

COLLEGE UNCERTAINTIES

California High School
Seniors in Spring of 2020

DECEMBER 2020



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California High School Seniors in Spring of 2020

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DECEMBER 2020

Acknowledgments

The California Student Aid Commission and the researchers from the California Education Lab at UC Davis are grateful to College Futures Foundation for their 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 Grants R305E150006 and R305A180227 to the Regents of the University of California, and approved by the UC Davis Institutional Review Board (Case #1600635). The opinions expressed are those of the authors alone and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education, the public agencies that provide data, or the foundations providing funding to the California Education Lab.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the coronavirus drastically altered the lives of youth across the country. With shelter-in-place orders and school closures, high school students were faced with significant interruptions to their learning, loss of extracurricular activities, strained social connections, and worries about the health and financial security of their families. For high school seniors, these challenges were coupled with tremendous uncertainty about their college plans following high school graduation.

Amidst great uncertainty about their futures, we asked college-bound high school seniors from the Class of 2020 about their educational plans. A report released in July 2020 summarized the survey results from nearly 60,000 college students and 16,000 high school seniors about their experiences during the pandemic and their thoughts related to college enrollment in Summer and Fall of 2020. In this report, we take a closer look at the survey responses from the high school Class of 2020. We investigate differences across subgroups, specifically racial/ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds of students, and explore more fully how students described—in their own words—the challenges they faced last spring and the ways in which COVID-19 may be impacting their college plans.

“

I am losing so much interest in going to college because it became so hard. I don't have one on one help from anyone or anyone to show me how to choose classes or do anything that is required. I'm a first-generation college student and at the moment I am lost.”

“

If I am being honest I still don't know where I stand with my school. I don't know if I will even have a place to sleep in next semester or if classes will be held online or not. [This is] truly a time in which we take one day at a time.”

STRUGGLING WITH UNCERTAINTY

High School Seniors Voice their Concerns

In May 2020, we asked high school students to report on how COVID-19 was impacting their future plans. Through Likert-scale survey questions, students indicated their level of concern across multiple dimensions of the college experience as they looked towards the future. In response to an open-ended question, students also described, in their own words, how COVID-19 changed their plans for college. To capture how responses to the survey differed by student race/ethnicity and a measure of income (Expected Family Contribution),¹ we matched survey responses to administrative data available through the California Student Aid Commission and the California Department of Education.^{2,3} Several key patterns emerged from survey responses, in particular students' overwhelming concerns about financial instability and virtual learning, as well as family responsibilities, overall health and wellbeing, and broader uncertainty about their futures.

Responses to the open-ended questions revealed both the intensity and complexity of students' concerns about the potential impact of COVID-19 on their college plans. Table 1 summarizes the most frequently cited concerns in students' responses to the open-ended questions.⁴

All 9,408 individual responses were qualitatively coded and grouped by themes. As students often raised multiple areas of concerns, the thematic codes are not mutually exclusive. That is, a student may have described challenges with finances, as well as concern about remote instruction. As with all survey research, these self-reported responses reflect students' perceived concerns, beliefs and attitudes, and thus provide important insights about the ways in which high school seniors are experiencing this challenging time. Many students expressed concerns about how COVID-19 has contributed to stress across multiple dimensions of their lives, as one senior wrote:

9,408

high school students
responded to the open-ended
questions in the survey

“

I wanted to go to a 4 year college. I wanted to be out on my own to show that I am growing up. I did not want to just rely on my Mom. I wanted to do a lot of things, like get a part time job to help. Covid 19 made [me] want to stay closer to home with my Mom. I am afraid of what's going to happen. I want to do good and make my family proud but I feel like I don't want to just be asking for money for food, clothes, school materials and things. I want to help. My mother is the only one working and she is scared to go to work sometimes but she tries to hide it. She has to pay rent, buy food, and everything else. So anything would help me at this point. I thought going to 4 year college means that I am really smart (USC and UCLA)...but many people told me that its not true, a community college is a good start, it will save money for your Mom and I can I always transfer later. Thank you.”

TABLE 1.

