The background of the cover is a complex, abstract graphic composed of numerous thin, colored lines (blue, orange, green, purple) that form a flowing, organic shape resembling a wave or a network. Interspersed among these lines are numerous small, semi-transparent colored dots (green, blue, purple, orange) of varying sizes. Several larger, semi-transparent colored circles (orange, blue, purple) of different diameters are scattered across the background, some overlapping the lines and dots. There are also a few larger, semi-transparent colored squares (orange, blue, purple) with thin black outlines, some containing smaller dots or circles. The overall effect is one of data visualization or a stylized representation of student trajectories and outcomes.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE REPORT

2025 Academic Year

In partnership with California Education Lab and California Student Aid Commission

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Dear Colleagues:



I'm happy to present the Cradle-to-Career Data System's 2025 annual *Student Experience Report* as a complement to the retrospective linked data of the data system. This report amplifies student voices and highlights the opportunities and challenges they face. As part of our process of listening first and then building, this report will inform how our team continues to build and scale data tools to smooth the paths students take as they transition from high school to college.

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 report highlights the many kinds of paths students take when transitioning into college. Student voices within this report speak on experiences ranging from navigating dual enrollment to planning to transfer to a 4-year institution from California Community Colleges to starting out at a 4-year college, and more. As C2C creates data tools, it is imperative that they are in response to students' experiences today and that our data insights reflect and capture the various paths students are taking.

I want to thank the students who took the time to complete the survey and share their thoughts. I also want to thank the students who participated in follow-up interviews to provide even more insight into the report this year. We are grateful for the second year of collaboration with the California Education Lab at the University of California, Davis. Their work in executing this research study and sharing the findings through this report is invaluable to our commitment to ensuring that all Californians have equitable access to the information and resources they need to succeed. We are also thankful to the California Student Aid Commission for its partnership on the survey and for 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 2025, 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](#) (CSAC) to document the experiences of of graduating high school seniors as they transitioned from high school to their postsecondary plans.

In this report, we present survey responses from 6,980 California high school seniors. They responded to the survey between May 28, 2025, and July 11, 2025, just after they graduated from high school. The web-based survey was sent via email to all students who applied for financial aid through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or California Dream Act Application (CADAA) in the spring or summer of 2025.

This is the third annual survey of California high school seniors from the California Education Lab and C2C's fourth year publishing a report on students transitioning from high school to college. Last year, the 2024 survey results were included in [C2C's 2024 Student Experience Report](#). These surveys enable us to capture a representative cross section of California high school seniors who completed financial aid applications throughout the state and document their plans and expectations, college and career preparation, and excitement about their futures. This year, we also conducted follow-up interviews with 16 students to learn more about their educational journeys and aspirations. The interviews provided additional in-depth information, stories, and insights about students' experiences compared to what respondents shared in the open-ended survey responses.

AUTHORS

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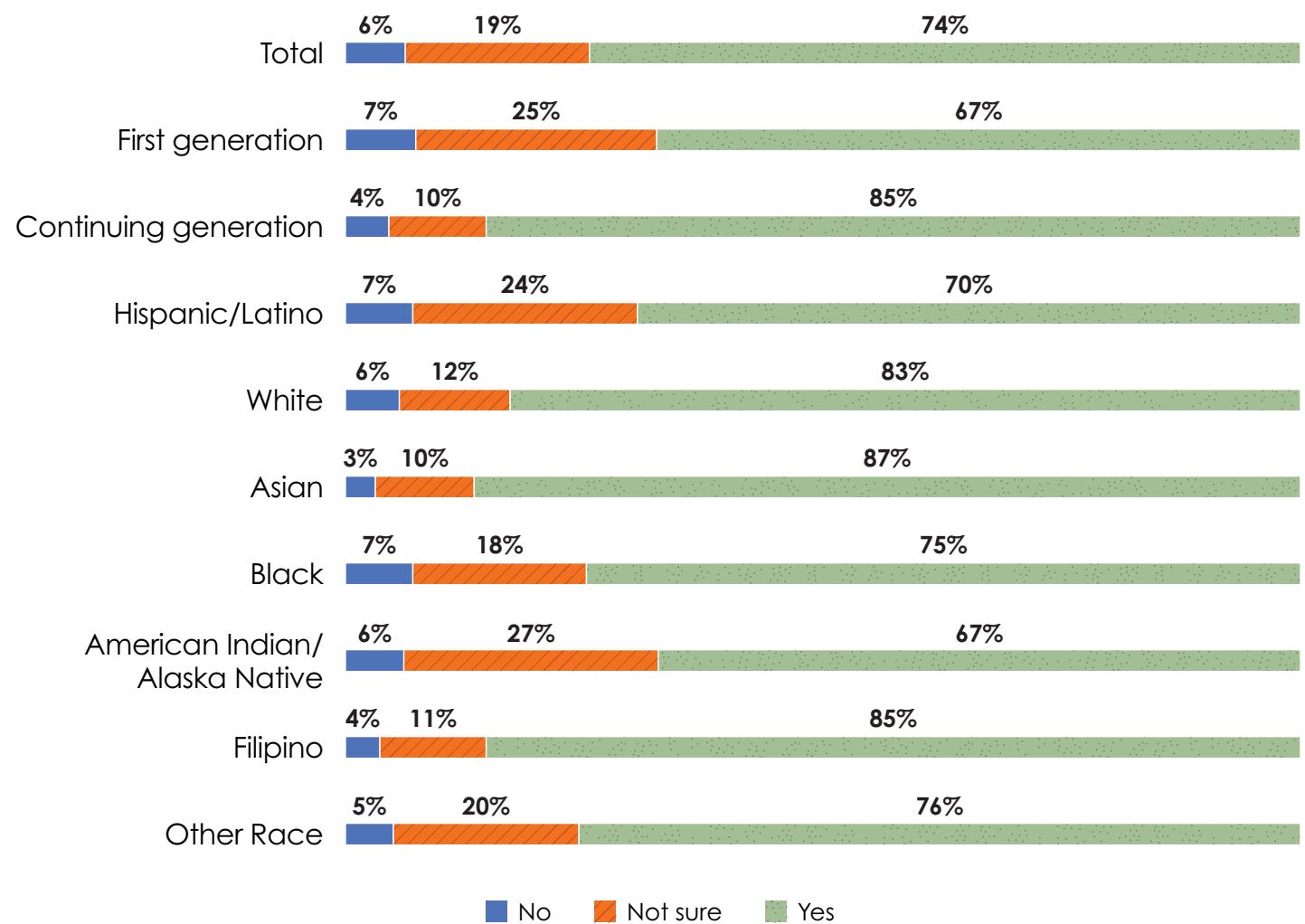
HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCES



Among the respondents, most planned to attend college, some were pursuing other postsecondary options, and a few were still undecided. We asked all the respondents about their high school experiences and their preparation for college and career.

STATE UNIVERSITY ELIGIBILITY: NAVIGATING A–G COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Completing course requirements and maintaining a strong GPA are key parts of preparing for college. A set of high school courses is required for admission to California State University (CSU) or the University of California (UC): California's A–G coursework.¹ It includes a core set of 15 yearlong courses that students must complete in high school with a grade of C or better to become eligible for admission to California's public 4-year universities. About 75% of our survey respondents reported being on track to complete their A–G requirements, with only 6% not on track and 19% who reported being unsure of whether they were on track for A–G completion (**Figure 1**).²

FIGURE 1**Self-Reported A–G Status by First-Generation Status and Race/Ethnicity**

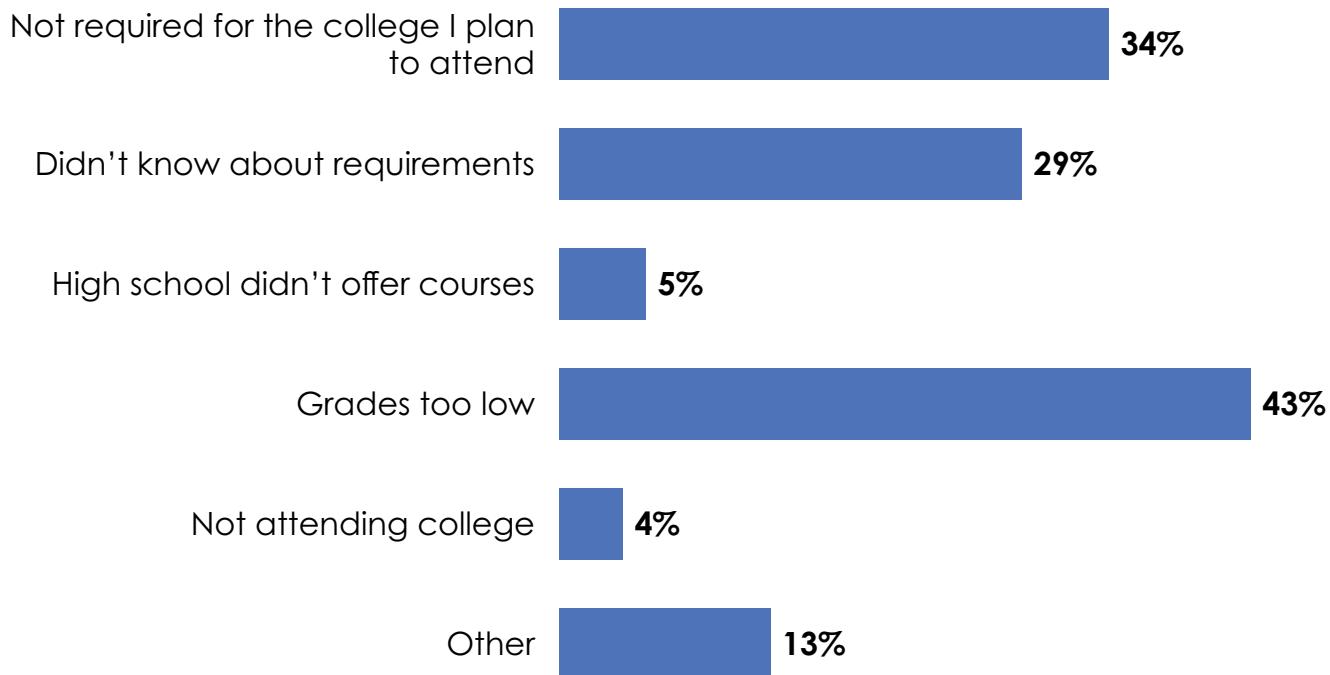
Note. Are you on track for A–G completion? Total students ($n = 5,816$), by parent education level ($n = 5,008$), and by race/ethnicity ($n = 5,320$). Not all students answered each question, and some students did not know their parents' education levels. Percents for each group may not add to 100% due to rounding.

