

The Fit Imperative:

How a Healthy Approach to College Planning
Helps Students Find the Postsecondary
Experience That's Right for Them



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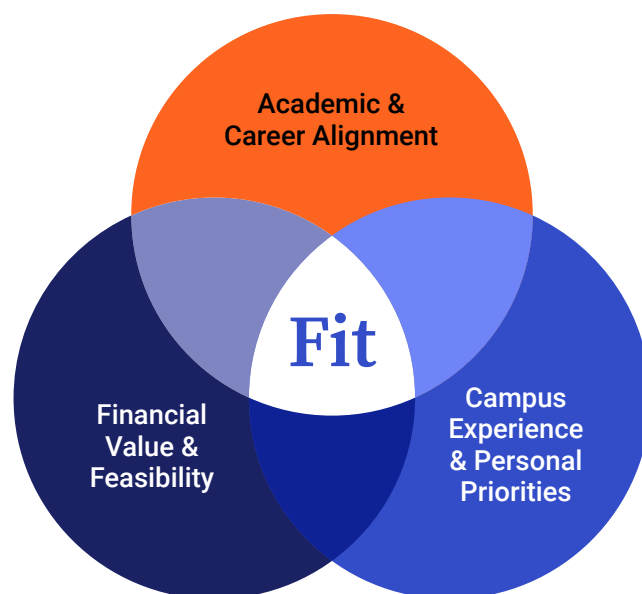
The BigFuture® team is also grateful to the many students who shared their stories and perspectives with us. They, and the millions of others navigating this process every year, are the reason this work matters. This paper is College Board's commitment to them and their families.

Executive Summary

By 2031, more than 70% of jobs in the United States will require some form of training beyond high school,¹ and today's high schoolers overwhelmingly aspire to college. Yet many families and students still worry about higher education's return on investment. For students to derive the full value of their investment in college, they need to choose the postsecondary path that sets them up for the future they want. They need to find the best fit for *them*.

The role of fit in college planning has been discussed for years. When students find a good fit—one where they experience academic success and a sense of belonging—they're more likely to graduate within four years.² Because fit is deeply individual, the process of identifying a college must be holistic, centered on each student's personal priorities.

Yet despite having access to more information than any previous generation, many students miss out on postsecondary options that could be great fits for them. Of 4,000 colleges and universities available on bigfuture.org, 42% of students who created a college list saved at least one of the same 10 institutions—a selective group that collectively will enroll just 3% of all students.



When students find a good fit—one where they experience academic success and a sense of belonging—they're more likely to graduate within four years.

¹ Carnevale, A.P., Smith, N., Van Der Werf, M., and Quinn, M.C. *After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2023. cew.georgetown.edu/Projections2031

² Kelly, A. P., Howell, J. S., & Sattin-Bajaj, C. (Eds.). (2016). *Matching students to opportunity: Expanding college choice, access, and quality*. Harvard Education Press. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED568746>

Meanwhile, some college freshmen remain uncertain that they've found their strongest fit. Among those surveyed by College Board this year, less than half (47%) *completely* agree that their college is a good fit for them; another 41% somewhat agree. Forty-nine percent say they needed more help to choose the right college. For all the time, effort, and money students pour into the college process, too few get the guidance they need to choose their best fit and feel fully confident in that choice.

When students don't find a good fit, there are real costs:

- **Some students discount their ability to succeed in college or don't apply to the right mix of schools.** Among high school graduates surveyed by College Board in 2025 who indicated they were not college bound, 14% reported that they had selected a different postsecondary plan because they "didn't think they would get in" to college. Sixteen percent chose to do something else after high school because they "weren't sure what else to do," and another 6% went through the planning process but didn't get into any schools where they applied.
- **Others lose time and money through unplanned transfers.** Nearly 1.2 million college students transferred in fall 2024, a process that can cost students dearly, especially if their credits are not all transferable.³ While transferring can be a viable pathway to a degree, it also comes with risk. On average, transfers cost students about one semester of lost progress and can add up to between \$13,000 and \$26,000 in additional costs.⁴

- **Too many don't complete their degree.** About 1 in 3 first-time, full-time college students in 4-year programs won't complete their degree within 6 years.⁵ These students earn 35% less, on average, than those who earn a degree, and they are 65% more likely to be unemployed. This has ripple effects on students' future life choices and civic engagement.

