

2023 Student Experience Audit

Executive Summary

January 2024

The California Cradle-to-Career Data System (C2C) partnered with Vital Research (Vital) to conduct a survey and in-depth interviews with recent high school graduates on students' lived experiences and the challenges they faced as they applied to and/or transferred to college and navigated the financial aid process. This executive summary highlights key findings and recommendations from the 2023 Student Experience Audit.

FOUR KEY FINDINGS:

1 College Admissions Applications

- Students were not always aware of where they needed to go to get all the information necessary to apply to college.
- Students indicated that it would be helpful to have more information about eligibility and their college options.
- Among those who experienced challenges during the college application process, first-generation college students were twice as likely to experience challenges compared to their peers.
- When deciding where to apply to and attend, students indicated that the most influential factors were location and cost.

2 Financial Aid Applications

- There is a need to build financial aid awareness (i.e., tools, terminology, processes, documentation) to support students throughout the financial aid process.
- Most students indicated that collecting the required documentation for the financial aid application was the greatest challenge. This includes income tax returns, W-2 forms, and other financial forms.
- Many students reported that financial aid was not enough to cover tuition costs and other expenses, such as housing or food.

3 Assistance for First-Generation and Underserved Students

- First-generation and underserved college students were less likely to be able to turn to and receive help from their parents or family members when completing their admissions and financial aid applications.
- First-generation and underserved students were more reliant on institutional help from school counselors or other sources to complete the admissions and financial aid applications.

4 Transcripts and Credit Transfer

- Nearly half of students experienced challenges at some level when requesting or receiving high school transcripts, community college transcripts from dual enrollment, or AP credit.
- Many students were not aware that dual enrollment courses and AP test results did not count towards credit at their college or in their degree program.

These results provide some insight into the experiences and challenges prospective and current students may face as they apply to and/or transfer to college and navigate the financial aid process. C2C has a unique opportunity to leverage its data and placement in the student/institutional data ecosystem to both enlighten the points of friction students experience and to promote data tools and improvements that can make these students' transitions smoother.

