

**SAN MATEO COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT (SMCCCD)
FINANCIAL AID OFFICES**

**Standard Operating Procedure (SOP):
Academic Qualifications - High School Diploma or Equivalent**

1. Purpose

This SOP outlines the procedures for verifying the academic qualifications of students seeking Title IV federal financial aid at SMCCCD (Cañada College, College of San Mateo, and Skyline College), specifically focusing on the requirements related to a high school diploma or its equivalent.

2. Scope

This SOP applies to all students applying for Title IV financial aid at SMCCCD and to all staff members responsible for processing and verifying student eligibility for such aid.

3. Responsibilities

- **Financial Aid Office Staff:** Responsible for processing FAFSA forms, verifying student academic qualifications **in cases of discrepancies and/or questionable validity** by requesting documentation, and maintaining accurate records.
- **Admissions Office Staff (if applicable):** May assist in obtaining and verifying documentation.
- **Students:** Responsible for providing accurate information on the FAFSA and supplying supporting documentation when requested.

4. Procedure

a- Academic Qualifications

To receive Title IV funds, students must be qualified to study at the postsecondary level, if they:

- have a high school diploma (this can be from a foreign school if it is equivalent to a U.S. high school diploma);
- have the recognized equivalent of a high school diploma, such as a general educational development (GED) certificate or other state sanctioned test or diploma-equivalency certificate;
- have completed homeschooling at the secondary level as defined by state law;
- have completed secondary school education in a homeschool setting which qualifies for an exemption from compulsory attendance requirements under state law, if state law does not require a homeschooled student to receive a credential for their education; or
- have completed one of the ability-to-benefit (ATB) alternatives and are either currently enrolled in an eligible career pathway program or first enrolled in an eligible postsecondary program prior to July 1, 2012.

A student may self-certify on the FAFSA form that they have received a high school diploma or high school equivalency certificate or that they have completed secondary school through homeschooling as defined by state law. If a student indicates that they have a diploma or high school equivalency certificate, Cañada College does not require students to submit a copy of their high school diploma or equivalent certification.

Students who indicate on their FAFSA form that they graduated high school must give the name, city, and state of the high school. The FAFSA form on the Web will not allow students to skip these items, and it will have a drop-down list of both public and private high schools populated by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Inclusion on the list does not mean that a diploma from the school is valid, nor does exclusion from the list mean that the diploma is invalid.

b- Checking the Validity of a High School Diploma

If SMCCCD has reason to believe that a student's high school diploma is not valid or was not obtained from an entity that provides secondary school education, SMCCCD will follow the below procedures to evaluate the validity of the student's high school diploma:

1. Obtain documentation from the high school that confirms the validity of the high school diploma, including transcripts or other written descriptions of course requirements, or written and signed statements by principals or executive officers at the high school attesting to the rigor and quality of the coursework at the high school;
2. If the high school is regulated or overseen by a state agency, Tribal agency, or Bureau of Indian Education, confirming with or receiving documentation from that agency that the high school is recognized or meets requirements established by that agency; and
3. If the Secretary has published a list of high schools that issue invalid high school diplomas, confirming that the high school does not appear on that list.

A high school diploma is not valid if it:

- Did not meet the applicable requirements established by the appropriate state agency, Tribal Agency, or Bureau of Indian Education in the state where the high school is located;
- Has been determined to be invalid by the Department, the appropriate state agency in the state where the high school was located, or through a court proceeding; or
- Was obtained from an entity that requires little or no secondary instruction or coursework to obtain a high school diploma, including through a test that does not meet the requirements for a recognized equivalent of a high school diploma under 34 CFR 600.2.

Acceptable documentation for checking the validity of a student's high school diploma is listed above. A student's self-certification is not sufficient to validate a high school diploma that is in question.

c- High School Status Discrepancy

If there is conflicting information between the student's certification on the FAFSA form and other documentation or information obtained from the student, SMCCCD Financial Aid Offices will work with the student to resolve this conflict by following the below procedure(s).

1. If the student self-certifies on the FAFSA that they did not receive a high school diploma or equivalent, SMCCCD Financial Aid Offices will instruct the student through WebSMART to complete these steps:
 - a) "You answered None to the high school completion status question on the FAFSA, but provided different info on CCCApply. If your FAFSA is incorrect, please make a correction on your FAFSA. If your FAFSA is correct, please see the financial aid office to determine your eligibility."
 - i. If the student's FAFSA is correct and the student did not complete high school or high school equivalent, the financial aid office will request the student submit post-secondary transcripts to determine if the student completed six (6) or more units of college degree applicable work prior to July 1, 2012.
 - ii. If the student does not have a high school diploma or the equivalent, and did not complete at least six (6) or more units of college degree applicable work prior to July 1, 2012, they are not eligible for Federal Financial Aid. They may still be eligible for the California College Promise Grant (CCPG Fee Waiver).
2. If there is discrepant information reported by the student on the FAFSA and the CCCApply Application (e.g. GED was reported on FAFSA but High School Diplomas was reported on CCCApply), SMCCCD Financial Aid Offices will provide the following instructions in the student's WebSMART:
 - a) "You are required to bring your original High School Diploma or equivalent to the financial aid office. If you do not have a high school diploma or equivalent, please visit the financial aid office for further instructions."
 - i. Once student brings High School Diploma or equivalent documentation to the financial aid office and the financial aid office verifies which application is correct, the financial aid office will advise the student to either make corrections to their FAFSA or make corrections with Admissions and Records by providing them with their original High School Diploma or equivalent documentation.
 - ii. If the student does not have a high school diploma or the equivalent, and did not complete at least six (6) or more units of college degree applicable work prior to July 1, 2012, they are not eligible for Federal Financial Aid. They may still be eligible for the California College Promise Grant (CCPG Fee Waiver).

For more information on academic qualifications of high school diplomas and high school equivalencies, please refer to the 2024-2025 Federal Student Aid Handbook:

<https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/fsa-handbook/2024-2025/vol1/ch1-school-determined-requirements>.