Themes from Analysis of Student Responses to Open-ended Question

Please tell us about how COVID-19 has changed your plans for college.

PRIMARY AREA OF CONCERN	DESCRIPTION	RESPONDENTS	
		NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Financial insecurity	Uncertainty about the ability to pay for college tuition, food, technology, and transportation	2864	30.4%
Virtual learning	Preference for in-person classes; concerns related to virtual learning, including quality of instruction, inability to learn and lack of access to institutional support	2060	21.9%
College worth	Uncertainty about the value of attending college remotely and during the pandemic	967	10.3%
Providing familial support	Need to provide support for family, including caring for ill family members or younger siblings and assisting financially	931	9.9%
Housing	Uncertainty about living situation, including financial challenges related to housing and disappointment about not living in college dorms	791	8.4%
Employment opportunities	Limited employment opportunities during pandemic impacting ability to pay for living and college expenses	631	6.7%
Mental health concerns	Increased stress, anxiety, and depression	623	6.6%
General uncertainty	General uncertainty about going to college, including weighing options for delaying or deferring enrollment and taking a gap year	538	5.7%
Social/college experience	Disappointment about missing out on the full social experience of college, including living in the dorms, participating in clubs, and making new friends	445	4.7%

Notes: Categories are not mutually exclusive. Students may report concerns in multiple categories in a single open-ended response. Percentages are raw, unweighted percentages calculated using the 9,408 total open-ended responses as the denominator.

FINANCIAL INSTABILITY



College bound high school students overwhelmingly reported that COVID-19 changed their college plans by straining their financial capacity to pay for tuition, fees, or other college related expenses. One student shared:

“

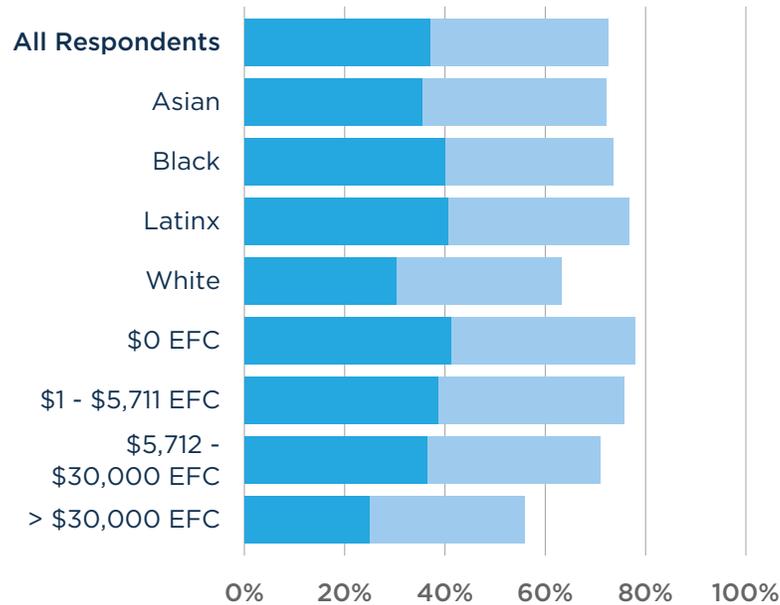
My parents do not make a lot, [...] I had gained some scholarships but due to COVID-19 my parents are now both unemployed, and I am quite worried if I will be able to pay for my tuition and other [college] expenses.”

FIGURE 1.

