

California College Students' Experiences during the Global Pandemic

JUNE 2021



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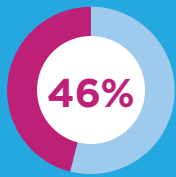
Jessica Moldoff, Ryan Fuller & Patrick Perry
California Student Aid Commission

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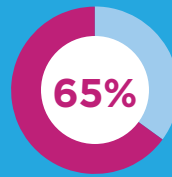
Acknowledgments

The California Student Aid Commission and the California Education Lab at UC Davis are grateful to College Futures Foundation for its ongoing support of our research. The research reported here was supported in part by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305A180227 to the Regents of the University of California and was approved by the UC Davis Institutional Review Board (Case #1600635). The opinions expressed are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education, the public agencies that provided data, or the foundations providing funding to the California Education Lab.

COVID-19 has disrupted many students' educational trajectories and created significant barriers to schooling.



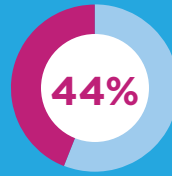
46% of students reduced units during fall term 2020



65% of students do not have a quiet place to work



70% of students missed class and homework due to stress

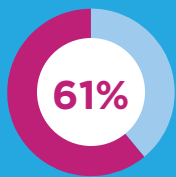


44% of students cannot access online course materials

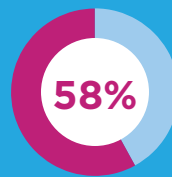


62% of students have unreliable internet connections

The COVID-19 pandemic has also disrupted the lives of college students more generally.



61% of students changed their living situation



58% of respondents had COVID-19 themselves or knew someone who contracted COVID-19



40% of students are caring for family members



COVID-19 has created challenges that I never thought I would have to face. Everyone is struggling and my household's financial situation has forced me to learn to balance work and school so that we can continue to live as normally as possible. This impacts my performance in my classes."

Introduction

Over the past year, college students have faced unprecedented challenges brought about by the COVID-19 global pandemic. This report documents these challenges and the experiences of college students across California as the pandemic disrupted students' educational plans and their livelihoods.

Last spring, the California Student Aid Commission partnered with the California Education Lab at the University of California, Davis to launch a survey to document the experiences of both college students and high school seniors who intended to enroll in college. Our prior reports document the obstacles college students faced early in the pandemic and the great uncertainty high school students expressed about their college futures. Eight months into the pandemic, in November 2020, we administered a second survey to continue to document and understand the students' experiences in these unprecedented times. The survey was sent to all students statewide who submitted federal and state financial aid applications for the 2020-21 academic year. In this report, we focus on the approximately 86,000 survey respondents who indicated that they were enrolled in college in fall 2020. Through selected response and open-ended questions, students shared how COVID-19 has changed multiple aspects of their college experience including course-taking, work, living situations, financial circumstances, and their mental health and wellbeing.

We also captured the differences in student experience by self-reported race/ethnicity, income level (based on students' Expected Family Contribution),¹ and type of college attended—University of California (UC), California State University (CSU) or California Community College (CCC). We focus here on findings from the largest subgroups in each of these categories; further disaggregated data can be found in tables in the online appendix.

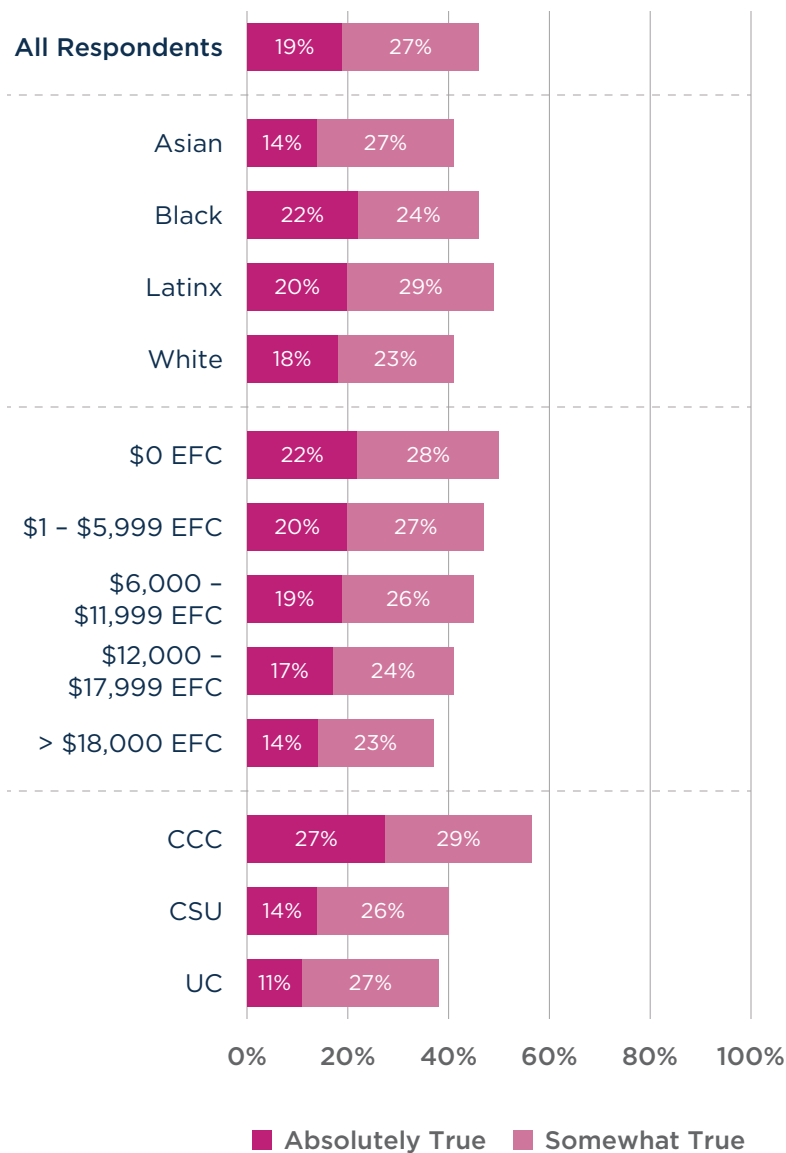


It's made it increasingly difficult to take on the full schedule of online classes topped with work from home and childcare from home all at the same time. My stress is through the roof."

