Statement from Hope Center President & Founder Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab in Support of California's AB 1456:
The Cal Grant Equity Framework

California policy experts, higher education leaders, students, and equity advocates, have worked tirelessly for more than a year crafting a new, and more equitable, state financial aid program (the Cal Grant) that meets the changing needs of #RealCollege students. Although one of the most generous and lauded programs in the country, the Cal Grant has structural barriers that have kept far too many of the lowest-income students from getting financial aid, particularly those at community colleges. Despite serving the majority of students enrolled in California colleges and universities, only a small fraction of state financial aid dollars currently go to students at the California Community Colleges.

The proposal, called the Cal Grant Equity Framework, takes an evidence-based policy approach to address major structural equity issues. The original program was designed in 1955 for traditional students who typically go straight to college right out of high school. Students no longer fit that mold: today, they are older and are combing school attendance with work and often caregiving. Due to wage stagnation and higher education costs now being borne overwhelming by students, they have greater difficulty completing college while also meeting their basic needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic and recession have exacerbated the barriers and challenges students were already facing, emphasizing the need for policymakers to act now. The Hope Center's most recent national report showed nearly 3 in 5 students experienced basic needs insecurity, with 39% of students attending a community college experienced food insecurity. The Hope Center also surveyed two California community college districts, Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) and San Diego Community College District (SDCCD). We found that students in both districts faced higher food insecurity rates than the national average for students at two-year institutions, 40% of students in the LACCD and 43% of students in the SDCCD.

Additionally, a California Student Aid Commission Covid-19 student survey revealed that more than 7 in 10 students had lost some or all their income due to the pandemic. COVID-19 only compounded the struggle college students were already facing affording groceries and housing.

The Cal Grant Equity Framework addresses the chronic problem of college affordability and is now in a bill, AB 1456 (Medina/McCarty/Leyva). The bill is moving through the California legislative process and deserves full support. The bill does the following:

- Expands access to 280,000 more low-income students who will now become eligible for a Cal Grant, especially at community colleges, by eliminating several eligibility barriers based on GPA, age, and time

out of high school.

- Simplifies and streamlines the financial aid process making it easier to understand for first-generation students and families. Right now, California has a complicated system of financial aid with different eligibility requirement and rules based on factors like at what stage in their education a student applies for aid

- Aligns Cal Grant eligibility requirements with the new federal policy changes to Pell Grant eligibility, which will make it easier for students to anticipate the full scope of financial support available to them to pursue higher education.

- Addresses equity gaps that hinder Black and Latino students with low incomes from receiving the Cal Grant. Compared to today's Cal Grants, over 160,000 more Latino students and 25,000 more Black students are eligible for a Cal Grant under AB 1456.

I, along with numerous national equity and higher education advocates applaud #RealCollegeCalifornia leaders and policymakers for taking bold steps to simplify the Cal Grant. These changes prioritize basic needs support for college students struggling to make ends meet and align the state financial aid program to the new federal Pell Grant eligibility changes.