Item 11

(Information Item)

Update on research into student and parent mindsets and communications on financial aid

SUMMARY:
California Student Aid Commission (Commission) staff, Wonder: Strategies for Good, and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research will present the public opinion and communications research conducted for purposes of informing the Commission's outreach, marketing, and communications strategies.

RECOMMENDATION:
This is an information item; no action is required.

BACKGROUND:
There is a growing public narrative across the United States that college is unaffordable, resulting in many students and families questioning the value of pursuing postsecondary education. In 2023, a Gallup Poll survey found that affordability related barriers were the most cited reason as to why adults between ages 18 and 49 did not enroll in postsecondary education or had dropped out. As discussed at the Commission’s June 2023 retreat, national conversations have continued around the “value proposition” of higher education and how that can best be communicated to prospective students and their families. Following the retreat, Commission leadership and staff set forth to undertake research to better understand how students and families consider the benefits of higher education, associated costs, and the aid available to them.

With the goal of reducing racial, economic, and other equity gaps in financial aid and college enrollment, in the fall of 2023, the Commission received funding from the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund and support from the Foundation for California Community Colleges to conduct quantitative and qualitative research about the college and financial aid mindset of California high school seniors who are currently underrepresented in postsecondary education. The Commission contracted with communications and public-opinion research firms, Wonder: Strategies for Good and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research to conduct the research. Specifically, the target audiences for this research included California high school seniors who are either first-generation, boys/men of color, undocumented, from a mixed-status family, or do not see themselves as college bound (i.e., students not on track to complete the A-G college preparation course sequence). The research also engaged the parents of such student populations.
The research firms worked with Commission staff from September 2023 through May 2024 to conduct an audit of the Commission’s existing communications, bilingual in-depth interviews, asynchronous and synchronous focus groups, and an online survey that tested various word associations, messenger videos, infographics, guides, and messaging approaches. At each stage of the research process, the Commission benefitted greatly from the expertise and feedback provided by community advisors, including: Dr. Edward Bush (Cosumnes River College President), Lina Calderón-Morin (Southern California College Attainment Network [SoCal CAN], Deputy Director), Alison De Lucca (SoCal CAN, Executive Director), Nora Dominguez (Bakersfield College, Director of Outreach and California Student Opportunity and Access Program South San Joaquin Consortium Project Director), Nancy Jodaitis (Immigrants Rising, Director of Higher Education), Michael Lynch (Improve Your Tomorrow, Chief Executive Officer), Jaclyn Piñero (uAspire, Chief Executive Officer), Angelica Salas (Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights, Executive Director), Dr. Chao Vang (Commissioner, California Student Aid Commission), and Dina Walker (BLU Educational Foundation, President and Chief Executive Director).

In this agenda item, representatives from the Commission, Wonder: Strategies for Good, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research, and the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund will present the final findings of the research, as well as the recommendations for the Commission to employ as part of its outreach, marketing, and communications strategies to students and their families regarding financial aid completion.

RESPONSIBLE PERSON(S):

Jake Brymner, Deputy Director
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Robert Perez, Founder & Chief Exploration Officer
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Daniel Gonzalez Galvan, Senior Research Analyst
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