COVID-19 has disrupted students' college enrollment.

Nationwide, undergraduate enrollments have fallen during the pandemic, with the sharpest declines in community colleges.² Among our survey respondents who were enrolled in college, nearly half reported that they reduced their course loads as a result of COVID-19.³

FIGURE 1.
Percent of respondents who reduced units taken during fall 2020



46%

of all students reported they reduced units during fall term 2020 as a result of COVID-19.

Almost half (49%) of Latinx students took fewer units, compared to 46% of Black students, and 41% of Asian and White students.

Half of the lowest-income students reduced their unit load, compared to only 37% of their higher-income peers.

CCC students were more likely to say they reduced unit load than their counterparts at CSU and UC.

WHAT IS EFC?

To determine a student's financial need for college, a number known as the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) is calculated from information reported on a student's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the California Dream Act Application (CADAA), including income, assets, household size, and dependency status. A lower EFC is associated with lower income/assets and greater financial need, whereas a higher EFC is indicative of higher family income/assets and less financial need.

Disruptions in college enrollment were accompanied by numerous other hardships.

The COVID-19 virus threatened the health and well-being of college students and that of their families and friends.

58%

shared they personally knew at least one individual who contracted COVID-19.

Many students knew a friend, classmate or co-worker with the virus. For some, the impact was closer to home. By the time of this survey in late fall 2020, about 7% of respondents had parents who contracted the virus and 6% reported they had contracted the virus themselves. Given that California's COVID-19 infection rates peaked in January 2021, many more students may have been infected or had someone close to them infected in the months following this survey.



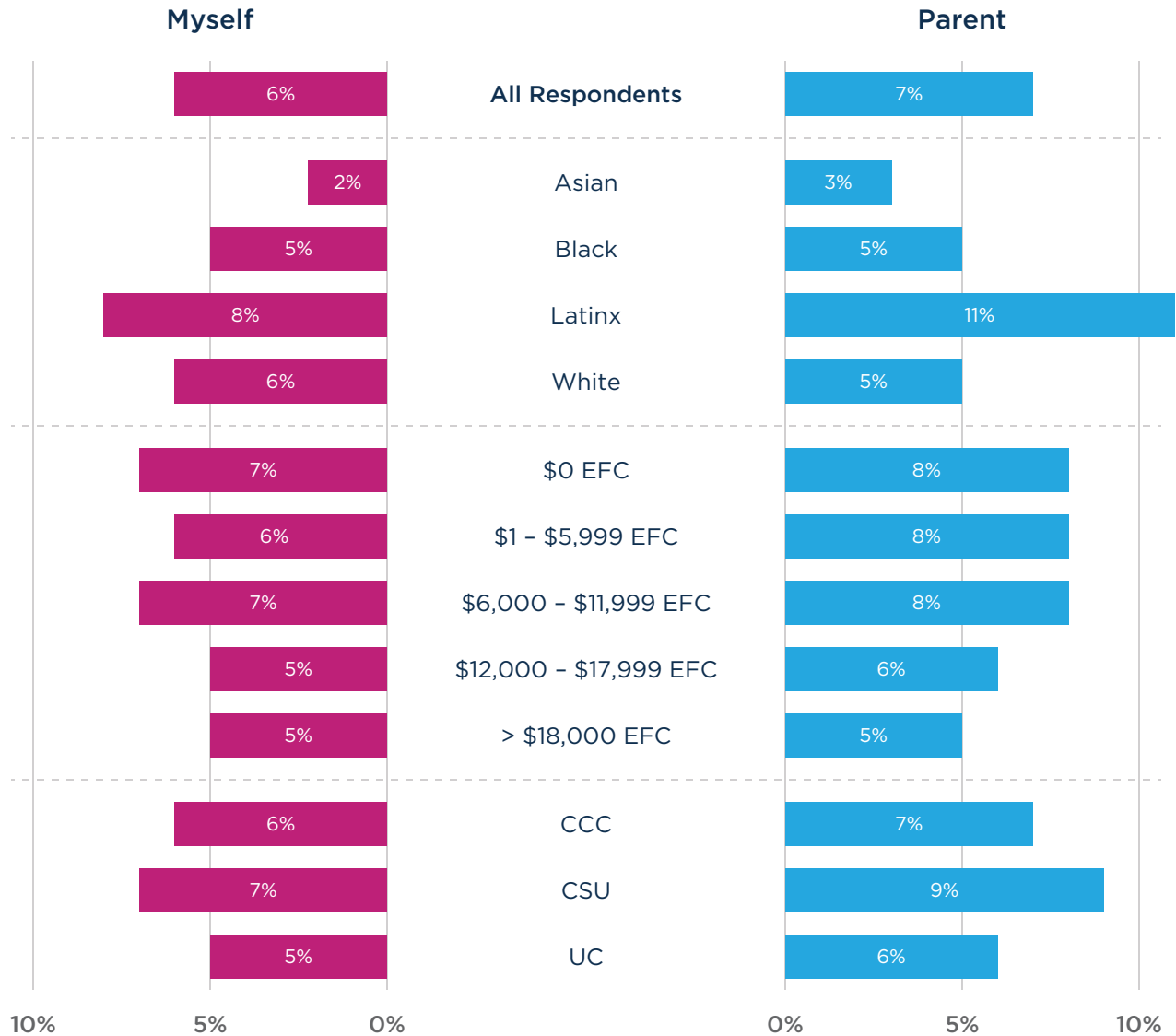
“

I have been exposed to Covid and [it] led me to worry for my own health. I then found out I had no health insurance and was staying in my car because I have family with underlying medical conditions. Then my mental health was declining rapidly. The last thing on my mind was school.”

The percent of students who knew someone with COVID-19 differed by race/ethnicity and income. Latinx students were more likely to have COVID-19 themselves or report having a parent who contracted it than respondents from other racial/ethnic subgroups. There were also big differences by income: The lowest-income students had the highest reported rates of personal or parent infection with COVID-19.

