

# STUDENT EXPERIENCE REPORT

2024 Academic Year

In partnership with California Education Lab and California Student Aid Commission



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**Dear Colleagues:**

I am pleased to share the findings from the 2024 California Cradle-to-Career Data System (C2C) *Student Experience Report*. Amplifying the voices of students helps us stay true to C2C's purpose: to ensure that all Californians have equitable access to the information and resources they need to succeed.

C2C is charged by statute to conduct a report each year on student experiences related to navigating the transition from secondary education to higher education. (This is called the "student experience audit" in California Education Code §10867(b)(5)(A).)

This annual *Student Experience Report* helps our office learn about the challenges and opportunities that students face today. That annual pulse check can shape how we scale tools that smooth the path from high school to college. In this year's report, I heard students call for support from people who can help them navigate the college-application process. Insights from this report will shape C2C's work with our partners as we develop and refine data-driven tools for students and for the family members and educators who support them.

I want to thank the students who shared their thoughts and took the time to complete the survey. We are grateful to the California Education Lab at the University of California, Davis, for executing this research study and sharing the findings through this report. We are also thankful to the California Student Aid Commission for its partnership on the survey and helping the *Student Experience Report* reach more students than ever before.

Sincerely,

**Mary Ann Bates**

Executive Director

California Cradle-to-Career Data System



# ABOUT THE SURVEY

In spring 2024, the [California Education Lab](#) at the University of California, Davis, partnered with the [California Cradle-to-Career Data System \(C2C\)](#) and the [California Student Aid Commission](#) to document the experiences of high school seniors. The web-based survey was sent via email to all seniors statewide who completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or California Dream Act Application (CADAA) in spring or summer of 2024.

In this report, we present survey responses from 11,238 graduating high school seniors. These students represent a diverse group of graduating seniors who generally plan to attend college. It is important to note that our sample does not include students who did not attempt to or were unable to apply for aid via the FAFSA or CADAA. Such students could have been less likely to fill out a FAFSA or CADAA if they were not intending to attend college or postsecondary training, or they could have intended to fill out an aid application but were dissuaded by the difficulty of doing so.

The 2024–25 FAFSA cycle was unique because the federal government made several changes to the FAFSA application. The new FAFSA was connected to the Internal Revenue Service to import income data, with the intent of greatly reducing the number and complexity of questions on the application for some families. However, there were challenges with the rollout of the new FAFSA, leading to fewer applications than in the previous year.

Therefore, the survey results represent a unique period for high school seniors, especially those transitioning to college. The survey, aimed at students on the cusp of graduation, asked about their plans after high school, their experiences with the FAFSA or CADAA and with college applications, their attitudes toward college, their experiences in high school, and their expectations for their college experience. The survey also gathered students' background characteristics. We report results from the survey across these domains and disaggregate by background characteristics for most questions.

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# COLLEGE PREPARATION



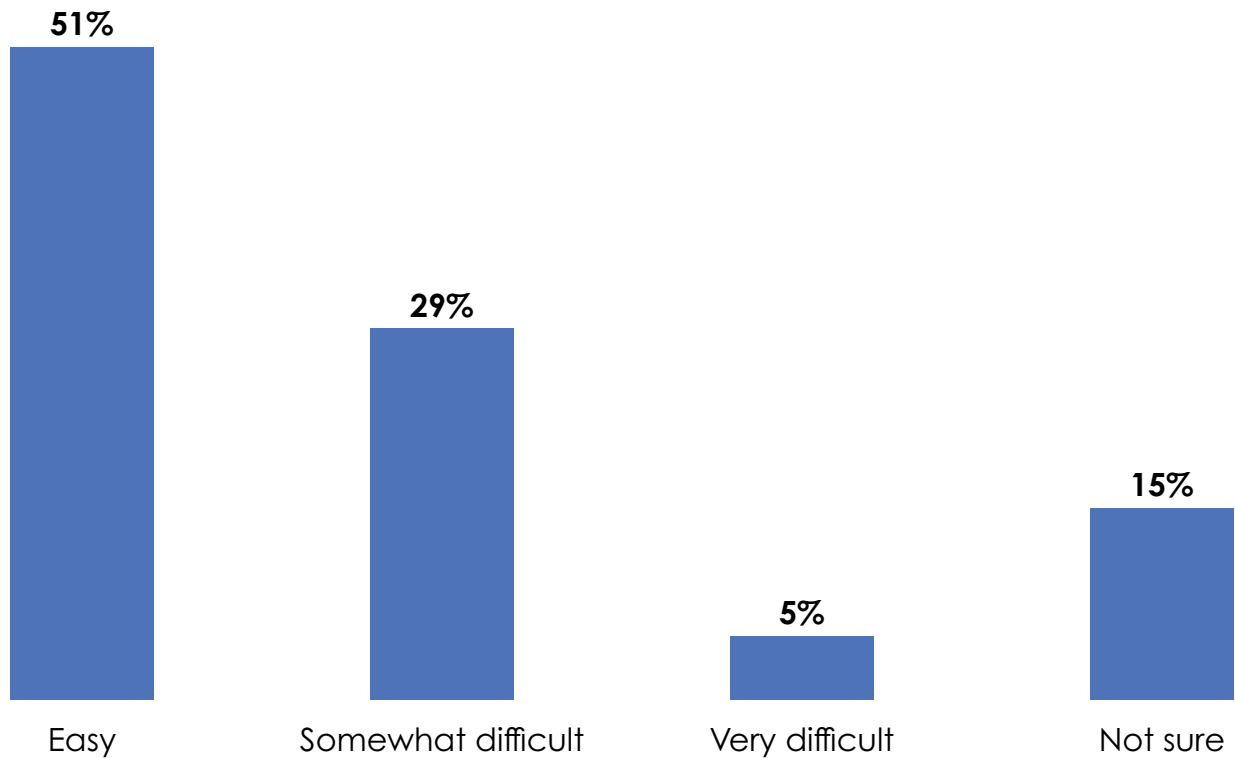
Our sample skews heavily toward those students who intended to go to college since the survey population was limited to those who completed a FAFSA or a CADAA application. In fact, the vast majority of respondents (94%) planned to attend college, 4% were unsure, and 2% were not planning to attend college.

## **MOST RESPONDENTS COMPLETED COLLEGE PREPARATORY COURSEWORK**

California's A–G coursework is a core set of 15 yearlong courses that students must complete in high school with a grade of C or better to be eligible for freshman admission to California State University (CSU) or the University of California (UC).<sup>1</sup> Students' ability to complete A–G courses is the result of the interaction of institutional practices and policies (e.g., graduation requirements, master scheduling and course availability, advising, and counseling) and student preferences. In 2022–23, about 52% of high school graduates completed A–G coursework, a rate that has been on the rise during the past decade.<sup>2</sup> Our survey respondents were more likely to have completed these course requirements, with about 76% of respondents reporting they were on track to complete their A–G requirements. About 17% were unsure if they were on track, and about 7% were not on track.

Not everyone found it easy to keep track of their A–G requirements, though. Only 51% of respondents said it was easy to keep track of A–G requirements, and 34% reported it to be somewhat or very difficult to do so (**Figure 1**).

**FIGURE 1**  
**How difficult was it to keep track of A–G coursework?**

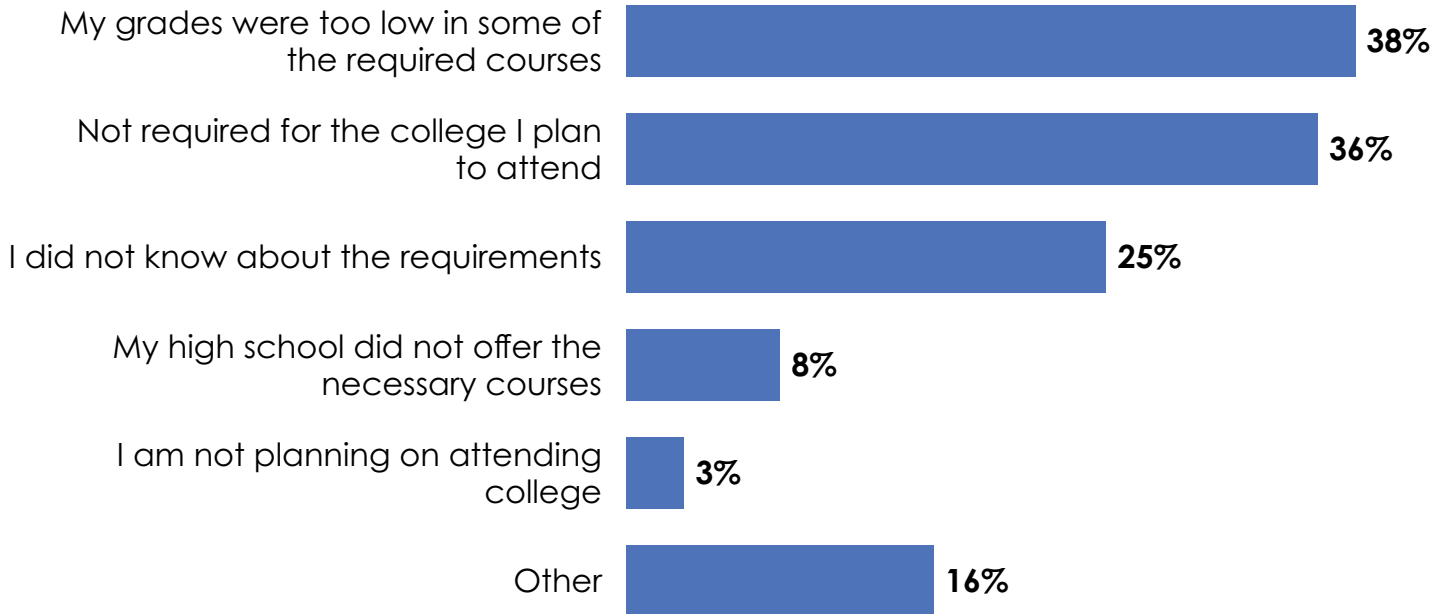


Note. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.  $N = 8,828$ .