There are some important disparities in A–G completion among different demographic groups. Only 67% of first-generation respondents reported being on track to complete A–G courses, compared to around 85% of continuing-generation students.³ White, Asian, and Filipino students were also more likely to report being A–G completers. Respondents who reported having higher grades in high school were more likely to report being on track to complete A–G courses. More than 90% of those reporting that they received mainly A grades were on track, compared to about 58% of those who reported receiving mostly Bs or Cs.

It is also important to note that about one in five students reported being unsure if they were on track to complete the A–G requirements. Respondents who would be first-generation college students were more than twice as likely to be unsure of their A–G status as continuing-generation students were (25% vs. 10%), and Hispanic/Latino, Black, and American Indian students were more likely than their Asian or White peers to be unsure of their A–G status. This information gap could result in fewer students being ready for a 4-year university or students who are eligible not knowing they could apply for entry to 4-year universities in the state.

Of the 6% of respondents who were not on track to complete A–G courses ($n = 353$), the most commonly cited reasons were: “My grades were too low in some of the required courses” (43%) and “They were not required for the college I plan to attend” (34%), as shown in **Figure 2.**⁴ Notably, nearly 30% of respondents indicated they “didn’t know about the requirements” as one of the reasons they were not on track to complete A–G courses. Interesting differences emerged when looking at the percentage of first-generation and continuing-generation students who cited each reason. More first-generation students reported not being aware of the requirements compared to continuing-generation students (29% vs. 26%), and more first-generation students reported having grades that were too low to complete their A–G requirements (49% vs. 36%). Only 30% of first-generation students said the courses were not required or they were not planning to attend college. This highlights the importance of providing information and support to students as they work toward college readiness.



FIGURE 2**Reasons Students Reported for Not Completing A–G Requirements**

Note. Why are you not on track to complete A–G requirements? Only asked of students reporting as not on track to complete A–G ($n = 353$). Bars do not total 100% because students could select more than one answer.

DUAL ENROLLMENT

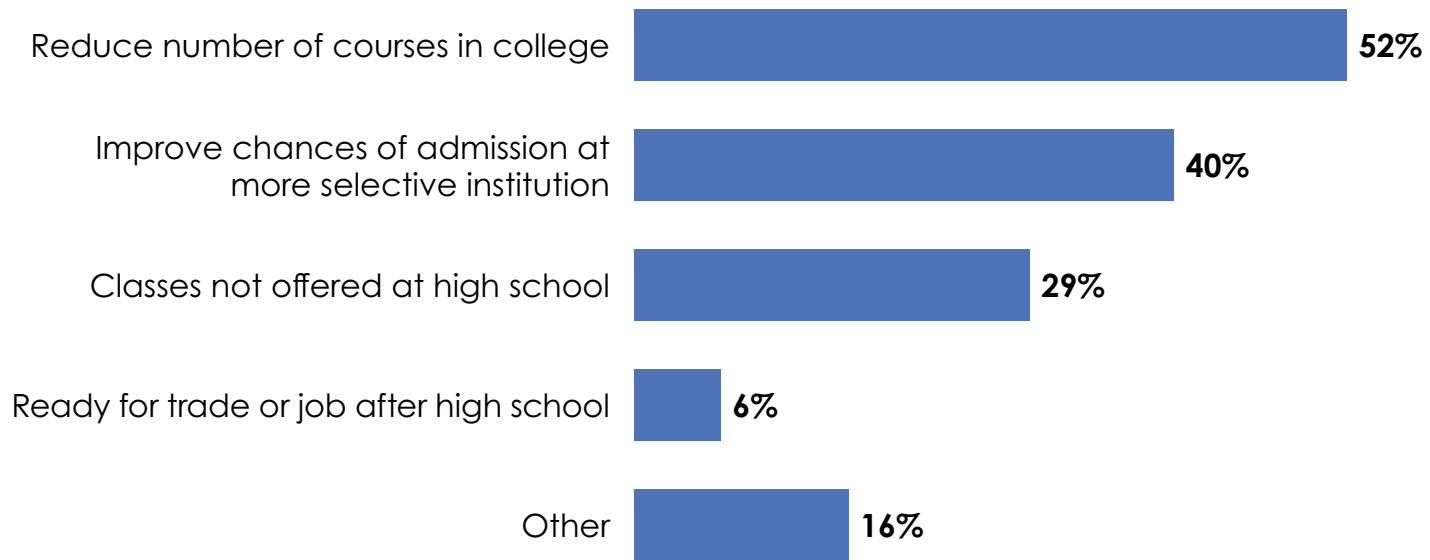
Dual enrollment (DE) classes are college courses that students take while in high school, giving them the opportunity to prepare directly for college and earn college credits.⁵ Approximately 39% of respondents reported taking DE coursework. Those who reported enrolling in DE varied somewhat by race, gender, and first-generation status, consistent with findings in other research as well as last year's survey.⁶ White and Asian respondents (48% and 47%, respectively) reported taking DE courses more often than their Hispanic/Latino (36%), Black (35%), and Filipino (39%) peers. Continuing-generation students (46%) reported enrolling in DE courses at higher rates than their first-generation peers (33%), and women (40%) were more likely than men (34%) to enroll in college classes while in high school.

Students reported enrolling in DE courses for many reasons (**Figure 3**). Many did so with an eye toward college. A majority (53%) of those who reported enrolling in DE courses indicated that they were taking these classes to reduce the number of courses they would need to take in college, and 40% reported that they enrolled in these courses to increase

their chances of being admitted to more selective colleges. About 29% of those who reported enrolling in DE took the courses because they were not offered at their high schools. A small number of respondents (10%) reported taking DE courses for a job or trade. Some students listed other reasons, such as career exploration, the opportunity to take interesting classes, and trying out college life. One student noted:

“I took college classes in high school to become more familiar with college-level work and to better understand how college classes and expectations work before I start college full-time.”

FIGURE 3
Reasons Students Took Dual Enrollment Courses

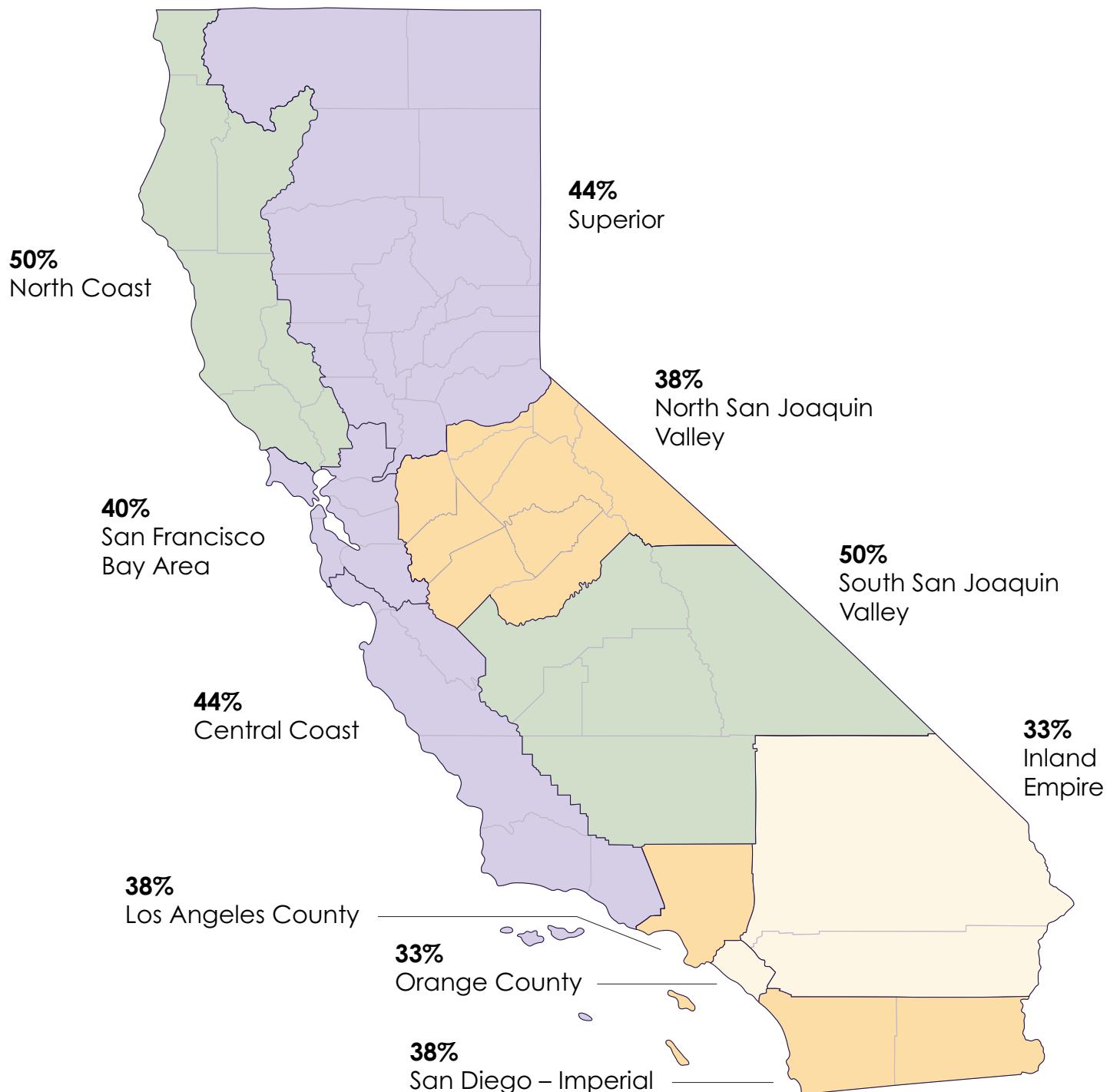


Note. Why did you take dual enrollment? Only respondents who reported enrolling in dual enrollment were asked this question ($n = 2,200$). Percentages do not total 100% because students could select more than one answer.

DE was common across all regions of California, ranging from one third of respondents in the Inland Empire to about half of respondents in the North Coast and Southern San Joaquin Valley (**Figure 4**). Students attending high school in rural settings were slightly more likely (44%) to take DE courses than those in cities (40%) or suburbs (37%).