FIGURE 2.

Percent of respondents who got sick with COVID-19 themselves or whose parents contracted COVID-19



The pandemic also significantly affected students' employment, whether through loss of employment due to pandemic closures or an increase in work hours to help support family members suffering from the virus or unemployment.

Nearly 50%

of respondents reported working fewer hours; a third reported they are working more.



“

I have had to work more some weeks and work less some weeks. I can't focus on school because I don't have a quiet space to focus. I am losing motivation as online school progresses; I am behind on assignments and I'm afraid I will fail classes.”

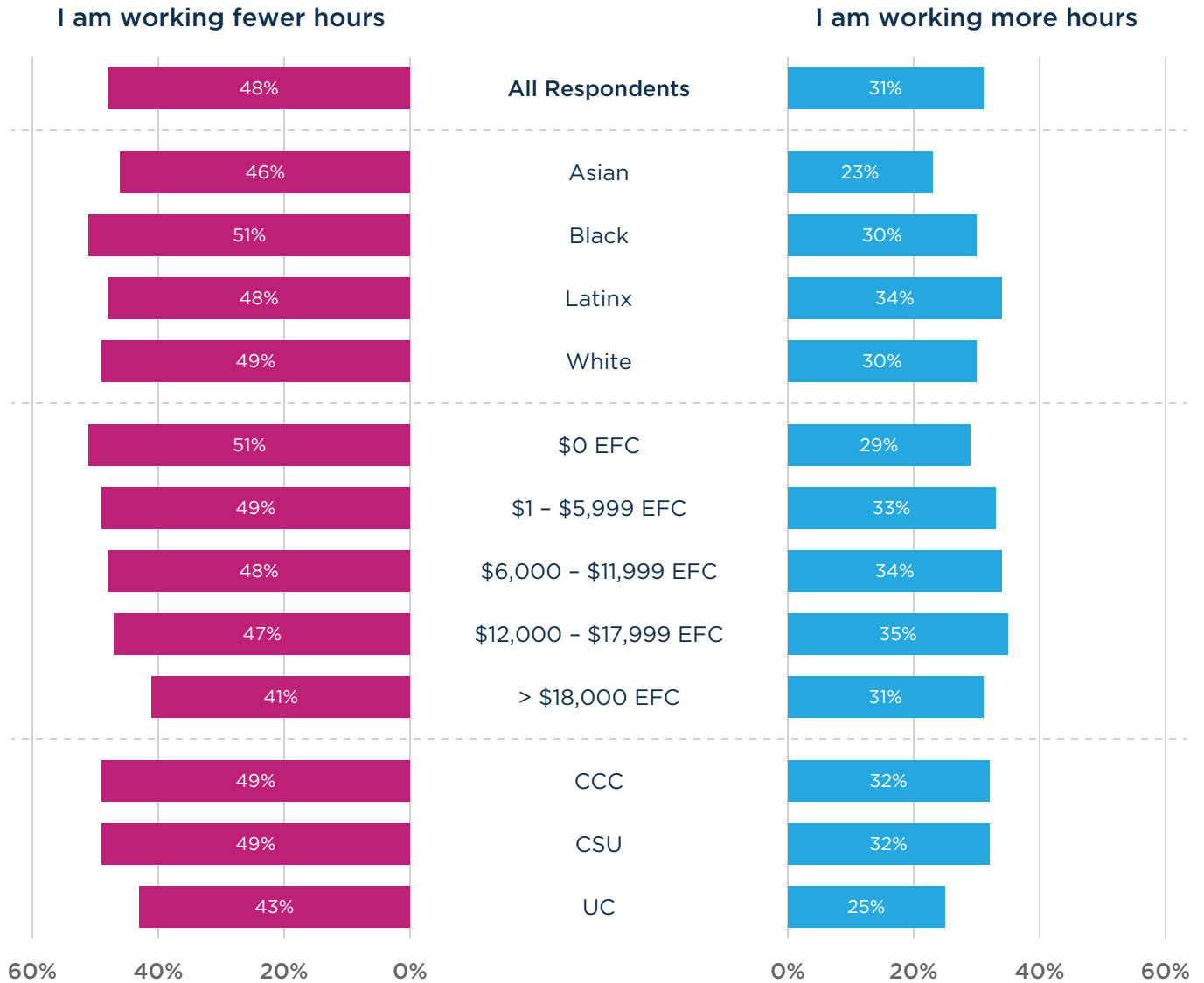
“

I lost my job as a direct result of quarantine and we can barely afford to feed the family let alone buy books and software for my classes.”

Shifts in work demands varied by subgroup. A greater proportion of Black students reported working fewer hours than students from other racial/ethnic subgroups, while a greater proportion of Latinx students reported working more compared to their peers. Almost half of CCC and CSU students worked fewer hours, compared to only 43% of UC students.

FIGURE 3.

Percent of respondents working more or fewer hours



Connectivity and technology problems are big impediments to online learning.

One of the most immediate impacts of COVID-19 was the physical closure of college campuses and the move to remote instruction. In the middle of spring term 2020, colleges and universities shifted quickly to online instruction and students were expected to attend courses through virtual platforms and access materials through online portals. Most students expressed concern about the shift to remote learning and many lacked access to the necessary technology and connectivity to do so.

Our Spring 2020 survey revealed that 90% of respondents had concerns about online classes and 69% were worried about paying for technology and internet access. Despite efforts to provide devices and internet access by colleges across the state, lack of available and reliable technology remained a stressor for many college students in fall 2020.



“

Everything has been switched to online classes and with no reliable access to the internet, it has been somewhat difficult for me to complete my work.”