The 635 respondents (7%) who were not on track to complete their A–G requirements were asked a follow-up question to understand their experiences better. The top three reasons students gave for not being on track for A–G completion were (a) their grades were too low in some of the required courses; (b) A–G coursework was not required for the college they planned to attend; and (c) they did not know about the requirements (**Figure 2**). It is worth noting that one in four of the students who were not on track were not aware of the A–G requirements. Students who answered “Other” (16%) were allowed to elaborate in a short response. Only 94 students wrote an explanation; they offered an assortment of reasons, including not having enough time to take the courses, being confused about the requirements, transferring from another state or country, being in special education courses, or not wanting to take a second foreign language course.

FIGURE 2

## Why were you not on track to complete the A–G course requirements?



Note. Students were allowed to select multiple reasons, so the percentages do not add to 100. A total of 635 respondents asked, 621 provided at least one answer.

## MANY STUDENTS ENROLLED IN COLLEGE COURSEWORK WHILE IN HIGH SCHOOL

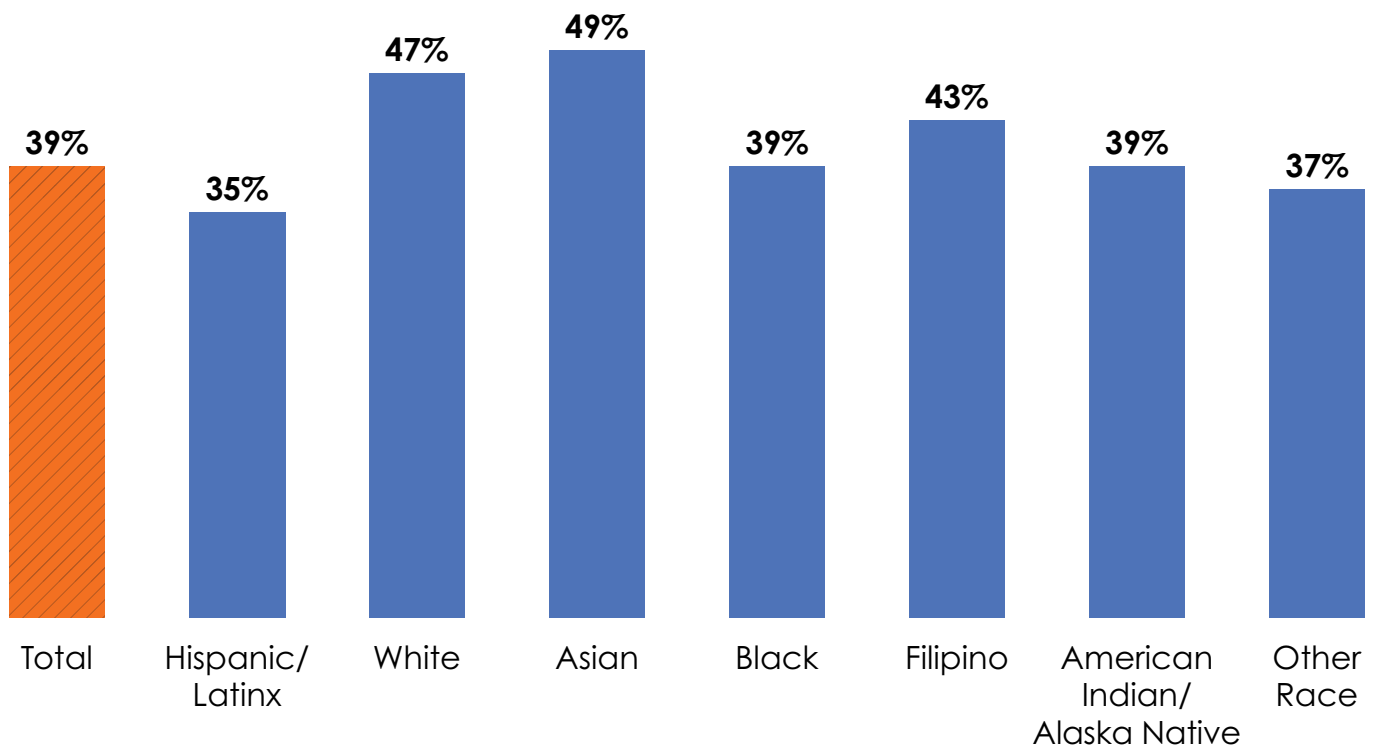
Dual enrollment, or taking college coursework while in high school, is an option offered in many schools and districts across the state. The program is often implemented in partnership with a local community college or university.<sup>3</sup> Dual enrollment through community colleges has seen significant growth in California, particularly since the introduction in 2016 of the College and Career Access Pathways. Of the 2022 California high school graduating cohort, 22.2% took at least one dual enrollment class during their 4 years of high school, a rate nearly 10 percentage points higher than the 2016 graduating cohort. Despite the program's growth, racial and ethnic disparities persist in dual enrollment participation.<sup>4</sup>

About 39% of survey respondents (class of 2024) took dual enrollment courses while 52% did not and 8% were unsure if they did. Students in our sample are more likely to have completed some dual enrollment because they were more college bound and therefore more likely to apply for financial aid. This oversampling allows us to analyze further those who participate in dual enrollment.

Even with widespread participation in dual enrollment, differences by race or ethnicity mirrored statewide patterns for the graduating cohort of 2022. White, Asian, and Filipino students were more likely to enroll in dual enrollment courses than Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and American Indian/Alaska Native students (**Figure 3**). Inequitable participation in dual enrollment is the result of many factors, including access to information, support with application and enrollment processes, and course availability and scheduling, among others.<sup>5</sup>

**FIGURE 3**

**Did you take college courses in high school (sometimes called dual enrollment)?**



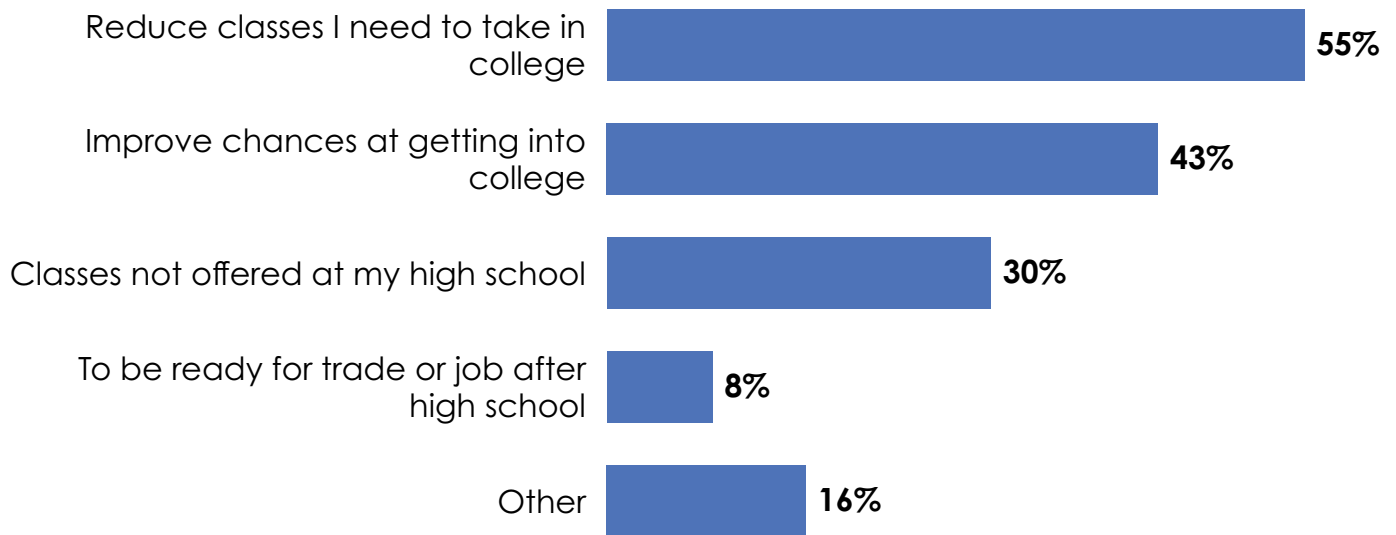
Note. Racial/ethnic groups sorted by size. N = 8,849.

To get a better understanding of why students take dual enrollment courses, we asked students who had enrolled (N = 3,446). Fifty-five percent of respondents shared that they took dual enrollment courses to reduce the number of classes they needed to take in college (**Figure 4**). Additionally, 43% said they took dual enrollment courses to improve their chances of getting into college, and 30% stated that they took specific or unique courses through dual enrollment that were not offered by their high school (e.g., a student who is interested may not have access to a third year of foreign language but could take the course at



the local community college). Of the 512 respondents who answered “other” and provided a description, many mentioned taking dual enrollment courses as enrichment. One student wrote: “I wanted to be able to further my education while also challenging myself.” Many wanted to familiarize themselves with college. One student wrote: “I wanted to get a feel of what a college course may be like.” Some were also interested in the academic benefits offered through dual enrollment, such as boosting their GPA with the college class.

**FIGURE 4**  
**Why did you take dual enrollment courses?**



*Note.* Students were allowed to select multiple reasons, so the percentages do not add to 100. *N* = 3,446.

Students were also asked if they used dual enrollment courses to satisfy A–G requirements. Only 22% of respondents said they did, 27% said they did not, and 51% were not sure. Students were then asked how easy it was to add dual enrollment coursework to their high school transcripts. A majority (53%) of seniors who took dual enrollment said that adding dual enrollment coursework was easy, 39% said it was somewhat easy, and 8% found the process very difficult.

