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**FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS FROM STUDENT SURVEY ILLUMINATE  
COST, FOOD, HOUSING OBSTACLES THAT IMPEDE COLLEGE  
SUCCESS**

*California Student Aid Commission armed with fresh data by region, race and ethnicity, age  
for reimagining student aid to meet growing needs of diverse population*

**Sacramento, CA (Thurs., Sept 12, 2019)** – The greatest obstacles to success in college are the costs of attending and achieving a school-work balance, according to a new student survey brief released by the [California Student Aid Commission](http://www.csac.ca.gov) Thursday at its public meeting.

The brief is an initial look at the survey findings and provides insight from students themselves into their experiences paying for college. For the first time in more than ten years, the Commission conducted its Student Expense and Resources Survey (SEARS) of students from all five segments of higher education in the state, which yielded up-to-date data from over 15,000 California college students.

The revamped survey, on hiatus since 2006 due to budget cuts, added key questions about food and housing insecurity and was conducted via a sophisticated online and mobile-friendly survey platform. SEARS serves a fundamental purpose to the agency as it provides data directly from students for the development of an up-to-date Student Expense Budget for determining Cal Grant and other state financial aid eligibility.

A combined 64 percent of students believe their success is obstructed by college costs and the struggle of balancing school and work-- emphasizing the need to address shortfalls in our state's financial aid system that leaves too many students out. Among the 15,000 respondents, 33 percent said their biggest obstacle to success in college is the cost of college, while 31 percent said their biggest obstacle is balancing school and work responsibilities.

The large number of survey responses will allow CSAC to conduct more detailed analysis to understand some the unique issues around financing college for diverse sub-populations – such as older students, those with dependents, and racial/ethnic groups.

“The Commission is excited that the SEARS findings can capture the student experiences and elevate the discussion on much-needed reforms to California's financial aid system. Student voices must play a leading role in this effort, and SEARS is helping elevate the voices and concerns of students to a statewide level,” said Commission Chair Catalina Cifuentes.

The SEARS brief contains survey findings on expenses by region, race/ethnicity, age and whether a student has a dependent-- useful information that is unavailable in current federal financial aid databases. The brief bolsters the reality that the true cost of college goes much further than tuition alone. Students across all segments and regions of the state reported spending an average of \$2,020 per month on textbooks, rent and utilities, food, transportation, and other personal expenses essential for attending college.

“Study after study tells us students are struggling, and now students are, too,” said Marlene Garcia, Executive Director of the Commission. “Far too many students do not have the financial means to cover the real costs of college, nor do they have access to sufficient aid. In many cases, they are skipping meals, sleeping in cars, or otherwise going deeper into poverty with crushing loan debt. This is unacceptable, and we must address these direct needs immediately.”

Many students don't believe they have the necessary resources to cover housing and utilities or tuition and fees, with 30 percent saying they don't have enough resources to cover housing and utilities and 38 percent saying they don't have enough resources to cover tuition and fees.

But even more startling in the SEARS data is that a staggering one-third of students face food and housing insecurity: 35 percent report low or very low food security within the past month and 33 percent of all students report housing insecurity in the past month. Food insecurity is generally higher in more rural areas, although students in all regions reported food insecurity at rates that range between 27 and 47 percent. Recent surveys by the Hope Center for College, Community and Justice as well as The Institute for College Access and Success showed similar challenges students face with food and housing and other costs.

CSAC Student Commissioner Caroline Siegel Singh, a senior at the University of California, San Diego, said, “The SEARS data provides us with the opportunity to shine light on how California's most needy students are being priced out of higher education with costs of housing and attendance rising as our financial aid options stay flat.”

With the SEARS findings, the Commission's Student Expense Budgets -- estimates of non-tuition costs for an average California college student -- can be updated with new data, directly reported from students, to ensure that State aid eligibility criteria reflect the true costs students face. Colleges and universities often use the Student Expense Budgets to help calculate their official Cost of Attendance figures.

Fortunately for students, some costs -- most notably, textbooks -- appear to have declined significantly since the last SEARS. Students in 2018-19 reported spending about half of the inflation-adjusted 2006-07 total on textbooks and other educational supplies.

During the years without a survey, CSAC has utilized the California Consumer Price Index to adjust the expenses based on inflation and/or deflation. The CSAC Research Evaluation and Data unit was created in August 2017 with a priority to reinstitute SEARS. A partnership was formed with the [College Futures Foundation](#) in November 2017 for conducting a reintroduced and more sophisticated survey instrument with [Mathematica](#). The project is funded by College Futures Foundation.

The Commission will make their data available later this year to other researchers for deeper dives into the data such as connecting expenses to the resource's students use to pay for college. The data can also be disaggregated by segment, serving as a resource to systems working to address the needs of their student populations.

"We stand true to our mission now more than ever to help lead the way in financial aid reform to truly reflect the input from students on their experiences paying for college in California," said Vice Chair Jamillah Moore.

College Futures Foundation President Monica Lozano said, "This survey allows us to hear directly from students, and they are telling us that they are faced with insurmountable pressures and impossible trade-offs. Completing a college education is critical to the long-term success of these families and our state as a whole—but paying rent and putting food on the table are not optional. They shouldn't have to choose. We at College Futures Foundation are proud to partner with CSAC and support the SEARS survey. The findings will be essential in addressing barriers to higher education, so all of California's diverse students can succeed."

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*The California Student Aid Commission administers the state's \$2.8 billion portfolio of student financial aid programs and services, including the Cal Grant, the Middle Class Scholarship, and the California Dream Act Application. The Commission serves as a resource for policymakers and the public on college affordability and financing issues, and advocates for policy changes to eliminate cost as a barrier to any qualified California student pursuing a higher education. For more information on how the California Student Aid Commission serves to educate, inform, and support students, their educational institutions, and the professionals who assist them please visit our website at <https://www.csac.ca.gov> or follow us on [Twitter](#) @castudentaid.*

*\*Updated on Sept., 25, 2019 to reflect a data reclassification.*