California Community Colleges

TO: Chancellor Sonya Christian

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RE: Reimagine Apply Task Force – March 2025

Background

In alignment with the Governor's Roadmap for the California Community Colleges and a key pillar of 2030 Vision – 'systems development to remove barriers at scale,' the Chancellor's Office initiated the reimagining and development of a new student-centered application process and supporting system architecture for prospective and returning students. The goal is for the resulting CCCApply online application to be one that is intuitive, inclusive, and secure, providing a best-in-class first impression to current and future students.

Task Force Preparation & Groundwork

The initial development of the CCCApply Task Force structure, governance model, and mobilization plan for key stakeholder groups was critical in establishing a foundation that honored the Chancellor's commitment to participatory governance. A Short-Term Working Group was established, comprised of Consultation Council members, that reviewed the current state of CCCApply, identified 'short-term' and 'long-term' improvement opportunities, developed a shared direction with guiding principles for the statewide Task Force, and identified key activities and milestones. The participating leaders acknowledged the shared responsibility to accomplish this complex transformation and collectively agreed on the need to improve our system's front door experience for our students.

Task Force Formation and Vision

The Reimagine Apply Task Force was then formed to provide statewide perspective and expertise in the development of the new application. The group ensured the application improves the user experience, balances equity concerns, and protects against and mitigates fraud. To guarantee a comprehensive and statewide perspective, the Task Force was comprised of members from the Student Senate, Chief Information Systems Officers Association, Institutional Research, Technology Center, Financial Aid, Chief Instructional Office, Public Information Officer, Academic Senate, Admissions & Records, Chief Executive Officers, and Chief Student Services Officers.

Over the nine sessions, the Task Force's vision - "to make the application process quick

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and easy, ensuring accessibility and equity when applying to California Community Colleges, ultimately opening doors for career advancement and a brighter future for all students"- informed their work. The group focused on the following key areas: the target state application design and governance, application tooling requirements, the RFP process, and support for implementation of the application.

The Target State Application

An extensive technical and functional analysis was conducted to inform the design of a best-in-class application. A review of the legal and organizational requirements for the 2,483 questions and fields was conducted as well as a peer review comparison with 14 institutions (including large community college systems and colleges, for-profit institutions, and public and private four-year systems both in California and nationally). In addition, more than over 150 stakeholders across 62 colleges and 45 districts were surveyed for their input. This comprehensive approach helped identify areas for improvement in application questions, technical architecture, design, and the use of applicant data, which contributed to the development of the target state design, architecture, and management of the new student application. Students were integral in the design and usability testing for the new application. Working with the Student Centered Design Lab, first-generation, returning, adult learners, and ESL students tested prototypes and a mock application process to validate the target state approach.

During the Task Force's meetings, the group aligned on a design approach that is modern and minimalist, reducing the cognitive load for an applicant, gamifying progress through guided paths, navigation, wayfinding and contextual help for the student. They recognized the challenge of balancing simplification and data collection without creating new barriers. Ultimately, the Task Force aligned on a mobile-first application with simplified questions and reorganized content in a structure that better aligns with a student's mental model for applying to college.

The group not only improved the standard application questions and its flow, but also worked to improve the supplemental questions. The Task Force agreed on the need to standardize redundant questions, establish governance, and ensure the solution effectively supports college processes in addition to streamlining the experience for students. The group aligned on the target state approach of asking only questions relevant to an applicant type (i.e., credit, non-credit, international, dual/concurrent enrollment) prior to submission, followed by an evocative prompt which would then guide students into post-submission questions. The Task Force also reviewed and aligned on how various use cases (veteran, unhoused/ homeless, foster youth, undocumented, justice impacted, adult/older applicants, and concurrent/dual enrollment) should experience the application uniquely.

The Task Force also addressed two key areas: fraud and residency. A fraud working group was created to identify key friction points, discuss current fraud mitigation tools and systems, and explore potential solutions for enhanced fraud mitigation. The team used

the resulting solutions to inform and refine the fraud-related application tooling requirements. A residency working group was also formed to propose short-term enhancements, improve the residency algorithm to prevent false flags that act as barriers for applicants and explore long-term potential solutions to make residency determination easier for both students and staff.