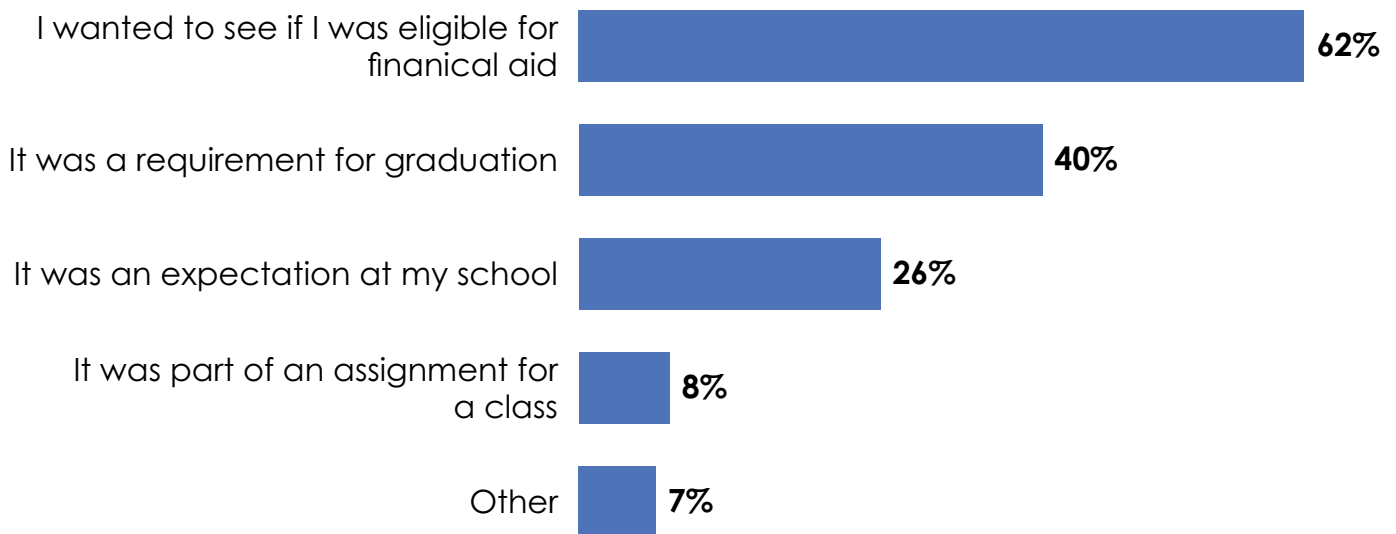
# APPLYING FOR FINANCIAL AID

California Assembly Bill (AB) 469 (Education Code §51225.7) tasks high schools with ensuring that all students either apply for financial aid or opt out. National estimates put California just outside the top 10 states for its percentage of seniors (just over half) applying for aid.<sup>6</sup> As previously described, the survey was administered to high school seniors who completed the FAFSA or CADAA. As such, all survey respondents applied for financial aid.

Students were asked to recall when they first heard about the FAFSA or CADAA. The majority of our respondents (60%) heard about the FAFSA prior to their senior year of high school. However, there were notable differences by race. About 65% of White students and 60% of Asian students heard about the FAFSA during their sophomore or junior years, compared to 57% of Hispanic/Latinx students and 54% of Black students.

When asked about why they completed the FAFSA or CADAA, the majority of students (62%) stated that they wanted to see if they were eligible for financial aid (**Figure 5**). Schools played an important role in getting students to apply for aid. In total, about 59% of students filled out the FAFSA or CADAA at least in part because it was a requirement (40%) or an expectation (26%) at their school or because of a class assignment (8%).

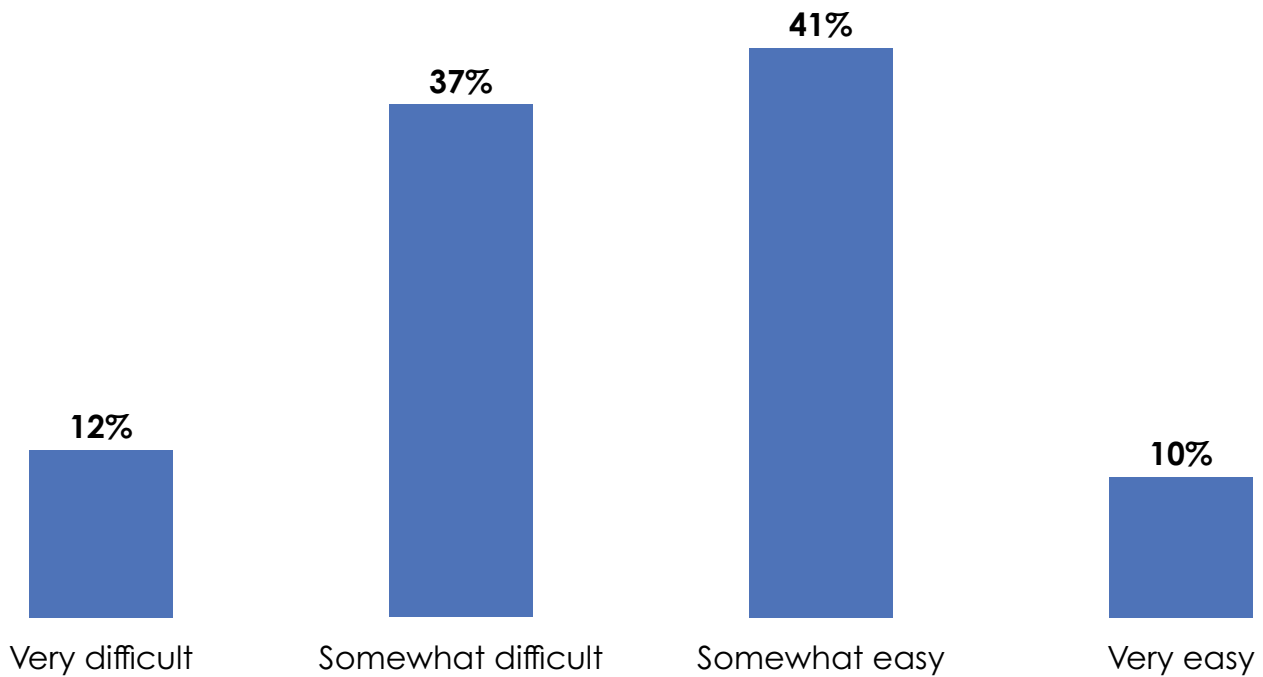
**FIGURE 5**  
**Why did you complete the FAFSA or CADAA?**



Note. Students could select multiple answers, so percentages will not add to 100. N = 11,238.

The redesigned FAFSA had fewer questions and was intended to streamline the application process for some students. However, an unintended consequence was that the 2024–25 FAFSA was rolled out later (in January 2024 instead of October 2023), and technical issues with the application presented barriers for many students. The CADAA, which is not a federal program, was not affected by the new FAFSA rollout. To investigate the experiences of students who went through the financial aid application process, we asked students about whether they had difficulty filling out the FAFSA or CADAA. Recall that our sample consists of students who *successfully completed* the FAFSA or CADAA; among them, a slight majority (51%) reported that they had a somewhat easy or very easy experience applying for financial aid (**Figure 6**). About 37% found it somewhat difficult, and 12% found it very difficult. First-generation students—those from families where neither parent had attended college—were more likely to find it somewhat or very difficult (56%) compared to students from families where at least one parent had attended college (45%), but sizeable portions of both groups found it difficult to apply for aid. It is important to repeat that only students who were able to complete the financial aid application were included in this survey, so we acknowledge that students who found the process so difficult that they did not persist were not surveyed.

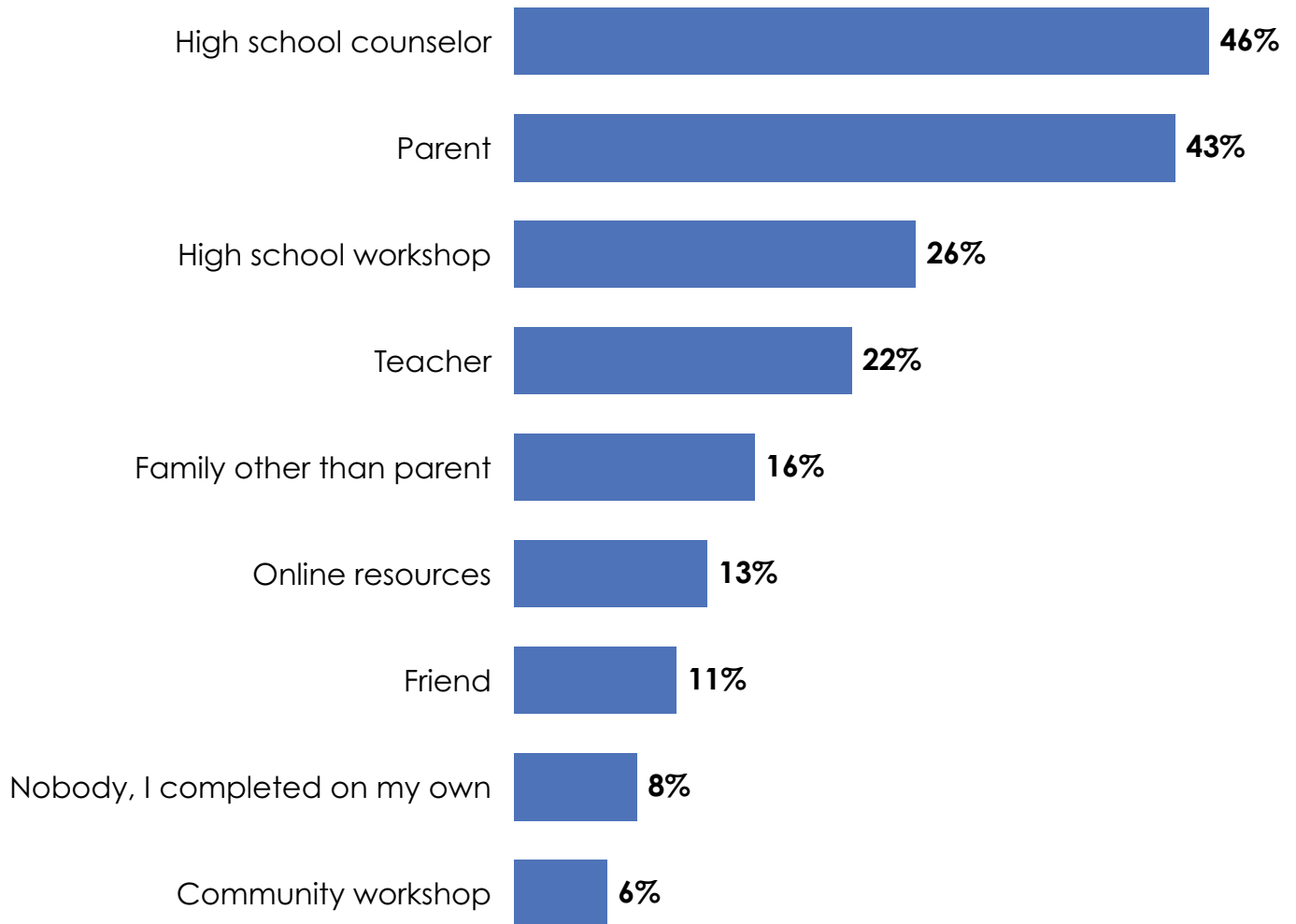
**FIGURE 6**  
**How difficult was completing the FAFSA or CADAA?**



Note. N = 10,744.