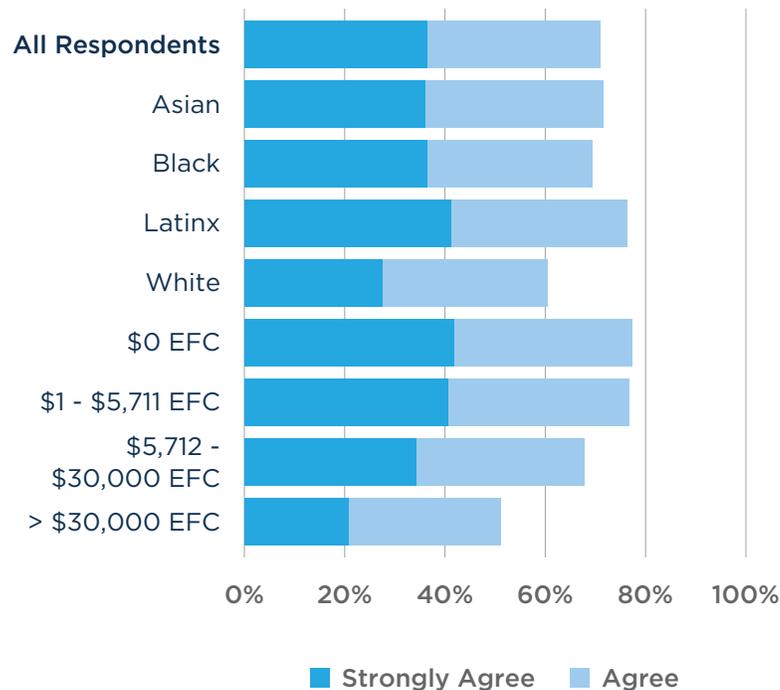
Students' Concerns about Personal and Family Financial Situations

As a result of COVID-19, I am now concerned about...

MY PERSONAL FINANCIAL SITUATION



MY FAMILY'S FINANCIAL HARDSHIP



In the survey questions,

over 70%

of all high school seniors reported concern about their own financial situation, as well as for their families' financial situations.

Not surprisingly, concern was higher among students with low or zero EFC levels compared to higher income students. Asian, Black, and Latinx students consistently report higher levels of concern than White students.

In the open-ended question, nearly one-third of respondents described this financial uncertainty in detail. Some wrote about their parents' loss of employment and their uncertainty about paying for tuition, fees, books and technology. Others described financial insecurity related to basic needs such as food, housing, and transportation.

Students across the income spectrum also expressed concern about their own ability to work, highlighting the limited employment opportunities available to them. They described difficulty in being able to save money for college tuition, or to support themselves during college. One student described the few alternatives present to offset recent financial losses:



I was planning on getting a job after my senior year ended, but due to this virus my source of income is undetermined. I can't save or earn enough money to focus on my schooling costs for tuition and books."

FAMILY STRESS AND PERSONAL WELL-BEING



Beyond concerns around paying for college, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced many other disruptions in students' lives. The pandemic often forced students to balance extra responsibilities that influenced and shaped their college plans. Students worried about their ability to juggle college coursework while working to support their families, taking care of sick family members, or teaching their younger siblings. One high school student shared the sentiment of many students as they considered transitioning into college:

“

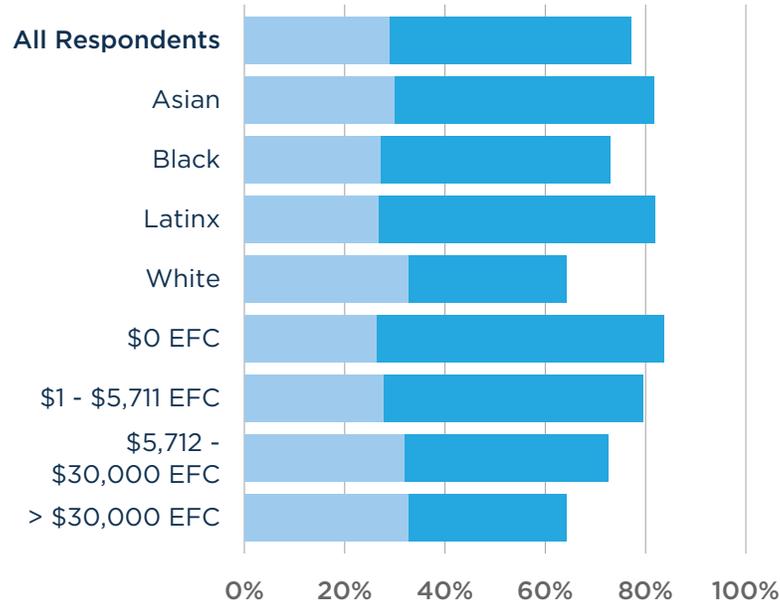
I might not have time anymore for college since my dad is not working, and my mom is receiving her paychecks 2 weeks after she's supposed to. Now I have to work eight hours to support my family economically.”