In spite of growing and wide recognition of the importance of fit, many students still experience barriers to finding theirs:

- Students are **overloaded with information about college, but it is often not relevant** to their unique needs. This makes it difficult to make a decision and adds stress and anxiety to the process.
- A dominant **culture of prestige** around college narrows students' views of their options, and it implies that value is derived from only a small set of institutions. Peer conversations both online and offline can put pressure on students, and students are constrained by what they see and hear around them.
- **Lack of transparency around true costs and financial aid** hinders students from accurately assessing financial fit.
- **Uneven access to college planning resources** means those who could benefit most from support—including first-generation students and those with limited access to advising—are often the least likely to receive it.

College Board data can be referenced in more detail in the Appendix.

³ National Student Clearinghouse (2025). *Transfer enrollment and pathways: Fall 2024*. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/transfer-enrollment-and-pathways/>

⁴ Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice. (2024). *The costs of today's college credit transfer system for learners and the mindsets and practices that reduce them*. https://www.chepp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CHEPP_Cost-of-Todays-College-Credit_WHITE-PAPER-003-FINAL.pdf

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics (2024). *Digest of Education Statistics 2024*, Table 326.10. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d24/tables/dt24_326.10.asp?current=yes
National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2025). *Some college, no credential: A 2025 snapshot for the nation and the states*. National Student Clearinghouse. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCNCReport2025.pdf>

**A great college fit
is within reach
for every college-
seeking student,
and we can build
on the work of
schools, counselors,
and organizations
already making
this a reality.**



In this paper, we elevate promising planning practices from College Board members and partners, and make the case for ensuring all students have access to these four key conditions of a healthy planning process centered on fit:

Four Core Conditions for Finding Best Fit



Vision building

A process for
self-reflection



Opportunities to explore skills and interests

Insights from coursework,
assessments, and experiences
and taking low-stake,
career-relevant test runs



Access to relevant information

Information about colleges
tailored to their goals and
personal priorities



Perspective from caring adults

A support team to listen, guide,
and protect well-being

These conditions enable students to identify and weigh the factors that define their personal best fit so they can find the postsecondary option that sets them up for future success—however they define it, whatever they aspire to.

Introduction

Every year, millions of teenagers stare down the same question: What will I do after high school?

There's no single right answer. As students consider investing their time and money into higher education, they'll assess a variety of factors: academic programs, graduation rates, employment outcomes, affordability, geography, extracurriculars, student demographics, career networks, support systems, "vibes"—all of which matter to varying degrees. But the criteria each student will use to evaluate these factors is personal, based on a teen's interests, strengths, circumstances, and aspirations. A good college fit, in other words, looks different for each student.

Fit is imperative to student success in college. But right now, too many students aren't able to make sense of all the information and advice they receive to come to a decision that aligns to their goals.

At College Board, we have a window into the college planning experiences of millions of high school students every year. We offer programs that inform and support those experiences, and we partner with K–12 schools and districts, higher education institutions, and nonprofit organizations that do critical work engaging students directly.

Those organizations offer many smart ideas and effective strategies for improving college access and planning for students across the country. Many counselors and access organizations have broadened their approach in recent years, from "where do you want to go to school?" to a more holistic approach that helps students reflect on who they are and what they need. This is critical progress that's already benefiting students.

But there is more to be done to make a great fit attainable for every student. Given College Board's reach in the field, the rapidly changing environment in which students are now future planning, and our mission to clear the way for all students to own their futures, we're building on the promising practices we've observed to elevate the role of personal fit in college planning. We aren't introducing the concept of fit here; it's well-established. Our goal is to make fit-based future planning more visible, actionable, and accessible to all.

Right now, many of the inputs that influence students' postsecondary decisions—the information they have access to; the advice they receive from family and friends; the narratives they consume on social media—are insufficiently relevant to their personal goals and priorities. This makes it difficult for students to find the postsecondary option that will deliver the greatest return-on-investment for them personally.

In a recent analysis of high school seniors' college "list saves" through bigfuture.org (indicating institutions that interest them), we found that the majority of institutions saved by students were among the top 150 ranked by *U.S. News and World Report*, a sliver of the more than 4,000 institutions in the United States. In fact, around 40% of students listed at least one of the same 10 schools—a narrow set of highly selective options that, together, will enroll only 3% of college attendees. While some young people may deliberately not save local institutions that they already know well, the extent of this trend reflects a cultural narrative about what constitutes postsecondary "success." A focus on a small handful of schools leads many students to overlook college options that might be a strong fit for their interests, financial needs, and aspirations—and are *also* high-quality institutions.