Students were asked to list the people who helped them fill out the FAFSA or CADAA to gauge the level of support they received. High school counselors (46%) and parents (43%) were most often listed as sources of help (**Figure 7**), followed by high school workshops (26%) and teachers (22%). Only 13% used an online resource, 11% used a friend, and 6% used a community workshop. About 8% of students completed the aid application on their own.

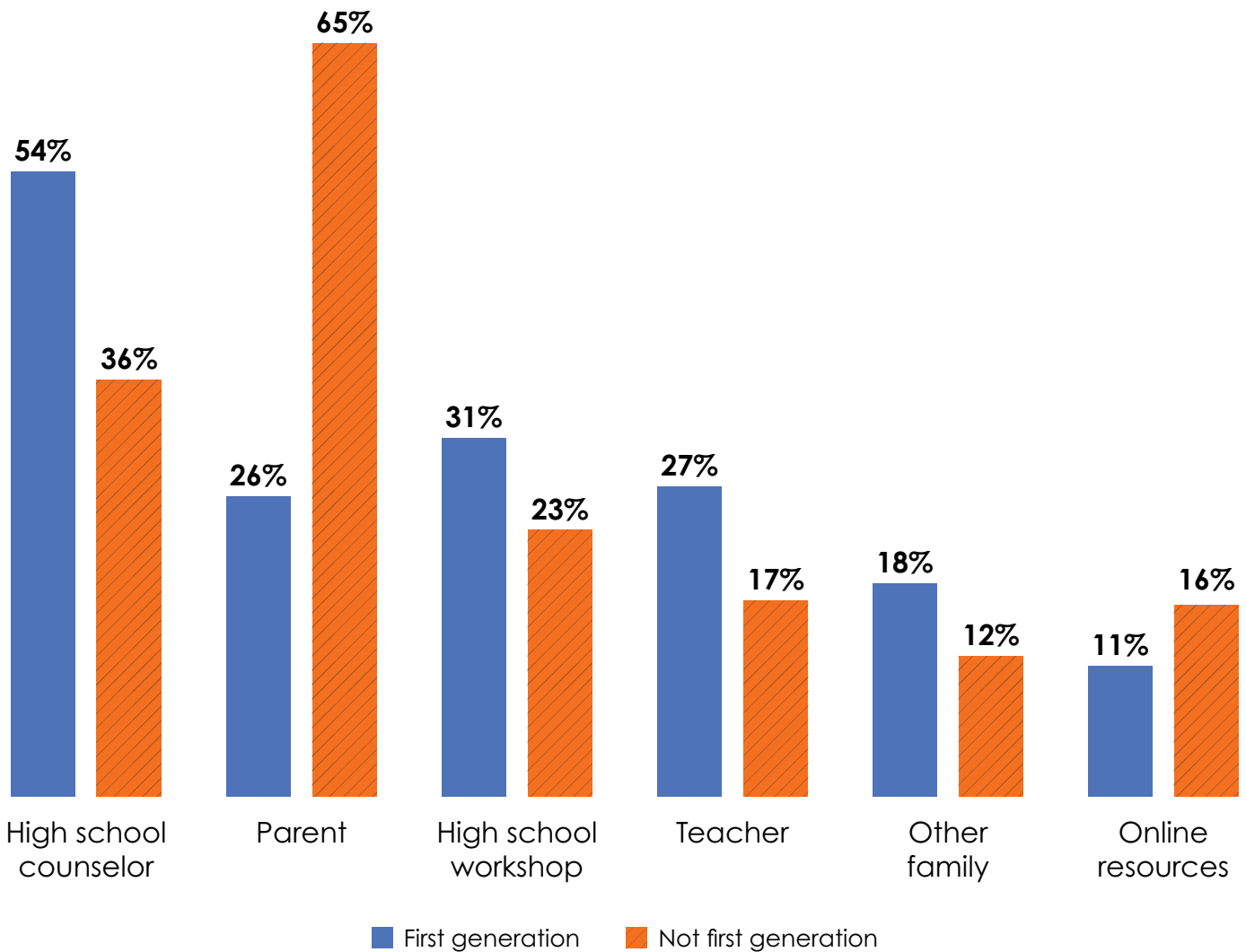
**FIGURE 7**  
**Who helped you fill out the FAFSA or CADAA?**



Note. Students could select multiple answers, so percentages will not add to 100. N = 10,733.

The people and tools that students turned to for help completing the FAFSA or CADAA varied for different groups of students. Examining the top six resources by first-generation status reveals some major differences (**Figure 8**). First-generation students were much more likely to get help from high school counselors (54%) compared to their peers who had parents who had attended college (36%). First-generation students were also more likely to have used high school workshops, teachers, and other family members compared to students who were not first generation. Students whose parents had attended college were much more likely to rely on their parents for FAFSA or CADAA help (65%) compared to students who were first-generation college students (26%).

**FIGURE 8**  
**Financial aid application help by first-generation status**



Note. Students could select multiple answers, so percentages will not add to 100. N = 10,733.

Last, we asked students about how they planned to pay for college tuition and fees. About half of students responded that they planned to use scholarships, and 38% said they would use grants. About 43% of students said they planned to work while enrolled in college, and only 23% planned to take out student loans. This aligns with what we know about student loans: California college students are less likely than their peers in other states to take out loans, partially due to the low cost of the state’s community colleges as well as the relatively generous state financial aid that California provides to its lowest income students.<sup>7</sup>

In this section, we noted that schools play an important role in financial aid application submission since more than half of students applied for aid, at least in part, because it was an expectation at their school. Respondents who would be first-generation college students found the application more difficult than their peers who were not first generation, and relied more on the adults at school when filling out the FAFSA or CADAA. Schools can also play a critical role in educating students about the FAFSA or CADAA earlier. About 40% of students didn’t hear about the FAFSA or CADAA until their senior year of high school.



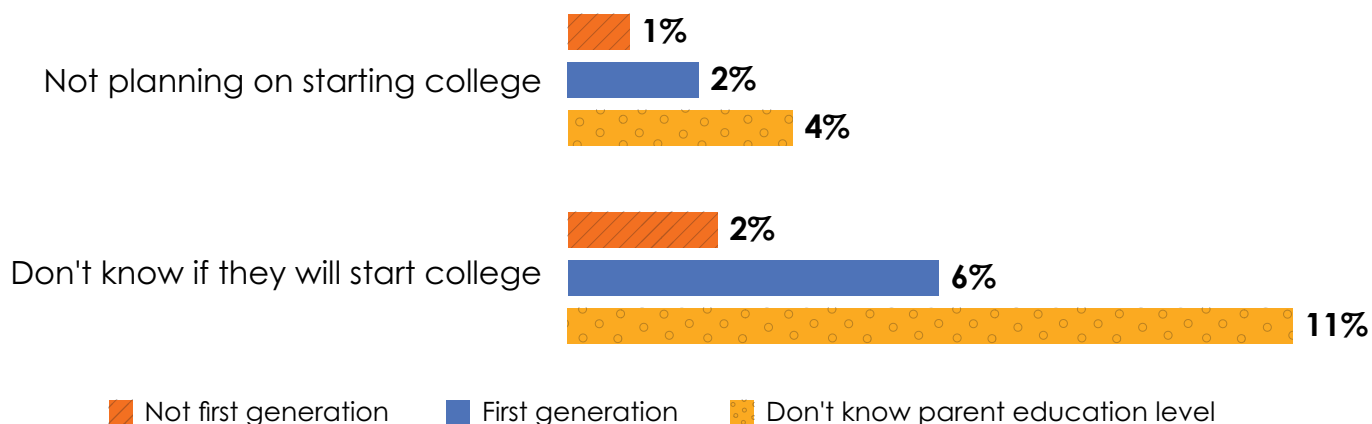
# PLANS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

Since most of our survey respondents intended to enroll in college, we asked them about the college-application process, which for many students had already taken place. We asked seniors about where they applied, what challenges they faced in the application process, and what resources they used when applying for schools. We also collected data from more than 500 students who were unsure of their college plans or who reported that they did not plan to attend college.

## STUDENTS WITHOUT COLLEGE PLANS

AB 469 (Education Code §51225.7) requires local educational agencies to support all California high school seniors in completing an application for financial aid, so many students without college plans, or who are unsure of their college plans, still fill out the FAFSA. Overall, about 4% ( $N = 417$ ) of respondents who answered questions about their fall plans ( $N = 10,029$ ) said they were not sure if they would attend college in the fall, and about 2% of the sample said they did not plan to start college. Students who would be first-generation college goers were more than twice as likely to be unsure of their plans or to have no college plans than those who were not first-generation students (**Figure 9**). Students who did not know their parents' education level ( $N = 507$ ) were the most likely group to be unsure about their plans or to have no college plans.

**FIGURE 9**  
**Fall college plans by first-generation status**



Note. Total number of students who were not first generation = 3,895; who were first generation = 3,869; and who didn't know their parents' education level = 507.



When those students who didn't plan to attend college ( $N = 139$ ) were asked why, 26% of respondents reported that they needed to work to provide for their household, and 15% indicated that college was too expensive, even with financial aid. Some students reported that they did plan to attend college in the future. And about 32% said they wanted to take a gap year after high school.