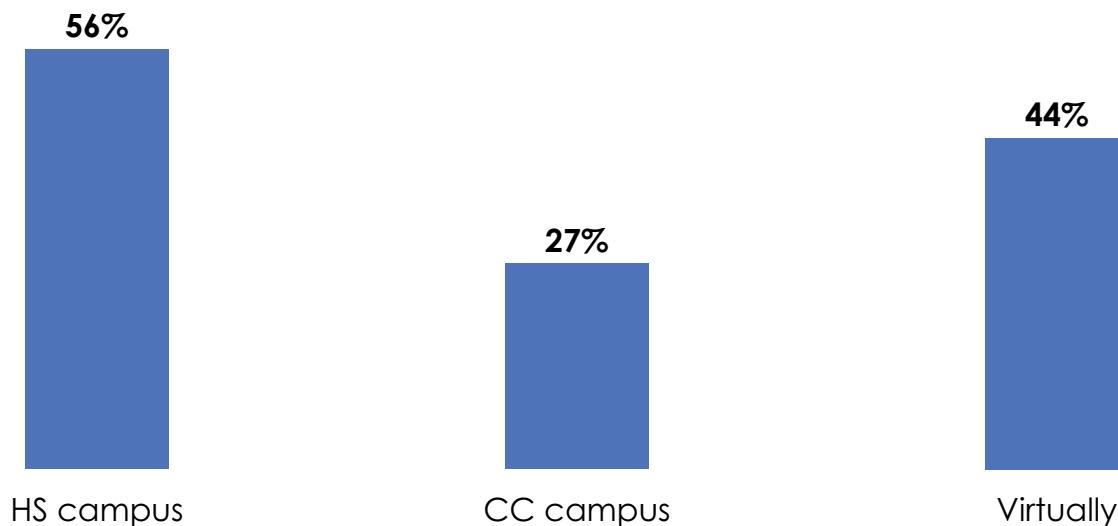
FIGURE 4
Student Reported Dual Enrollment Participation, by Region



Note. Did you take dual enrollment? (n = 5,816)

DE courses are offered in various settings, including high school classrooms, community college campuses, and online (**Figure 5**). Most respondents who took DE courses reported doing so on their high school campuses (56%), while 44% took virtual courses. However, 27% of students reported taking the courses on a community college campus, potentially gaining valuable experience in a college setting. Although this varies somewhat by region and locality, students from most regions of California were more likely to take these courses on a high school campus than anywhere else. Two notable exceptions are in the San Francisco Bay Area and Orange County, where students were more likely to enroll in virtual courses than take the courses on their high school campuses. Respondents who would be first-generation college students were more likely to take the courses at a high school campus than their continuing-generation peers (65% vs. 48%) and less likely to take courses virtually (35% vs. 53%).

FIGURE 5
Dual Enrollment Class Locations



Note. Where did you take dual enrollment? Question asked only of students who indicated that they took a dual enrollment course ($n = 2,197$).

CAREER PREPARATION

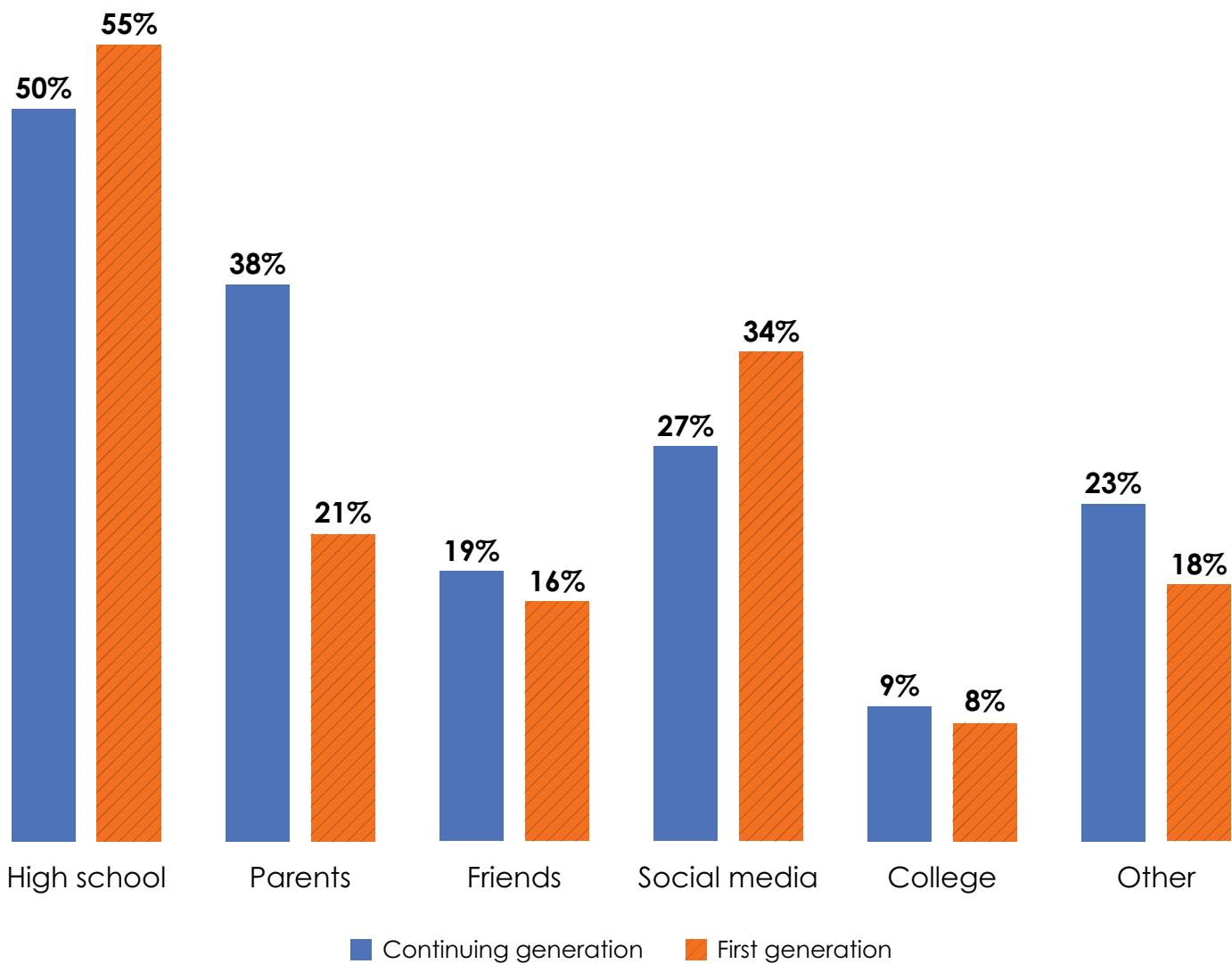
Students prepare for their future careers while in high school. A majority of respondents (78%) already had a future career in mind and were taking steps to learn about and prepare for it. The top two sources from which students indicated they learned about their future careers were high school (53%) and social media (31%), but many also learned about their future careers from parents (27%), friends (18%), and colleges (9%). These influences were relatively consistent across race/ethnicity, gender, and region. However, respondents who would be first-generation college students were more likely to get their future career ideas from their schools (55%) compared to their continuing-generation peers (50%), but they were much less likely to get career ideas from their parents (21% vs. 38%, respectively; **Figure 6**). Some students mentioned other sources, including other family members, community engagement, and personal experiences:

“ ASL [American Sign Language] has always been something I wanted to learn. Working with kids has always been a dream of mine so once I found out that I could do both and I fell in love with following this dream.”

“ My older sister helped me into getting interested in accounting and finance. High school helped me too because I took business classes and they had topics like accounting on which we learned about and did assignments on which was interesting to me.”

“ I did an internship with the National Park Service that hooked me on the idea of doing science directly in the field.”

“ My aunt, she is a therapist, and, you know, she's just really like, rock of my life. My mom, she does social work, so it's similar in that vein, too. So, a lot of people in my life have really just done, like, that field, you know what I mean? And ... that kind of made me want to go do that.”

FIGURE 6**Sources Used by Continuing- and First-Generation Students to Learn About Their Future Careers**

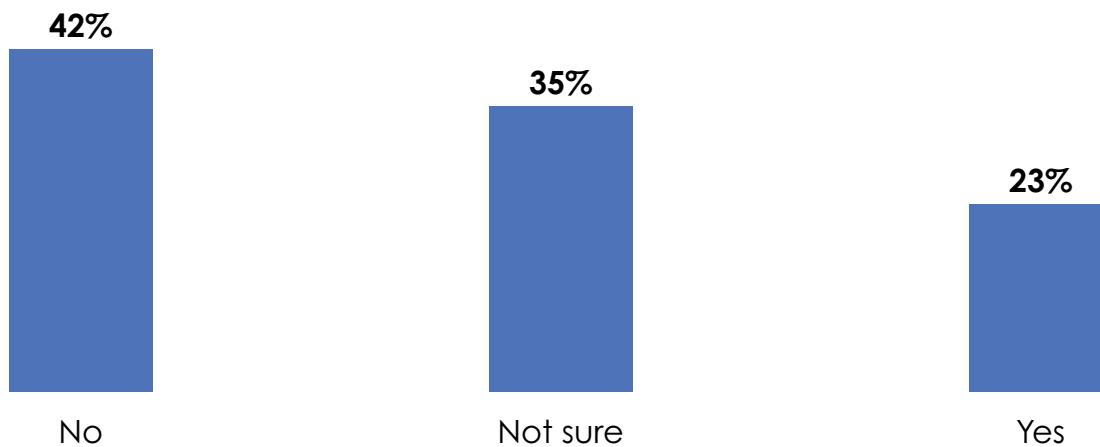
Note. Where did you learn about your future career? First-generation students ($n = 2,548$); continuing-generation students ($n = 2,230$). Percentages do not total 100% because students could mark multiple choices.

While most students had a career in mind, few reported having done career planning while in high school (**Figure 7**). When asked, only 23% were sure they did career planning in school. About 42% of students said they did not, and about 35% of students were unsure. There was little difference by first-generation college status, gender, race/ethnicity, or locality.