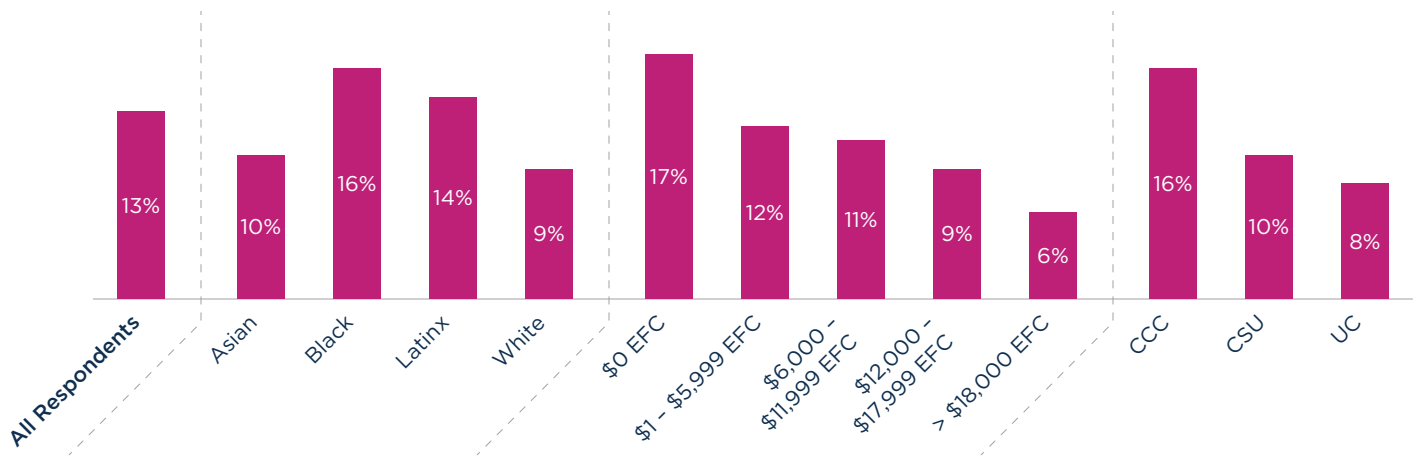
“

It's hard to access class because of bad internet connection.”

13% of students do not have a computer readily available for online coursework, with remarkable disparities between subgroups of students. Lack of access to a computer was disproportionately experienced by Black students and students with a lower EFC. Twice as many Community College students lacked access to a computer than those attending a UC campus.

FIGURE 4.

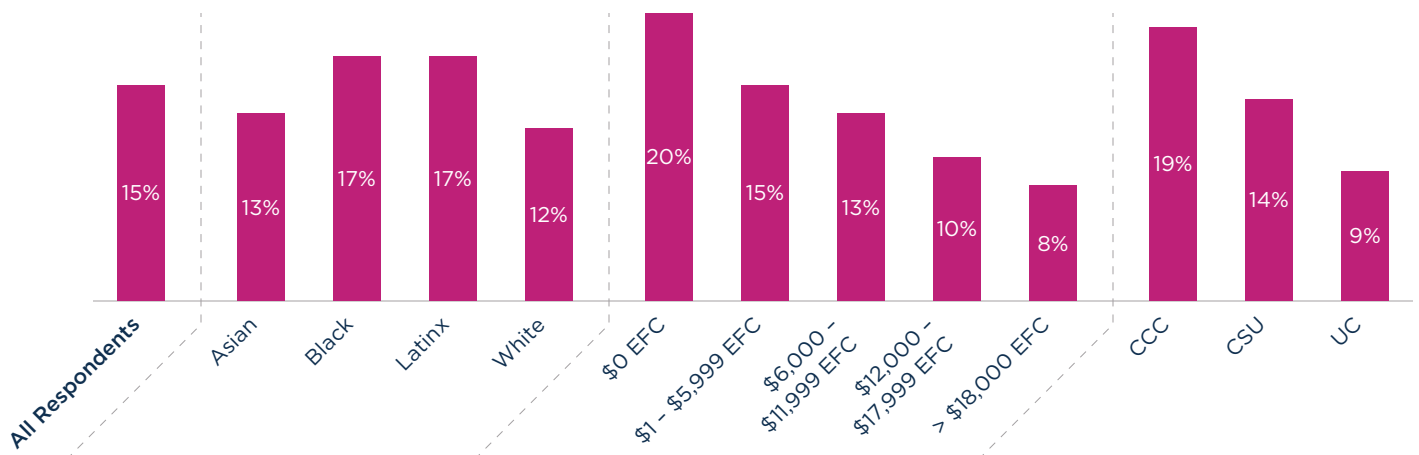
Percent of respondents in each subgroup lacking computer access



15% of students relied on wireless hotspots, DSL or dial-up connections for internet access, presumably with less reliability than broadband or satellite service. A greater proportion of Black and Latinx students relied on hotspots, DSL or dial-up than their Asian and White counterparts. Community College students were twice as likely to rely on hotspots, DSL or dial-up internet than UC students. Reliance on the less reliable internet connections was highest among low-income students.

FIGURE 5.

Percent of respondents in each subgroup relying on wireless hotspots, DSL or dial-up connections for internet access



Even when devices and connectivity were readily available, many students struggled with unreliable internet and challenges accessing course materials. The struggles were reported at similar rates among students from all racial/ethnic backgrounds and income levels, as well as across types of higher education institutions.

62%

of students reported unreliable or unpredictable internet connections at least some of the time.

22%

report they must leave the house to access reliable internet.

“

The internet connection is unstable because we have three people using the internet at the exact same time for classes.”



44% of students reported difficulty accessing course materials at times.



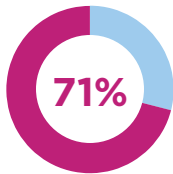
“

It has cost me more because I need the technology to learn and I had to buy a laptop and get WiFi at home. It has also increased my costs for class materials because we have had to use online programs that you have to pay for which aren't needed for in person classes such as mastering chemistry and math. This has made me take fewer classes.”

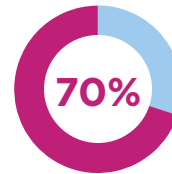
These hardships have impacted students' engagement in coursework. The majority of respondents reported they missed class and/or failed to complete homework due to personal stress. Respondents also reported missing class and/or homework at alarming rates due to a variety of other stressors. Although many students faced these challenges previously, it is likely these obstacles were heightened in fall 2020 as a result of the pandemic.