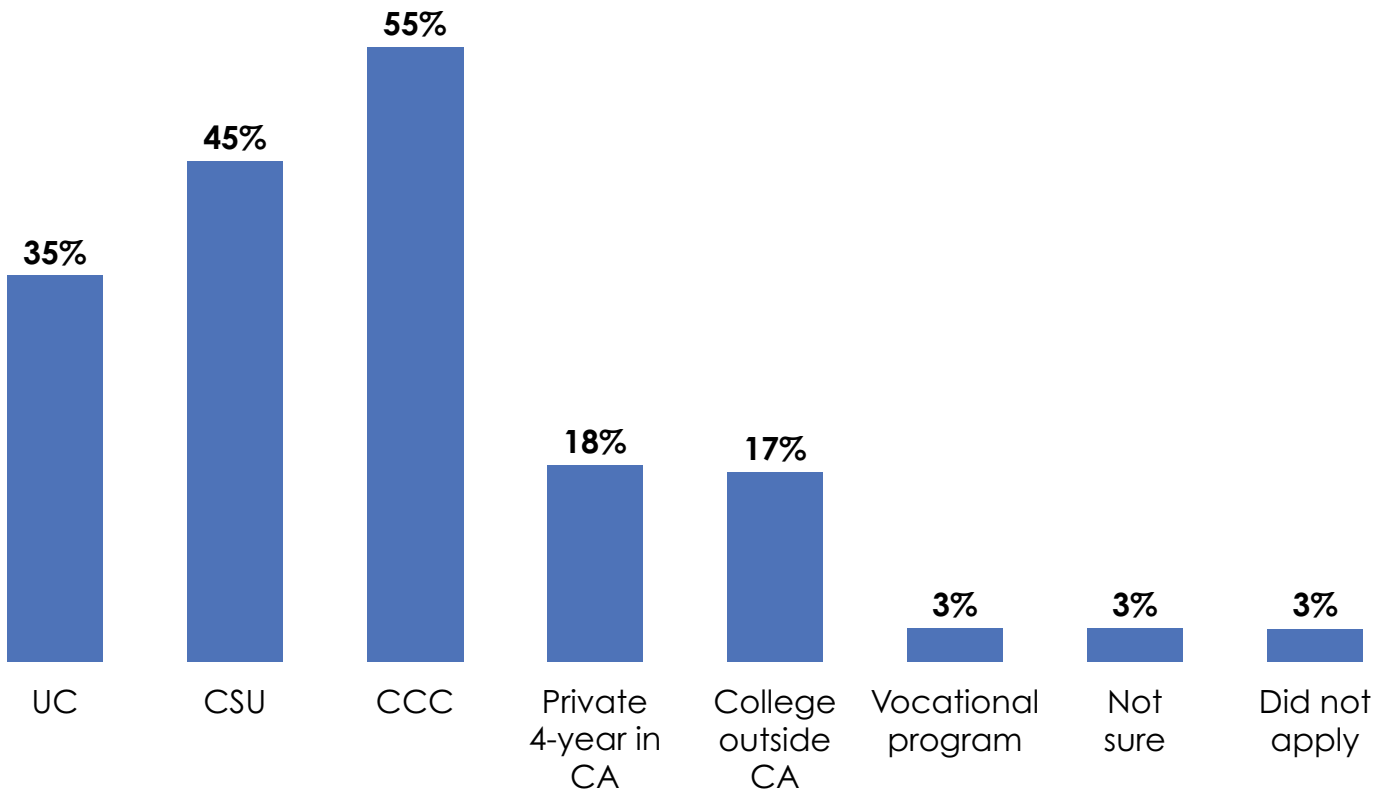
We also asked those students who were unsure about attending college ( $N = 406$ ) what factors might influence their decision to attend college. About 76% of respondents said financial support might influence their decision.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, 41% of respondents said that family or other support and 33% said that academic support might also influence whether they attended college.

## MOST STUDENTS APPLIED TO CALIFORNIA PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

We asked all students in the survey about whether and where they applied for college. The seniors in our sample largely applied to in-state public options (**Figure 10**), such as UC, CSU, and California Community Colleges (CCC). About 18% also applied to private 4-year schools in California, and another 17% applied to colleges outside California. About 3% applied to vocational programs. We also found that students often applied to more than one type of college. While 55% of students applied to a CCC, only 34% of students applied *only* to a CCC. The rest of the community college applicants applied elsewhere as well. In all, about 45% of all respondents applied to multiple postsecondary education sectors.



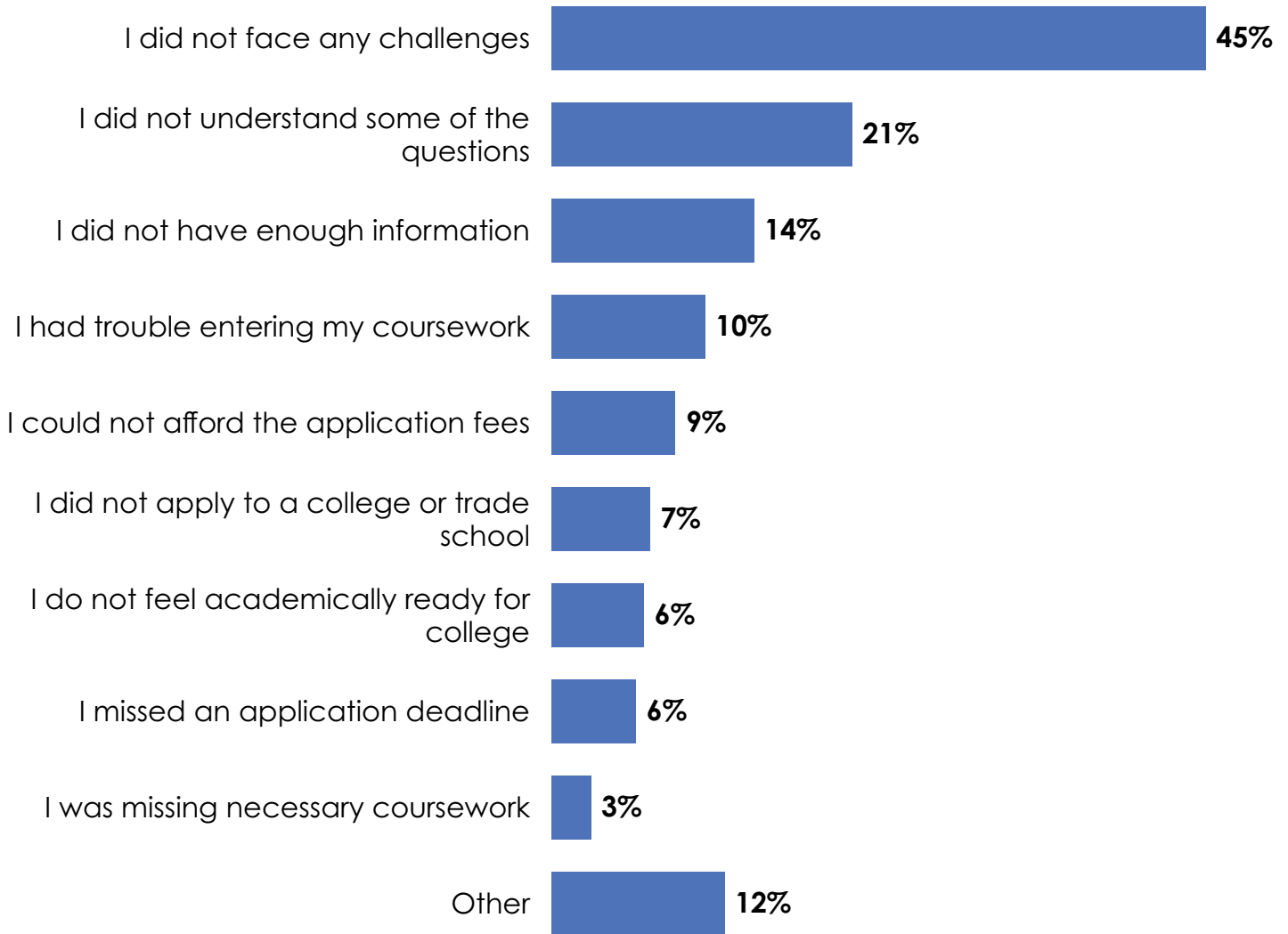
**FIGURE 10**  
**Where did you apply to college?**



Note. Students could select multiple answers, so percentages will not add to 100. N = 9,997. UC = University of California; CSU = California State University; CCC = California Community Colleges.

Most students in our sample faced challenges during the college-application process. While almost half (45%) of students reported not experiencing any challenges, about 21% did not understand all the questions on the application, 14% indicated that they did not have enough information to fill out the application, and 10% had difficulty entering their high school coursework (**Figure 11**). Of those who marked “Other” and followed up with a short description of their challenges, some expressed frustrations with essays while others were concerned about costs during the application process—both the overall cost of college and the application fees.