FIGURE 7

Student Engagement With Career Planning While in High School

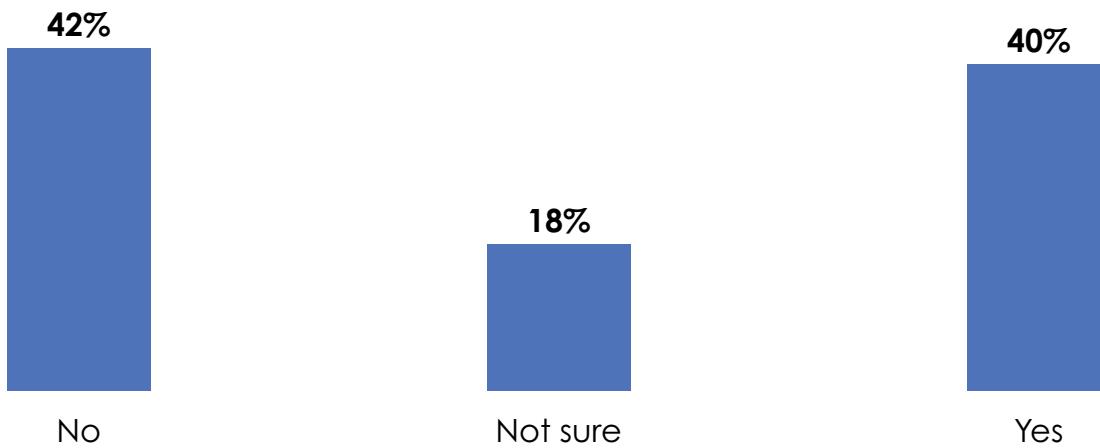


Note. Have you done any career planning through high school? (n = 5,590)

However, more students were taking classes related to their future careers (**Figure 8**). Among our survey respondents, 40% reported having taken coursework related to a future career, compared to 42% who indicated they had not and 18% who were unsure if they had. Again, the findings were largely similar by race/ethnicity, gender, first-generation college status, and locality.

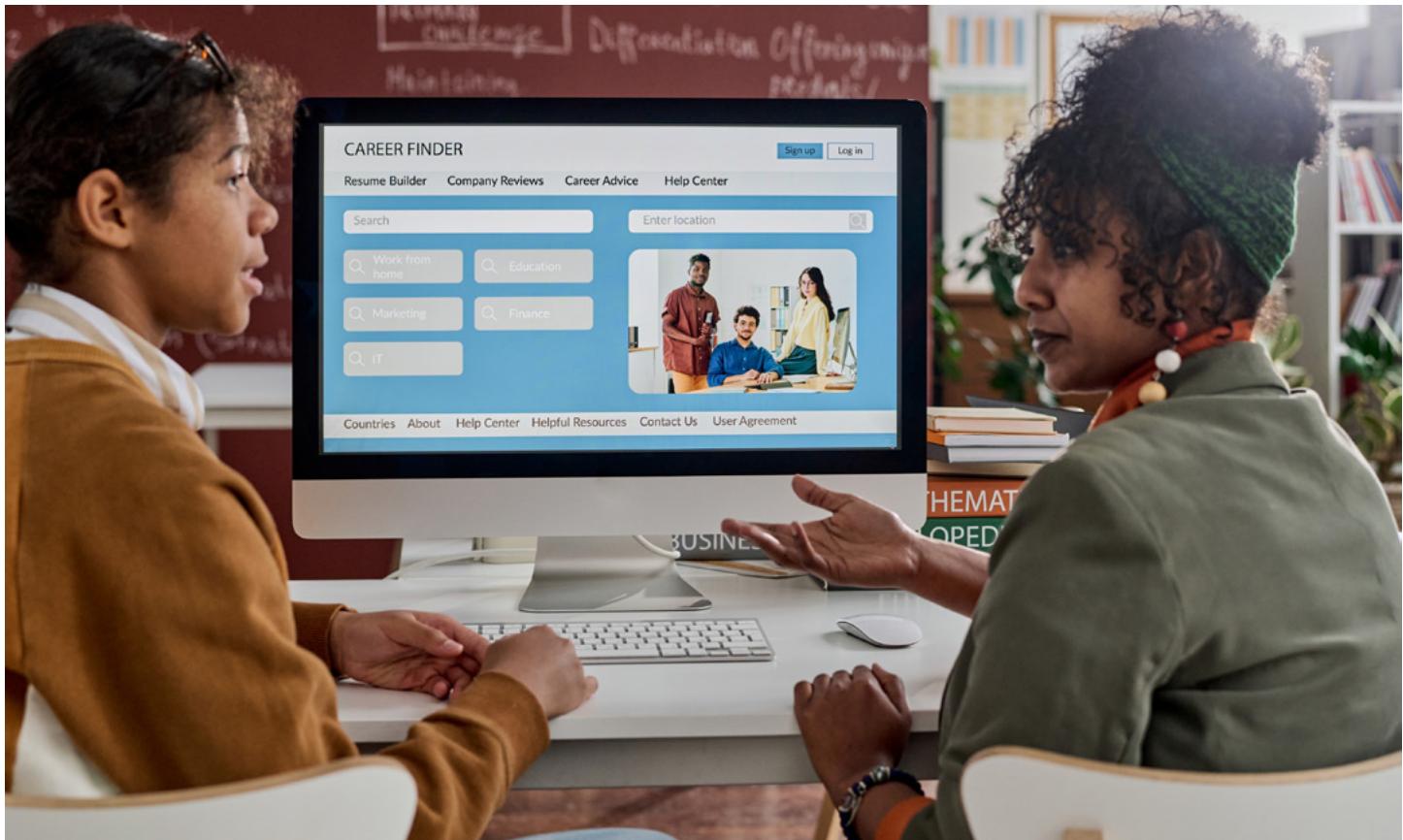
FIGURE 8

Students Taking Courses Related to Future Careers



Note. Have you taken a course related to a future career? (n = 5,591).

POSTSECONDARY PLANS



STUDENTS WITHOUT COLLEGE PLANS

Only 6% ($n = 373$) of respondents said they did not plan to attend or were unsure about attending college in the fall. This group was much more likely to have parents who did not attend college (68%) compared to students whose parents had college experience (32%).

For those respondents who did not intend to start college in the fall ($n = 137$), 78% planned to work full- or part-time. Another 12% had family obligations, and 11% planned to enter the military. When asked why they would not be attending college, students provided many answers, but the most frequent reasons given were that they needed to work (32%), they were taking a gap year and planned to attend college in the future (33%), and college was too expensive (26%). Very few students (less than 8%) indicated that college was not worth the cost.

Some ($n = 236$) students were still undecided about attending college as their senior year came to an end. We asked them what might influence their decision to attend college. A majority (75%) indicated that financial support could affect their college decision, while 46% and 44%, respectively, indicated that family support or academic support might influence their decision. Similar to findings in last year's student survey, financial concerns were prevalent among both students attending and those not attending college.⁷ One student who did not plan to attend college said, "I can't afford college and I can't even qualify for a student loan to pay for it."

COLLEGE-BOUND STUDENTS

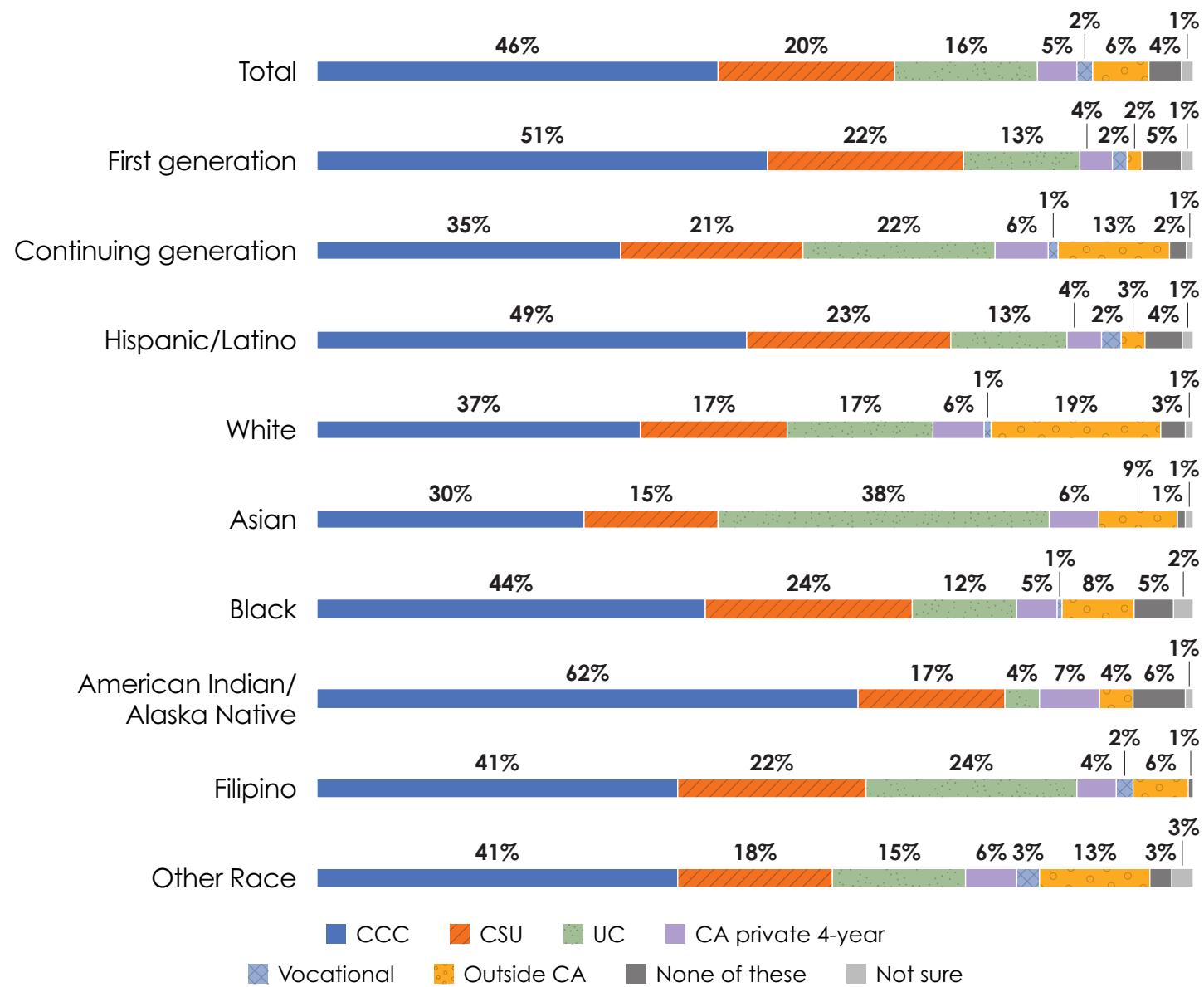
A vast majority of survey participants planned to pursue higher education. We asked college-bound seniors about the institutions to which they applied, the challenges they faced during the application process, and the resources they used when applying to college.

