

Ask Me and I'll Tell You: Why I Am (or Not) Choosing Community College

A practice brief about how the San Diego and Imperial Regional Consortium leads an intersegmental enterprise surveying 10,000 high school students enrolled in CTE courses and sharing data results with the region's K–12 and community college CTE leaders and practitioners. This unique data is accessible on the [Options after High School Data Dashboard](#) and can be disaggregated by demographics and college or school district to better understand why high school students consider and don't consider attending community college, their enrollment in CTE courses and paths, and their WBL experiences. These data can inform outreach strategies and program improvement to support institutional equity goals.

Imagine if educators had insight into students' thinking about their post-high school plans. Imagine if educators used that data along with meaningful information about student populations to inform programs and services. High school students can tell us a lot about their in-school and out-of-school opportunities to explore college and career options as well as their perspectives on attending community college — we just need to ask. In San Diego and Imperial Counties' schools and districts, teachers do ask. And during year three of surveying students in 2023–2024, an impressive total of 10,081 high school students responded.

Survey data that informs both K–12 and community college decision-makers

In 2021–2022, the San Diego and Imperial Regional Consortium (SDI RC) began facilitating a unique collaboration between the region's K–12 and community college partners. The intersegmental enterprise involves collecting student survey data from San Diego and Imperial high school students enrolled in career technical education (CTE) courses, analyzing the data, and then sharing back usable data and results to inform program decision-making in both systems. Importantly, to support equity goals, the survey collects demographic data along with the responses, allowing the region to explore disparities by gender and race or ethnicity. Remarkably, the *Options after High School* survey has gathered information from more than 26,000 survey takers across 25 school districts in San Diego and Imperial counties over the three years. The effort is possible because of SDI RC's initiative to support the collaboration and carry out the plan, while enlisting help from county office of education leaders and CTE directors to engage CTE teachers and students in participating.

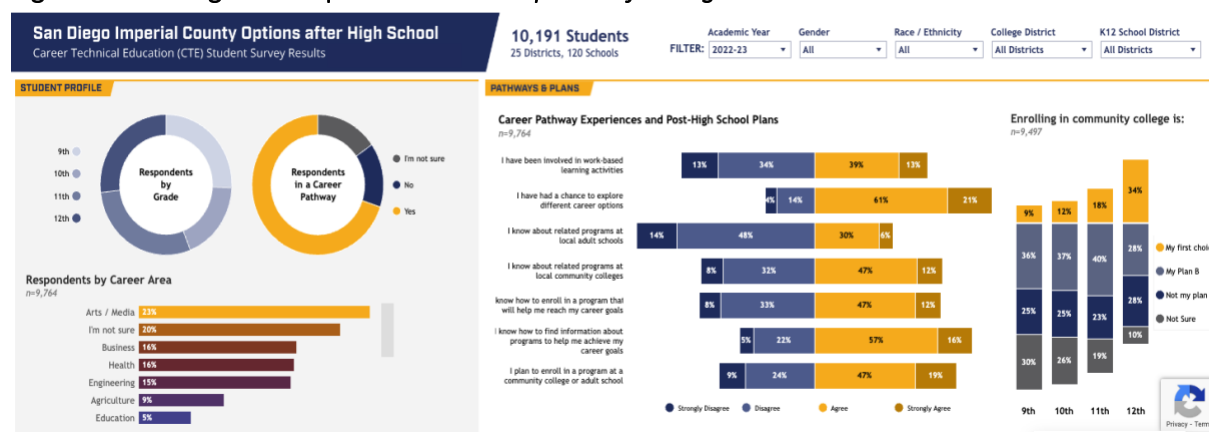
The survey results can yield helpful information to CTE directors at K–12 local education agencies (LEAs) and to outreach teams at community colleges and adult schools, suggesting ways to improve practices that better equip students with the kinds of information they need for making informed choices about their future plans. K–12 CTE decision-makers can use the survey data, for example, to ensure equitable participation in pathways and work-based learning, as well as to help students realize the array of postsecondary options available to reach their career goals. Community college decision-makers can use different data from the survey to understand why some students see community college as an attractive

— or unattractive — choice and act on those insights through targeted, and possibly, earlier interventions and outreach. And with demographic data, decision-makers can examine all of this through an equity lens.

Support for utilizing the student data and data dashboard

At the request of the SDI RC, WestEd lends support with survey design, data analysis, and the development of a regional *Options after High School* [data dashboard](#). User-friendly data can be reviewed at the regional level, or alternatively for local program improvement, CTE directors, teachers, counselors, and staff can easily access data at the district level (see Figure 1). Dashboard filters allow for flexibility and exploration of data disaggregated by school or college district, grade level, career areas, gender, race/ethnicity, or other factors to better understand equity gaps and fine-tune practices to improve equitable participation in career pathways and postsecondary education.

