Prepared for

CALIFORNIA
CRADLE TO
CAREER
DATA SYSTEM

STUDENT EXPERIENCE AUDIT

January 2024 - Summary of Results

Based on work by VITAL RESEARCH

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The California Cradle-to-Career Data System (C2C) seeks to advance equity by bringing together and aligning data across large, state-level institutions. C2C's objectives include scaling current tools, like CaliforniaColleges.edu, and future tools, to better serve educators, students, and families. The aim in conducting an annual student experience audit is to ensure that each year the work prioritized by the Office of Cradle-to-Career Data remains closely tied to the lived experiences of students.

An **initial audit** in Fall 2022 focused on perspectives from ten front-line college access providers who had roles in increasing college access for underserved students,

first-generation college students, students from marginalized communities, and students with special custodial circumstances (i.e. former foster youth, undocumented youth, etc.). Key findings from the initial audit suggested there were three pain points students experienced during the process of applying for financial aid and requesting or sharing electronic transcripts. These were:

1) Lack of resources to support students with special custodial circumstances.
2) Deep-seated fear to complete any government-related form and a general mistrust of local and governmental institutions.
3) Lack of guidance for post-application requirements.

One drawback of the 2022 student audit was that students' perspectives about their own college and financial aid application processes were not captured. Therefore, for the 2023 student audit, C2C partnered with Vital Research (Vital) to conduct an audit centered on students' lived experiences about the challenges they face when applying for college and financial aid, as well as students' experiences transitioning from secondary to postsecondary education. This report provides a summary of the 2023 student experience audit. This report is prepared based on data collection, analysis, and insights from work led by Vital Research. The report's format and presentation have been adapted by C2C.

Introduction

The purpose of the 2023 student audit was to capture students' voices on the topics of the college and financial aid application process. The following questions guided the 2023 student audit:

1) What are recent high school completers' experiences with college (two- and four-year) and financial aid applications?
2) What are students' experiences with transitioning to college?

To address these questions, Vital focused on five key areas: the college/postsecondary admissions application process, the financial aid application process, receipt of financial aid, requesting transcripts, and transferring credits. Students were eligible to participate in the study if they graduated from high school or obtained a GED in California and applied for higher education programs, such as vocational/trade schools, two-year or community college, and/or four-year colleges/universities. Students were invited to participate in a survey and/or interview to discuss their experience in these five focus areas. Data was collected in August and September 2023.

5 FOCUS AREAS OF THE 2023 C2C STUDENT AUDIT

01 **Applying for college/postsecondary options** – Support in completing the process, factors influencing decisions for application and attendance

02 **Applying for financial aid** – Support in completing the process, awareness of what sources of financial aid were available, barriers/challenges in the process

03 **Receipt of financial aid** – Difficulties/challenges, timeliness

04 **Requesting transcripts** – Difficulties/challenges, timeliness

05 **Transferring credits** – Difficulties/challenges, timeliness

Introduction

Survey and interview data were analyzed to understand the experiences of all students and when relevant, by subgroups of interest as well. Subgroups included underserved minority groups (defined as anyone who self-identified as Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Native American/Alaskan Native), first-generation college students, and those with unique custodial circumstances. Some questions on the survey and during the interviews were asked only when relevant and results may not represent the overall study sample. For example, students who did not apply for financial aid were not asked about challenges they experienced completing the financial aid application. Additional details on the 2023 C2C student audit methods can be found in Appendix A.

Study Participants

Survey Participants

In total, 152 student survey responses were included in the audit. All 152 participants attended high school in California, received a high school diploma, GED, or equivalent certificate, and applied to college or trade programs. All participants graduated from high school within the past five years. Just over half of the survey participants identified as a woman, and the plurality of participants identified as Hispanic/Latino. Overall, when considering all students' self-identified choices on race/ethnicity, half of the students surveyed belonged to an underserved minority group.

One general note on the survey participants is that the students who responded during this audit were generally more college-prepared than others in their age group.

As detailed later in this and subsequent sections, the majority of students who responded were enrolled in a four-year university, had participated in a dual or concurrent enrollment program in high school, and had taken at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course.
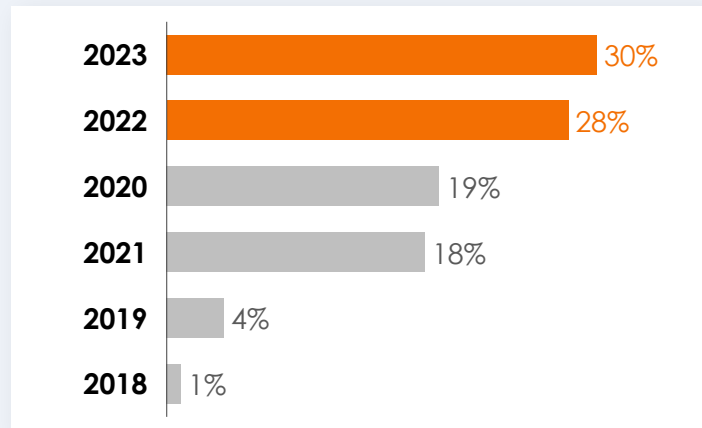
152

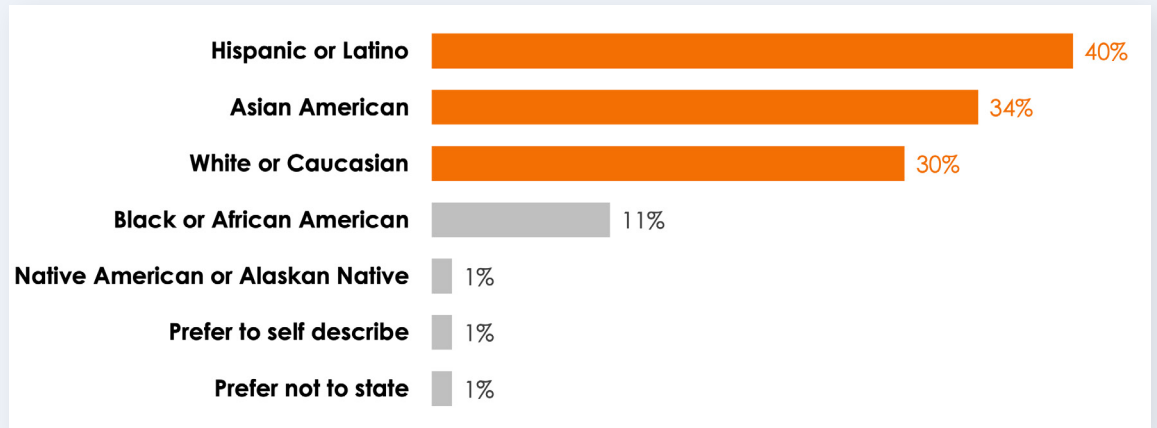**student survey responses were included in the audit**

Study Participants

FIGURE 1. DEMOGRAPHICS OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS (N=152)

High School Year Graduation
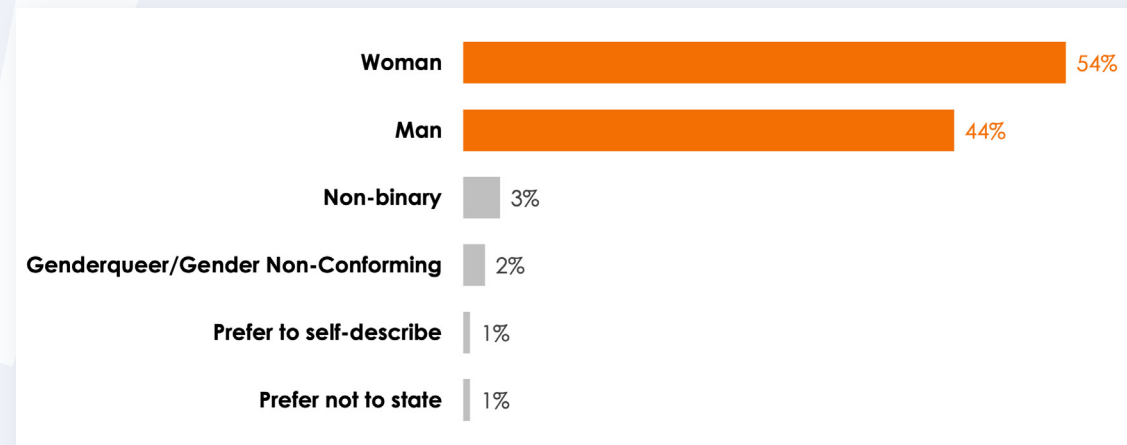
Year	Percentage
2023	30%
2022	28%
2020	19%
2021	18%
2019	4%
2018	1%

Race/Ethnicity

Category	Percentage
Hispanic or Latino	40%
Asian American	34%
White or Caucasian	30%
Black or African American	11%
Native American or Alaskan Native	1%
Prefer to self describe	1%
Prefer not to state	1%

Gender Identity

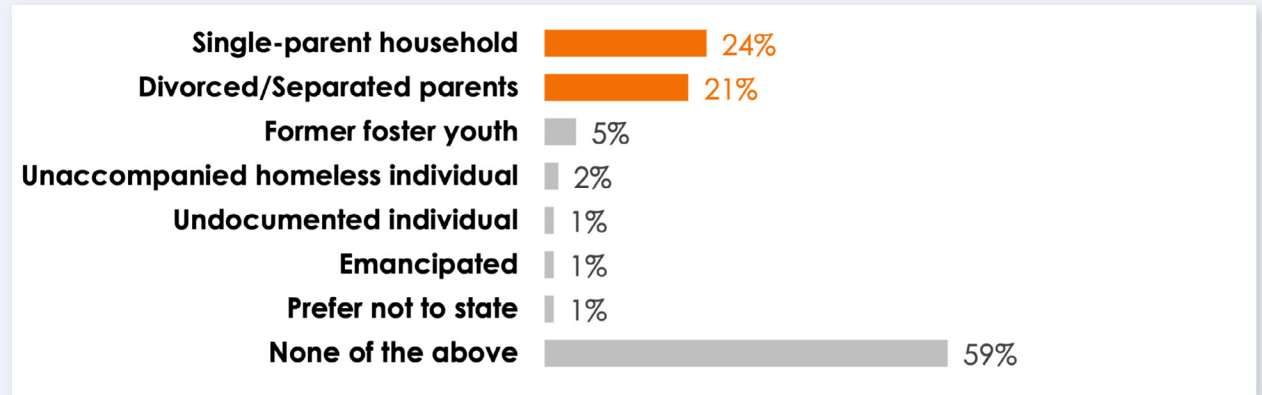| Category	Percentage
Woman	54%
Man	44%
Non-binary	3%
Genderqueer/Gender Non-Conforming	2%
Prefer to self-describe	1%
Prefer not to state	1%

Note: Responses total more than 100% as participants were able to select all categories that applied.

Study Participants

Although most reported no unique custodial background, nearly a quarter indicated they were from a single-parent household or had divorced/separated parents. Seven students identified as former foster youth, three students identified as unaccompanied homeless individuals, and two students identified as undocumented.

FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS WITH UNIQUE CUSTODIAL STATUS (N=152)

| Category	Percentage
Single-parent household	24%
Divorced/Separated parents	21%
Former foster youth	5%
Unaccompanied homeless individual	2%
Undocumented individual	1%
Emancipated	1%
Prefer not to state	1%
None of the above	59%

Note: Responses total more than 100% as participants were able to select all categories that applied.
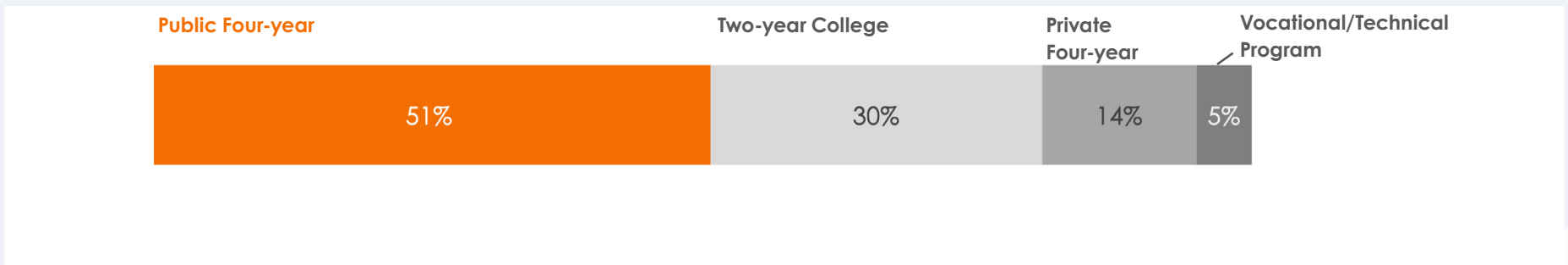
Study Participants

Most participants were currently attending classes, while a few participants had attended but dropped out or were not attending/did not enroll. For those who had enrolled at some point, most participants attended college directly after high school, while 16% had transferred from another higher education setting, and 1% attended college after taking a gap year. Most participants attended or were attending a public, 4-year college or university. Fifty percent of participants identified as first-generation college students. Students who identified as an underserved minority were also more likely to indicate they were first-generation college students (73% of underserved minority students were also first-generation college students).

FIGURE 3. Survey Participants' College Attendance

86%
Currently Attending
Classes (N=152)

83%
Attending Directly After
High School (N=139)

50%
First-Generation College
Student (N=139)
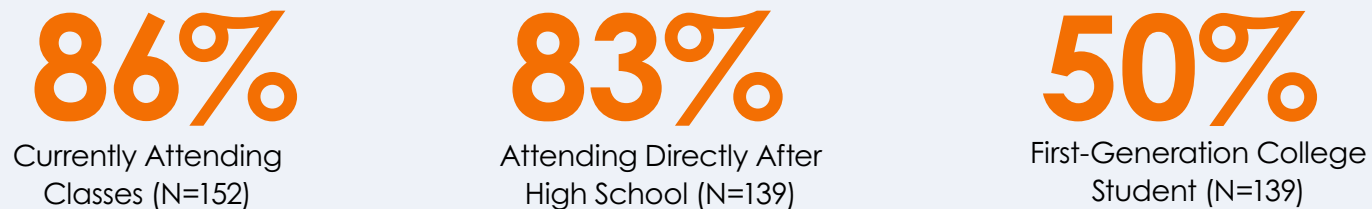
Type of College/University Attended (N=139)

Public Four-year	Two-year College	Private Four-year	Vocational/Technical Program
51%	30%	14%	5%

Study Participants

All ten interview participants were enrolled postsecondary students at the time of the interview. Similar to the survey participants, all interviewees had also recently graduated from a California-based high school. Eight students were attending a four-year college or university, one student was at a community college, and one student was enrolled in a vocational program. One of the eight four-year college students had transferred from a community college. One student had applied to college, took a year off, and then reapplied to school. Four of the ten students mentioned they were first-generation college students.

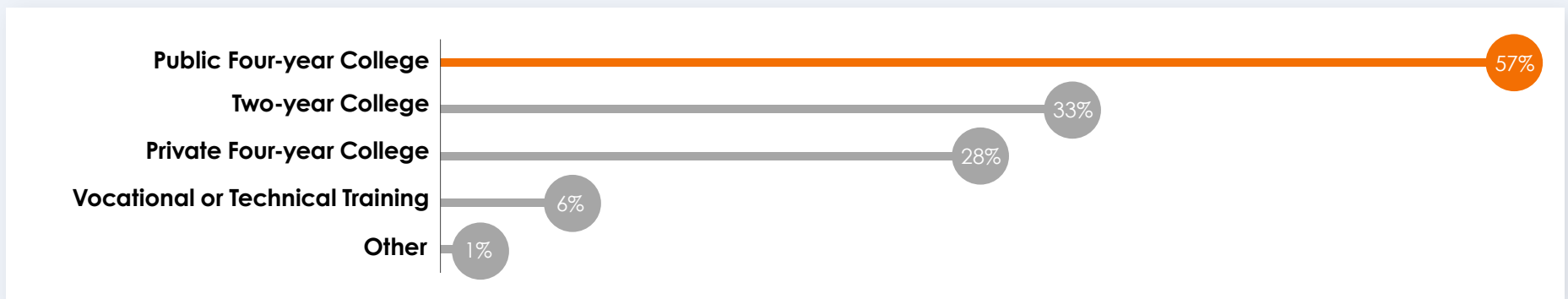## Key Finding #1 - Regarding Admissions Applications

KEY FINDING #1

REGARDING ADMISSIONS APPLICATIONS

The postsecondary admissions application process can be overwhelming, especially for first-generation college students, and students often turned to multiple places to get all the information needed. During the application process, however, students were not always aware of where they need to go to locate needed information. Having a centralized "hub" that could serve as a resource for students would be helpful.

The students who participated in the audit had primarily applied to public four-year colleges (57%), while one-third of students applied to two-year colleges (i.e., community colleges), and just over one-quarter of students also applied to private four-year programs.

FIGURE 4. STUDENTS WERE MOST LIKELY TO HAVE APPLIED TO A PUBLIC, FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY (N=152)

Category	Percentage
Public Four-year College	57%
Two-year College	33%
Private Four-year College	28%
Vocational or Technical Training	6%
Other	1%

Note: Responses total more than 100% as participants were able to select all categories that applied.

Key Finding #1 - Regarding Admissions Applications

When deciding where to attend, the most influential factors were location and cost. Academic quality was the next most important factor.

FIGURE 5. LOCATION AND COST WERE THE TWO FACTORS THAT MOST INFLUENCED WHERE STUDENTS APPLIED TO COLLEGE (N=52)

Factor	Percentage
Location	69%
Cost (i.e., tuition, books, transportation, etc.)	67%
Academic quality	41%
Scholarship or grant opportunities	34%
Quality of majors of interest	32%
Recommendations from family and friends	30%
Campus environment	28%
Transportation access	28%
Acceptance rate	26%
Career specialization	25%
School size	22%
Recommendations from school personnel	20%
Feelings of trust with the institution	14%
Housing quality and availability	13%
Faculty	12%
Resources and support systems	11%
College outreach	10%
Participation in athletics	7%
Other factors	2%

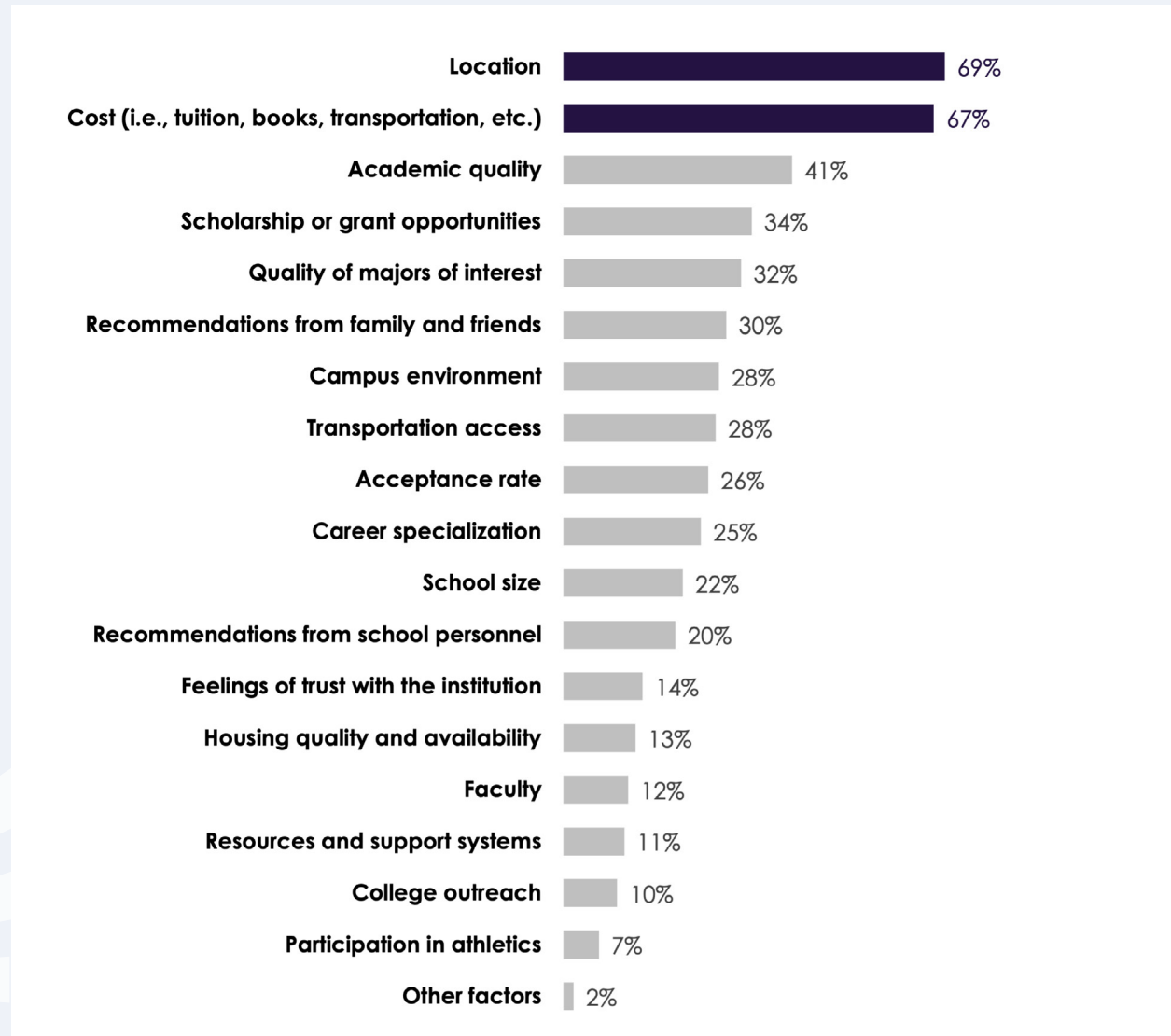*Note*: Responses total more than 100% as participants were able to select all categories that applied.

Key Finding #1 - Regarding Admissions Applications

Similar to the survey participants, student interviewees also identified location and cost amongst the most influential factors when applying to or attending postsecondary school. Interviewees elaborated on the importance of location by explaining that proximity to family and commuting factors, like distance, were deciding reasons for where they applied and/or attended. Location was related to cost in that several students discussed the cost of commuting. Affordability and the financial aid package offered were also factors related to cost.

Additionally, interviewees discussed their desire to find a representative community. In other words, students were looking to see if the school had "people that looked like me." A few of the interviewees already knew what type of program they wanted to apply to (e.g., type of vocational program, a specific theater program, etc.).