COLLEGE CHOICE

The majority (94%) of survey respondents planned to attend college in fall 2025, and most applied to one or more higher education institutions. Just over half of respondents applied to a community college (55%), 48% applied to a CSU campus, 35% to a UC campus, 19% to a private institution in California, 19% to a school outside the state, and about 3% to a vocational program.

When students planning to attend college were asked where they would likely attend in the fall, just under half (46%) reported that they planned to attend a community college, 20% planned to attend a CSU campus, and 16% planned to attend a UC campus. Another 5% planned to attend a private institution in the state, and 6% planned to attend an out-of-state institution, while 2% said they would start a vocational program (**Figure 9**).

FIGURE 9
Most Likely College of Attendance



Note. Where are you most likely to attend college this fall? Total students ($n = 5,905$), those with generation status ($n = 4,831$), and those with race/ethnicity ($n = 4,238$). CCC = California Community Colleges; CSU = California State University; UC = University of California. Percents for each group may not add to 100% due to rounding.

There were some considerable differences between subgroups of students. First-generation college students were more likely to indicate plans to enroll in community college or CSU. In contrast, continuing-generation students were more likely planning to attend a UC, private, or out-of-state school. Black and Hispanic/Latino students were much more likely to be planning to start at a community college or CSU.

Not all students found the process of applying for college easy. Just over half of respondents who applied for college reported that they did not face challenges during the application process (52%). Others reported a variety of challenges, most common among them being not understanding questions on the applications (27%), not having enough information about how to apply (17%), difficulty submitting other required items (15%), and trouble entering coursework (13%). This pattern is similar for students of different races and ethnicities as well as those with varying levels of parental education. One student shared:

“I am a first-generation student, nobody told me how to even apply. I had to look for people who knew. And when applying to classes, I also didn’t know how to and which [classes] I had to take. A counselor that I had to seek out for taught me!”

Some students also struggled to balance schoolwork, extracurricular activities, and college applications. One student explained:

“[Applying to college is] too time-consuming; wish we had a class in high school to help us go through the application process.”

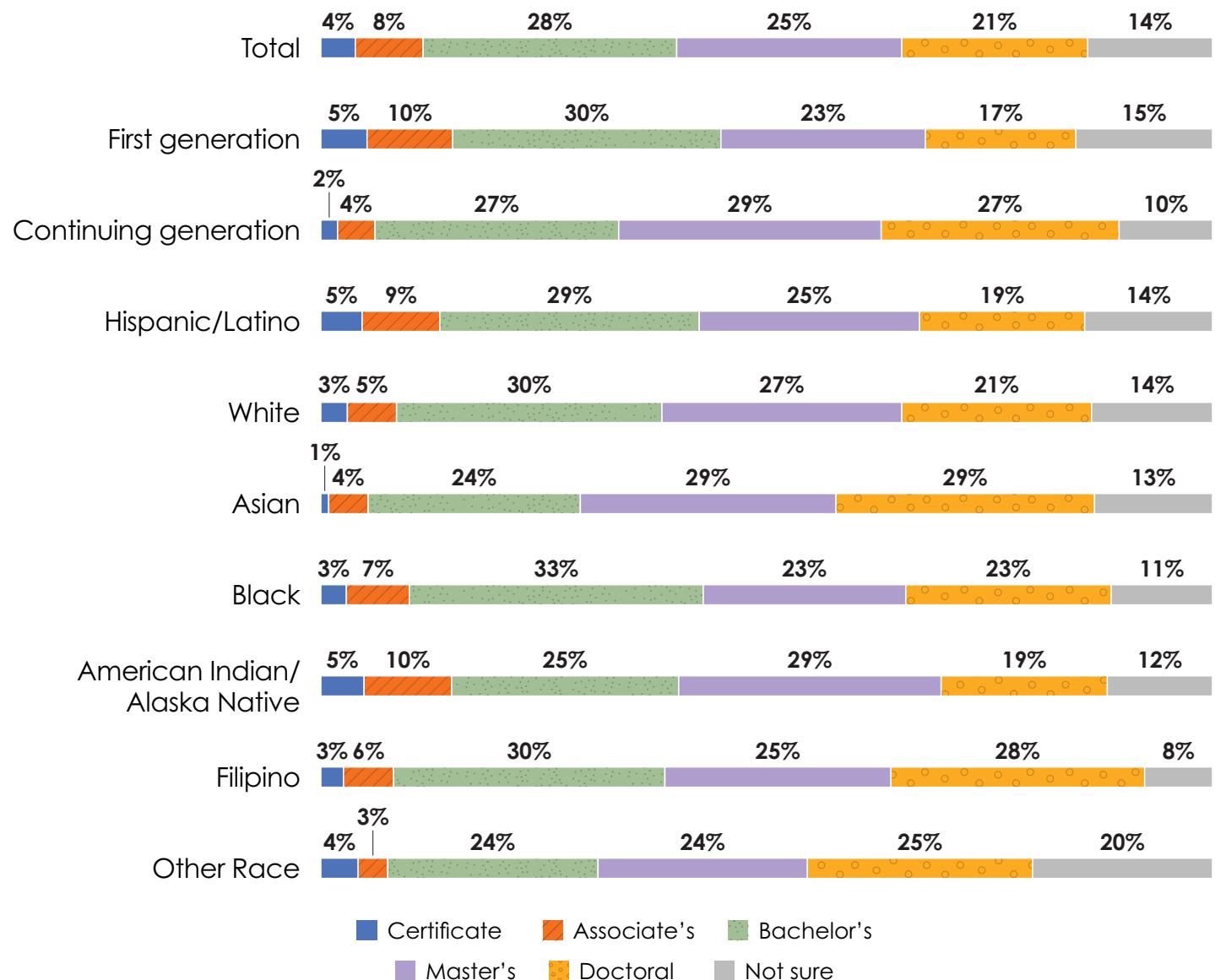
Some interviewed students reported receiving support with applications during college and career preparatory classes, such as AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), or during English classes, which they credit as helping them overcome application challenges.

DEGREE ASPIRATIONS

We asked students about the highest degree they hope to earn upon completing their education. Survey respondents reported high levels of educational aspirations, with 75% hoping to earn a bachelor's degree or higher. Just under half (46%) hoped to earn an advanced degree: 25% a master's degree and 21% a doctoral degree. Approximately 8% and 4% of respondents hoped to attain an associate's degree or a certificate in a vocational or technical field, respectively.

Degree aspirations were similar across racial/ethnic groups and among first- and continuing-generation students, as most hoped to attain a bachelor's or advanced degree (e.g., master's or doctoral degree). There were some key differences, though (Figure 10). First-generation students were less likely to seek bachelor's degrees and advanced degrees compared to non-first-generation students (70% vs. 83%). Differences between racial/ethnic groups were smaller. However, Pacific Islander students were the least likely to aspire to a bachelor's or advanced degree (69%) while Filipino and Asian students were the most likely (84% and 81%, respectively).

FIGURE 10
Student Hopes for Highest Degree Attainment



Note. What is the highest degree you hope to attain? Total students ($n = 5,630$), those with generation status ($n = 4,828$), and those with race/ethnicity ($n = 5,163$).

Given that almost half of the students in our survey planned to attend a community college in the fall but 75% planned to achieve a bachelor's or advanced degree, we can already see that many students were considering transferring to a 4-year university. In the next section, we focus on students who are planning to attend a community college first and then transfer.

TRANSFER-INTENDING STUDENTS

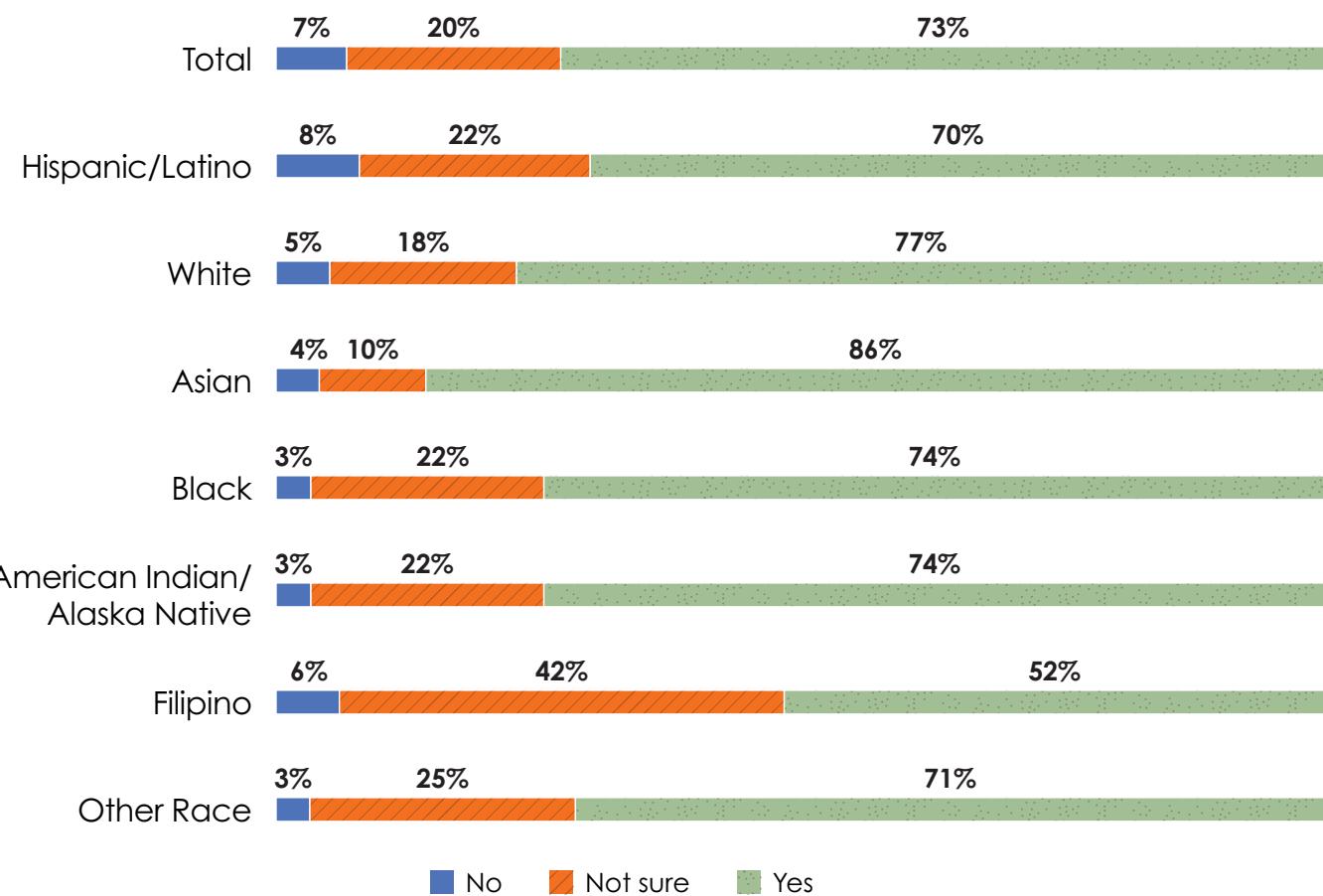


The majority of California students who begin college immediately after high school graduation attend a community college.⁸ Students at community colleges may earn degrees or certificates or transfer to a 4-year university to earn a bachelor's degree. In fact, in 2022–23 more than 33,000 students (or about one third) who graduated with bachelor's degrees from California's public 4-year universities were transfer students.⁹

Community college serves as an accessible entry point into higher education, particularly for students who may not feel academically prepared for immediate enrollment at a 4-year institution or who need the financial flexibility that community colleges offer. California Community Colleges (CCC) offer low tuition, and grant programs may reduce tuition to zero for many students.

