

The Fresno Bee



Spreading the word: Financial aid is available at Fresno State

I'm a newcomer to Fresno State — learning my way around the beautiful campus, finally remembering names of people I've met starting back in May and soaking up all things Bulldog!

And while I may still be memorizing the words of the alma mater and locating all the campus buildings, one thing is already crystal clear to me: students and their success are the top priority for everyone at Fresno State.

That fact delights me. As the Vice President for Student Affairs, working on behalf of students is my focus. I want students to choose Fresno State, I want them to have a transformational collegiate experience filled with discovery, diversity and distinction, and I want them to graduate in a timely manner.

At Fresno State, we're working hard to reduce roadblocks to student success and graduation. One of the areas in which we are succeeding is helping students get the financial aid they need to pay for their education. This is no small task given that over almost three-fourths of our 23,000 students need some kind of financial assistance in order to attend school. But we're up for the challenge.

This fall, Fresno State awarded a total of \$96 million in financial aid to nearly 17,000 of our students. That's up \$5 million from last year and \$10 million from the year before. Next spring, we expect to award another \$90 million in aid, bringing the total for this academic year to nearly \$200 million.

And better yet, 70 percent of the aid is grants or scholarships – money that does not have to be paid back. That means the “sticker price” for students is just 30 percent of the full cost of California State University tuition, which is among the lowest in the nation.

In my short time here, I've learned that the Central Valley has many families who strain to make ends meet. I know the everyday struggles they face to provide the necessities of life and I know many think college tuition is just not affordable.

My Fresno State colleagues and I are working to show these families that college is affordable, thanks to the financial aid programs designed especially for students of modest means. We're working hard to be “myth-busters” about financial aid. For example:

- Myth #1: I'll have to borrow a lot of money to pay the tuition. That's not true. Most of our awards to students are awarded financial aid that does not have to be paid back.

- Myth #2: I'll graduate with a boatload of debt and it will take decades to pay off my loans. Not true again. The average Fresno State student graduates with about \$13,000 in debt (less than the cost of a used car!) and repays that in 10 years. By the way, the U.S. average for debt at graduation is much higher -- \$20,000.
- Myth #3: I've heard the paperwork is a nightmare and there's no one to help me. There are forms to fill out, but there are also Fresno State staffers who are ready to walk you through them. In fact, I'd call our 23 financial aid staff members unsung heroes. They put in long hours and come in on weekends when it's crunch time for filing documents, simply because they want to eliminate any roadblocks to enrolling and keeping students in school.

Overseeing the distribution of financial aid is just one of the facets of my new job at Fresno State, but it's one that is near and dear to my heart. As a first-generation Latino college student myself, I was the recipient of financial aid that helped make my education possible.

I know personally that a college education can change an individual's life, as well as the lives of his or her family and future children. A bachelor's degree is the No. 1 degree that changes lives – and it adds a million dollars in lifetime earnings!

I may be a newcomer, but I already know something very important about Fresno State – it is a place where lives are changed! Our work to provide students the financial aid they need is one very important part of helping them succeed.

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Frank Lamas, Ph.D., is chairman of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. He joined the Fresno State administration as vice president for Student Affairs in June and welcomes tweets at @LamasVPSA.