Reasons for missing class:

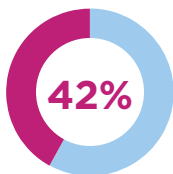
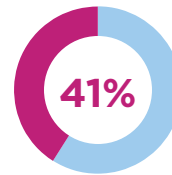
Reasons for missing homework:



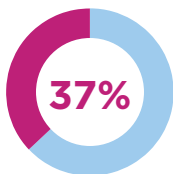
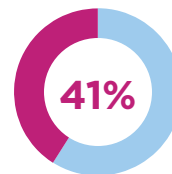
PERSONAL STRESS



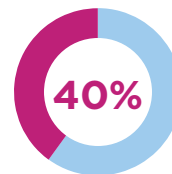
UNRELIABLE INTERNET



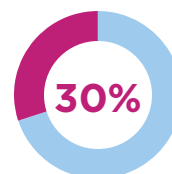
WORK HOURS



CARING FOR FAMILY



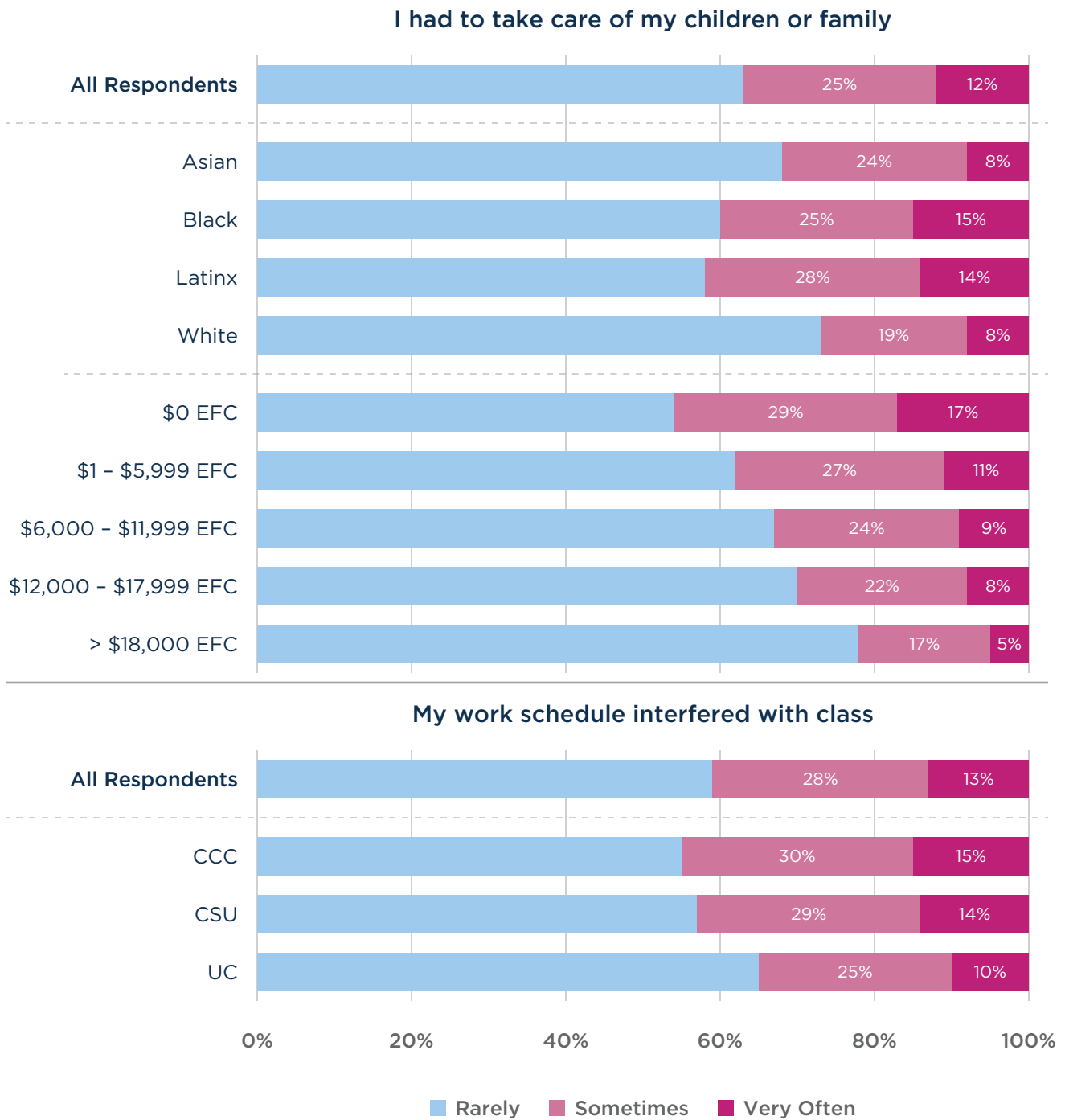
LACKED ACCESS TO MATERIALS



Just as students from different subgroups experienced the challenges of coursework, technology, home life, and finances differently, **the impact of these stressors on engagement in online classes and homework varied across student subgroups.** Students from lower-income backgrounds were much more likely than their higher-income counterparts to miss class and homework as a result of stress, work, caring for children and lack of reliable internet—a gap of at least 10 percentage points in each area of stress. A greater proportion of Black and Latinx students reported missing class due to stress, work, and caring for children than Asian and White students. Students at CCC, CSU and UC reported similar rates of missing class due to stress and internet connectivity, while CCC and CSU students were more likely than UC students to report missing class due to work and caring for children.

FIGURE 6.

Percent of respondents who missed class due to various stressors



I had to resign from my part-time job in order to take care of my toddler and still be able to take classes.”

COVID-19 also caused significant changes to students' living arrangements.

The pandemic also had a profound impact on students' home lives. As physical campuses closed, students living in residence halls were forced to return home or seek private housing. Many students living in off-campus accommodations also retreated to family homes. These changes in living arrangements, and campus closures more generally, brought about additional challenges for college students, including changes to living expenses, difficulty finding a quiet work space, and increased home and child care responsibilities.