**FIGURE 11**  
**What challenges did you face when applying to college or trade school?**



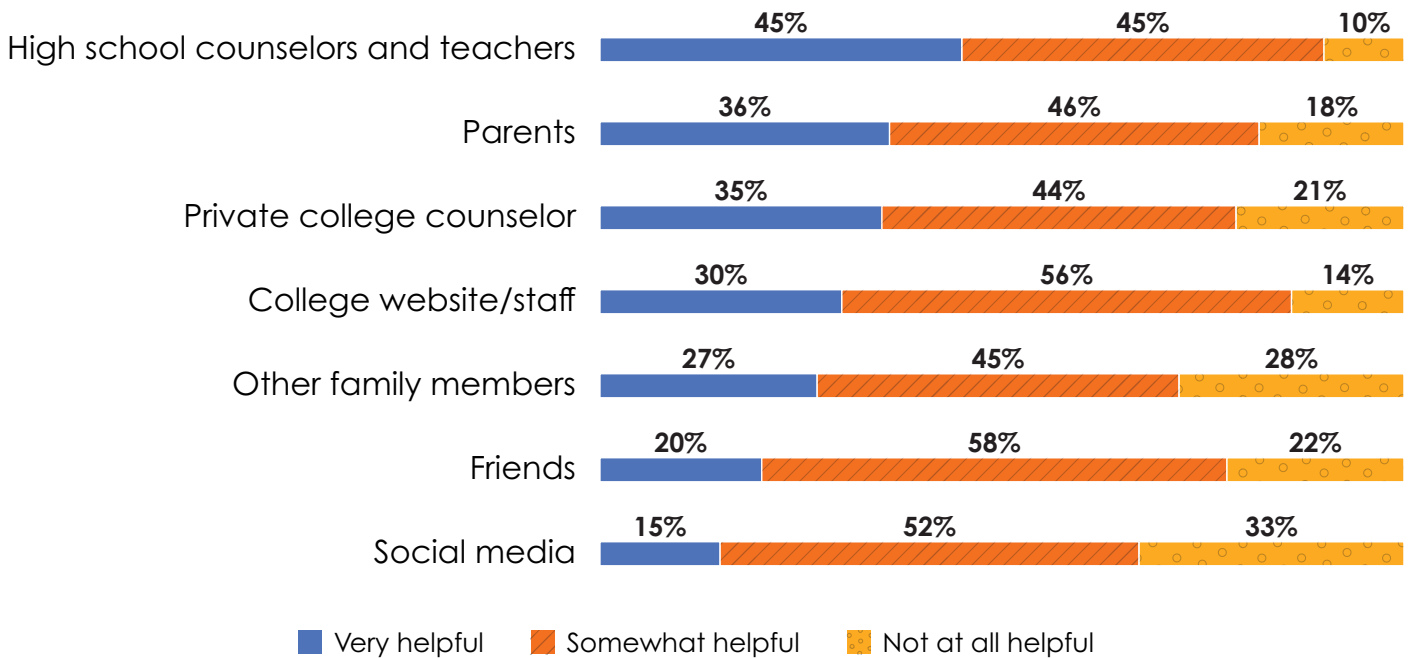
Note. Students could select multiple answers, so percentages will not add to 100. N = 9,497.

## STUDENTS FOUND FAMILY AND SCHOOL PERSONNEL MOST HELPFUL WHEN APPLYING FOR COLLEGE

For help with their college applications, students largely turned to the same resources as they did with completing the FAFSA and CADAA. Students listed parents (45%), high school counselors (42%), and teachers (21%) as their top supporters. However, about one in three students reported completing their college applications by themselves.

Students were then asked to rate how helpful the various information sources were for college planning and financial aid (**Figure 12**). Social media was least likely to be thought of as helpful while high school counselors and parents were more likely to be viewed as helpful. Those students who used a private college counselor generally found it helpful, although only 9% reported using one.

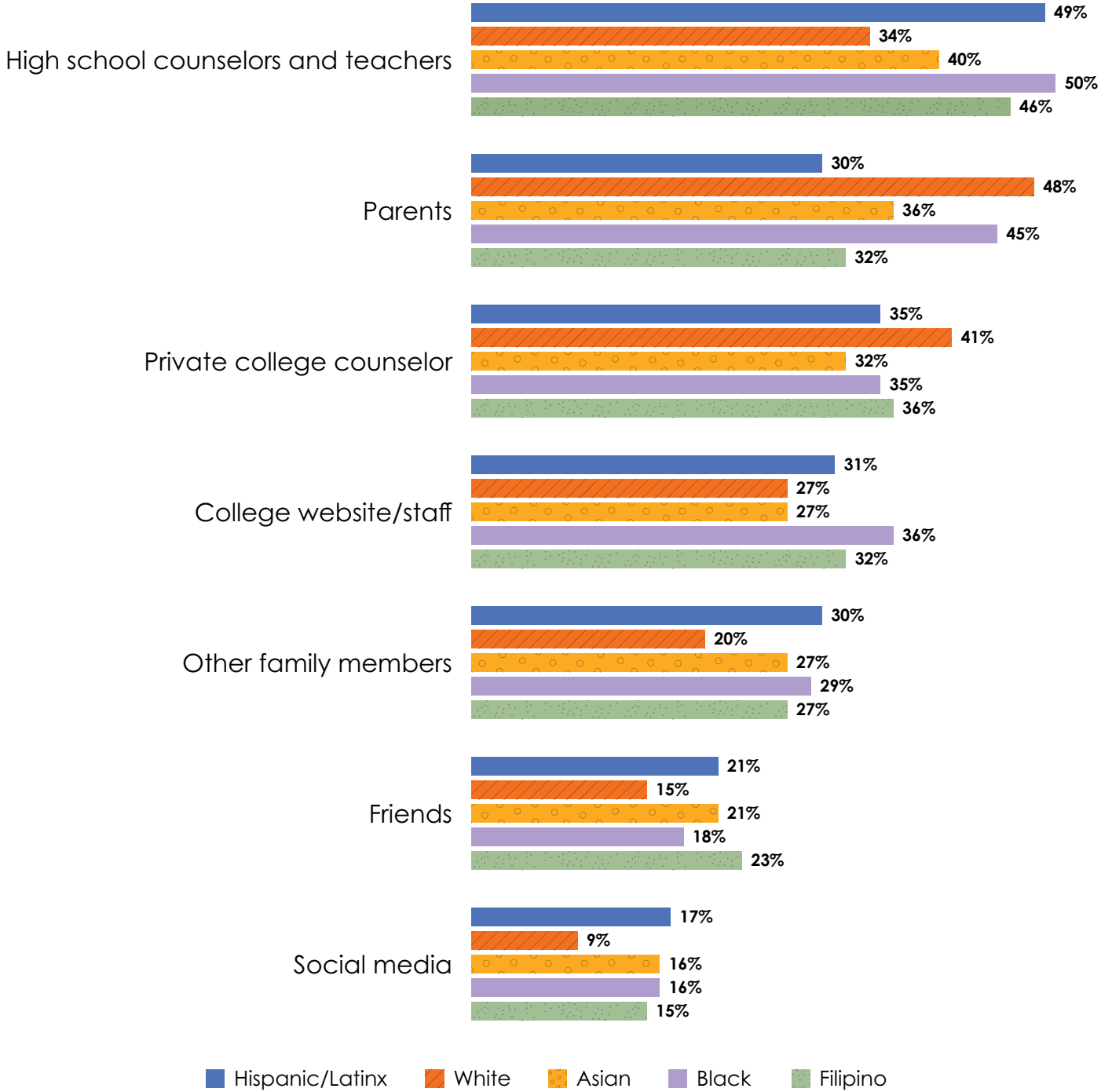
**FIGURE 12**  
**How helpful were each of these sources of information about college planning and financial aid?**



Note. Sample sizes varied for each information source since they were separate questions and not all students answered each question.

There are important differences by race/ethnicity in student reports on resources they found helpful when applying for college. Students in general found high school counselors and teachers to be very helpful compared to other resources, but Black and Hispanic/Latinx students found them to be more helpful than their peers did. White students found their parents to be most helpful, especially compared to Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, and Filipino students (**Figure 13**). While students generally thought social media was less helpful than the rest of the resources, White students found it to be the least helpful.

**FIGURE 13**  
**Sources of information students found to be “very helpful” by student race/ethnicity**



Note. Five most populous race/ethnicity groups listed. Sample sizes varied for each information source since they were separate questions and not all students answered each question.

Students were then asked to select which college-planning resources they used from a provided list. College websites (58%) were most selected, followed by financial aid tools (42%) and college application tools (31%).

Students also answered an open question about what would have been helpful when applying for college and financial aid. Students gave a wide range of answers ( $N = 2,373$ ); about 80% suggested ways to improve the process. About 13% said they would have appreciated having a person to help them. For example, one student said, "Probably someone going more in depth about the whole process; since I was first generation I didn't fully understand the whole process until the last two weeks." Another said, "One on one with a counselor to help plan better and complete college apps." One student made a sharp contrast between help from a person and online resources: "I think it would have been helpful if I went to my college and asked for help in person instead of trying to figure out everything online." This is a recurring theme; for college as well as FAFSA and CADAA applications, students lean on the adults in their lives, be they family members or teachers and counselors.

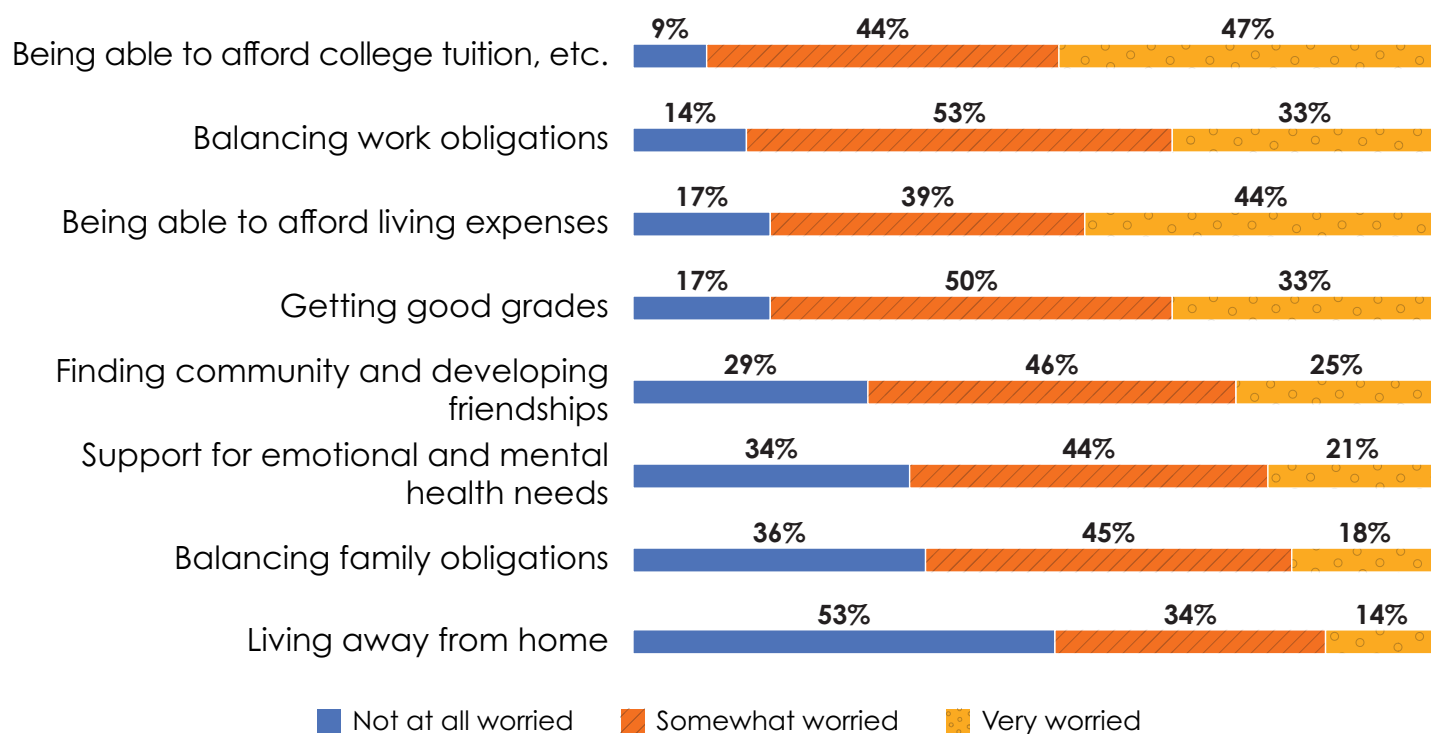
Students (5%) also mentioned that early reminders or starting to think about college applications earlier in their high school years would have been helpful. Another 5% suggested that documents, videos, or step-by-step guides could help students decipher instructions. About 5% also mentioned better FAFSA or CADAA timing, support, and clarity, which aligns with the FAFSA or CADAA difficulties we found in the financial aid questions. Last, students suggested that they would have liked more help with essays (2%), automatic transcripts/course inputs for applications (2%), a high school course on the topic (1%), help deciding among schools or programs (1%), and one place for all college applications (1%).