Most of the respondents in our sample (72%) who planned to start at a community college intended to transfer to a 4-year university (**Figure 11**). About 69% of first-generation students and 82% of continuing-generation students planned to transfer. There were notable differences across racial/ethnic subgroups in students' plans to transfer: Asian respondents had the highest intentions to transfer to a 4-year university (86%), compared to Hispanic/Latino (70%) and Filipino (52%) students. It's important to note that very few students indicated they were not intending to transfer, as only about one in five students remained unsure of their transfer plans upon graduation from high school. This group represents many potential transfers if the right information and support can be delivered to students.

FIGURE 11
Student-Reported Transfer Plans for Those Starting at a Community College



Note. Do you plan to transfer to a 4-year university? Only students who indicated that they were starting at a community college were asked this question ($n = 2,203$).

CHOOSING THE TRANSFER PATHWAY

Many graduating seniors shared the same primary goals for attending a community college before transferring, with 70% of respondents reporting completing general education requirements as a primary goal. Respondents also cited earning an associate's degree (62%) and exploring majors and career paths before transferring (34%), with 2% citing other goals.

Affordability (71%) and proximity (47%) were the top two cited reasons for choosing the community college transfer pathway. Approximately 23% of respondents were unsure about their career paths or majors and wanted to consider options before committing to a 4-year university. Another 24% of students felt they were not academically prepared to attend a 4-year university directly from high school.

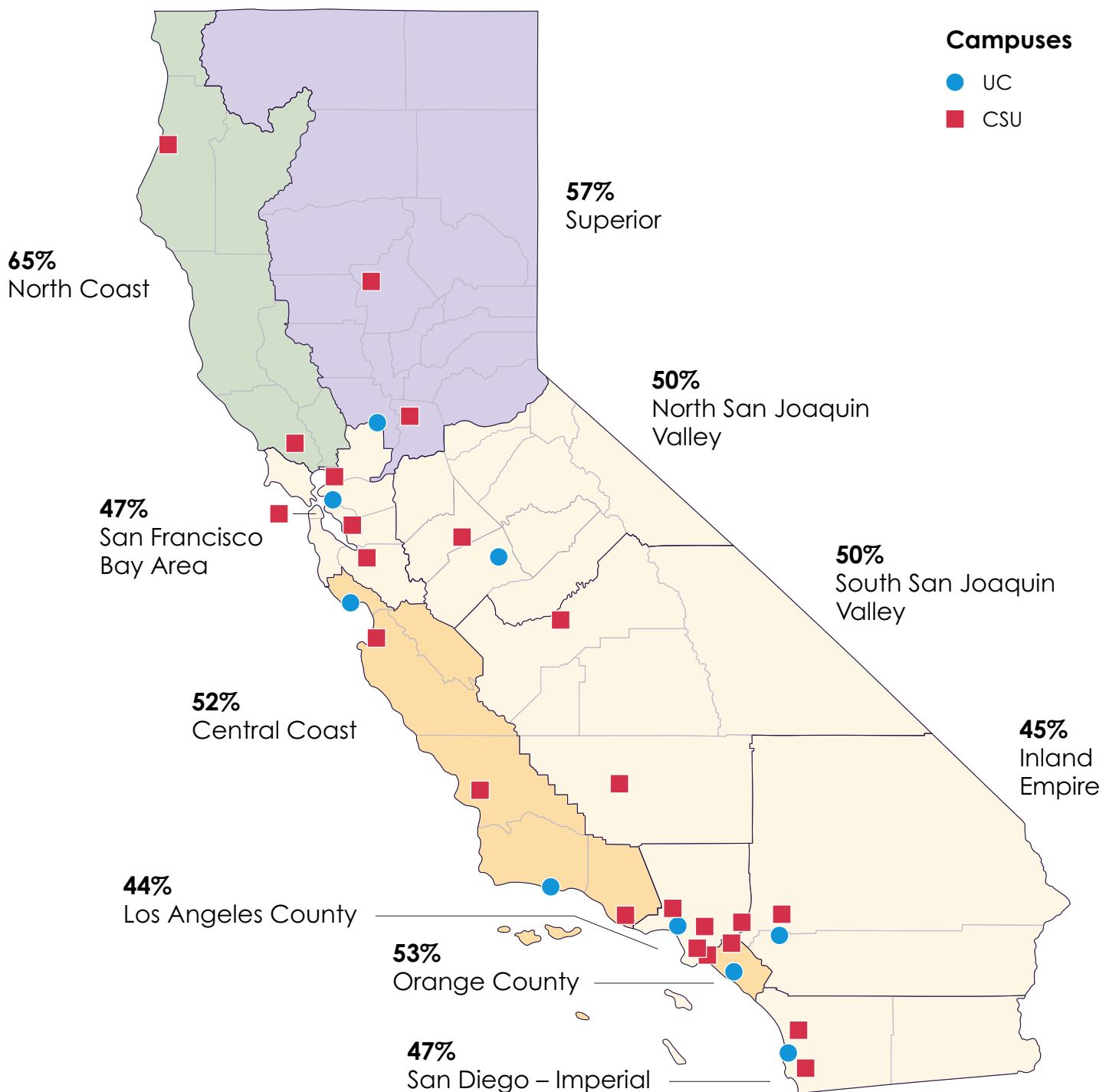
A transfer-intending Latino student from the San Francisco Bay Area shared:

“I didn't get amazing grades or anything like that, so I wasn't sure if the colleges were gonna accept me. ... Now I'm starting fresh at community college, so I'll hopefully get the grades up, and then the higher GPA hopefully should get me a better chance of going into the four-year college, and also to complete my required classes, my required units, to be able to transfer.”

During an interview, a White student from the Central Coast, who intends to transfer to a 4-year university, explained that her main reasons for choosing the transfer pathway were proximity to home and affordability:

“I guess location and money. I didn't wanna pay, like, tens of thousands of dollars to go to college, when I could go to college for free. And then, also just, closeness to home. ... And then it also allows me to work while I'm at school. ... So I was like, let me just do free college, and then go make money on the side while I'm at it.”

Despite affordability and proximity being the primary factors statewide in students' decisions to transfer, there were some notable differences across regions (**Figure 12**). Students in the North Coast, Superior, and Orange County regions were especially likely to cite proximity as a reason to choose the transfer pathway. The North Coast and Superior regions each have two CSU campuses, while Superior also has one UC campus (Davis), and Orange County has many 4-year universities nearby.

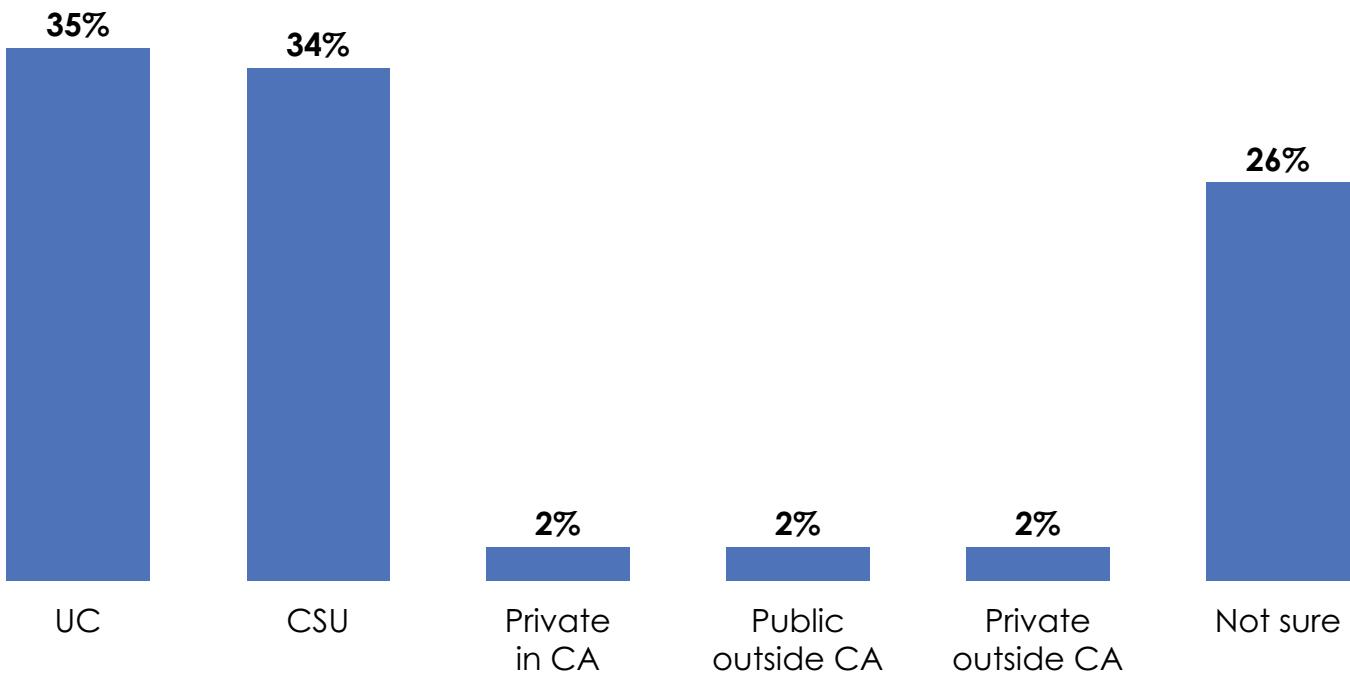
FIGURE 12**Share of Students Citing Proximity to Home as a Reason to Choose the Transfer Pathway, by Region**

Note. Why did you decide to transfer? Answer: "Proximity to home." Only students who intended to transfer were asked this question ($n = 1,317$).