There are many postsecondary paths that can be a good fit; all students deserve to find theirs. In fact, we believe a fit-focused approach to future planning is relevant for all students, whether they see themselves attending a two- or four-year institution, serving in the military, or entering the workforce. But right now, too many students are still missing out on the conditions necessary to find their best fit. And the costs of poor fit are high.

In this paper, we elevate the best of what happens when fit is at the forefront of future planning, and offer a case for ensuring all students have ready access to the four key conditions they need in order to find their best fit.

Interest

42%

of high school students
save at least one of
the same 10 colleges
on bigfuture.org

Reality

3%

of U.S. college
students will enroll
in these 10 colleges

Is College Worth It?



ALEXIS

“I didn’t know if I wanted to go to college.”

Alexis, a junior at a public university in the San Francisco Bay Area, is studying interior design and architecture. She’s working as an assistant to a designer, while also taking a full course load. She knows what she wants to do after college and how her current degree program will help her get there.

But Alexis’s college experience didn’t start out this way.

“I didn’t know if I wanted to go to college,” Alexis says, reflecting on her high school self. She was concerned about the financial implications and felt burned out after working hard in high school. A mentor from a college access program helped her see that a degree would support her career prospects. But how to afford it remained a major question mark.

Alexis heard from friends and family that Southern California would likely have a lower cost of living than the Bay Area, where she’d grown up. So she chose a state university there, leaving home for the first time in her life. The school didn’t have a major in interior design, her main interest, but she was hopeful that a program in urban planning would be close enough, and that the financial aid she received would make it affordable.

It didn’t work out that way. Instead, Alexis found herself far from home and family, financially overwhelmed, and enrolled in an academic program that didn’t suit her needs. She didn’t feel a strong sense of belonging at her school, and her mental health suffered. Alexis was at a great university—but it wasn’t a good fit for her.

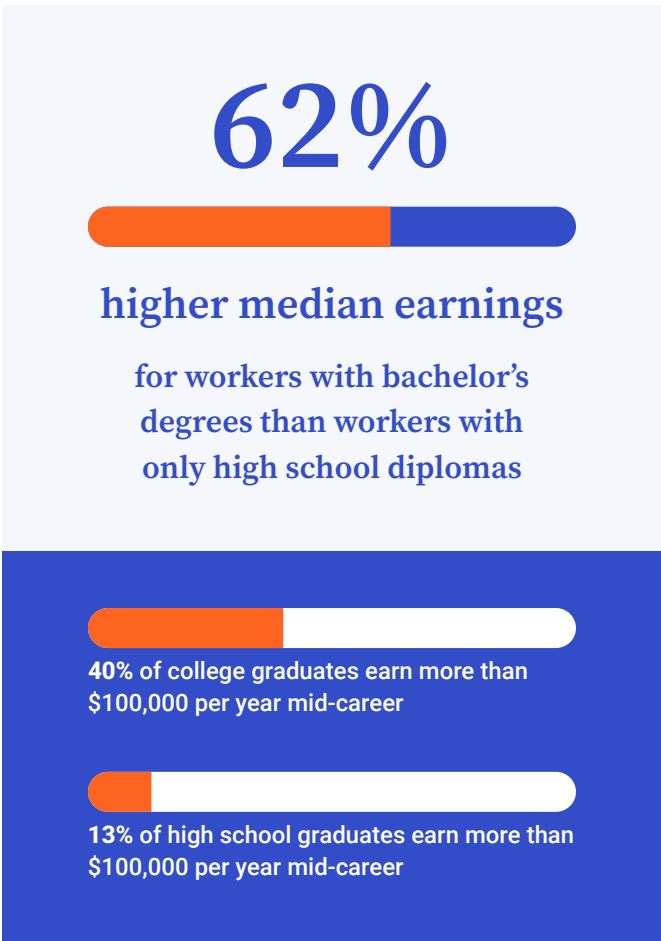
College Degrees Still Matter

Like Alexis, many students and their families feel uncertain about making the investment in college. A Gallup poll released in 2025 found that only 35% of adults view a college degree as “very important,”⁶ compared to 75% of adults in 2010, and almost two-thirds of respondents surveyed by NBC News said a four-year degree wasn’t worth the cost.⁷

Yet the economic case for a college degree remains strong.

