



STUDENT EXPENSES AND RESOURCES SURVEY (SEARS) OVERVIEW

California students know something state policymakers want to understand: The true cost of attending college.

The California Student Aid Commission (CSAC), the agency that administers Cal Grants and other financial aid in California, is surveying students in public and private colleges to learn how much they spend for living and school-related expenses in addition to tuition. We will also learn about the sources of funds they use to pay for these costs of college. This Student Expenses and Resources Survey (SEARS) will be implemented between fall 2018 and spring 2019.

SEARS will generate timely, relevant information

This survey data is essential to inform the State Legislature and policymakers as they work to ensure that Cal Grants and other financial aid programs help make college affordable for all students. Hundreds of colleges and universities in California also use this information as they plan their own financial aid offerings, and as they publish information on their cost of attendance.

The California Student Aid Commission will use the survey results to update and improve the estimate for how much the typical student in California pays annually for books and supplies, technology, housing, food, transportation, medical care, and other expenses while attending college. We'll also report on the sources of funds—such as wages, grants, loans, and money from parents—that students use to pay for all costs of college.

The survey will provide student expense information that is specific to regions of California. It will also examine any differences in expenses based on demographic characteristics including gender and race/ethnicity.

This year's survey is especially important because it is the state's first comprehensive research on college expenses in more than a decade. The survey results will be of high interest to education groups in California and across the nation.

SEARS implementation begins this fall and spans multiple segments

Data will be collected between fall 2018 and spring 2019 from a representative cross-section of students across the five higher education segments:

- Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities
- California Community Colleges
- California State University
- For-Profit Private Colleges (California Association of Private Postsecondary Schools)
- University of California

Participation in the survey is optional for individual institutions. CSAC has collaborated with lead entities or governance bodies in each segment (e.g., the CSU Chancellor's Office) to invite participation by member institutions.

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For participating institutions with fewer than 1,500 students, the research methodology includes all students as part of the survey sample. For institutions with more than 1,500 students, CSAC and each institution work together to draw a sample of approximately 1,500 students. CSAC administers the survey online to the sampled students.

SEARS data has many uses and audiences

Data from the Student Expenses and Resources Survey is analyzed by the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) to estimate an annual expense budget for students. CSAC uses this expense budget as a baseline to determine students' eligibility for needs-based Cal Grant awards.

Survey data will also be available to institutions—including the University of California, the California State University, California Community Colleges, and the state's independent and private institutions of higher education—as they conduct their own analysis and planning for student financial aid.

Survey findings, including CSAC's updated estimate of annual student expenses, will be shared with participating institutions and be publicly available in the fall of 2019. This material can help inform the college financial plans of students and their families.

SEARS data will also be made available to assist researchers who study college costs, financial aid, and related subjects.

SEARS enhancements, and context

This year's survey has been significantly enhanced to allow more detailed examination of ways that college costs may vary by geographic region as well as by demographic characteristics including gender and race/ethnicity. It will generate a higher quantity and quality of data that tells a more complete story of how the state's diverse student population experiences the economics of college attendance. This will in turn enable deeper and more nuanced analysis by the State Legislature and policymakers as they assess the role of financial aid in making college affordable.

From the early 1970s through 2006-07, CSAC implemented SEARS every three years. The most recent SEARS report, based on 2006-07 data collection, is available here:

http://www.csac.ca.gov/pubs/forms/grnt_frm/200607SEARSCasebookFinal.pdf

Due to budget cuts, SEARS has not been implemented in more than 10 years. In this period, CSAC updated its estimates of annual student expenses by applying the inflationary rate of the California Consumer Price Index (CCPI) to the 2006-07 estimated annual student expense budget. In 2018, CSAC is reinstating the triennial SEARS survey as a means to more accurately estimate the true cost of college for students.

The decision to re-institute SEARS was made with support from CSAC's Financial Aid Advisory Board. A SEARS advisory committee was formed in 2017; it comprises representatives of the five primary higher education segments in California, CSAC staff, student association representatives, and other stakeholders and college affordability advocates.

CSAC engaged [Mathematica Policy Research](#) to help revamp and administer SEARS research. With guidance from the advisory committee, Mathematica and CSAC staff have identified questions to include in the survey, determined the best approaches for sampling students and implementing the survey, and prepared processes for collecting and analyzing data gathered from the survey. Mathematica's involvement is supported through funding provided by [College Futures Foundation](#).