TRANSFER DESTINATIONS

Of the students planning to transfer to a 4-year college or university, 35% intended to transfer to a UC campus and 34% to a CSU campus, the two most common transfer destinations (**Figure 13**). About 26% of respondents were unsure about where they planned to transfer, with the remainder planning to transfer to a private college in California or to colleges outside the state. This pattern is similar for both first-generation and continuing-generation students, with some noticeable differences across regions.

FIGURE 13
Transfer Destinations for Those Intending to Transfer



Note. Where do you intend to transfer? Only students who indicated that they were starting at a community college and intended to transfer were asked this question ($n = 1,865$).

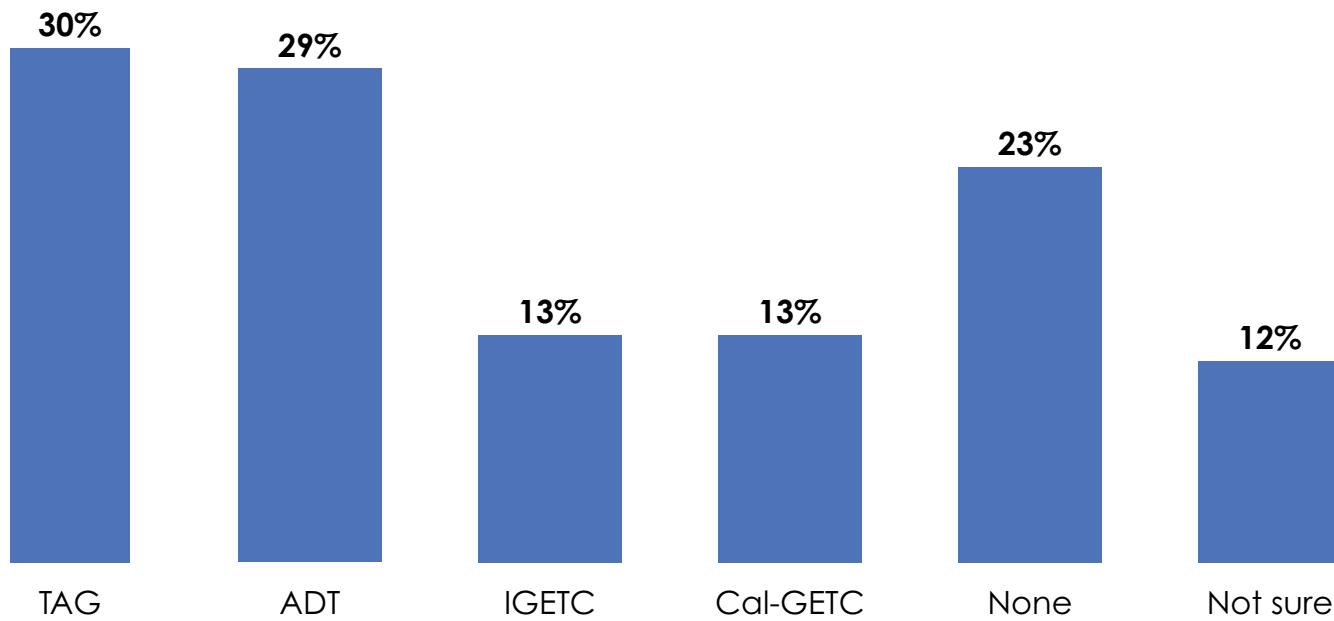
The transfer pathway offers an option for students seeking to complete a bachelor's degree while balancing financial and academic responsibilities. However, the pathways to transfer are not always clear to students. To address this information gap, California institutions have collaborated to create a set of transfer pathways and guidelines that help students navigate the transfer process. One key program is the Transfer Admission Guarantee (TAG), which simplifies the transfer process to six UC campuses. Another important program is the Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT), which facilitates transfers to CSU campuses.

Additionally, the California General Education Transfer Curriculum (Cal-GETC) will replace the Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum (IGETC) in 2025. Both are a series of courses that CCC students may complete to satisfy the lower division breadth and general education requirements before transferring to CSU or UC. One third of students who planned to transfer had heard about the TAG and ADT programs while only 13% had heard about Cal-GETC (Figure 14). About one third of students planning to transfer had not heard of any programs or were unsure if they had, presenting an opportunity for outreach and intervention. This is especially true for first-generation students intending to transfer; they were less likely by 7–9 percentage points to have heard of each of the transfer programs, and more than half had not heard of any or were unsure.

A transfer-intending, White, continuing-generation woman from Orange County shared her experience searching for college information on websites:

“ *My favorite resource for transferring is assist.org, because every time I find a college I’m interested in, like, I was looking at Davis the other day, you can see exactly what they want from you. And I just want to be prepared, or even ahead.”*

FIGURE 14
Awareness of California’s Transfer Programs and Paths



Note. Have you heard of these transfer programs? TAG = Transfer Admission Guarantee; ADT = Associate Degree for Transfer; IGETC = Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum; Cal-GETC = California General Education Transfer Curriculum. This question was asked only of students starting at a community college and intending to transfer ($n = 1,867$).

COLLEGE EXPECTATIONS



Students planning to attend college in the fall reported anticipating numerous challenges in the transition, even though 52% of students strongly believed they were academically prepared. Overall, students' largest worries were the affordability of and the transition to college. Specifically, students worried about finding a sense of community and socializing, adjusting to a new environment, feeling homesick, and coping with the academic rigors of college. This can be especially challenging for students with different learning abilities. One student shared:

“ [I anticipate] challenges with my learning disability. I have dyslexia. I fear it's holding me back a bit.”

The cost of college was a major concern. Some expected to work part-time to cover living expenses and textbooks. Many of these students were concerned about balancing their coursework, extracurricular activities, and part-time jobs. As one student expressed:

“ The biggest challenge I will face in college will be managing my time and trying to find a balance between academics, social life, work, and more. I fear that I will be overwhelmed by the pressures and responsibilities that I have to endure to achieve my goals and to become successful in college.”

Mental health and well-being were additional concerns that students anticipated—specifically, experiencing imposter syndrome, procrastinating, remaining motivated, and maintaining mental health. Despite these concerns, respondents were hopeful about their ability to persevere:

“ I think maintaining my mental health will be hard. I have always struggled with my mental health, and with the major changes that are going to happen, I know I will struggle a bit but I know I will get through it.”

Prospective transfer students also anticipated challenges in their transfer process. The two primary concerns students voiced regarding transfer were academic preparation and the application process:

“ I am concerned about the amount of time it will take for me to fulfill the credits and courses needed to properly transfer to the university of my choice. I am also worried about how academically successful my GPA will be, especially when compared to my GPA now, when it is time for me to transfer.”

Affordability was another concern. Although students tended to opt for the transfer route to save money for a 4-year university, some students still worried about their ability to afford the cost of attending. One student shared:

“ I’m worried about not being able to transfer to the university I want to attend, and financial concerns. Fear of not being able to afford four years of university tuition.”

Students were also concerned about being accepted into the university they wanted to attend. While pathway programs help students meet the eligibility requirements for 4-year universities, admission to a specific university is not guaranteed. Additionally, some students worried that their future university might not meet their expectations and that they might regret their decision:

“ I do have concerns if what happens if the college I decide to transfer to isn’t what I hope for, and if it’s still possible to try and transfer somewhere else instead in any case where I could get better help in a different college.”

EXCITEMENT ABOUT COLLEGE

Despite the anticipated challenges and worries about college, students expressed excitement about the next chapter of their academic journey. Students looked forward to the independence of living on their own and to personal growth. They were excited to explore new cities and meet people from diverse backgrounds and worldviews. Many students were also excited to receive the financial aid necessary to be the first in their families to attend college. One student shared:

“ [I’m excited about] all the financial help the school is giving me and being the first in my family to have the opportunity to attend college, and also the help the college staff is giving me as an immigrant student.”

Academically, students were excited to explore majors, careers, and interests:

“ What excites me most about college is the opportunity to explore potential career paths and learn new things, discover what I’m truly passionate about, and gain knowledge that will help me in the future.”

“ I am excited to learn more about myself through engaging with my academics and campus culture. I want to connect with my peers and professors, especially those related to my study (English) to figure out how I want to approach a professional career following college.”

“ The ability to advance my education in tandem with broadening my interests, world experiences, and career opportunities.”



CONCLUSION



This survey offers important insights into the experiences, postsecondary plans, expectations, and apprehensions of California's high school seniors as they transition to adulthood. The student responses also highlight crucial information gaps, opportunities for intervention, and important data points that education systems in the state can work to remedy. C2C should consider these challenges and opportunities when building the statewide data system and tools for students, families, and practitioners.

Information gaps exist throughout the pipeline from high school to college, starting with college eligibility. Survey respondents are mostly on track for A–G completion and eligibility admissions to a California 4-year public institution. However, one in five students is not sure if they are on track for A–G completion. Those who would be first-generation college students are twice as likely to be unsure, as well as about one quarter of Hispanic/Latino and American Indian/Alaskan Native respondents. Additionally, 30% of students who indicated they were not on track for A–G completion reported not knowing about the requirements. As found in previous surveys, students also faced many information gaps when applying for college: 22% did not understand questions on the applications, and 14% did not have enough information to apply. Data and tools aimed at helping parents, teachers, counselors, and students with information about eligibility and application requirements could eliminate some of these barriers.

Student responses indicated several possible intervention points for information, tools, and guidance for students. About 73% of our respondents who are starting at a community college intend to transfer to a 4-year university. However, one in five is still unsure if they will transfer, and those rates are even higher for those who will be first-generation college students. More information about the benefits of transferring and how to transfer might aid many students who have not yet made up their minds. In fact, more information can also help students who do plan to transfer. Those who intend to transfer aren't always aware of the programs and policies that have been created to streamline the process. One third of students said they did not know about the primary transfer pathways to UC and/or CSU. Early instruction about transfer options and pathways could smooth the transition for those who are currently unsure or uninformed. Providing parents, teachers, and practitioners with information and tools could help them guide students seamlessly into community college with a plan for transfer, if that is a student's goal.