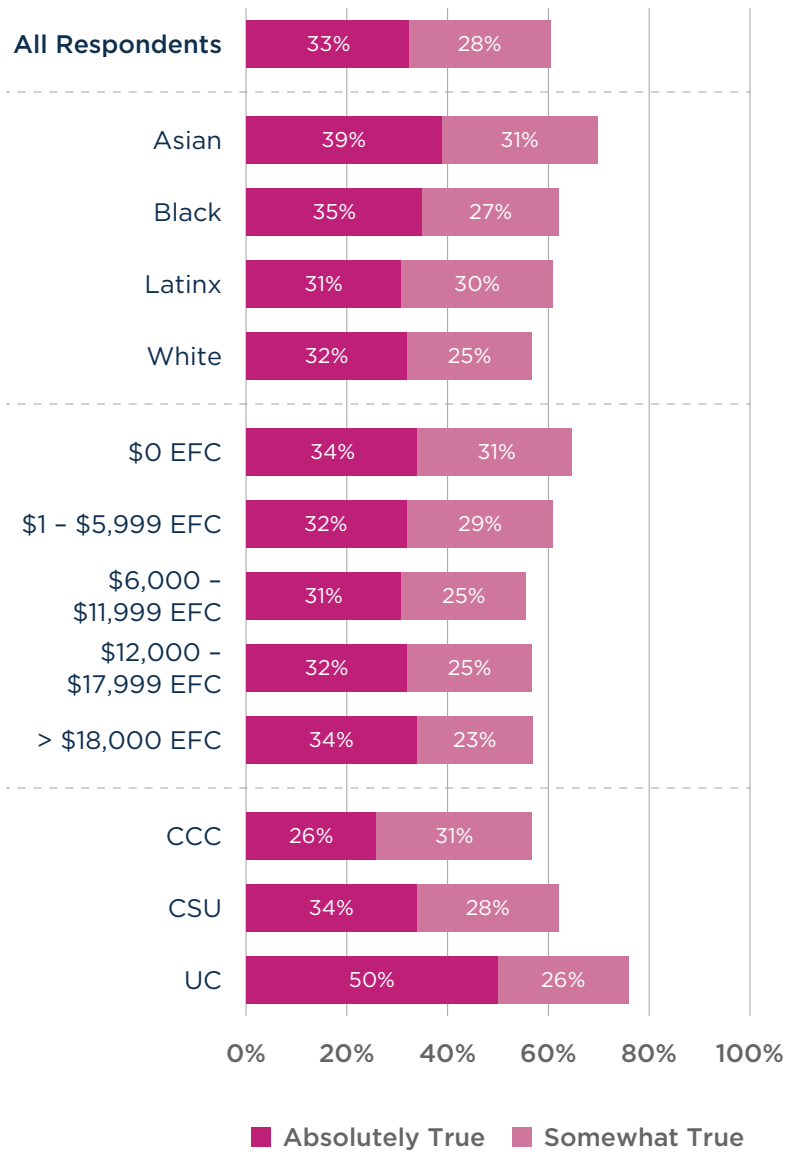


“

I now have to live at home because we can't afford to pay for another rent bill for me to live near campus. I have to care for my siblings and make sure their schooling is in line before I get to my own. I no longer have a steady job and I am working an odd job with minimal hours every week. Overall assignments and expectations from professors [have] increased since we are all home, but some of us have had our responsibilities increase instead of decrease.”

61% of students reported that their living situation changed as a result of COVID-19, with considerable variation across subgroups.

FIGURE 7.
Percent of respondents whose living situation changed

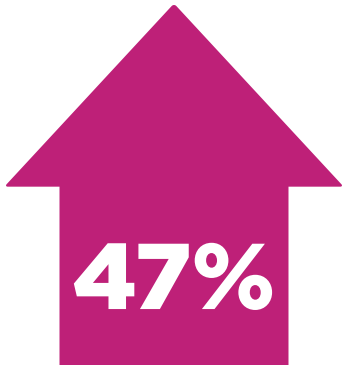


UC students reported the largest impact on living arrangements, with 75% reporting a change to their living situation, likely the result of closures to on-campus housing. Although slightly fewer CSU and CCC students reported changes, rates were still high: 62% among CSU students and 57% among CCC students.

Changes were most pronounced among the lowest-income students: 65% of students with zero EFC reported a change in their living situation compared to only 57% of respondents with greater than \$18,000 EFC.

A higher proportion of Asian students (70%) experienced changes to their living arrangements compared to students from other racial/ethnic subgroups.

About half of all college students reported increased monthly housing expenses and increased weekly food costs during the pandemic. Though the survey did not pinpoint the cause of these increases, the combination of real price increases in food and housing throughout the pandemic and the shift in living situation for many students may be to blame. Many students (38%), however, also experienced a decrease in transportation costs, likely due to the discontinuation of commuting to in-person classes and/or work.



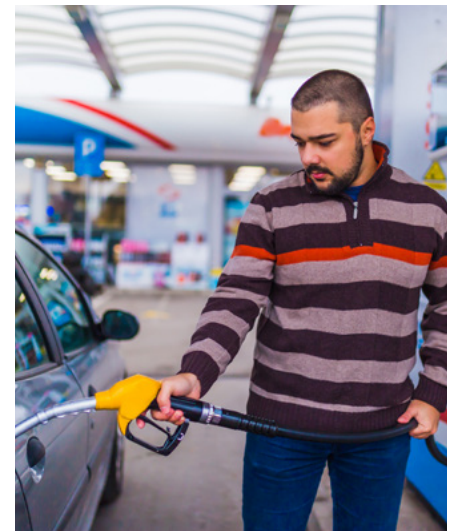
**MONTHLY
HOUSING EXPENSES**



**WEEKLY
FOOD COSTS**



**WEEKLY
TRANSPORTATION COSTS**



“

Along with my rent, food and other expenses increased, buying materials and books for my classes was more challenging than ever before.”

“

COVID-19 has affected my college plans because without me being able to fully work I do not have the financial stability to pay for food, gas, rent and school tuition and books.”