Students were also asked to indicate if they had experienced challenges or difficulties during the admissions application process and to indicate which obstacles they experienced when completing postsecondary

applications. Overall, nearly half (43%) of all surveyed students experienced challenges when completing the college or vocational/trade school application. However, amongst those who did experience challenges, first-generation college students were twice as likely to experience challenges in completing the college or vocational/trade school application compared to those who did not identify as a first-generation college student.

67%

OF COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO EXPERIENCED
CHALLENGES COMPLETING THE ADMISSIONS
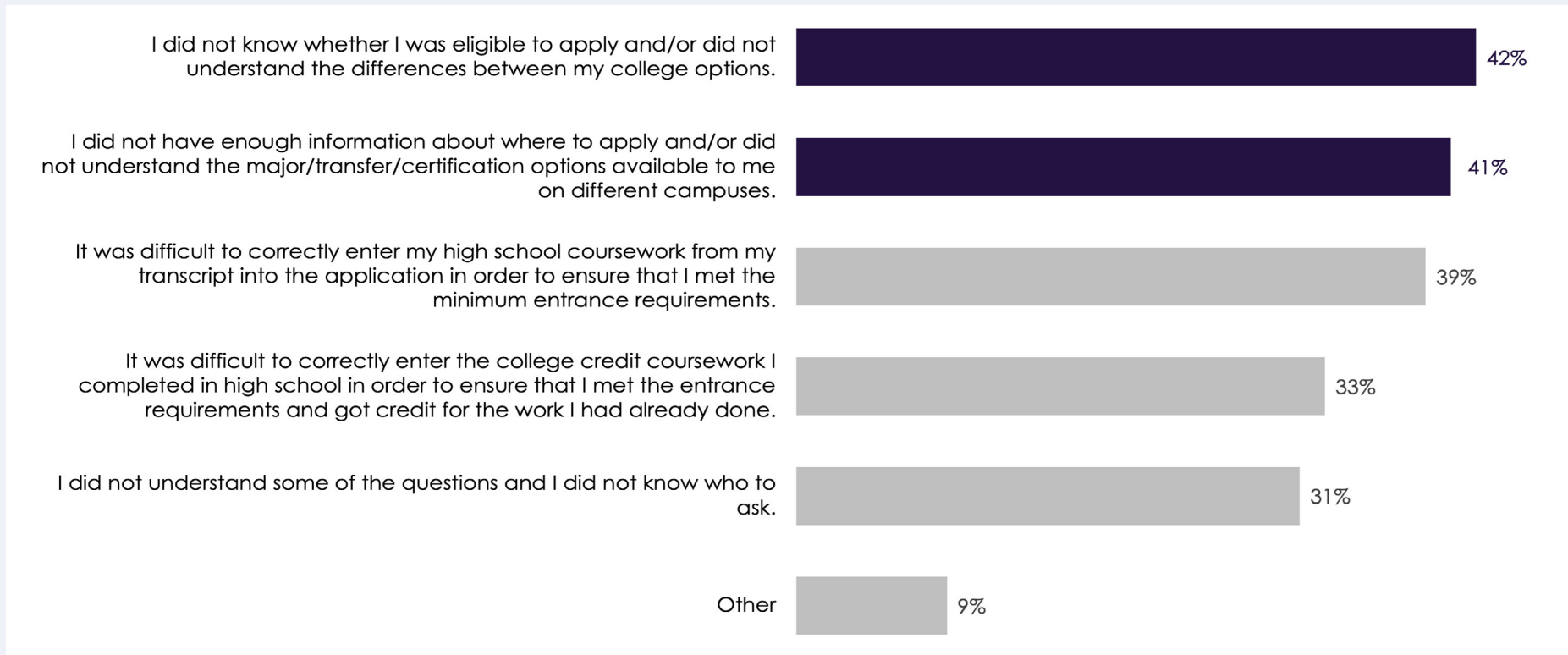APPLICATION IDENTIFIED AS 1ST-GENERATION

33%

OF COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO EXPERIENCED
CHALLENGES COMPLETING THE ADMISSIONS
APPLICATION IDENTIFIED AS NON-1ST-GENERATION

Key Finding #1 - Regarding Admissions Applications

For students who did experience challenges to the admissions application, the top barriers they identified were related to lack of information related to eligibility and understanding the differences between their college options. Students also expressed not having enough information about where to apply and that there needs to be more information to better understand what options (whether it be majors, transferring, or certification) are available at different campuses.

FIGURE 6. CHALLENGES STUDENTS EXPERIENCED WHEN COMPLETING ADMISSIONS APPLICATIONS (N=64)

Challenge	Percentage
I did not know whether I was eligible to apply and/or did not understand the differences between my college options.	42%
I did not have enough information about where to apply and/or did not understand the major/transfer/certification options available to me on different campuses.	41%
It was difficult to correctly enter my high school coursework from my transcript into the application in order to ensure that I met the minimum entrance requirements.	39%
It was difficult to correctly enter the college credit coursework I completed in high school in order to ensure that I met the entrance requirements and got credit for the work I had already done.	33%
I did not understand some of the questions and I did not know who to ask.	31%
Other	9%

Note: Responses total more than 100% as participants were able to select all categories that applied.

Student Voices - Regarding Admissions Applications

A similar sentiment about not being given enough information about their major options was expressed by one of the student interviewees highlighted here.

"

I do wish … somewhere on the general application, like the main page where you go to apply for stuff, it would've had more frequently asked questions about majors, what major or programs that you're applying to. Maybe if they give a link to the school's websites themselves, because now I know if you go to the school's websites they have whole pages explaining what types of jobs you can do with these majors, what you will be learning, but when you do the actual application itself they don't really give that much information about what it means.

Student Voices - Regarding Admissions Applications

Several student interviewees mentioned challenges they faced with the different types of postsecondary applications. For example, the differences in applying between the California State University (CSU) system and the University of California (UC) system were confusing. Also, interviewees described how difficult it was needing to create accounts and apply through different portals. Different colleges had different deadlines and it was difficult to manage various deadlines and application requirements without a resource to help them. Two students said that writing the personal essay and/or personal statements were the most challenging aspect of the application.

The college application process was pretty stressful. It was very rigorous, but confusing at the same time.

There is a lot of help out there for students, but many people including myself don't really know about it.

I also feel like [challenges] came from self-doubt when applying to colleges. I think a lot of the things that held me back were missing: I'm not good enough because I've had no family apply to college, or even go to college before, so it kind of felt like I was wandering off into a black hole.

It was really difficult trying to find the proper resources to help me in applying for colleges, I would say I would have to do my own personal research to figure out like specific things about the application.

Key Finding #2 - Regarding Financial Aid Applications

KEY FINDING #2

REGARDING FINANCIAL AID APPLICATIONS

There is a need to build financial aid awareness before students fill out financial aid applications. They need to be provided with the tools to understand the process, the terminology, and the documentation required when applying. This scaffolding should continue throughout the process of receiving aid.

Most students (76% of surveyed students; 8 of 10 interviewed students) completed financial aid applications, including those who applied to but did not enroll in post-secondary education. Some students (16%) did not apply for financial aid, and 7% of students applied for financial aid but were selected for verification and did not complete it.

Students who did not apply for financial aid or complete the verification process were asked why they did not do so. The most common reasons for not applying for financial aid or completing the verification process included not needing financial aid, being unable to obtain all the needed information, or the application was too complicated or difficult to complete. One student interviewee opted to apply for scholarships, rather than financial aid and another used military benefits.

Key Finding #2 - Regarding Financial Aid Applications

First-generation college students were more likely to apply for financial aid than non-first-generation college students and similar to the admissions application, first-generation college students were more likely to experience challenges completing the financial aid application, as well.

FIGURE 7. FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS WERE MORE LIKELY TO APPLY FOR FINANCIAL AID AND EXPERIENCE CHALLENGES
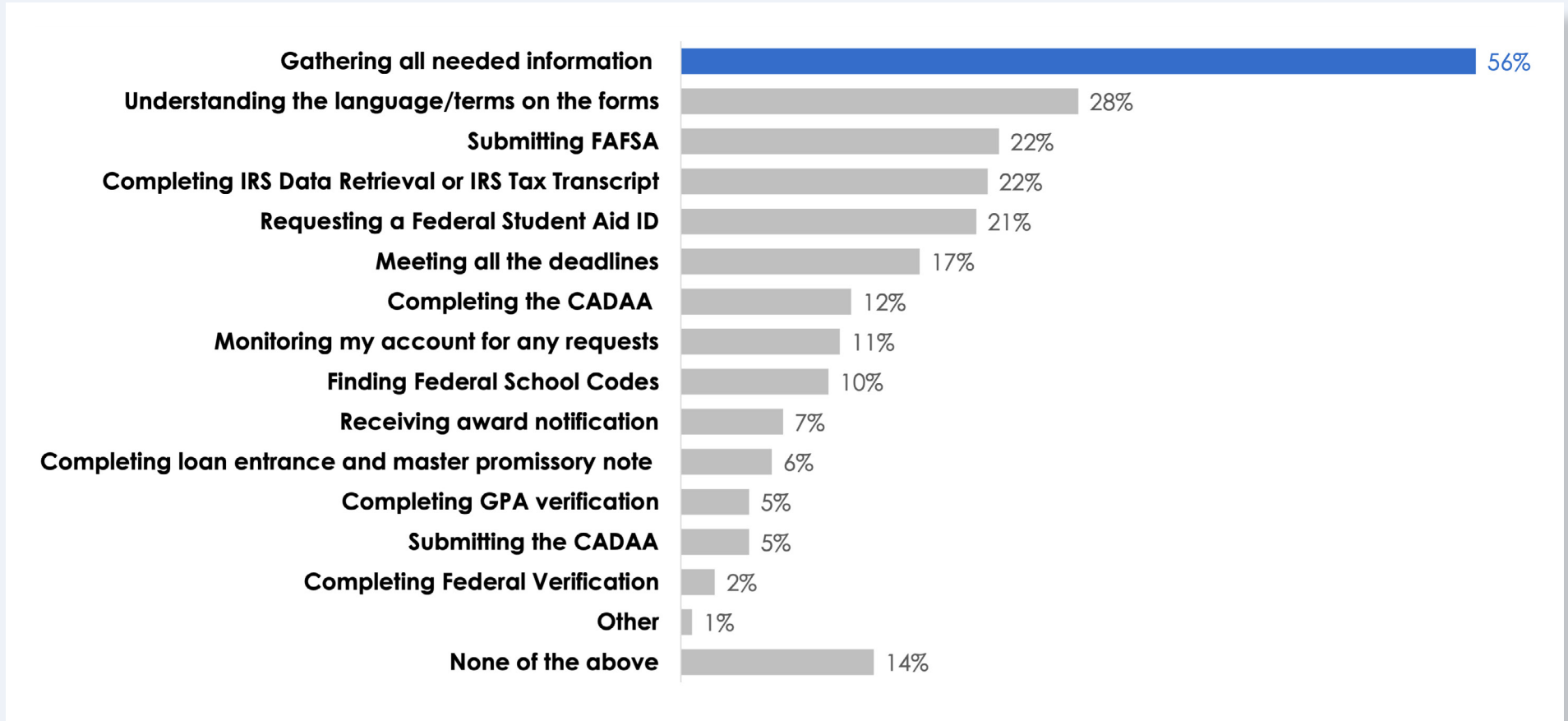
	First-Generation College Student	Non-First-Generation College Student
Applied for Financial Aid:		
Yes	87%	72%
No	13%	28%
Experienced At Least One Challenge When Applying for Financial Aid	90%	80%

When asked about challenges faced when completing their financial aid applications, most surveyed students indicated that collecting the required documentation for the application, including income tax returns, W-2 forms, and other financial forms, was the greatest challenge. Students also had limited exposure to the terms on the forms, knowledge on submitting the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), completing/submitting the IRS data retrieval and tax transcript, and requesting a Federal Student Aid ID. Few students experienced no challenges.