# COLLEGE EXPECTATIONS

We asked students who were planning to attend college about how worried they were about the challenges they might face. Students were generally less concerned about living away from home and balancing family obligations than they were with issues of affordability (**Figure 14**). About 91% of respondents were at least somewhat worried about being able to afford tuition, books, fees, and other college expenses, and almost half of respondents were very worried. Students were concerned about other aspects of affordability as well, with more than 80% at least somewhat worried about affording living expenses and balancing work obligations. Students were also concerned about academics, with one third being very worried and half being somewhat worried about getting good grades. In comparison, some students seemed more confident about social and health transitions. Fewer than 25% were very worried about finding community and developing friendships, finding support for emotional and mental health needs, balancing family obligations, and living away from home. It's important to note that more than half of all respondents were at least somewhat worried about each of these issues.

**FIGURE 14**  
**When you think about college, how worried are you about the following?**



Note. Sample size varied for each response, but more than 8,300 students answered each question.

## COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY IS A LEADING CONCERN FOR STUDENTS

Students had many concerns related to attending college, including affording college, adjusting to more difficult coursework, living away from home, managing their time, and navigating social challenges. The top concern among students was being able to pay for college and living expenses. For example, one Latino first-generation student who hadn't yet decided where to attend college explained:

**“Financial stress is a significant challenge that impacts students' ability to succeed academically and socially. The cost of college, including tuition, books, materials, and living expenses, can create a heavy financial burden for me and my parents. This burden often leads to worries about how to cover my costs, especially for those who may need the money more than [I do]...like paying my grandma's medical bill, but [who] chose to support me and help me reach a higher education level.”**

Students also worried about keeping up with the academic rigor of higher education and being able to balance school with other responsibilities, such as work, sports, extracurricular activities, and friends. Some students expressed concern about accessing resources and receiving support for their different learning abilities and mental health. One Filipino first-generation college goer planning to attend a CCC described this:

**“I am disabled, but 99% of the time my disability is not visible to others. While professors have provided the test accommodations necessary, they often lack understanding as to why I need to leave frequently from class, or come late, or mentally do not look present. Those would typically be the signs of a non-engaged student. Whereas with me, they are the signs of a disabled student pursuing her education, while managing a disability that is on no one's schedule but its own. I have a lot of anxiety about managing my health along with everything else all at once.”**

Echoing the findings shown in **Figure 14**, some students worried about being away from home for the first time and finding community on campus. Students also anticipated dealing with self-doubt about whether they belonged as first-generation college students. One Asian first-generation student hoping to pursue a doctoral degree and planning to start college in another state said: “Will I fit in? Will I find support when I need it most? Will I make meaningful connections, and find my place, and family here?”



## STUDENTS SHARE EXCITEMENT ABOUT INDEPENDENCE AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Students also shared what they were most excited about when looking forward to college, despite their anticipated challenges and worries. Overall, students were excited about the new opportunities and experiences that awaited them: new classes, friends, extracurricular activities, and career options. One American Indian/Alaska Native first-generation student planning to attend a CCC said:

**“What excites me most about college is the academic freedom, independence, and career opportunities. I’m eager to explore new subjects, make lifelong friends, and develop new skills. I’m also looking forward to campus life, diversity, and innovation. College is a time for growth, discovery, and creating unforgettable memories!”**

Students looked forward to being independent and having more agency in their lives. Some students were proud to be the first in their family to attend college and pursue their dream careers. Others were excited to meet new people and find a sense of belonging in new communities. One Asian high school senior planning to start college at a UC campus stated:

**“After spending 12 years doing the same routine over and over again, I’m excited to go out and attempt to be my own individual. I believe that not only will going to college help me mature but also give me the ability to learn about myself and reach out to new people. In high school, I was a little bit introverted[,] resulting in me not making as many friends as I would have liked[,] so I want to take advantage of opportunities in college and make meaningful connections.”**





## CONCLUSION

This survey offers critical insights into what California students experience as they transition from high school to college and career.

The survey results also highlight potential avenues for improving college readiness in California. Although the number of students completing UC and CSU college preparatory coursework (A–G courses) has increased somewhat during the last decade—and most survey respondents reported completing the required coursework—nearly half of the high school graduates in the state do not complete the A–G coursework.<sup>9</sup> Responses from this survey provide insight into why students may not complete A–G courses. Among survey respondents who did not complete the UC/CSU preparatory coursework, about one quarter didn't know about the requirements, and 38% were not able to complete the courses with high enough grades (a C or better). Students also faced challenges keeping track of their A–G course requirements. About one third of students found it at least somewhat difficult to keep track. The survey responses highlight that students aspiring to attain 4-year degrees may benefit from additional information about the A–G requirements as well as increased academic support and opportunities to complete the courses and ensure their eligibility for CSU and UC admission.

Given the potential for dual enrollment to increase college enrollment, performance, and completion, it is important to understand students' perceptions of the opportunity and their experience in these courses.<sup>10</sup> Results from this survey suggest that students view dual enrollment as an important component of preparing for college. Among survey respondents, 39% participated in dual enrollment, a rate higher than the 22% of all high school graduates statewide.<sup>11</sup> However, not all students participated equally, with notable differences across racial and ethnic groups. White and Asian students were more likely than their Black and Hispanic/Latinx peers to take dual enrollment courses. Survey respondents took dual enrollment for a variety of reasons, including to reduce college coursework, improve their chances at getting into college, and gain access to courses not available at their high schools. However, nearly 50% of students were unsure if their dual enrollment courses satisfied their A–G course requirements. Ensuring equitable access to dual enrollment—by increasing access to information, advising students about the benefits, and removing barriers to registration for courses, among other actions—could better prepare more students for college and give them a head start in their higher education journey.



The survey also highlights the importance of high schools—and their staff—in helping students transition to college. Students, especially those who are first-generation college goers, rely on the people around them to help with both the financial aid and the college application processes. Students pointed to high school counselors, teachers, and high school workshops as critical resources when applying for financial aid. About 59% of students filled out the FAFSA at least in part because it was part of a class, a school expectation, or a graduation requirement. Moreover, 45% of students listed high school counselors and teachers as very helpful in college and financial aid planning. When students were asked what would make the college and financial aid application process easier, one of the most common answers was a person to help them with the process. Improving access and support to school personnel so that they have the necessary tools and training to help students apply for financial aid and college could increase higher education enrollment rates throughout California.



# APPENDIX: SAMPLE AND METHODS

## SURVEY CONSTRUCTION AND ADMINISTRATION

The online survey consisted of 64 total questions, although not all students saw every question since some questions were displayed only for a given prior answer. The questions were a combination of Likert-scale questions, selected response items, and open-ended text responses. The survey was created in Qualtrics and administered via an anonymous survey link emailed to students. The survey remained open from May 10, 2024, to July 1, 2024, in order to capture students who were completing the FAFSA later than usual because of the late start and problems with the FAFSA rollout.

## POPULATION, RESPONDENTS, AND ANALYTICAL SAMPLE

The survey was sent to the population of high school students who completed a FAFSA or CADAA during the 2024-25 cycle, which was about 300,000 students. Students reported on varying dimensions of their preparation and plans for the future. Additionally, in responses to open-ended questions, students described in their own words the challenges and excitement they anticipated prior to matriculation to college.

We present data from the 11,238 survey respondents who indicated they were high school seniors at the beginning of the survey. Seniors were asked about their intent to enroll in college in fall 2024. Those who intended to enroll in college (approximately 9,400 seniors) were then asked about their college plans. We also capture differences in student experience by self-reported race/ethnicity and parental education level. This research builds on our prior reports, several of which documented the obstacles that high school seniors and college students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>12</sup> and another that examined students' attitudes and behaviors following the first year of California's universal FAFSA program.<sup>13</sup>

It is also important to note that our sample does not include students who did not complete, did not attempt to complete, or were unable to apply for financial aid via the FAFSA or CADAA. These students could have been less likely to fill out a FAFSA or CADAA if they were not intending to attend college or postsecondary training or if they intended to fill out an aid application but were dissuaded by the difficulty of doing so.

This was a problematic year for completing financial aid applications because of the problems with the rollout of the new FAFSA. The 2024 FAFSA cycle opened for submissions on December 31, 2023, nearly 3 months later than the usual start time in October. In addition, numerous technical glitches in the application prevented many students from initially being able to complete the FAFSA. For example, students from mixed-status families (those with a noncitizen parent) were unable to submit a FAFSA until the last day in April.<sup>14</sup> Completion rates lagged prior years for the entire FAFSA cycle, and the total number of FAFSA applications for the graduating class of 2024 was down 113,813, or about 12%, compared to the 2023 FAFSA cycle. The rollout problems delayed the collection and distribution of financial aid information by colleges, which caused UC and CSU to change their FAFSA deadlines and admission intent-to-enroll deadlines to accommodate students who had difficulty applying for aid. The fewer FAFSA applications in 2024 may also have depressed survey response numbers.