Our survey shows that students are preparing for their future careers while in high school. Most respondents have a future career in mind, and just over half of students, especially those who would be first in their families to go to college, learned about their career fields in high school. However, few respondents reported participating in career planning in high school, and less than half reported taking high school coursework related to their future career. As C2C continues to build its tools to support career planning, more data on college majors and employment outcomes—including earnings—could help students decide on career paths while in high school.

C2C is leading the way in providing the tools and data that span multiple data sources in the state to support students and families as students transition out of high school and into their adult lives. These tools are intended to meet the needs of students and families across California and to better inform their college and career planning. C2C's current Student Pathways [Dashboard](#) provides a breakdown of the different types of degrees students earn, time to degree completion, and earnings after college. In an effort to get the dashboard into the hands of more students, families, and teachers throughout the state, C2C recently launched a Lesson Plan Challenge encouraging educators to explore ways to incorporate the Student Pathways Dashboard into their instruction. These lesson plans are aimed at helping practitioners recognize the value in the dashboards, while helping students plan life after high school and facilitating data literacy. With efforts like these, hopefully students, parents, practitioners, and researchers can work together to leverage the available data tools to improve the transition from high school to college and career.

TECHNICAL APPENDIX

SURVEY CONSTRUCTION AND ADMINISTRATION

The online survey consisted of 58 total questions, although students did not see every question because some were displayed only after a specific prior answer was selected. The questions consisted of 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 28 to July 11, 2025, to capture students who completed the FAFSA over the summer.

POPULATION, RESPONDENTS, AND ANALYTICAL SAMPLE

The survey was sent to the population of students who filed and completed the FAFSA or CADAA during the 2025–26 cycle. Students reported on various dimensions of their preparation and plans for the future. In response to open-ended questions, students described in their own words the challenges and excitement they anticipated before starting college.

We present data from the 6,980 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 2025. Those who intended to enroll in college were then asked about their college plans; these students compose our sample for this report. We also capture differences in student experience by self-reported race/ethnicity, gender identity, and parental education. 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 and another that examined students' attitudes and behaviors following the first year of California's universal FAFSA program.

It is important to note that our sample does not contain students who did not attempt to complete a financial aid application or who were unable to apply for financial aid via the FAFSA or CADAA. Students may be less likely to complete a FAFSA or CADAA application if they do not plan to attend college or pursue postsecondary training. Additionally, some students may intend to apply for financial aid but are discouraged by the complexity of the application process or are hesitant to disclose their citizenship status to the federal government.

Although we were only able to obtain surveys from just over 2% of the graduating class, the large sample 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 significantly from those of nonrespondents,

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 California. Nevertheless, they capture a critical slice of recent California high school graduates.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The overall senior survey sample contains 6,980 students. In **Table 1**, we present the demographic characteristics of our sample, including race and ethnicity, and compare them to the overall population characteristics of the 2025 census of California public high school seniors. Our sample of respondents is diverse, and their race/ethnicity characteristics resemble the graduating class of 2025 as a whole. A majority (58%) of the students in our sample are Hispanic/Latino, similar to the cohort of 12th graders in 2024–25 (56.5%). In the survey, all subgroups are overrepresented, but the cross section of students covered by the survey proportionally reflects California’s high schools in the same year.

TABLE 1
Survey Sample by Race/Ethnicity

| RACE/ETHNICITY | SENIOR SURVEY SAMPLE (N) | SENIOR SURVEY SAMPLE (%) | 2024–25 12TH-GRADE ENROLLMENT (%) |
|------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Hispanic/Latino | 3,116 | 58.0 | 56.5 |
| White | 783 | 14.6 | 20.5 |
| Asian | 673 | 12.5 | 9.7 |
| Black | 366 | 6.8 | 5.0 |
| Filipino | 168 | 3.1 | 2.6 |
| Native American | 112 | 2.0 | 0.5 |
| Pacific Islander | 29 | 0.5 | 0.4 |
| Other race | 121 | 2.2 | — |
| Total sample | 5,368 | — | — |

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’s public high schools in the 2024–25 academic year, as reported by the California Department of Education’s DataQuest data reporting system (dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/EnrEthGrd.aspx?cds=00&agglevel=state&year=2024-25). Data on graduates were not available at the time of writing.

Students were asked to identify their gender from the options of woman, man, nonbinary, other (please specify), and prefer not to say. Comparing the distribution of gender in the sample to that of the 2025 high school graduating class, we can see that women are overrepresented in our sample (**Table 2**). About 60% of respondents identified as women while only 35% identified as men. Nonbinary students (2%), those who preferred not to say (2%), and those listing another gender (1%) made up the rest of the respondents. The graduating class of 2025 was more evenly split, with approximately 48% female, 52% male, and 0.2% nonbinary students.

TABLE 2
Survey Sample by Gender

| GENDER | N | PERCENTAGE |
|-------------------|-------|------------|
| Women | 3,300 | 60 |
| Men | 1,925 | 35 |
| Nonbinary | 110 | 2 |
| Prefer not to say | 130 | 2 |

Note. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding. $N = 5,465$.

As shown in **Table 3**, about 34% of our sample came from families where the highest reported education level of a parent is an associate's degree (6%), a bachelor's degree (14%), or a graduate or professional degree (14%). While we do not 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. We considered students from families where no parent attended college to be first-generation college students. Almost half of our sample (48%) have parents who did not complete high school (20%) or who did complete high school but did not attend college (28%). This enables us to delve deeper into the experiences and college plans of first-generation college students.

TABLE 3
Survey Sample by Parental Education Level

| PARENTAL EDUCATION | N | PERCENTAGE |
|------------------------------|-------|------------|
| Did not complete high school | 1,082 | 20.1 |
| High school diploma | 1,488 | 27.7 |
| Some college | 607 | 11.3 |
| Associate's degree | 315 | 5.9 |
| Bachelor's degree | 757 | 14.1 |
| Graduate/professional degree | 756 | 14.1 |
| Don't know | 372 | 6.9 |

Note. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding N = 5,377.

A vast majority of respondents came from public schools (95%) while about 3% came from private schools and 2% were homeschooled. Almost half of the respondents spoke a language other than English at home (46%).

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 simply not have wanted to respond to a particular question (i.e., they skipped the question); and/or a student may have stopped and exited the survey before the given question.

TABLE 4
Survey Sample by Grade Distribution

| GRADE DISTRIBUTION | N | PERCENTAGE |
|--------------------|-------|------------|
| Mostly As | 1,645 | 28.2 |
| Mostly As and Bs | 2,406 | 41.3 |
| Mostly Bs and Cs | 1,474 | 25.3 |
| Mostly Cs | 190 | 3.3 |

TABLE 5
Survey Sample by High School Region

| REGION | N | PERCENTAGE |
|----------------------|-------|------------|
| Superior | 516 | 7.5 |
| North Coast | 105 | 1.5 |
| SF Bay Area | 622 | 9.0 |
| N San Joaquin Valley | 173 | 2.5 |
| Central Coast | 347 | 5.0 |
| S San Joaquin Valley | 523 | 7.5 |
| Inland Empire | 674 | 9.7 |
| LA County | 1,292 | 18.7 |
| Orange County | 373 | 5.4 |
| SD—Imperial | 396 | 5.7 |

Note. Regions from California Census 2020, census.ca.gov/regions.



TABLE 6
Survey Sample by Locale

| LOCALE | N | PERCENTAGE |
|--------|-------|------------|
| City | 2,212 | 31.9 |
| Suburb | 2,251 | 32.5 |
| Town | 361 | 5.2 |
| Rural | 321 | 4.6 |

Note. Locale classifications from National Center for Education Statistics, nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Geographic/LocaleBoundaries.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ California Department of Education. (n.d.) *Courses required for California public university*. cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/hs/hsgrttable.asp
- ² About 52% of the total graduating cohort in 2023–24 completed the A–G course sequence. Our sample likely skews toward college enrollees.
- ³ First-generation students do not have a parent that attended college while continuing-generation students have at least one parent who attended college.
- ⁴ Students who indicated that the courses were not required were predominantly planning to attend California Community Colleges.
- ⁵ DE classes are typically community college courses, but we didn't ask students to distinguish who offered the course.
- ⁶ Zeiger Friedmann, E., Bennett, S. R., Kurlaender, M., & Dykeman, K. A. (2024, February). *A strong start for college and career: Dual enrollment participation from 9th to 12th grade* [Infographic]. Policy Analysis for California Education. edpolicyinca.org/publications/strong-start-college-and-career; California Cradle-to-Career Data System. (2024). *Student experience report: 2024 academic year*. c2c.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/C2C-Student-Experience-Report-2024-Academic-Year.pdf
- ⁷ See the 2024 C2C Student Experience Report. c2c.ca.gov/resources/student-experience-report-2024-academic-year
- ⁸ Kurlaender, M., Bennett, S. R., Dykeman, K. A., Naven, M., Martorell, P., & Carrell, S. (2018, December). *Where California high school students attend college*. Policy Analysis for California Education. edpolicyinca.org/publications/where-california-high-school-students-attend-college; Ugo, I., & Assan, E. (2025, April). *College access in California*. Public Policy Institute of California. ppic.org/publication/college-access-in-california
- ⁹ These are 2014–15 public high school graduates who graduated from a public 4-year university in 2022–23; see authors' calculations from data from the California Cradle-to-Career Data System. (2025). *Student pathways data story* (Version number 1). c2c.ca.gov/data-stories/pathways-to-college-in-california

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

California Education Code §10867(b)(5)(A) directs the California Cradle-to-Career Data System (C2C) to conduct an annual student experience audit. The audit is intended to highlight students' lived experiences as they navigate the transition from secondary education to higher education. This work supports the scaling, expanding, operating, and maintaining of C2C's operational tools and data system. For the 2025 report, C2C partnered with the California Education Lab at the University of California, Davis, to capture student experience through a large-scale research study. The California Education Lab thanks College Futures Foundation and Stuart Foundation for their ongoing support of partnerships with state agencies and our collaborative research. We also thank the California Student Aid Commission for its continued partnership on this survey. The authors are grateful to Sherrie Reed, Mary Ann Bates, Amyrose McCue Gill, Mark Briggs, Jessica Moldoff, and Ryan Fuller for aid in developing the survey and report. Research findings are our own and do not necessarily reflect the views of our partners. Any errors or omissions are our own.

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.



California Cradle-to-Career Data System

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