Key Finding #2 - Regarding Financial Aid Applications

FIGURE 8. MOST STUDENTS EXPERIENCED CHALLENGES COLLECTING THE NEEDED INFORMATION FOR THEIR FINANCIAL AID APPLICATIONS (N=125)

Challenge	Percentage
Gathering all needed information	56%
Understanding the language/terms on the forms	28%
Submitting FAFSA	22%
Completing IRS Data Retrieval or IRS Tax Transcript	22%
Requesting a Federal Student Aid ID	21%
Meeting all the deadlines	17%
Completing the CADAA	12%
Monitoring my account for any requests	11%
Finding Federal School Codes	10%
Receiving award notification	7%
Completing loan entrance and master promissory note	6%
Completing GPA verification	5%
Submitting the CADAA	5%
Completing Federal Verification	2%
Other	1%
None of the above	14%

Note: CADAA = California Dream Act Application

Key Finding #2 - Regarding Financial Aid Applications

Similar to surveyed students, interviewees said their biggest challenge was finding and gathering the information needed for the FAFSA. Another common challenge was not having guidance on the tax filing system, and, therefore, the information requested by the FAFSA was foreign to them. A couple of students also indicated that parents needed to set up their own accounts to apply and complete the FAFSA, which posed a challenge as students then had to help their parents complete the process. One student who applied for scholarships instead of FAFSA said the process was much easier, but to get enough aid, they applied for a lot of scholarships without guarantee of being awarded aid.

Of the 102 students surveyed who were enrolled in postsecondary education and applied for financial aid, most (85%) were awarded financial aid, and of those, 94% received financial aid. However, over half of students (52%) reported that financial aid did not cover tuition expenses, and about two-thirds (68%) reported it was not enough to cover other expenses, such as housing or food.
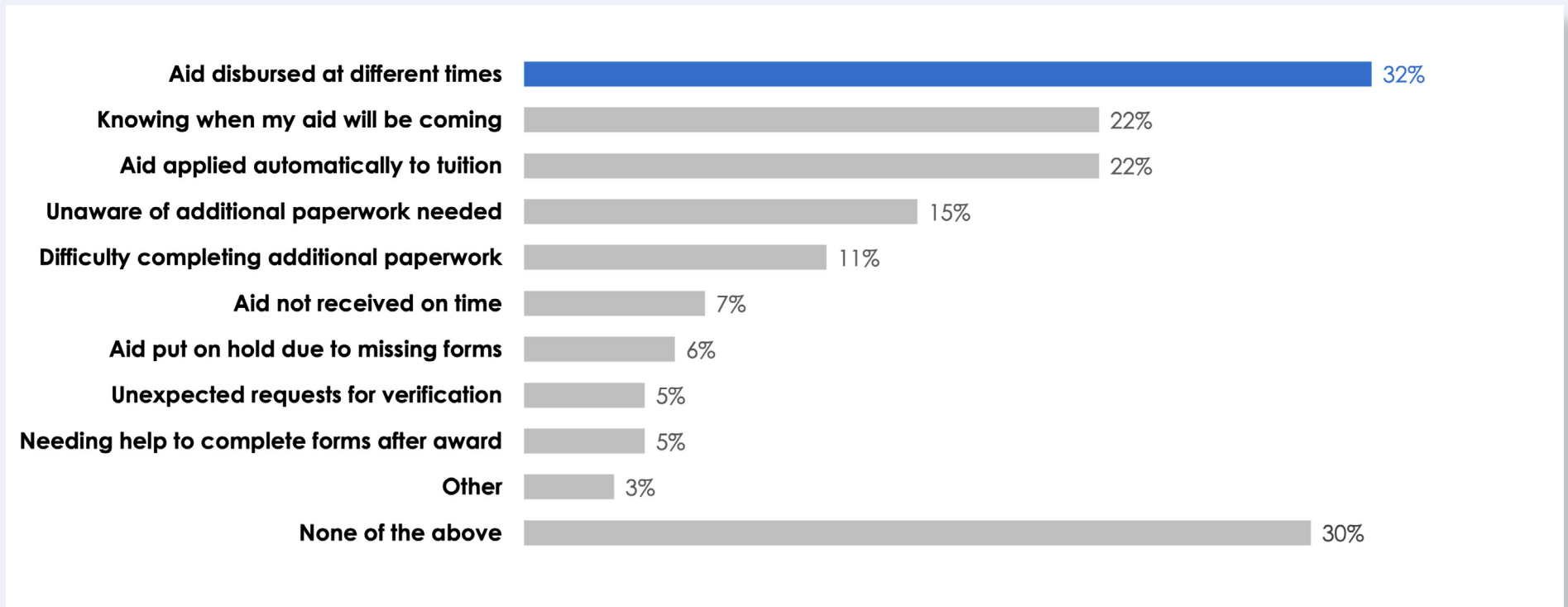
Key Finding #2 - Regarding Financial Aid Applications

While the vast majority of students who applied were awarded and received financial aid, the receipt of aid was not without its challenges. Students who received financial aid were asked what obstacles they faced obtaining aid. For one third of students, aid was disbursed at different times. Almost a quarter of students expressed they were not informed when aid would arrive or that aid would automatically be applied to their tuition rather than the direct recipient of funds. Additional challenges that were discussed included not being told about additional required paperwork, and then needing to complete said paperwork.

FIGURE 9. STUDENTS FACED MANY CHALLENGES IN RECEIVING FINANCIAL AID (N=87)

Challenge	Percentage
Aid disbursed at different times	32%
Knowing when my aid will be coming	22%
Aid applied automatically to tuition	22%
Unaware of additional paperwork needed	15%
Difficulty completing additional paperwork	11%
Aid not received on time	7%
Aid put on hold due to missing forms	6%
Unexpected requests for verification	5%
Needing help to complete forms after award	5%
Other	3%
None of the above	30%

Note: Responses total more than 100% as participants were able to select all categories that applied.

Key Finding #2 - Regarding Financial Aid Applications

One student interviewee shared that their financial aid would often not be disbursed on time to purchase course materials before the start of the semester, which prevented them from keeping up in courses. Another shared that they did not receive as much aid as they expected and needed to work two jobs during the semester to cover expenses, such as housing and groceries.

Students who were interviewed offered some tips or suggestions for students going through the financial aid application, which included:
- preparing paperwork well in advance and completing the application as soon as possible,
- making sure to have all log-in credentials, including your parents', ready to go, and
- apply for a full ride, even if you think you might not qualify.

Three surveyed students identified as former foster youth and knew about additional financial aid resources available to them, such as Chafee grants. However, only one of these students applied for these additional resources.

Two surveyed students who identified as an undocumented youth responded that they knew of and applied for the California Dream Act Application (CADAA) rather than FAFSA. Additionally, one of the students knew of and applied for Cal Grants via CADAA.

Student Voices - Regarding Financial Aid Applications

> " *I don't remember taking a single class that talked about anything that was on the financial aid application, or anything on tax forms. So, it kind of felt like I was trying to figure something out that was in a foreign language.*

> " *[At the start of] the semester…they'll send a syllabus saying, you need this, this, this and that, before you started classes. [B]ut the disbursement for those financial aid had not been sent out yet. So you would be left behind in the curriculum [for that class].*

> " *[For me,] what would make it [easier] is if they provide the instructions of how to complete the process. Like, sometimes when I did the application, there wasn't really instructions of how to complete it or what information you would need at the time to finish [the application].*

Student Voices - Regarding Financial Aid Applications

> "
> *I don't have W2s or anything like that. So I would have to go to the IRS itself in the mornings to do that process, which was annoying, and then turn those in to the school for them to fill in any missing information from the financial aid...to renew it or applying for it.*

> "
> *I had a mix up of questions where if I was an independent or a dependent, I didn't understand what that meant, as a student, like if it didn't have any help, I didn't understand what that meant.*

> "
> *Having people from FAFSA or CalGrant speak with high school students and advise what they need to do to complete application and other necessary steps [would be helpful].*

Key Finding #3 - Regarding Help During the Application Process

KEY FINDING #3

REGARDING HELP DURING THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Additional resources are needed to support first-generation and underserved minority students as they navigate the postsecondary admissions and financial aid application processes.

When completing the postsecondary admissions application, most students indicated that they received help with their college applications primarily from school counselors and/or a parent/family member. Interviewed students also mentioned relying on someone close to them that had already attended college, such as a family member or friend, when completing the college application.

Key Finding #3 - Regarding Help During the Application Process

FIGURE 10. STUDENTS RECEIVED ADMISSIONS APPLICATION HELP FROM MANY DIFFERENT SOURCES (N=149)
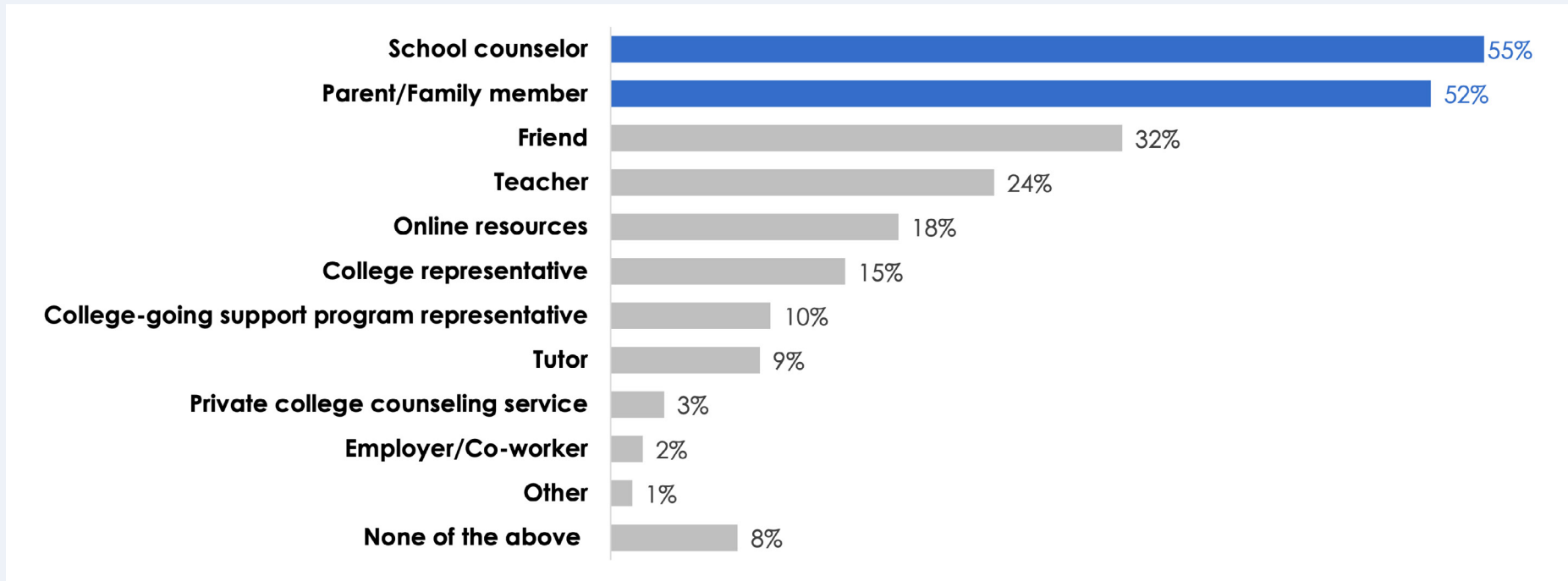
Source	Percentage
School counselor	55%
Parent/Family member	52%
Friend	32%
Teacher	24%
Online resources	18%
College representative	15%
College-going support program representative	10%
Tutor	9%
Private college counseling service	3%
Employer/Co-worker	2%
Other	1%
None of the above	8%

Note: Responses total more than 100% as participants were able to select all categories that applied.