FIGURE 2.

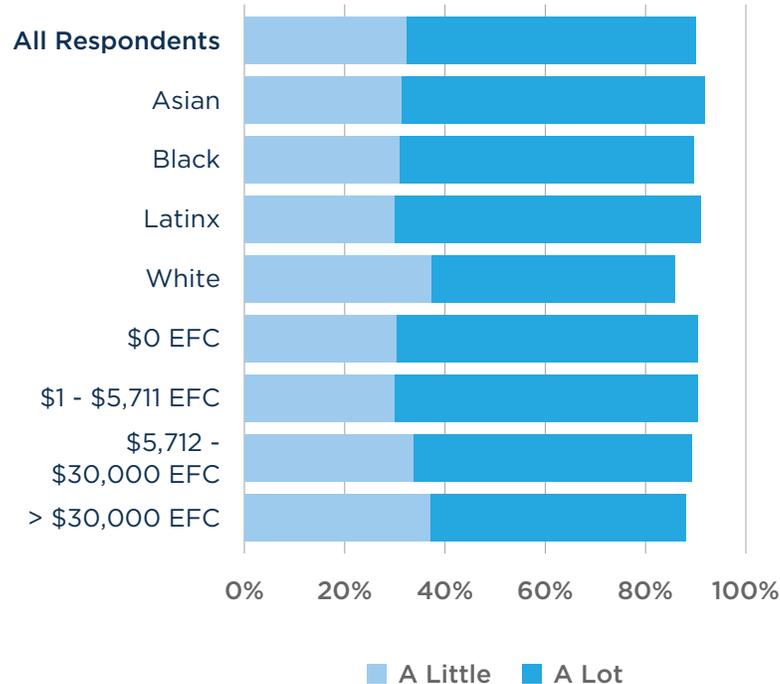
Students' Concern about Personal Health and Caring for Family

Since COVID-19, how worried are you about...

CARING FOR FAMILY MEMBERS



PERSONAL HEALTH/WELL-BEING



Since COVID-19, most students reported being worried about caring for family members (77%). Worry was greater among lower income students than their more affluent peers, and greatest for Asian and Latinx students when considering differences across racial/ethnic subgroups.

Nearly 90%

of students reported some level of worry about their personal health and well-being. This concern varied little across student subgroups.

Students were also concerned about losing interest and motivation as a result of distance learning and juggling family responsibilities. In the words of two students:

“

I now feel a lot less motivated to attend college knowing it will all be online and I will have to work from home. With everyday problems at home I don't feel as though it is a good work place for my schooling. I still plan to attend college just wish things were different.”

“

Both of my parents lost their job so meanwhile I have to pay some of their bills and pay my bills. My brother is also graduating, so I need to buy him a computer [...] I'm just hoping the COVID-19 ends very soon because I don't make a lot of money and I'm stressing so much.”

COLLEGE EXPERIENCE



Coupled with the concern about paying for college and supporting their families through COVID-19, students expressed uncertainty about the remote learning environment brought on by the pandemic, and disappointment around the potential of missing out on the full college experience. As one student wrote:

“

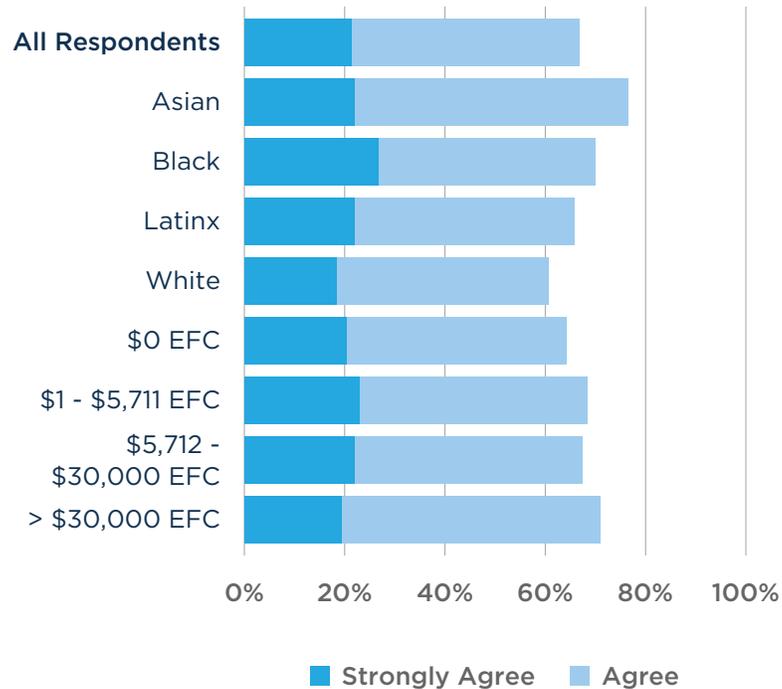
As a result of COVID-19 my college plans have completely changed, I still plan and am willing to attend college online, although it's not what I expected to experience on my first year since I was highly looking forward to dorm, get involved with school and meet new people on campus since in my high school years I found that difficult to do and wasn't able to get involved with school.”

FIGURE 3.

Students' Concern about Going Away to College

As a result of COVID-19, I am now concerned about...

GOING TO COLLEGE FAR FROM HOME



About 1/3

of students reported concern about going to college far from home.

Black and Asian students worried more about this aspect of the college experience than their White and Latinx peers. Students from higher income families also reported slightly higher rates of concern about going to college far from home, potentially because they were more likely to enroll in a college far from home, when compared to their lower income peers.

While many students were hesitant about leaving home to attend college, they also perceived online instruction as a major obstacle. Across the income spectrum students expressed concerns over the quality of the education they would receive remotely. One student wrote:



I spent countless hours of studying and volunteering to be able to attend a prestigious university with world leading courses and resources. At the end I am going to have to take online classes and have zoom sessions that I can take in a community college for 1/3rd of the tuition cost of my private university. [...] I will not be able to obtain the best education possible.”

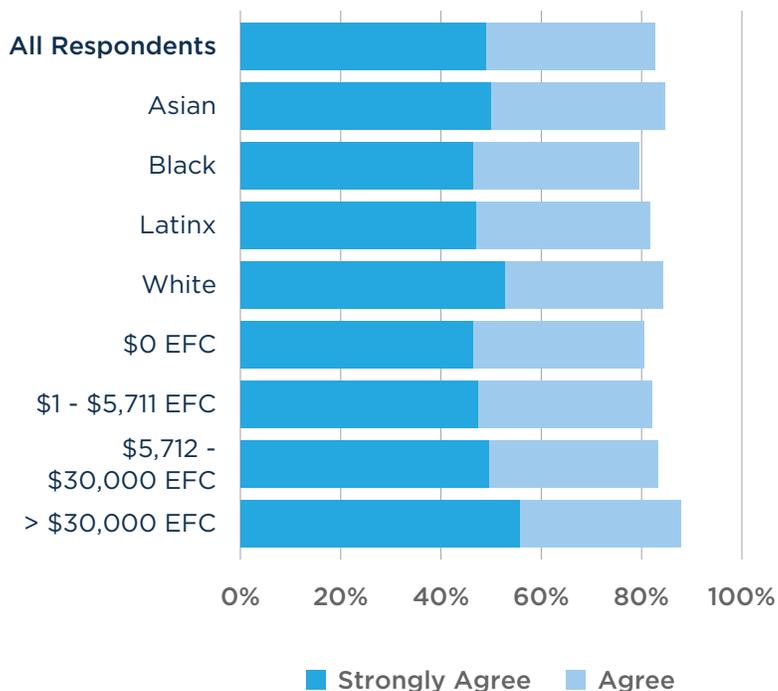


FIGURE 4.

Students' Concern about Remote Learning

As a result of COVID-19, I am now concerned about...

TAKING CLASSES ONLINE



Over 80%

of students indicated that they were concerned about taking college courses online. The highest rates of concern were observed among White and Asian students and higher income students.