Although the survey response rate, at 4%, was low for all aid applicants, the large sample size (more than 11,000 students) represents a diverse group of students from many different socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic regions throughout the state. Because of potential response bias, where survey participants' experiences may differ from nonrespondents in important ways, and the lack of random sampling in the survey design, the results presented in this brief are not statistically generalizable to the broader population of all high school graduates in the state. They nevertheless capture a critical slice of recent California high school graduates.

## SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The overall senior survey sample contains 11,238 student responses. In Table 1, we present the demographic characteristics in terms of race and ethnicity, and compare them to the overall population characteristics of respondents of the census of California public high school seniors in 2024. Our sample of respondents is diverse, and their race/ethnicity characteristics resemble the graduating class of 2024 as a whole. A majority (56%) of the students in our sample are Hispanic/Latinx, similar to the cohort of 12th graders in 2023–24 (57%). In the survey, White students are underrepresented while Black and Asian students are overrepresented, but the cross section of students covered by the survey largely reflects those seen in California's high schools in the same year.<sup>15</sup>

**TABLE 1**  
**Survey sample by race/ethnicity**

RACE/ETHNICITY	SENIOR SURVEY SAMPLE (N)	SENIOR SURVEY SAMPLE (%)	2023–24 12TH-GRADE ENROLLMENT (%)
Hispanic/Latinx	4,895	57.9	56.5
White	1,319	15.6	20.7
Asian	1,109	13.1	9.5
Black	644	7.6	5.2
Filipino	291	3.4	2.7
Native American	204	2.4	0.5
Pacific Islander	47	0.6	0.4
Other race	211	2.5	—
Nonresponse	2,518	—	
Total sample	11,238		

*Note.* Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding. We compared our survey sample to the racial composition of all 12th graders enrolled in California public high schools in 2023–24 from the California Department of Education’s DataQuest data reporting system, [dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/EnrEthGrd.aspx?cde=00&aggllevel=state&year=2023-24](https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/EnrEthGrd.aspx?cde=00&aggllevel=state&year=2023-24). Data on graduates were not available at the time of writing.

Students were also asked to identify their gender from the options woman, man, nonbinary, other (please specify), and prefer not to say. Comparing the distribution of gender in the sample against that of the high school graduating class of 2024, we can see that women are overrepresented in our sample. About 59% of respondents identified as women, while only 36% identified as men. Nonbinary students (2%), those who preferred not to say (2%), and those listing another gender (0.2%) made up the rest of the respondents. The graduating class of 2024 was more evenly split, with about 52% male, 48% female, and less than 1% nonbinary.

As shown in Table 2, about 32% of our sample came from families where the highest reported education level of a parent was an associate’s degree (5%), a bachelor’s degree (15%), or a graduate or professional degree (13%). Another 13% of students had at least one parent attend college. While we don’t have a direct comparison of the survey sample to the population of high school graduates by parental education level, we do know that the

current estimated degree-attainment rate is about 55% for working-age adults, including associate's degrees, bachelor's degrees, and beyond.<sup>16</sup> We considered students from families where no parents attended college as potential first-generation college students. Almost half of our sample (48%) had parents who did not complete high school (21%) or did complete high school but did not attend college (27%). This gives us the ability to look more deeply into the experiences and college plans of first-generation college students.

**TABLE 2**  
**Survey sample by parental education level**

PARENTAL EDUCATION	N	PERCENTAGE
Don't know	507	6
Did not complete high school	1,813	21
HS diploma	2,389	27
Some college	1,133	13
Associate's degree	452	5
Bachelor's degree	1,277	15
Graduate/professional degree	1,167	13

Note. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding. N = 8,738.

A vast majority of respondents came from public schools (95%) while about 3% came from private schools and 2% were homeschooled. A majority of respondents spoke a language other than English at home (55%). A large majority of those listed Spanish as the primary language spoken in their home (75%).

The demographic characteristics of the survey respondents suggest that we have a diverse sample of high school seniors in California on the cusp of transitioning to work and college.

Nonresponse to any given question can arise for several reasons: The question may not have been shown to a subset of students based on their answers to previous questions (i.e., conditionally displayed questions); a student may not wish to respond to a particular question (i.e., they skipped the question); and/or a student may have stopped and exited the survey prior to the given question.

# ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> There are other requirements for entry to a CSU or UC school. The 15 required courses consist of 4 years of English, 3 years of mathematics, 2 years of social studies, 2 years of college preparatory science, 2 years in the same world language sequence, 1 year of visual or performing arts, and 1 year of elective coursework.
- <sup>2</sup> Data are from California Department of Education, *2022–23 four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate*, DataQuest, [dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/CohRate.aspx?cde=00&agglevel=state&year=2022-23](https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/CohRate.aspx?cde=00&agglevel=state&year=2022-23).
- <sup>3</sup> Rodriguez, O., & Gao, N. (2021). *Dual Enrollment in California*. [ppic.org/publication/dual-enrollment-in-california](https://ppic.org/publication/dual-enrollment-in-california)
- <sup>4</sup> Friedmann, E., Reed, S., Kurlaender, M., & Dykeman, K. (2024, February). *A strong start for college and career: Dual enrollment participation from 9th to 12th grade*. UC Davis Wheelhouse, California Education Lab, and Policy Analysis for California Education. [education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/file-attachments/wheelhouse\\_infographic\\_dual\\_enrollment\\_02-2024\\_final\\_1.pdf](https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/file-attachments/wheelhouse_infographic_dual_enrollment_02-2024_final_1.pdf)
- <sup>5</sup> Friedmann et al., 2024.
- <sup>6</sup> Data Insight Partners. (2025). *Current FAFSA completion rates by state*. FAFSA Tracker. [national.fafsatracker.com/currentRates?selectedSchoolSelectModel=5&sortBy=current\\_comp\\_rate&](https://national.fafsatracker.com/currentRates?selectedSchoolSelectModel=5&sortBy=current_comp_rate&)
- <sup>7</sup> Jackson, J., & Starr, D. (2023, June). *Student loan debt in California* [Fact sheet]. Public Policy Institute of California. [ppic.org/publication/student-loan-debt-in-california](https://ppic.org/publication/student-loan-debt-in-california)
- <sup>8</sup> Many high school students, motivated by immediate financial needs and a belief in the benefits of practical skills over formal education, are opting to skip college to gain work experience which raises questions about the evolving value of college degrees in the job market. See Mowreader, A. (2023, November 2). *Report: Young people want to get to work sooner*. Inside Higher Ed. [insidehighered.com/news/student-success/life-after-college/2023/11/02/high-schoolers-skip-college-gain-job-experience](https://insidehighered.com/news/student-success/life-after-college/2023/11/02/high-schoolers-skip-college-gain-job-experience)
- <sup>9</sup> Derived from California Department of Education data on postsecondary enrollment, available from [cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/pse.asp](https://cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/pse.asp).
- <sup>10</sup> Rodriguez, O., Payares-Montoya, D., Ugo, I., & Gao, N. (2023, August). *Improving college access and success through dual enrollment* [Report]. Public Policy Institute of California. [ppic.org/publication/improving-college-access-and-success-through-dual-enrollment](https://ppic.org/publication/improving-college-access-and-success-through-dual-enrollment)
- <sup>11</sup> Friedmann et al., 2024.
- <sup>12</sup> Reed, S., Friedmann, E., Kurlaender, M., Martorell, P., Rury, D., Moldoff, J., Fuller, R., & Perry, P. (2021, June). *California college students' experiences during the global pandemic*. California Student Aid Commission and California Education Lab. [csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/fall\\_2020\\_covid19\\_student\\_survey\\_results\\_presentation.pdf](https://csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/fall_2020_covid19_student_survey_results_presentation.pdf)
- <sup>13</sup> Cook, K., Jackson, J., & Gomez, S. (2024, October). *Implementing California's universal financial aid application policy* [Report]. Public Policy Institute of California. [ppic.org/publication/implementing-californias-universal-financial-aid-application-policy](https://ppic.org/publication/implementing-californias-universal-financial-aid-application-policy)
- <sup>14</sup> Martinez-Alvarado, S. (2024, June 12). How students from mixed-status families are doubly damaged by the FAFSA mess. *EdTrust Blog*. [edtrust.org/blog/students-mixed-status-families-doubly-damaged-fafsa-mess](https://edtrust.org/blog/students-mixed-status-families-doubly-damaged-fafsa-mess)
- <sup>15</sup> We allowed students to mark multiple race categories. We aggregated students who selected multiple categories (about 14% of the sample) into race categories ordered to capture the experiences of those students who are historically underrepresented in higher education. We aggregated in the following order for those who chose more than one category: Native American, Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Pacific Islander, Filipino, Asian, other, and White.
- <sup>16</sup> Lumina Foundation. (2025). *A stronger nation: Learning beyond high school builds American talent—California insights* [Report]. [luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress/state/CA](https://luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress/state/CA)



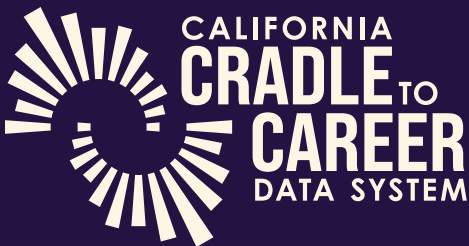
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## ABOUT CALIFORNIA CRADLE-TO-CAREER DATA SYSTEM

The California Cradle-to-Career Data System (C2C) is a statewide longitudinal data system that provides tools to help students reach their goals and delivers information on education and workforce outcomes. C2C connects individuals and organizations with trusted information and resources, providing insights into critical milestones in the pipeline from early care to K–12 to higher education, skills training, and employment. The data system empowers individuals to reach their full potential and fosters evidence-based decision-making to help California build a more equitable future. For more information, visit [c2c.ca.gov](https://c2c.ca.gov).





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