Additional resources may be needed, as first-generation college and/or underserved minority students were less likely to be able to turn to and receive help from their parents or family member when completing their admissions applications compared to students who did not identify as a first-generation college student or as a member of an underserved minority group, often because their parents or relatives had not previously participated in the process. Just over one-third (36%) of first-generation college students said they received help from a parent/family member compared to 70% of non-first-generation students. Similarly, 39% of underserved minority group students received help from a parent/family member compared to 65% of non-underserved minority group students.

Key Finding #3 - Regarding Help During the Application Process

First-generation and underserved minority group students were often more reliant on help from school counselors or other sources to complete the admissions application. Yet, feedback from students indicated that the quality and availability of support from school counselors and career centers could vary greatly. One student shared that their school only had one college counselor, which made it difficult for them to help everyone. On the other hand, a different student shared that their school had several counselors that helped their class, and they felt it was a great source of support.

FIGURE 11. FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE AND/OR UNDERSERVED MINORITY STUDENTS WERE LESS LIKELY TO GET HELP FROM A PARENT OR FAMILY MEMBER ON THE <u>ADMISSION</u> APPLICATION

| | Help on Admissions Application From Parent/Family Member | |
	Yes	No
1st Generation College Student		
Yes	36%	64%
No	70%	30%
Underserved Minority Group		
Yes	39%	61%
No	65%	35%

Key Finding #3 - Regarding Help During the Application Process

Online resources, such as websites and social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, etc.), as well as college representatives and college-going support program representatives, such as Upward Bound, were also helpful to students throughout the college application process. Several students mentioned that going directly to a specific college's website, sending an email, or contacting someone directly at the school of interest were also helpful actions they took. One interviewee mentioned that it would be helpful to have a guide or a "how-to" with steps on how to fill out college applications. As discovered in last year's student audit, guides are available for California's public colleges on CaliforniaColleges.edu, so more awareness may be needed.

Key Finding #3 - Regarding Help During the Application Process

Students were also asked who provided help or support when completing the financial aid applications. To an even greater extent, overall, students had help from a parent or family member when completing the financial aid application. School counselors were again the second highest source of help. Interestingly, 10% of students had no help when filling out their financial aid applications.

FIGURE 12. MOST STUDENTS HAD A PARENT OR FAMILY MEMBER HELP THEM WITH FINANCIAL AID APPLICATIONS (N=125)
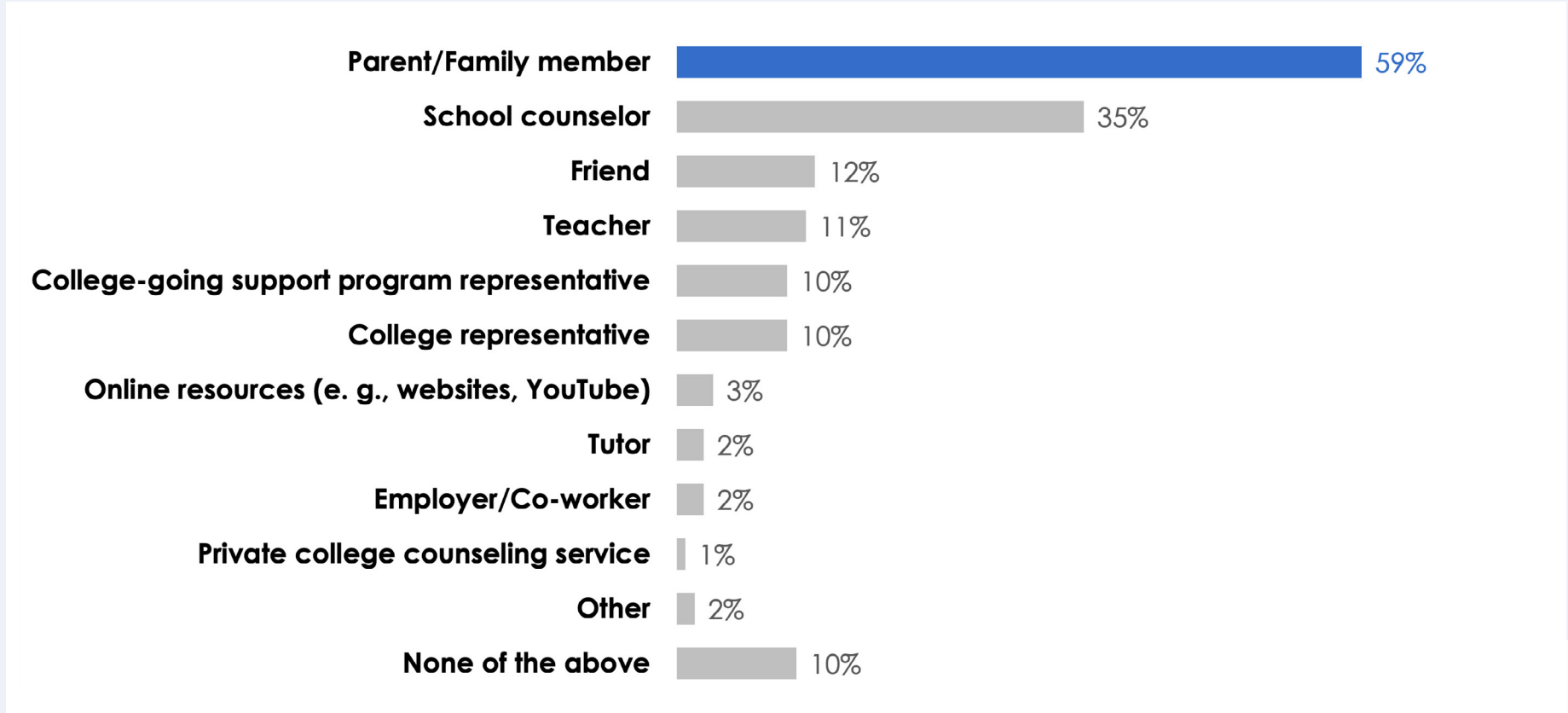
Category	Percentage
Parent/Family member	59%
School counselor	35%
Friend	12%
Teacher	11%
College-going support program representative	10%
College representative	10%
Online resources (e. g., websites, YouTube)	3%
Tutor	2%
Employer/Co-worker	2%
Private college counseling service	1%
Other	2%
None of the above	10%

Note: *Responses total more than 100% as participants were able to select all categories that applied.*

Key Finding #3 - Regarding Help During the Application Process

Much like what students said about sources of help for the admissions application, first-generation college and underserved minority group students were also less likely to indicate receiving help from their parents when completing financial aid applications.

FIGURE 13. FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE AND/OR UNDERSERVED MINORITY STUDENTS WERE LESS LIKELY TO GET HELP FROM A PARENT OR FAMILY MEMBER ON THE <u>FINANCIAL AID</u> APPLICATION

	Help on Admissions Application From Parent/Family Member	
	Yes	No
1st Generation College Student		
Yes	44%	56%
No	86%	14%
Underserved Minority Group		
Yes	50%	50%
No	70%	30%

Student Voices - Regarding Help During the Application Process

While first-generation college and underserved minority group students may have been less likely to receive help from their parents or family members on completing and submitting postsecondary admissions applications and/or financial aid applications, it is important to note that this does not mean parents and family members were not supportive. Instead, it indicates that additional support structures are needed.

> "
> As a first-generation college student, it was kind of difficult to have that parental support and I think that's also affected a lot in college. I feel like a lot of these college students have that parental support. I also do have that parental support, but it also feels like it's kind of from a distance like my family is proud of me. They're part of what I'm doing, but they just don't know how to support me and what I'm doing. And I also know being that I'm in college now. I'm going to be the one helping my younger sister when she applies to colleges next year, I'm going to help her fill out her financial aid, and I'm going to help her fill out all the scholarship applications.

Student Voices - Regarding Help During the Application Process

> *Luckily I had my parents to kind of help me. So we kind of just kind of like winged it in a way.*

> *I really leaned on my high school teachers and my counselors as mentors to really check my application, like my English teacher, was checking my essays.*

> *…but my parents at the time, or my parent, was not knowledgeable enough to know about transferring taxes and information through digital means. Um… they would have to make an account, but they weren't a student. So it was kind of bizarre for them to ask my parents to make a financial student aid account.*

> *I'm a first generation college student, and applying to college, I think, was really difficult giving the I had no resources, I would say. The only resource that I had in my community was my counselor, but my counselor was helping an entire class of nearly 200 people trying to figure out what they want to do after college…it was really difficult trying to find the proper resources to help me and apply for colleges.*

> *The CCC Application should be shortened. You have adults, undocumented, and current immigrants filling out this application. It can be overwhelming. [Perhaps] a more in-depth application can be completed when the students meet with the college counselor to enroll/register for classes.*

Key Finding #4 - Regarding Transcripts and Transferring College Credits

KEY FINDING #4
REGARDING TRANSCRIPTS AND TRANSFERRING COLLEGE CREDITS

When students faced obstacles related to receiving transcripts, challenges stemmed from systemic issues (i.e., slow processing times, having to rely on HS counselors) or lack of guidance on how to request transcripts. The primary difficulty for receiving credits/transferring credits was also limited guidance on what courses were transferrable for both dual/concurrent enrolled and transfer students.

Students were also surveyed about challenges faced when requesting, obtaining, and sending transcripts to their college or trade program. When asked about challenges, overall, about 40% of students experienced some sort of challenge with transcripts. A quarter of surveyed students had difficulties requesting, receiving, or sending their high school transcript to their higher educational program, 20% with their community college transcripts and 5% with four-year college/university transcripts.

