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Information Item

California Student Aid Commission

Update on Student Expenses and Resources Survey (SEARS)

Description/Summary: Triennially, the Commission produces the Student Expense and Resources Survey (SEARS Survey) data used in the development of Student Budgets. This process will be completed in synergy with EdFund regarding electronic data submission. Data gathered through the SEARS Survey provides the Legislature, Department of Finance, Legislative Analyst's Office, the segments of higher education, media, and other interested parties with current data on the demographic characteristics, financial status, and fiscal concerns of students.

The Commission and other State agencies benefit from the SEARS Survey results because they provide current data to track trends in student borrowing, family income, and financial resources. The survey also allows the state to identify new trends in student expenses, such as computer use. The Commission uses these data to work collaboratively with the segments and other entities, such as California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC), to analyze current issues in higher education. The project is on target.

Recommended Action: For information only, no action required.

Responsible Staff: Paula Rockwell
Research Manager II Research and
Policy Analysis Branch

Student Expenses and Resources Survey (SEARS)

History:

Existing data quickly lose their relevancy in light of the present budget concerns and the changing economic climate. Therefore, the Commission, in cooperation with California's segments of higher education, has sponsored and administered SEARS on a triennial basis since 1971-72. SEARS provides data on the financial resources and educational costs of students and their families, and how students use their financial resources to cover the cost of attending college in California. SEARS also provides California's students the chance to inform policy-makers of the realities of paying for higher education in California.

The Commission's Research and Policy Analysis Branch staff convene a SEARS Advisory Committee (Committee) to review the questionnaire, revise the format, and discuss alternative survey techniques. Segmental representatives are responsible for providing Commission staff with a student sample file. The Commission then maintains close contact with the Committee throughout the survey administration to monitor response rates and discuss ways of reaching non-respondents.

Description:

The Commission produces and administers SEARS for all five segments of higher education as follows:

- California Community Colleges
- University of California
- California State University
- Independent Colleges and Universities (Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (AICCU))
- Private Career Colleges

SEARS collects up-to-date student expense information on the actual costs of obtaining a postsecondary education in California. Additionally, SEARS identifies available resources that students and families have to assist in paying college expenses. These data are required to generate the student expense budgets used to determine a student's financial need for the Entitlement and Competitive Cal Grant Programs, as specified in Education Code 69432.9(b)(2) as follows:

(b) Financial need shall be determined using the federal financial need methodology pursuant to subdivision (a) of Section 69506 and applicable regulations adopted by the commission, and as established by Title IV of the Federal Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. Secs. 1070 et seq., as amended). The calculation of financial need shall be consistent with the commission's methodology for financial need for the 2000-01 academic year.

(2) Financial need is defined as the difference between the student's cost of attendance as determined by the commission and the expected family contribution. The calculation of financial need shall be consistent with the commission's methodology for determining financial need for the 2000-01 academic year as established by Title IV of the federal Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended (20 U.S.C. Secs. 1070 et seq.).

The survey is created with input from all segments. Questions are developed and the survey questionnaire is designed. Once the survey is finalized, it will be distributed via the web or by mail, based on individual requests from the segments.

CSAC has been working in a synergy project with EdFund to develop the technical application of the web-based tool. This web-based tool allows students to input their survey responses on-line making data collection and analysis much more effective. Additionally, working with EdFund has greatly reduced the technology associated costs of SEARS and saved the Commission thousands of dollars.

The SEARS will be administered dependent on the method each segment selects. The CCC will do an in-class survey; the UC and PPC have opted to administer a web-based survey without paper follow-up. Finally, the CSU and AICCU will administer the survey primarily by web. A paper questionnaire will be sent to students that did not have a valid email address on file, and to students that did not respond to the survey invitation or reminder. In addition, CSAC will contact non-respondent students by telephone to collect data.

Data gathered through SEARS provides the Legislature, Department of Finance, Legislative Analyst's Office, the segments of higher education, media, and other interested parties with current data on the demographic characteristics, financial status, and concerns of students. The Commission and other State agencies benefit from the survey because it provides current data to track trends in student borrowing, family income, and financial resources that cannot be obtained elsewhere. The survey also allows the state to identify new trends in student expenses, such as computer use. The Commission uses these data to work collaboratively with the segments and other entities, such as California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC), to analyze current issues in higher education.

Accomplished to Date:

- √ EdFund-CSAC Synergy project approval.
- √ Development of business requirements.
- √ Old surveys reviewed and packets completed for Advisory review.
- √ SEARS Advisory Meeting with CSAC staff and stakeholders, June 2006.
- √ Changes requested by the Advisory were incorporated.

Timeline:

February 2006-October 2006	SEARS Advisory Committee Meetings
September 2006	Development of web-based tool
October 2006	Survey design finalized
November 2006	Surveys sent to printer
November 2006	Web-based tool testing
December 2006 - January 2007	SAS code updated
February 2007 - March 2007	First delivery
February 2007 - June 2007	Survey tracking
February 2007 - June 2007	Surveys scanned
March 2007 - April 2007	Second delivery
March 2007 - June 2007	Telephone survey
June 2007	Cut-off date
June 2007	Prepare data files and documentation
December 2007	Print and distribute Case Book

NOTE: From July 2006 through June 2007, staff will analyze and document data. During this period, the information gathered through SEARS will be used for report writing and data requests.

Staff Contact Information:

For questions or additional project information, please contact Paula Rockwell at (916) 526-7906 or via e-mail at prockwel@csac.ca.gov