (not federal) government agency whose mission is to make higher education more accessible and affordable for all people living in California, regardless of their immigration status. The

information you provide when you complete the CADAA is never shared with any federal agencies, and it is not used for immigration enforcement; it is only used to determine your eligibility for financial aid to help you pursue your higher educational goals.

## 8. Who can apply for the CADAA?

Thousands of undocumented students in California apply for and receive financial aid every year. Any of the following students who meet the requirements for a "non-resident tuition exemption" (read more on [FAQ #9](#)) can apply for the CADAA:

- Undocumented students
- DACA recipients (valid or expired)
- Students with a U visa
- Students with Temporary Protected Status (TPS)

U.S. citizens or "green card holders" whose parent(s) or spouse are undocumented ([mixed-status families](#)) can also apply for the CADAA if they do not want to submit a FAFSA.

## 9. What is the "non-resident tuition exemption"?

For more than 20 years, California has provided a pathway to allow undocumented students to attend college. "Non-resident tuition exemption" is often referred to as "AB 540" and is a requirement to apply for CADAA. AB 540 is a status that allows students to be considered a California resident for purposes of paying in-state tuition (instead of out-of-state tuition, which is much higher). To qualify for AB 540, students must submit an AB 540 Affidavit indicating that they have:

- 3 years of coursework and
- 3 years of attendance at a combination of California elementary school, middle school, high school, adult school, or community college

There is a short section in the CADAA that allows you to submit the AB 540 Affidavit. So,

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by completing the CADAA you *also* submit your AB 540 Affidavit!

## 10. How do students apply for financial aid using the California Dream Act Application?

- Start by visiting the [CADAA page](#) and create an account
- Answer a few pre-registration questions to determine if you are eligible to apply
- Once your CADAA account is created, you and your parent(s) or spouse, (if applicable) will complete the application questions
- Electronically sign the CADAA. If parent information is required, only one parent's electronic signature will be needed (read more on [FAQ #17](#))

After a few days of submitting the CADAA, CSAC will process the application.

## 11. When is the deadline to submit the CADAA?

Submit your CADAA by March 2 *every year*! Students attending a California Community College can apply by September 2. While it is never too late to apply, the sooner you submit a CADAA you maximize your financial aid options and have time to address any challenges that may come up.

## 12. What will students need to fill out the CADAA?

You only need a few items to get started and complete your CADAA.

- valid and permanent email address (do not use an email provided by your school)
- copies of tax information from two years before the award year you are applying for

## 13. How can I get help with completing the CADAA?

You don't have to complete this journey alone — help might be closer than you think. Start with your school by reaching out to a

counselor. If it's hard to find time to meet with a counselor, financial aid experts at CSAC and local community organizations are available to provide step-by-step assistance at *free* [Cash for College workshops](#) (either in person or virtually).

## 14. What if me or my parents do not file taxes?

Taxes can be stressful to think about. Luckily, there are options for you and your family if you did not file taxes two years before the award year you are applying for.

- If you indicate the option of “not going to file” you must still report income. If you/your parents earned more than what the IRS considers the [threshold](#) for filing taxes, the application will be flagged, and you/your parents will have to get an ITIN and file taxes for that year.
- If you indicate the option of “will file” a tax return, you will have to provide income estimates. After the tax return is filed, you will have to update your CADAA with the new tax information.

## 15. What if my parents live in another country?

All families are unique. The CADAA allows you to enter the information of parents who may live in another country.

- Students who are under the age of 24 and do not meet any other limited criteria, are considered “dependent” for financial aid purposes and therefore, must provide parental information.
- Aunts, uncles, grandparents, foster parents, siblings or guardians are not considered your parent(s), unless they have legally adopted you.
- If you are unable to get your parents' information, complete the CADAA as much as you can and contact your college's financial aid office so they can evaluate your situation.



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## 16. Why are there questions about race, ethnicity, gender, and language on the CADAA?

These questions are optional and do not have any impact on your eligibility for financial aid. Responses to these questions are only used by CSAC for research on how to better communicate and do outreach to CADAA applicants based on their diverse backgrounds.

## 17. How do parents sign the CADAA?

If it is determined that parent information is needed on the CADAA, only one parent's signature will be required. There are two options for how parents can electronically sign the CADAA:

- If a parent is with the student while completing the CADAA, they will be able to sign at that moment by selecting a check box agreeing to the accuracy of the information they provided.
- If a parent is unable to provide a signature at the time that the student is applying, they can sign at a later time by either (1) having the student log back into their application and selecting the appropriate box or (2) via the [external parent signature page](#).

Both signature options are quick and easy! Please note that your CADAA will not be processed if a parent signature is missing.

## 18. What's next after completing the CADAA?

You are almost at the finish line, congrats! After submitting your CADAA, you should review the Confirmation Page to identify and fix any errors. CSAC will email you a nine-digit "Dream ID number" that you will need to create a [WebGrants 4 Students](#) account and check the status of your application, eligibility for Cal Grant and Middle Class Scholarship, and any next steps. CSAC will send your CADAA to all the colleges that you listed on

the application to determine what type of financial aid you are eligible for.

## 19. Where can I get more information about the CADAA process and financial aid if my question is not answered here?

As you get ready to submit your CADAA application, you might have questions specific to your unique circumstances. We're here to help! You can find more resources by visiting our CADAA resource website: [csac.ca.gov/undocumented](https://csac.ca.gov/undocumented). You can also connect directly with a CSAC staff member by emailing us at [studentsupport@csac.ca.gov](mailto:studentsupport@csac.ca.gov) or by calling (888) 224-7268. For helpful video content, please visit our [TikTok](#) or [Instagram](#).

## 20. Where can I get access to resources beyond financial aid as an undocumented student?

All public colleges and universities (and some private universities) in California have Dream Resource Centers that offer various free resources for undocumented students and students from mixed-status families, such as:

- Immigration legal services
- Financial aid support
- Basic needs
- And more!