Finally, the Task Force discussed a proposed governance to maintain the integrity of the new application and reviewed the application structure and branching. This branch logic enables overall streamlining of the application into one welcoming, secure 'doorway' for an applicant by ensuring the applicant only needs to answer those questions relevant to their desired education/training objective.

Application Tooling Requirements

When evaluating application tooling requirements, the Task Force considered maintaining the current homegrown solution or transitioning to a commercial solution. The group concurred on the potential advantages a commercial solution could provide and discussed the importance of "futureproofing" technology to adapt to evolving needs and challenges. Streamlined user journeys were developed to inform the application tooling requirements.

The functional requirements included data formats, identity and access management (IAM), fraud, dashboard, stakeholder input, multi-apply, support, submit, post-submission, solution-platform, and integration. The technical requirements included universal technical requirements, identity and access management (IAM), fraud prevention, user interface, commercial solution platform, service layer extensions, data platform, infrastructure, question state machine, and DevOps. These functional and technical requirements were reviewed and revised with the Task Force and ultimately used to create the Request for Proposal (RFP).

RFP Process

The Task Force helped solidify the RFP Review Committee – a group of 11 experts representing CEOs, CISOs, Admissions & Records, the Student Senate, the RP Group and CSSOs, tasked with evaluating vendors and providing a recommendation to the Chancellor's Office for a commercial technology vendor to power the new online student application. This group will review vendor submissions and determine finalists who will then be reviewed by the Extended Committee, an additional group of 37 stakeholders with functional and technical expertise and 10 students. All from a diverse subsection of districts, the group is equally represented between campus setting (e.g., urban, suburban, and rural), college size and district type.

The Task Force also aligned on the use of an RFP scorecard to evaluate and compare vendor responses and assess each proposal systematically. The Task Force provided feedback for the scorecard criterion (i.e., Technical Expertise and Support Strategy, Higher Ed Experience, Pricing, Accessibility & User Experience, Supplier Capability and

Qualifications, Fulfillment of Requirements/ Breadth of Offerings, etc.), offering input on prioritization for the categories. With considerations for these categories, Task Force members emphasized the need for decision-makers and scorers to be intentional about prioritizing systemwide needs, not just those at the college level. The Task Force also provided valuable use cases and input for vendor demonstration scenarios.

Wave 1 Implementation

The Task Force members identified key attributes for prioritizing the selection of 'Wave 1' districts that will be early adopters of the new application system, with an initial go-live for Spring Semester 2026. This included location, size, campus setting, multi-district vs. single district, and SIS. As of February 2025, there are 12 districts and 32 colleges that are interested in participating in Wave 1. In the Task Force sessions, the group emphasized the importance of developing a Wave 1 Readiness Checklist to identify eligible districts and establish clear expectations. These requirements included the availability of functional and technical stakeholders to help with implementation and system requirements.

To support the successful implementation and adoption of the new online application, the Reimagine Apply Implementation Advisory Group (RAIAG) was created. RAIAG will be led by the Reimagine Apply Steering Committee (RA SteerCo), composed of representation from the Academic Senate, Admissions & Records, CEOs, Trustees, CISO, CIO, CSSO, Financial Aid, the RP Group, the Student Senate, and Wave 1 district leads. The RAIAG will support the seamless adoption and deployment of the new student application by collaborating with statewide associations, respective early-adopter districts, and the chosen vendor to incorporate stakeholder voices in the design, build, test, and implementation process, refining the approach where needed to meet the diverse needs of all stakeholders.

Reflections and Next Steps

The Task Force's final meeting took place on January 23rd, 2025, in Sacramento. The effort by the Task Force was to bring the entire system into a shared conversation and agreement about how to improve a problem that had existed for more than a decade. The group was pivotal in crafting the target state application, ensuring it is user-friendly, inclusive, and secure. The implementation of the new student application will now be overseen by the Reimagine Apply Implementation Advisory Group, continuing the impactful work of the Task Force. Four Task Force members' districts will be participating in Wave 1, and several Task Force participants will continue with the RA SteerCo.