Students expressed their concerns with sentiments of “anxiety,” “fear,” and “nervousness.” Many worried that they wouldn’t learn as much and would have difficulty accessing academic support. As expressed by one high school student:

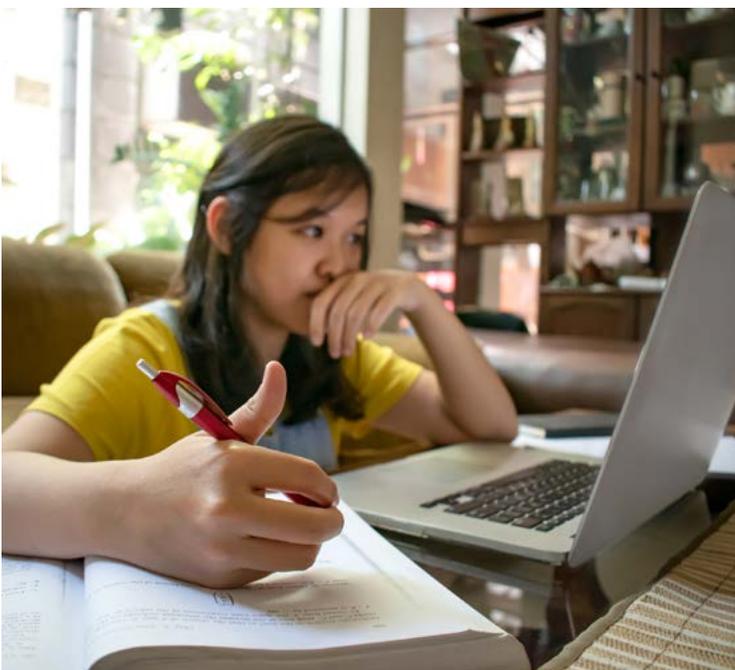


I’m used to one on one help and it is kinda hard taking online classes because some teachers don’t explain enough.”

Many also voiced doubt related to keeping up with coursework and succeeding in online college courses, given their home environment:



Studying for school will be harder since everyone in my family is home and they’re all doing the internet all at once and there isn’t [a] quiet place to study for a test.”



WEIGHING THE OPTIONS

High School Seniors Reconsider their College Plans

Reflecting on these unprecedented changes, some students described the possibility of changing their college plans. One student explained the shift from planning to attend a four-year university to enrolling at the local community college:



I wanted to go to a four-year university, but due to COVID-19 my parents aren't working, and I can't afford to pay so I changed my plan to attend community college then transfer to a four-year university."

For those students who anticipated delaying college, the stress brought on by COVID-19 was overwhelming. As one student stated:



I now am unable to have plans set for college. There are so many unknowns that I am unsure about almost everything to do with attending school in the fall. I do not know the best course of action or how to prepare for college."

Similarly, another student wrote:



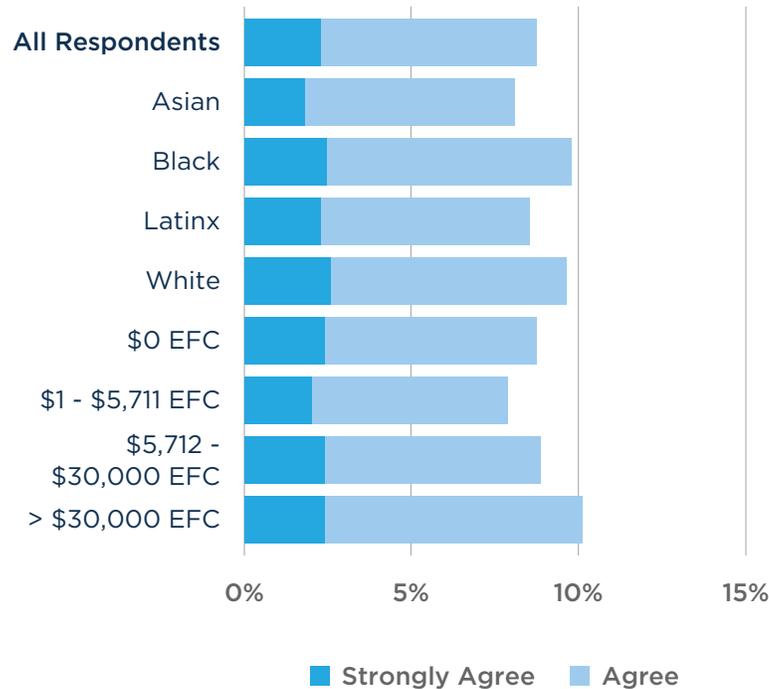
I knew I would be having some issues financially before the pandemic but now I'm not even sure if I'll be able to attend the school I want to go [to]."