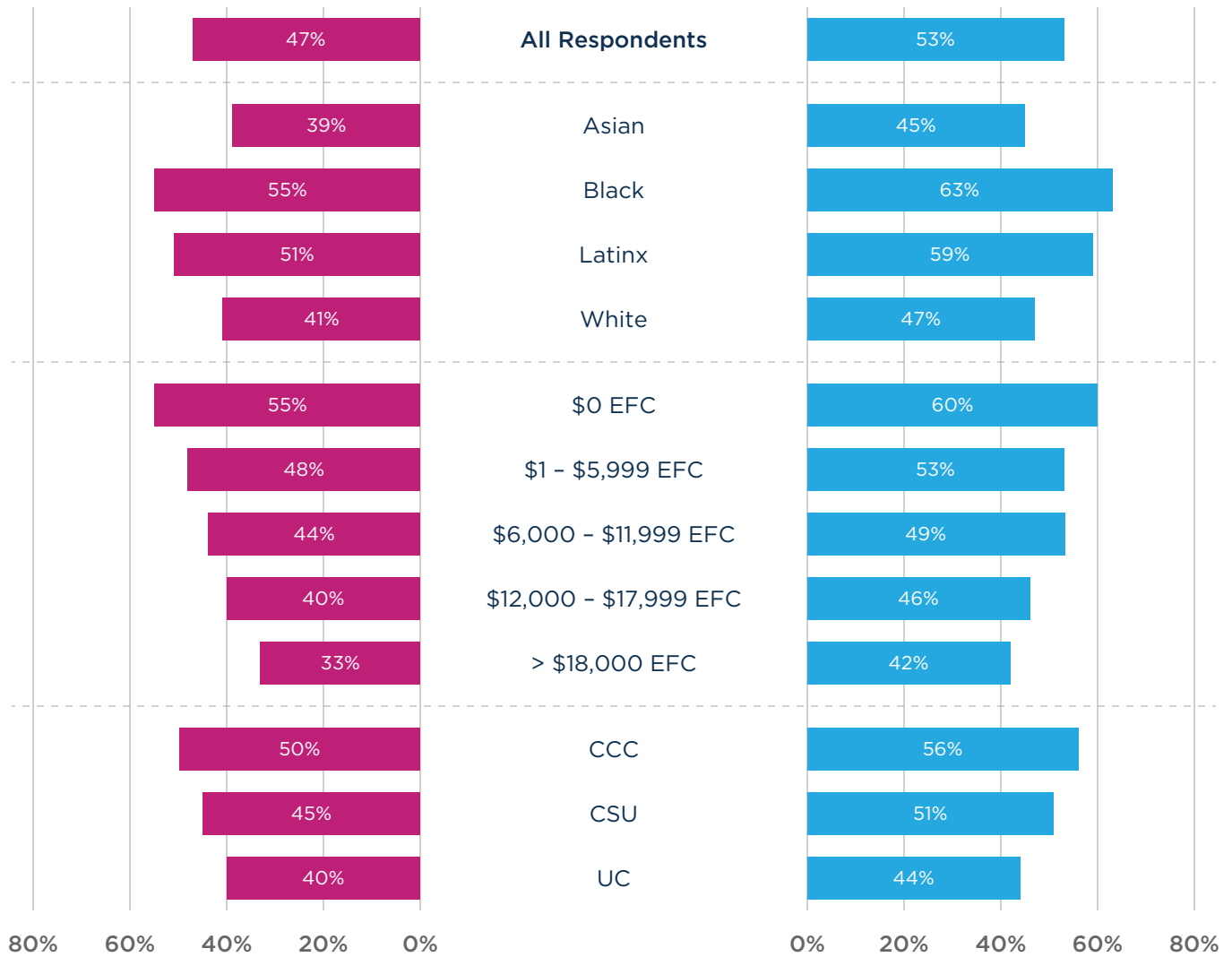
Increased living costs did not affect all students equally. Black and Latinx students reported increased housing and food expenses at higher rates than their White and Asian peers. 56% of CCC students reported increased weekly food expenses, compared to 44% of students attending UC. There were also large differences by income: 60% of students from the lowest-income group faced higher food expenses, while only 42% of students from the highest-income group reported increased costs.

FIGURE 8.

Percent of respondents with increased housing and food costs

Increased monthly housing expenses

Increased weekly food expenses



The shift to remote instruction along with housing changes likely contributed to other challenges in the home lives of college students across California. About two-thirds of survey respondents reported that they did not have a quiet place in their home to work on coursework or to attend virtual classes.

65%

of students do not have a quiet place to work.

“

It is hard to find a quiet space to learn and complete my assignments.”



40% of students reported that caring for family members disrupted their ability to attend classes and complete homework. This was most commonly reported by CCC, Black, and Latinx students. There was also a clear pattern by income, specifically such disruptions steadily decreasing as income level increased.



“

It is harder for me to do my school work when I also have 3 other kids (aged 9-12) doing online school at the same time that need my help, as well as a 11-month-old baby that needs my attention. The house is chaos, my bills are backed up, food is scarce, kids eat all day. The house is never clean even after I clean. Laundry is always full.”

Accumulated stress impacts students' mental health and education trajectories.

The coronavirus pandemic—and the resulting disruptions to education institutions, workplaces, and community services across the state—is taking a toll. In their responses to open-ended questions, students were candid about increased levels of anxiety, worsened mental health, and difficulty keeping up with their school goals.



“

Covid has increased my anxiety levels and made it really difficult to learn and stay focused in class.”

“

My stress/anxiety/depression has gotten a lot worse because of this pandemic and finances. This has caused me to be unmotivated and discouraged. I have to work full time to keep up with my finances and school, but I cannot register for classes on time due to finances not being there at the time.”

Conclusion

The data and voices collected in this second survey tell a clear and troubling story: The pandemic has impacted the lives and educational trajectories of California college students in profound and profoundly uneven ways. While the accumulated toll has been substantial on students overall, disruption and stress have been disproportionately felt by Black and Latinx students, by lower-income students, and by those who attend community colleges.

As California looks toward recovery, the restoration of these students' educational trajectories must be a state and higher education system priority. Necessary investments include financial aid reform to reach more students for whom the real cost of attending college has been too high; new resources to support students' basic needs and housing; expanded health and mental health services; enhanced connectivity; and improved college advising—particularly for those students who will need focused guidance to get back on track. These efforts can help restore the promise and opportunity of college, not only to recover and realize students' aspirations but to strengthen the California economy in which they live.