FIGURE 14. MANY STUDENTS EXPERIENCED DIFFICULTY OBTAINING TRANSCRIPTS FOR THEIR HIGHER EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM (N=149)
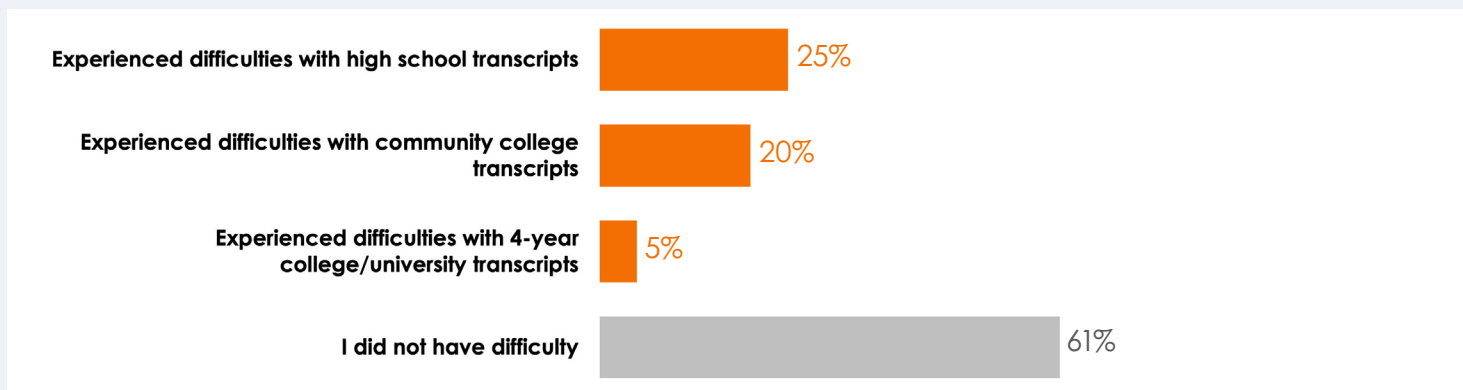
Experienced difficulties with high school transcripts — 25%

Experienced difficulties with community college transcripts — 20%

Experienced difficulties with 4-year college/university transcripts — 5%

I did not have difficulty — 61%

Note: Responses total more than 100% as participants were able to select all categories that applied.

Key Finding #4 - Regarding Transcripts and Transferring College Credits

One in ten students did not receive their transcripts on time. For one interviewee, their biggest challenge was having to go in-person to their high school to request a transcript. Another had difficulty because they are hard of hearing, so requesting transcripts via phone was a barrier. A third student mentioned that requesting transcripts was slow due to the counselor at their school taking a while to send them out. There were no differences in difficulties regarding transcripts for first-generation college students or underserved minority groups.

FIGURE 15. ONE IN TEN STUDENTS DID NOT RECEIVE THEIR TRANSCRIPTS ON TIME (N=136)
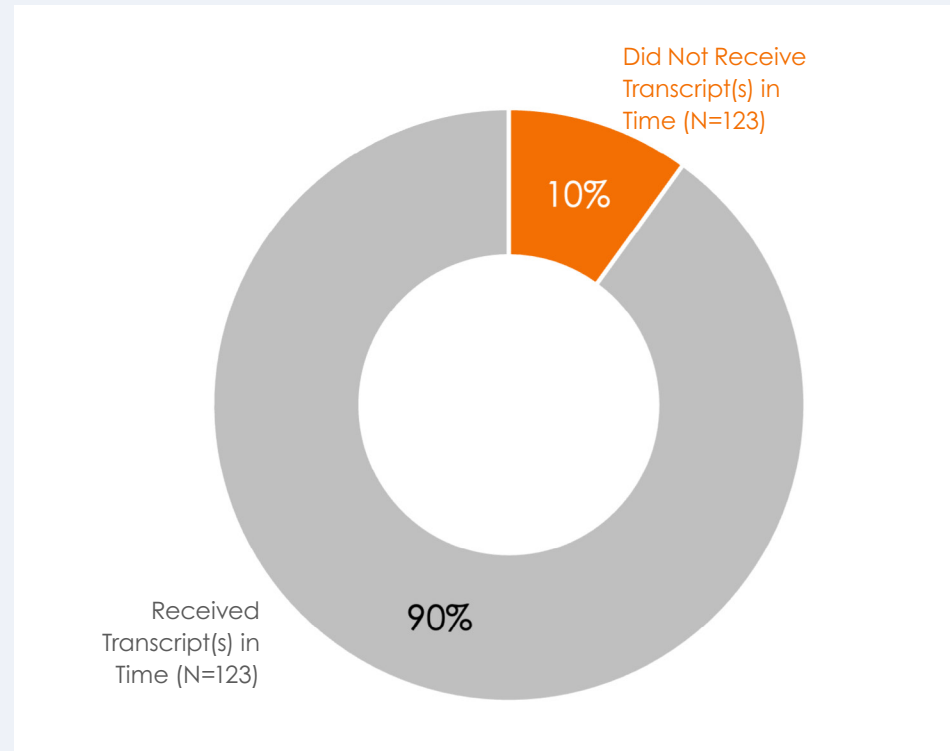
Did Not Receive Transcript(s) in Time (N=123)

10%

Received Transcript(s) in Time (N=123)

90%

Key Finding #4 - Regarding Transcripts and Transferring College Credits

For students that had difficulties with transcripts, many were unsure of where to order their transcripts and experienced long processing times before their transcript was sent to their college or vocational/trade program. This was true particularly for students who had trouble with community college transcripts. For example, several students indicated that there was not a centralized location on their community college's website to order transcripts for the college they were transferring to. Other students mentioned that it took a long time for the college or vocational/trade program they ultimately attended to receive their high school or community college transcripts. A few students mentioned that their transcripts had errors that needed to be corrected first before they could be sent to their college or vocational/trade program, which took additional time to complete.

Key Finding #4 - Regarding Transcripts and Transferring College Credits

Students were also asked whether they received college credit during high school through dual or concurrent enrollment, or by taking Advanced Placement (AP) classes. Just over half of students surveyed were dual or concurrently enrolled in college courses while in high school. Most students indicated that they took AP courses while in high school.

FIGURE 16. JUST OVER HALF OF STUDENTS WERE DUAL OR CONCURRENTLY ENROLLED IN COLLEGE COURSES WHILE IN HIGH SCHOOL (N=139).

No	45%
Yes, as part of a program coordinated by my high school	38%
Yes, independently	15%
I don't know	1%
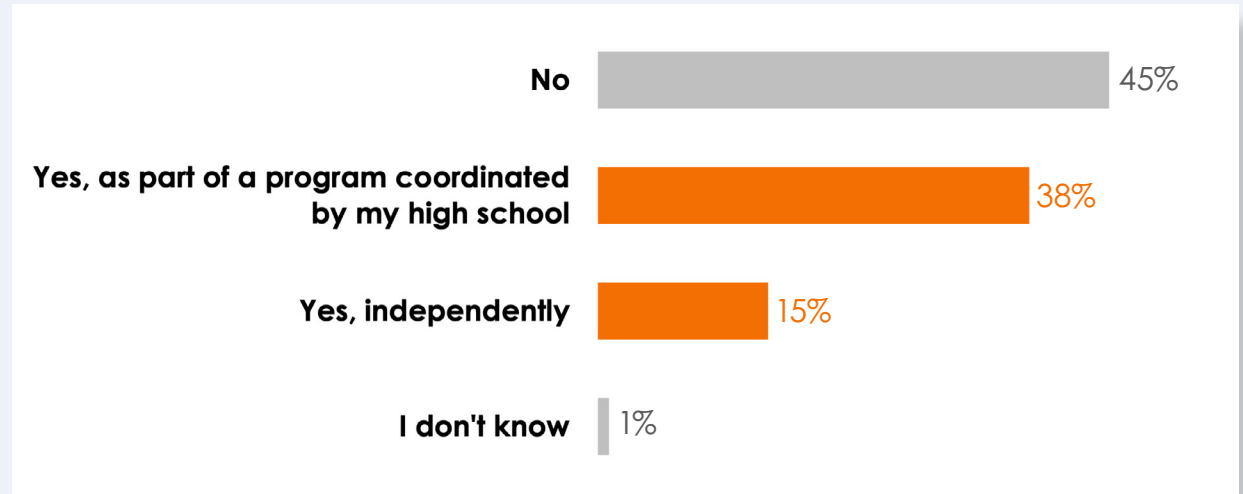
FIGURE 17. MOST STUDENTS TOOK AP CLASSES IN HIGH SCHOOL (N=138).
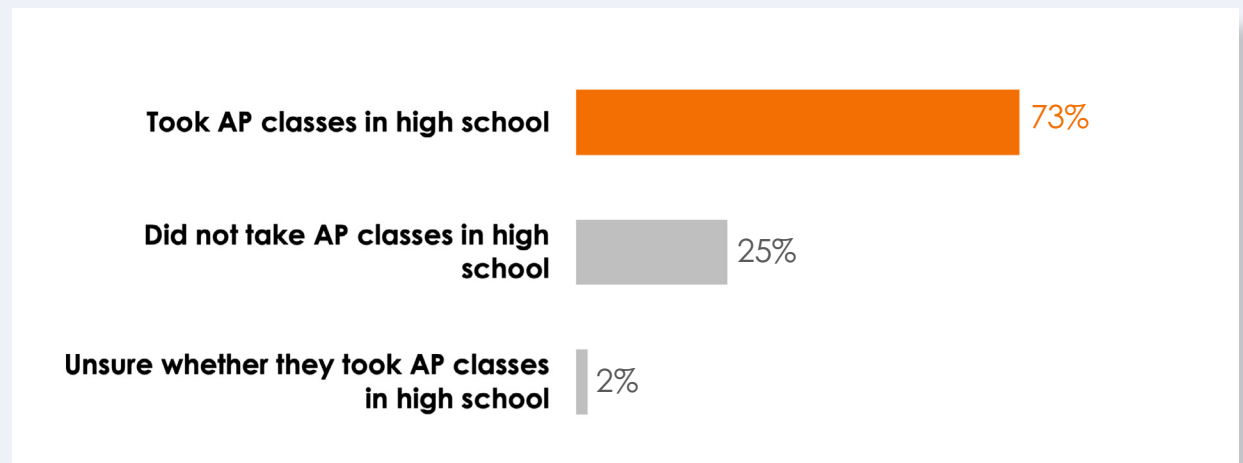
Took AP classes in high school	73%
Did not take AP classes in high school	25%
Unsure whether they took AP classes in high school	2%

Key Finding #4 - Regarding Transcripts and Transferring College Credits

Surveyed students who were a transfer student, were dual or concurrently enrolled in high school, or took AP courses in high school were asked to indicate if they had difficulty transferring their earned credits to their college or trade/vocational program, and whether those credits were ultimately accepted. Between 18-29% of students had some trouble transferring credits and between 13-44% had trouble getting credits accepted at their college or trade/vocational program, particularly if they were transferring from another college or university.

FIGURE 18. TRANSFERRING CREDITS AND GETTING CREDITS ACCEPTED: PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO SAID YES OR NO.