FIGURE 5.

Students Consider Delaying College Enrollment

As a result of COVID-19, I now plan to...

DELAY MY COLLEGE ENROLLMENT



Despite the shifts that students considered around their enrollment plans,

few

high school seniors planned to delay college enrollment altogether,

a finding that was consistent across family income levels and racial/ethnic subgroups. In the Likert-scale survey questions, less than 10% of all students planned to delay their college enrollment completely as a result of the pandemic.

Importantly, high school students expressed in their own words a resolve to attend college, even if the plans of where and when to attend differed. In fact, one in four students responding to the open-ended questions stated they were committed to following through on their plans to enroll in college. As two students reflected:

“

This crisis in which we're in is affecting my college plans but that doesn't mean I won't achieve them, although my family and I may not have the financial stability, I am willing to achieve my dreams and accomplish my goals.”

“

It has just been a minor setback for a major comeback!”

LOOKING AHEAD

Hope Amidst the Uncertainty

Students in the high school Class of 2020 expressed great uncertainty in the face of a global pandemic that drastically altered the way in which they would graduate from high school and transition to college. That uncertainty undoubtedly continues today. The unprecedented economic, academic, and social-emotional toll of transitioning to college amidst these uncertainties is one that demands ongoing attention. Early reports about fall enrollment indicate enrollment declines across many college and universities nationally.⁵ The documented declines in enrollment suggest that the concern and fears many high school seniors had this past spring may have in fact contributed to the lower enrollments we are witnessing at California Community Colleges. We must continue to document and attend to the unique obstacles faced by the cohorts of young people trying to reach their college degree goals in such challenging and unpredictable times. Their future, their families and communities, and our State depends on it. In the words of students:

“

COVID-19 has changed my college plans by limiting my ability to experience college life to it's full potential. Although this may be the case it will not impede my ability to strive for success.”

“

Covid-19 has opened my eyes to realizing how important school is [and] we should not take it for granted. [B]y learning and getting educated [our] generation [can help] the problems that are going on right now and find ways to help stop this as quickly as possible.”

STAY TUNED

The California Student Aid Commission and the California Education Lab are continuing to survey California's college students to learn more about their ongoing college experiences amidst the coronavirus pandemic. Watch for our next research report in Spring 2021.



ABOUT THE SURVEY

In partnership with the California Education Lab at the University of California, Davis, the California Student Aid Commission surveyed current college students and high school seniors during two weeks in May 2020. The survey was emailed to a random sample of students statewide who submitted financial aid applications to the California Student Aid Commission for intended college enrollment in the 2020–21 academic year. More than 16,000 high school seniors completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 11%. The survey combined Likert-scale, selected response, and open-ended questions. For more information on the survey construction, administration procedures, survey questions, and tables of responses, see the Technical Appendices of the original report posted at csac.ca.gov/survey2020.

To capture how responses to the survey differed by student characteristics (specifically race/ethnicity and a measure of income), we matched survey responses to other administrative data available through the California Student Aid Commission and the California Department of Education. After merging survey responses to both administrative datasets, our final analytical sample consists of 12,576 respondents for whom we have the background information necessary to conduct our analysis. Of these, 9,408 respondents provided written answers to open-ended questions. The sample of survey respondents were generally representative of the population of high school seniors who submitted a financial aid application to the California Student Aid Commission, with a few exceptions.⁶ Table 1 presents the distribution of the sample by race/ethnicity and income (defined here by Expected Family Contribution), respectively.