“

I'm working on getting by and passing classes to the best of my ability... Hopefully things can get better as time goes on.”

“

It has been a tough year for me, but I hope the coming year becomes better as I still plan on transferring to a UC.”

About the Survey

In partnership with the California Education Lab at the University of California, Davis, the California Student Aid Commission invited the full population – nearly 1.4 million students – of California financial aid applicants in the 2020–21 academic year to participate in this survey. The survey was emailed to students in November 2020. More than 106,500 respondents completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of about 8%. The survey combined Likert-scale, selected response, and open-ended questions. For more information on the survey questions, construction, and administration procedures, see the online appendix.

Of these respondents, about 98,000 were enrolled in college at the time of the survey. We leveraged respondents' self-reported demographic information as well as information contained in administrative data from the California Student Aid Commission to compare the experiences of students from various subgroups, and to evaluate the representativeness of the sample of respondents. After merging the survey responses to the administrative data, our final analytical sample consists of 86,236 respondents who were enrolled in college in fall 2020. Table 1 presents the distribution of the sample by key demographic characteristics for the full set of survey respondents and for our final analytical sample.

Given survey nonresponse, we assess whether our findings accurately reflect the experiences of the full population of California financial aid applicants. We investigated this issue by comparing respondents and nonrespondents using CSAC administrative data containing detailed information on the characteristics of the entire target population. This comparison revealed some important differences between respondents and the target population. In particular, respondents tended to be older, more likely to be female, more likely to have applied for aid as an independent student, have greater financial need (lower EFC), and have higher grade point averages. We accounted for these differences using statistical reweighting methods (for more information on the statistical methods, see the online appendix). Despite clear differences in the observable characteristics of respondents and nonrespondents, the main findings in this report hold in both the raw and reweighted analyses.

In this report, we describe the overall results from our analytical sample and disaggregated results by race/ethnicity, income, and type of college. To understand how responses differed by race/ethnicity and college type, we rely on respondents' self-reported demographic information from the survey itself. To examine responses by income, we use Expected Family Contribution—a measure of income calculated in the financial aid application process. We limit our reporting and illustrations here to the largest subgroups in each category, but include a full set of tables for all subgroups, and details on the construction of these subgroups, in the online appendix.

The Online Appendix for this report is posted at csac.ca.gov/survey2020.

TABLE 1.

Distribution of sample respondents by key characteristics

		ALL RESPONDENTS	RESPONDENTS MERGED TO CSAC AND ENROLLED	RESPONDENTS MERGED TO CSAC AND ENROLLED (WEIGHTED)
Total Observations		106,546	86,236	86,236
Female			69.7%	61.0%
Race/Ethnicity	Asian	11.4%	11.5%	12.5%
	Black	7.7%	7.7%	7.4%
	Filipinx	2.6%	2.6%	2.8%
	Latinx	46.5%	46.4%	45.4%
	Native American	0.9%	0.9%	0.8%
	Pacific Islander	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
	White	22.2%	22.3%	22.7%
	Multi-racial	4.1%	4.1%	4.3%
	Other Race	4.0%	4.0%	3.7%
	Missing Race Information	29.0%	21.5%	21.9%
Income & EFC	\$0 EFC		47.3%	40.6%
	\$1 - \$5,999 EFC		27.2%	27.0%
	\$6,000 - \$11,999 EFC		10.4%	10.6%
	\$12,000 - \$17,999 EFC		4.7%	5.3%
	\$18,000+ EFC		10.3%	16.4%
	Average EFC		\$7,777.23	\$18,138.13
	Average Total Income		\$50,538.76	\$128,570.80
GPA	GPA < 2.0		2.5%	3.7%
	2.0 < GPA < 2.5		7.7%	8.1%
	2.5 < GPA < 3.0		18.1%	17.0%
	3.0 < GPA < 3.5		24.9%	22.1%
	3.5 < GPA		26.3%	22.4%
	Missing GPA		20.5%	26.8%
	Average GPA		2.529	2.284
Average Age			25.04	23.32
Dependent			56.5%	66.3%
Do you have children?			18.9%	12.5%
Level of Education	HS Senior in Spring 2021		16.0%	20.5%
	Highest Ed Entering Freshman (Student)		20.0%	26.0%
	Highest Ed Freshman w/units (Student)		13.6%	12.5%
	Highest Ed Sophomore (Student)		25.4%	21.8%
	Highest Ed Junior (Student)		25.2%	22.1%
	Highest Ed Senior (Student)		11.8%	13.4%
Parent Level of Education	Highest Ed Middle School (Mother)		16.3%	15.2%
	Highest Ed High School (Mother)		33.6%	32.9%
	Highest Ed College or More (Mother)		25.6%	29.5%
	Highest Ed Unknown (Mother)		20.9%	18.6%
	Highest Ed Middle School (Father)		16.2%	14.8%
	Highest Ed High School (Father)		37.5%	36.6%
	Highest Ed College or More (Father)		33.1%	37.0%
	Highest Ed Unknown (Father)		12.3%	10.8%
College of Enrollment	California Community College (CCC)	46.4%	47.4%	42.2%
	California State University (CSU)	28.7%	28.0%	26.6%
	University of California (UC)	9.8%	9.0%	11.7%
	Private 4-year college/university in CA	5.8%	5.9%	6.6%
	Vocational, technical, or career college in CA	3.7%	3.8%	4.3%
	College outside of California	5.7%	5.9%	8.5%
	Missing Segment	9.3%	0.0%	0.0%

Endnotes

- ¹ To determine a student's financial need for college, a number known as the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) is calculated from information reported on a student's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the California Dream Act Application (CADAA), including income, assets, household size, and dependency status. A lower EFC is associated with lower income/assets and greater financial need, whereas a higher EFC is indicative of higher family income/assets and less financial need.
- ² National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, April 2021.
- ³ The analysis included in this report is based on survey respondents who reported that they were enrolled in college during fall 2020. Of course the pandemic has also contributed to enrollment declines (see updates from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center: <https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed>).
- ⁴ https://www.csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/2020_covid19_student_survey.pdf?1594172054



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