DUAL OR CONCURRENTLY ENROLLED IN HIGH SCHOOL
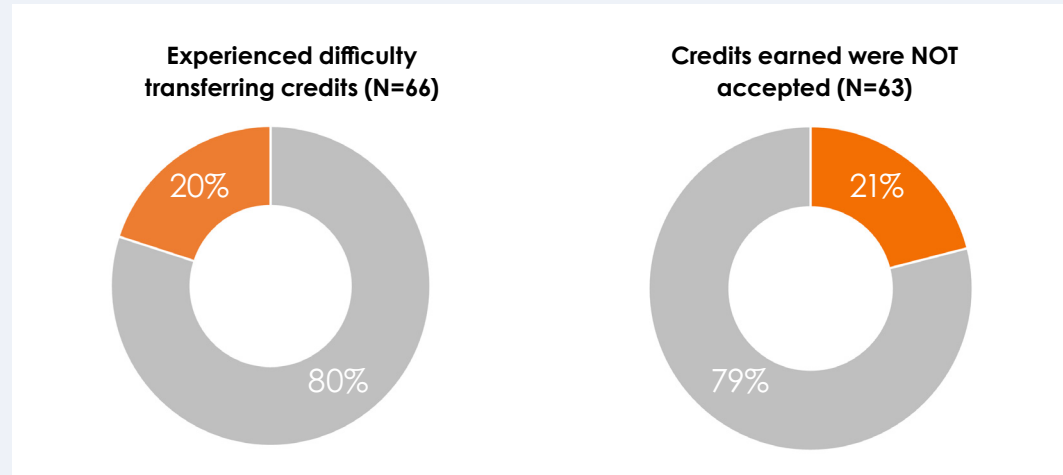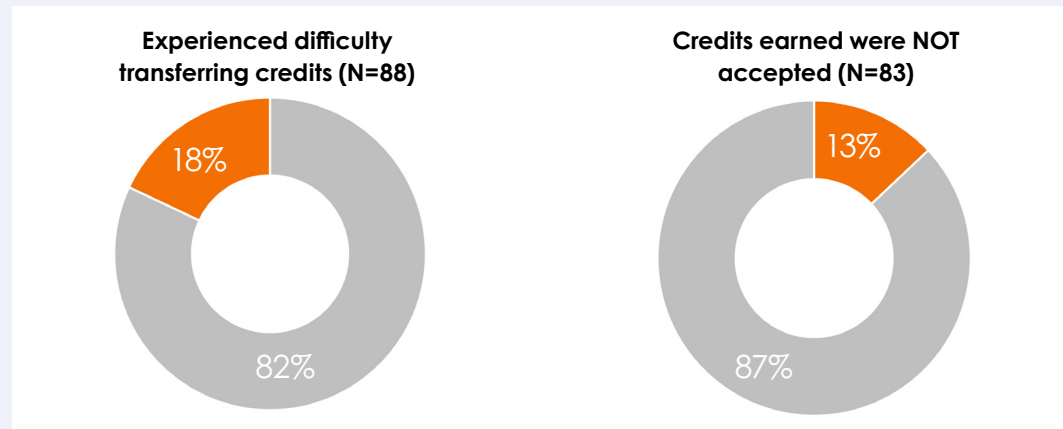
Experienced difficulty transferring credits (N=66)
20%
80%

Credits earned were NOT accepted (N=63)
21%
79%

AP COURSEWORK

Experienced difficulty transferring credits (N=88)
18%
82%

Credits earned were NOT accepted (N=83)
13%
87%

Key Finding #4 - Regarding Transcripts and Transferring College Credits

Obstacles encountered by dual or concurrently enrolled students when transferring credits included:

- Not being able to get online courses approved
- Difficulty with finding the equivalent course taken for college credit/only some credits were accepted
- Additional paperwork/forms required to receive credit

Obstacles encountered by AP students when transferring credits included:

- Encountering lengthy processing times for credits to be accepted
- Not knowing in advance that certain scores were needed on AP exams/ scores not accepted

For transfer students, the primary obstacle was discovering that coursework or credits did not transfer over because there was not an equivalent course at their new institution.

FIGURE 18. CONTINUED. TRANSFERRING CREDITS AND GETTING CREDITS ACCEPTED: PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO SAID YES OR NO.

TRANSFERRED FROM ANOTHER INSTITUTION

Experienced difficulty transferring credits (N=17): 29% / 71%

Credits earned were NOT accepted (N=17): 53% / 47%
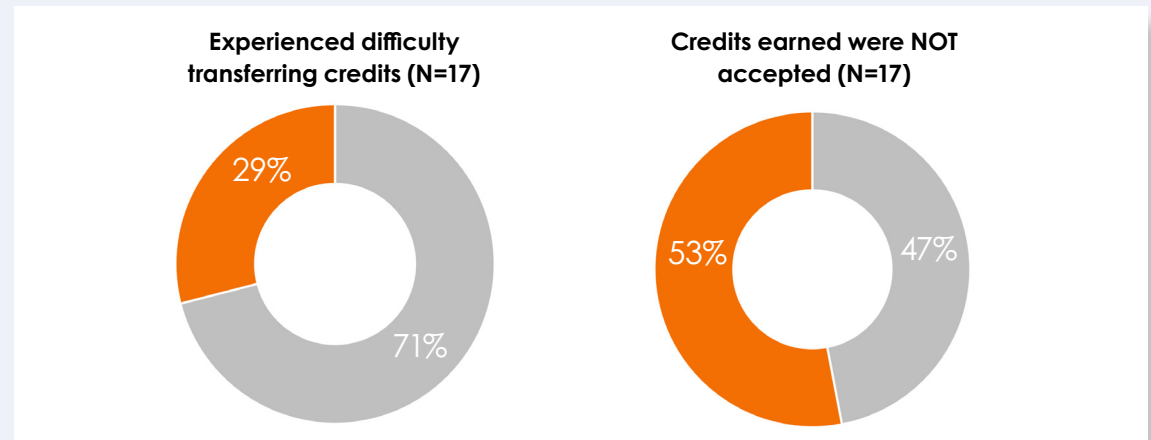
Student Voices - Regarding Transcripts and Transferring College Credits

> *My [high school was] very slow with it. I think it's cause like a lot of people are requesting at the same time, but they're very slow with it, very unorganized with it, like some would get sent to the wrong college, and it'd be crazy for me and end up working up okay. But, like my friends, had lots of issues with it, too, like even mine was kind of slow on the uptake, because there's just this big wave of seniors trying to get their college or their high school transcripts transferred over to college.*

> *It costs money to send transcripts; money that amounts to gas money for the week. I don't understand why I have to enter my transcript into every type of admission application and then still have to pay money to order transcripts be sent. I wish the colleges had better technology to transmit this information to each other instead of me doing data entry for the schools.*

> *Getting the score to the college took about 2 months! Almost delayed my graduation. I wish they would've told us this in high school.*

> *Only some credits were accepted. I wish I knew more earlier about which credits would transfer as it would have changed the classes I took in high school and at the community college.*

> *The credits were nontransferable because the university I transferred to didn't have equivalent courses.*

The purpose of the 2023 student audit was to capture students' voices on the topics of the college and financial aid application process. The results of the audit demonstrate challenges and difficulties students face when completing and submitting college and financial aid applications, receiving financial aid, and requesting and receiving transcripts and transfer of credits.

For future student experience audits, Vital would like to continue exploring the following:

1. **Focus on key areas of interest:** Vital approached the student audit experience this cycle broadly to obtain a clearer understanding of common challenges young Californian adults experience when applying to higher educational programs. For future cycles, Vital would like to narrow the focus in discussion and collaboration with C2C to understand and gain insight into specific challenges or areas that are of most interest to C2C. This could be focusing on individuals with special custodial circumstances or perhaps focusing on a specific topic. The focus of future audits may also shift or change from year-to-year as C2C increases their operational tools.

2. **Continue building collaborative networks to expand representation:** By continuing to build collaborative networks, Vital and C2C can target recruitment efforts to include representation from specific groups of interest, including those who are undocumented or were formerly foster youth. Vital will network and collaborate with organizations who may have connections with specific groups of interest to broaden recruitment avenues, as needed, with the expectation that we can also tap into the expertise of C2C's various board members, as well.

3. **Extend or adjust data collection timelines:** Young adults applying to higher educational programs may follow different timelines for completing tasks related to applications, financial aid, etc. By extending the data collection period, or choosing to collect data in the spring versus fall, etc., Vital may receive a greater number of responses, in addition to information that is more salient to these individuals as they navigate the process.

APPENDICES

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE 2023 C2C STUDENT AUDIT APPROACH AND METHODS

The purpose of the 2023 student audit was to capture students' voices on the topics of the college and financial aid application process. A mixed methods research design was utilized to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from young adults who had recently experienced filling out the college and/or financial aid application(s), and/or the need to request transcripts. Based on the 2022 audit, C2C was interested in hearing from foster youth and undocumented youth, in particular. A survey protocol was developed to gather data from participants on a variety of topics and was used to identify challenges they experienced. In-depth interviews further explored these challenges and how they affected postsecondary experiences. The following questions guided the 2023 student audit:

1) What are recent high school completers' experiences with college (2- and 4-year colleges) and financial aid applications?
2) What are college students' experiences with transitioning to college?

DATA COLLECTION MEASURES

Prior to the development of the data collection instruments, a literature review was conducted and used to inform the development of both the survey and interview protocols. The literature review sought to triangulate findings from the previous audit, peer-reviewed studies, and published reports by organizations focused on college access to create the most appropriate survey questions for all students. Literature review findings were also used to create additional survey questions for students from populations that can be particularly marginalized in this process, such as foster youth and undocumented students. Findings from the literature review resulted in the development of questions in five focus areas: **1)** the college/postsecondary admissions application process, **2)** the financial aid application process, **3)** receipt of financial aid, **4)** requesting transcripts, and **5)** transferring credits. Demographics questions (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, custodial circumstances, etc.) were also included on the survey to understand the general characteristics of the survey participants. A detailed summary of the literature review findings can be found in **Appendix B**.

An initial draft of the survey protocol was developed by Vital and then

subsequently reviewed by C2C and a panel of experts at the California College Guidance Initiative (CCGI). The final revised version of the protocol was comprised of 65 questions that were mostly closed-ended and had multi-choice responses, with a handful of open-ended comments. The survey began with a series of demographic questions that were used to direct participants to question sets that were relevant based on their experiences. Within the survey content areas survey logic was also used to show/hide relevant questions based on participants' responses.

The interview protocol was also informed by the literature review. The protocol began with open-ended questions in the same five focus areas as the survey to gain further insight into the challenges and experiences

of interviewees who applied to postsecondary schools and financial aid. However, several probing questions for each area were also developed to gain additional in-depth insight in the areas that the interviewee indicated they had experienced obstacles and challenges. Interviews were semi-structured, therefore the protocol and probing questions may have varied depending on responses from interviewees. A copy of the interview protocol can also be provided upon request.

RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS & DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES
In an effort to bring a wide range of student voices to the 2023 annual student experience audit, the recruitment strategy utilized purposeful outreach to youth

approximately in the age-range of 18 to 25, leveraging the existing networks of Vital staff and C2C, as well as through the use of a research panel. The research panel allowed for a guaranteed sample of the minimum target number of complete survey responses, which for the 2023 student experience audit was 100. Screening questions on the survey were also used to ensure the data set analyzed were from youth who a) attended and obtained their high school degree or equivalent in California, and b) had participated in the postsecondary application process. The survey was programmed online and two URLs to the survey were distributed and used to track participants recruited from Vital and C2Cs networks and the research panel. Survey participants were recruited in August and

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE 2023 C2C STUDENT AUDIT APPROACH AND METHODS

September 2023, with the survey open for responses for just over four weeks (8/23/23 to 9/22/23).

During the data collection window, the survey was accessed 334 times (i.e., someone clicked on the link). Once disqualified participant responses were removed (e.g., blank responses, did not attend high school in CA, went straight into the workforce after high school, etc.), 180 partial and complete survey responses were initially included in the analysis. However, we found that 17 partial surveys included responses to only the demographic questions and therefore were removed. An additional 11 participants indicated that they had received their high school degree prior to 2018. Because the intent of the audit was to include participants who had recently experienced the postsecondary application process(es), these participants were also removed from the data set. The final analysis included 152 survey participants, 102 from the research panel and 50 from our networks.