TABLE 2.

Distribution of Sample Respondents by Race/Ethnicity and Income

	RESPONDENTS ANSWERING			
	SURVEY QUESTIONS		OPEN-ENDED QUESTION	
	NUMBER	PERCENT	NUMBER	PERCENT
Analytical Sample	12,576	100%	9,408	100%
Panel A: Respondents by Race/Ethnicity				
Asian	2,106	16.7%	1,461	15.5%
Black	547	4.3%	415	4.4%
Latinx	6,506	51.7%	4,944	52.6%
Native American	50	0.4%	43	0.5%
Pacific Islander	42	0.3%	29	0.3%
White	2,839	22.6%	2,157	22.9%
Other/Multi	392	3.1%	291	3.1%
Missing	94	0.7%	68	0.7%
Panel B: Respondents by Estimated Family Contribution Levels				
\$0	4,845	38.53%	3,636	38.6%
\$1 – \$5,711	2,905	23.10%	2,202	23.4%
\$5,712 – \$30,000	2,902	23.08%	2,196	23.3%
> \$30,000	1,924	15.30%	1,371	14.6%

Notes: Expected Family Contribution (EFC) is a measure of family income calculated from information reported on a student's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the California Dream Act Application (CADAA). A lower EFC is associated with lower family income and assets, whereas a higher EFC is indicative of higher family income and greater assets.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Expected Family Contribution is calculated from information reported on a student's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and indicates how much money a family can be expected to contribute towards college expenses before receiving financial aid. As such, a lower EFC is associated with lower family income and assets, whereas a higher EFC is indicative of higher family income and greater assets. In the 2020-21 academic year, an EFC equal to or less than \$5,711 indicates eligibility for the federal Pell Grant.
- ² Administrative data from the California Student Aid Commission includes financial aid filing status indicators (income and Expected Family Contribution), available from students' Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the California Dream Act Application (CADAA). These data are available through a partnership between the California Student Aid Commission and the California Education Lab at the University of California, Davis, and supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305A180227 to the Regents of the University of California, and by the College Futures Foundation.
- ³ Administrative data from the California Department of Education includes student level demographic information (race/ethnicity, gender) and academic performance data (performance on the 11th grade standardized assessment) used to ensure representativeness of the analytical sample. These data are available through a longstanding partnership between the California Education Lab at the University of California, Davis, and the California Department of Education investigating the college and career readiness of California's high school students. This partnership is supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305E150006 to the Regents of the University of California, and by the College Futures Foundation.
- ⁴ We analyzed the 9,408 open-ended survey responses using a mixed-methods software helpful for analyzing large qualitative data sets - MAXQDA analytics. We drew on MAXQDA's systemized coding functions (e.g., word clouds, word frequencies, lexical searches) to identify and code the most recurrent key words and phrases in students' open-ended survey responses. This first cycle of coding reflects qualitative In Vivo coding processes that categorize and summarize the data based on respondents' own words or responses. In the second cycle of coding, we drew on qualitative pattern coding approaches to create a higher-level schema that built on the initial In Vivo codes to understand how COVID-19 changed entering students' college plans (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).
- ⁵ See: edsources.org/2020/fewer-students-attending-california-community-colleges-early-fall-numbers-show/640373
- ⁶ Compared to the full population of financial aid applicants, survey respondents are more likely to be female, have greater financial need, and have higher high school GPA's. We re-tabulated responses after adjusting for these differences and found very similar results. Specifically, we used inverse probability weighting, where the weights were the inverse of the estimated probability of response conditional on covariates available for both the survey respondents and nonrespondents. These probabilities were estimated using probit regression models of response status on covariates including race/ethnicity, gender, Expected Family Contribution, high school GPA, 11th grade standardized assessments scores, and functions of these variables. This approach of course cannot account for unobserved differences between respondents and nonrespondents that remain after adjusting for the observed covariates. Nonetheless, it is reassuring that the unweighted tabulations reported here are similar to the reweighted tabulations.



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Download the Spring 2020 COVID-19 Student Survey at
csac.ca.gov/survey2020