Figure 1. San Diego and Imperial Counties' *Options after High School Data Dashboard*



Source: San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges Regional Consortium

Several layers of professional development support have been offered to K–12 and postsecondary decision-makers to fully utilize the data dashboard. For example, K–12 decision-makers such as CTE leaders and high school counselors, might attend the San Diego County Office of Education-hosted CTE Leaders Network meetings and regional professional learning, respectively, to engage with the data dashboard and to consider change implications. The former, regional Counselor Conference provided K–12 counselors and community colleges career and academic counselors an opportunity to learn about the *Options after High School Data Dashboard* and to explore their local data. Additionally, the SDI RC has shared the data dashboard with the San Diego and Imperial community college CEOs and the regional governance to demonstrate a useful tool providing K–14 decision-makers with current and meaningful data.

Potential usage of Options after High School data

Demographic data items about gender and race/ethnicity were added to the *Options after High School* survey in year two of administration. Filtering for these characteristics in the data dashboard can help education teams gain a clearer picture about inequities in such areas as student participation in CTE

pathways and access to opportunities, as well as whether current equity-focused interventions are having the desired impact. As teams look at the data, they could begin to raise questions, consider the change that is needed, and assess the solution they might employ. Here are three examples of how *Options after High School* data and ensuing questions could drive equity-driven change for the different educational segments.

K–12 School District (Example 1)

Team observation: Of the students who took the survey in our district, 8% of female high school students, compared to 21% of male high school students, are enrolled in engineering pathways.

Question for consideration: How can we increase engineering pathway participation for female students?

Possible equity-centered solutions: To start, a local intervention might be to set up an informal listening session with female students and ask, *Why did you not choose the engineering pathway?* Follow-up interventions might include ensuring regular and earlier exposure to female engineers, fostering engagement opportunities with female engineering students, establishing partnerships with women engineer organizations, and providing salary information related to a range of engineering and non-engineering careers for comparison.

Feeder High Schools and Community College (Example 2)

Team observation: The data show that among survey takers, 44% of career pathway students in our district don't know about related career area programs at the local community colleges.

Question for consideration: How can we build greater awareness about the array of community college programs and pathways available to high school students for continuing their career area interests and goals?

Possible equity-centered solutions: Identify existing community college relationships with the district or feeder high schools that can be leveraged to provide more information to students and families about postsecondary programs related to CTE pathways that lead to high-wage, in-demand careers. Reach out directly to relevant community college departments and invite a representative to speak about careers and pathways. Ensure diversity of gender; race and ethnicity; and first-generation, college-going representation among speakers.

Community College (Example 3)

Team observation: Among the students participating in the survey at one of our K–12 feeder districts, the data reveal that 9% of 9th grade students and just 15% of 11th grade students indicate that community college is their first choice; however, 32% of 12th grade students indicate that community college is their first choice.

Question for consideration: How can our outreach and marketing team do a better job at communicating to high school students earlier about the benefits of community college and

student services — including explaining the different types of early college credit, such as dual enrollment, College and Career Access Pathways (CCAP), and credit by exam — while helping students see community college as a choice? Additionally, how can community colleges use the data when reviewing articulation agreements with their K–12 feeder high schools?

Possible equity-centered solutions: With this insight about prospective students, community colleges can play a more intentional role by sending ambassadors to the high schools, speaking directly with K–12 teachers and counselors, students, and families about the topics important to students such as costs and financial aid eligibility, pathways and programs, and support for employment or transfer. Start building knowledge and relationships with students in 9th grade. Additionally, colleges can create multiple social media campaigns that speak to high school students or customize in-person and digital messaging to reach different prospective students and to help them see community college as their first choice, rather than as a default. Some San Diego community colleges have reported utilizing the data dashboard to inform new outreach strategies or alongside strategic planning findings to increase student enrollment at a particular campus. It is also an opportunity for community colleges and feeder high schools to review articulation agreements and to promote to high school students the various opportunities for dual enrollment and continued study in a pathway at the local community college after graduation.

Survey data is powerful because it gives decision-makers and others insight into student perspectives. It provides a snapshot into students' thinking at a specific point in time. Over time, these data can reveal trends and patterns that would otherwise remain undetected. Disaggregating these data by race and gender can also reveal potential equity gaps in students' access to opportunities. Such data can inform leaders and practitioners to develop inclusive pathway recruitment strategies or interventions. In fact, a compilation of strategic [intervention recommendations](#) was created by partners in this intersegmental partnership and is available for K–14 practitioners. With the *Options after High School* survey data that are both local and current, students may actually benefit from contributing their perspectives before they graduate from high school — especially, when educators and decisionmakers choose to act on the data they ask for.

Looking forward

The *Options after High School* survey data and dashboard offer the region a tremendous opportunity for K–12 LEAs and community colleges to make sense of meaningful data and to plan improvements — improvements that potentially can boost K–12 graduation and college/career readiness metrics, as well as community college enrollment and persistence measures. Above all, for students, the data can inform K–12 and community colleges on student equity gaps, pointing to areas for strengthening K–14 CTE pathways and programs, including demonstrating to students a clearer career and education path forward.

Developed in partnership with WestEd, this brief is part of a series by the San Diego and Imperial Regional Consortium to strengthen education and workforce opportunities and to increase economic mobility in the region. For more information, visit the [San Diego and Imperial Regional Consortium](#) website.