

STATE BOARD OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES
State Board Reserve Funds Request
Financial Aid First Look Taskforce
FY 2026-27

Request: The State Board of Community Colleges is requested to approve \$25,000 in State Board Reserve Funds to support the Financial Aid First Look initiative designed to help colleges provide financial aid award information earlier in the enrollment cycle. The initiative aims to enable community colleges to notify prospective and continuing students of their financial aid eligibility by March, aligning more closely with the timelines used by UNC System and NCICU institutions. Earlier notification will help students better understand the affordability and value of attending a community college, strengthening enrollment pipelines, improving access for low-income students, and reinforcing the affordability advantage of North Carolina's community colleges.

The System Office will identify lead colleges to convene financial aid professionals from across the system to develop implementation resources and best practices that support timely, consistent financial aid communication. Funding is requested to support the participation of financial aid practitioners whose expertise is essential to developing these statewide resources. Reserve funds will cover meeting-related expenses, including meals and travel reimbursement, ensuring broad participation from colleges across North Carolina. The resulting guidance and training will benefit all colleges by providing scalable tools and practices that promote earlier student engagement, increase awareness of affordability, and support enrollment growth throughout the System.

Strategic Plan Reference: Goal 3: Student Success

Provide resources inside and outside the classroom for all students to successfully enroll, persist, and complete education or training in a chosen career path.

Strategy 3.1.2

Background/Rationale:

The Financial Aid First Look initiative supports the System Office's commitment to increasing student access, enrollment, and success by helping colleges provide financial aid information earlier and more consistently. Research and institutional experience demonstrate that students often make postsecondary enrollment decisions before receiving financial aid award notifications from community colleges. As a result, some students may underestimate the affordability of a community college education or choose an alternative institution before fully understanding their financial aid options.

To address this challenge, the Financial Aid First Look Taskforce will bring together experienced financial aid professionals representing community colleges across the state to develop practical implementation of resources and recommendations. These materials will help colleges streamline processes and improve communication.

Deliverables will include communication templates that can be integrated into customer relationship management and student success platforms, a step-by-step implementation guide for

institutional processes, and marketing materials that encourage early FAFSA completion and scholarship applications. The initiative will also provide implementation support, technical assistance, and ongoing engagement with colleges to promote continuous improvement and statewide adoption.

Fund Source and Availability:

FY 2026-27 funding is available from the State Board Reserve from July 1, 2026, through June 30, 2027. G.S. 115 D-5(j) provides that "[t]he State Board of Community Colleges shall use its Board Reserve Fund for feasibility studies, pilot projects, start-up of new programs, and innovative ideas." The State Board Reserve is a recurring funding source of \$250,000 annually. Of the remaining balance, this request would allocate \$25,000.

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