The demographics of the network participants and panel participants were analyzed to see if there were any differences between the two groups. There were no differences between the groups in percentage of students identifying as a member of an underserved minority group. The network participants were more likely to be first-generation college students (63% of network participants versus 45% of panel participants). Panel participants were more distributed in the type of postsecondary institution they attended; network participants were more likely to be enrolled at a public four-year university. The network participants had a slightly higher percentage of students who identified as women (61% of network participants versus 50% of panel participants).

Survey participants were asked at the end of the survey if they would be interested and willing to participate in a one-on-one interview that further discussed challenges they described in their survey. Interviewees were also recruited through Vital and C2C networks. The sampling approach was again purposeful, targeting recent high school graduates who were current college students who could speak to their experiences with obstacles and challenges with higher education and financial aid applications, resources, requesting transcripts, and transferring credits.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE 2023 C2C STUDENT AUDIT APPROACH AND METHODS

The target was to conduct at minimum 6-8 interviews. A total of 10 interviewees participated. Interviews ranged from 15 to 40 minutes and were conducted virtually via Zoom.

DATA ANALYSIS

Survey data was analyzed using the statistical software SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to describe survey results and demographic information. Findings from both data sources, surveys and interviews, were integrated and are summarized in subsequent sections of the report. Note that both complete and partial survey responses were included in the analysis and some follow-up questions on the survey were asked to participants only if relevant. Therefore, the number of responses for individual items (n) can vary. Questions that allowed for multiple responses are reported in frequencies

and percent of participants, and therefore percentages may not total to 100% due to multiple selections. Open-ended comments from the survey were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interviews were recorded for notetaking purposes and responses were also themed to the corresponding focus areas to add qualitative depth to survey findings.

For this report, some survey responses were disaggregated by several subgroups of interest, including underserved minority populations, first-generation college students, and those who identified as former foster and/or undocumented youth. Underserved minority groups include anyone in the sample who self-identified as Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian/Pacific

Islander, and Native American/Alaskan Native. While there is interest in understanding the experiences of students with special custodial circumstances, the data collected from those subgroups was limited and disaggregation by this subgroup was only conducted among questions specific to this population (i.e., specific financial aid questions).

Initially, it was hypothesized that obstacles and difficulties with the postsecondary application and financial aid application process might differ for students who had participated in the process but did not enroll or attend an institution of higher education compared with students who participated in the process and had in fact enrolled and attended a postsecondary school. However, very few youth

who were part of the "applied but didn't enroll" group responded to the survey (n=13) and about half had not enrolled yet because they had deferred. (See section on study participants for additional details.) Therefore, responses from both student groups were combined. Detailed tables with the frequencies of responses to all survey items can be provided upon request.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. While Vital attempted to recruit a diverse sample of individuals, we were not able to include a sufficient sample of individuals with unique custodial circumstances, such as those who are undocumented or were a former foster youth. Vital was not able to recruit an adequate sample of individuals who had applied to college or a trade program but did not attend/enroll. Additionally, participants were recruited in a purposeful, targeted way which limits generalizability of findings to other young Californian adults who applied to a higher educational program. Vital also recruited a subsample of participants via a research panel, and while findings from these participants were not significantly different from the findings of other participants, it limited some of our recruitment efforts to participants who have joined a research panel.

SURVEY DEVELOPMENT LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

In an effort to bring student voice to the 2023 Annual Experience Audit for California's Office of Cradle to Career (C2C) initiatives, the current audit will design and administer a survey capturing student experiences in the college and financial aid application process, including their transition from high school to college. This survey will further the work of, and build on, the Student Experience Audit of Fall 2022. The current literature review seeks to triangulate findings from the previous audit to create the most appropriate survey questions for students and build a data-informed base for additional survey questions, especially for students from populations that can be particularly marginalized in this process, such as foster youth and undocumented students.

METHODS

Google and Google Scholar were used to conduct searches of peer reviewed studies and published reports. Results for searches were sorted by relevance, and sources included in this review yielded the most pertinent and useful information for building a survey that would include questions relevant to youth generally and from the special populations of interest. The search teams that provided useful resources related to the broader population were: challenges in college access, California college access; FAFSA challenges; and financial aid challenges. Additionally, organizations and networks working on college access in California were included in our search such as Wheelhouse at UC Davis, the Career Ladders Project, SoCal CAN, the Institute for College Access & Success, and others. The search terms that provided the most relevant results for special populations were: foster youth college transition, foster youth financial aid access, undocumented youth college transition California, undocumented youth financial aid access California. Results for undocumented youth were restricted to publications from 2013 on to reflect the changes in the college admission and financial aid processes after Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and California DREAM Act took effect.

SURVEY DEVELOPMENT LITERATURE REVIEW

KEY TOPIC AREAS

1. COLLEGE INTEREST AND EARLY GUIDANCE

STUDENTS NEED GUIDANCE WHEN APPLYING TO COLLEGE, AND YOUTH WHO DO NOT HAVE FAMILY MEMBERS TO ASSIST THEM MAY FACE ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES.

The first step towards the college admissions process is the knowledge of and desire to attend college. Once a student is interested in college, they must also see attending college as an attainable goal (Ngo & Astudillo, 2019). For students without role models in their own families that have attended college or prioritize attending college, it is important to be introduced to these ideas as early as middle school to begin the college track (Murillo, 2021). Once a student is interested in attending college, having knowledgeable guides throughout high school and the college admissions and financial aid processes is critical to success. Students who do not have a family member to help guide them must rely on school counselors, teachers, and other providers to be trustworthy, dependable, and knowledgeable advocates. Finding a trusted source can be more difficult for certain student groups, such as undocumented students who have concerns about disclosing their own or their family's legal status (Enriquez et. al, 2021), and foster and other youth that lack stability in their living situations (Cochrane and Szabo-Kubitz, 2009).

2. DIFFICULTIES APPLYING FOR FINANCIAL AID

STUDENTS ARE OFTEN UNAWARE OF THE AMOUNTS AND TYPES OF AID AVAILABLE, AND THE FINANCIAL AID APPLICATION IS OFTEN VIEWED AS COMPLICATED AND CONFUSING. YOUTH WITH DIFFERENT LIVING CIRCUMSTANCES MAY BE UNAWARE OF ADDITIONAL FUNDING THEY ARE ELIGIBLE FOR.

Once students begin the application processes, they are bombarded with varying deadlines, forms to fill out, and documentation to gather from their lives and high school career. A 2009 report by the Institute for College Access and Success (Cochrane and Szabo-Kubitz) identified hurdles around financial aid specifically for foster youth, but these hurdles could very well apply to first generation college students, low-income students, students experiencing homelessness, and some

undocumented students as well. The first hurdle was the process of applying for financial aid. Students often lacked awareness of the amounts and types of aid available, which could lead students to not access these sources of aid or even apply for college at all, thinking it was financially out of reach (see also Ngo & Astudillo, 2019). The process of applying for financial aid was also so complicated, many students would give up or be unable to complete it. Students also needed to be aware of and meet the early deadlines for certain state aid, such as Cal Grants. These findings are echoed in research about undocumented students, who also could have difficulty trusting the process when it involved revealing the legal status of them and their parents (Enriquez et. al, 2021), as well as the findings of the previous audit which found that students had difficulty providing required documentation in time for important deadlines.

3. TRANSITION TO COLLEGE: FINANCIAL AID, TRANSCRIPTS + CREDITS

STUDENTS OFTEN FACE DIFFICULTIES VERIFYING FINANCIAL AID NEEDS, REQUESTING TRANSCRIPTS, AND TRANSFERRING CREDITS. UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH MAY FACE ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES RELATED TO THEIR LEGAL STATUS.

Another hurdle identified in the 2009 report (Cochrane and Szabo-Kubitz) was completing the process after applying for aid, meaning providing the correct documentation to the appropriate entities to verify eligibility for various funding sources. Gellman and Meyer (2023) note challenges in the FAFSA application process ranging from not knowing about eligibility to difficulties with the form itself which can be exacerbated for low-income students who are less likely to have academic supports. Additionally, the FAFSA verification process is challenging for the subset of students randomly chosen to do so such that ~ 11% who are involved in the verification process, drop out of the process (Gellman and Meyer, 2023). Verification challenges include knowing what documentation is needed, how to submit documentation and meeting deadlines (Friedman and Martorell, 2019).

In addition to completing financial aid requirements after they are admitted to college, students also face challenges ensuring that prior courses completed at the higher

education level are accepted for credits at the institution they are entering (Hodara, Martinez-Wenzl, Stevens, and Mazzeo, 2017). This is critical for students transferring from a two-year to four-year college and for dual enrollment, where students in high school also take classes at the post-secondary level. Dual enrollment has demonstrated benefits for students in terms of degree attainment, persistence, and achievement (Allen and Dadgar, 2012; Karp and Hughes, 2008). The 2022 audit found students faced similar challenges, including requesting and accessing transcripts, and being able to transfer appropriate credits. In addition, undocumented students have been found to have difficulty working through challenges related to their legal status, such as legal guardianship or changing legal status (Murillo, 2021).

4. TIMING OF FINANCIAL AID
DELAYED RECEIPT OF FUNDS OFTEN DELAYS STUDENTS FROM OBTAINING NECESSARY COLLEGE RESOURCES OR PAY FOR LIVING EXPENSES. FINANCIAL AID MAY ALSO NOT COVER NECESSARY EXPENSES.

The final hurdle of Cochrane and Szabo-Kubitz's (2009) report was the timing of aid receipt. Whether because of issues verifying eligibility or delayed disbursement from colleges or the state, delayed receipt of funds after a student entered college could lead to difficulty obtaining books or paying for housing, effecting grades and the ability to stay enrolled. Other studies have found that both foster youth and undocumented students, while having sources of aid available to them (sometimes more than their peers), often still do not receive enough aid to pay for all related costs of college, such as housing, and are unable to persist (Davis, 2006; Enriquez et. al, 2021).

5. ACCESSING STUDENT SERVICES
STUDENTS MAY NOT BE AWARE OF STUDENT SERVICES AT COLLEGE THAT CAN HELP THEM ACCLIMATE TO STUDENT LIFE AND ASSIST THEM WITH FINANCIAL AID REQUIREMENTS.

Once students have been accepted into college, connecting with programs designed to acclimate them to student life, access resources to help them navigate processes such as enrollment, and help them continue to meet financial aid requirements, is particularly important for students with special circumstances to be able to persist and succeed in college (Kirk & Day, 2011; Jackson,

Colvin & Bullock, 2020; Frerer et. al, 2013; Skobba, Meyers & Tiller, 2018; Cochrane and Szabo-Kubitz, 2009; Enriquez et. al, 2021).

6. FOSTER YOUTH AND UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH

FOSTER AND UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH MAY HAVE SPECIFIC FORMS AND APPLICATIONS THAT THEY ARE UNAWARE OF.

For a more complete picture of the college application and financial aid processes for specific populations, additional questions may be necessary for a subset of students. For example, foster youth may qualify for Chafee Grants, which they may not know about or could have difficulty qualifying for (Niznik, Fletcher & Barone, 2022; Chafee Education and…, 2022; Cochrane and Szabo-Kubitz, 2009).

Undocumented students will fill out the California Dream Act Application (CADAA) instead of the FAFSA, and while they will be ineligible for federal student aid, they could be eligible for Cal Grants and other state and institutional funding. Even with these resources, these students, as well as students experiencing homelessness and low-income students, may not receive enough financial aid, or have enough stability in housing or transportation to persist in college (Enriquez et. al, 2021; Davis, 2006).

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