In College Board’s *Education Pays 2026* report, we found that median earnings for workers with bachelor’s degrees were 62% higher than workers with only high school diplomas, a premium that has been stable for decades. Forty percent of mid-career college graduates earn more than \$100,000 per year, compared to only 13% of high school graduates.⁸ And college degrees are drivers of social mobility, too: Graduates from lower-income backgrounds earn as much as higher-income peers who attended similar colleges.

By 2031, 72% of jobs in the U.S. market will require some type of training beyond high school—and the fastest growing sectors, like healthcare, technology, and professional



business services, employ the most workers with postsecondary education and credentials.⁹

Moreover, the value of higher education is not measured exclusively in future earnings. College graduates are more likely to receive employer-provided health insurance, to enroll in retirement plans when offered by their employers, and to vote and participate in volunteer activities.¹⁰ They benefit, too, from opportunities to develop important durable skills as critical thinkers, communicators, and leaders.

6 Saad, L. (2025, September 11). Gallup. *Perceived importance of college hits new low*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/695003/perceived-importance-college-hits-new-low.aspx>

7 Kamisar, B. (2025, November 28). NBC News Poll: *In a dramatic shift, Americans no longer see four-year college degrees as worth the cost*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/poll-dramatic-shift-americans-no-longer-see-four-year-college-degrees-rcna243672>

8 Pender, M., Ma, J., Hu, X., & Edwards, A. (2026). *Education pays 2026*. College Board. <https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/education-pays-2026-full-report.pdf>

9 Carnevale, A.P., Smith, N., Van Der Werf, M., and Quinn, M.C. (2023). *After everything: Projections of jobs, education, and training requirements through 2031*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/projections2031/>

10 Trostel, P. (2015). *It’s not just the money: The benefits of college education to individuals and to society*. Lumina Foundation. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/its-not-just-the-money.pdf>

High schoolers intuit this. In a 2024 College Board/Morning Consult survey of high school students, we found that 65% of students in grades 9–12 are strongly considering a four-year college;¹¹ among high school seniors who graduated in 2025, 78% say they're planning to attend a four-year college immediately after high school (11% intend to attend a two-year college). The National College Attainment Network (NCAN) also reports that a record share of students completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) in 2026.¹²

But as much as college is valuable in the aggregate, students realize its value individually.

Median early career earnings vary by major,¹³ and degree-holders from institutions with graduation rates above 70% have higher median earnings than those from institutions that graduate less than half of their students.¹⁴

For students to derive the full value of their investment in college, they need to choose a postsecondary path and environment that suits their needs and priorities, and sets them up for the future *they want*.

Without a strong personal fit, students and their families will rightly continue to ask: Is college worth the price?

Nearly
3 in 4



U.S. jobs will require postsecondary training by 2031

Nearly
9 in 10



high school seniors plan to attend a two- or four-year college immediately after high school

¹¹ College Board. (2024). *Career and skill-building survey*. https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/College%20Board%20Career%20Skills%20Report%20-%20October%202024_FINAL.pdf

¹² National College Attainment Network. (2026, May 13). *Class of 2026 sets all-time high FAFSA completion record*. <https://www.ncan.org/Web/Web/News/Class-of-2026-Sets-All-Time-High-FAFSA-Completion-Record.aspx>

¹³ Pender, M., Ma, J., Hu, X., & Edwards, A. (2026). *Education pays 2026: The benefits of higher education for individuals and society*. College Board. <https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/education-pays-2026-full-report.pdf>

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

The Cost Conundrum

Understanding the potential return-on-investment of a college degree is critical as students and their families consider postsecondary options, because questions about the value of college abound.

There are valid reasons for this. Attending college means forgoing the opportunity to earn a full-time wage right after high school.¹⁵ For young people looking ahead to the early years of their careers, the promise of college paying off can seem like a distant dream. They're staring down a rapidly evolving job market, where advances in artificial intelligence and automation are reshaping industries, altering entry-level work, and creating uncertainty. Recent research by Deloitte found that more than 60% of Gen Z and millennial young adults are concerned that AI will eliminate jobs and make it harder for young people to enter the workforce.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the costs of college remain intimidating. High school students cite cost as one of the top three factors they prioritize in college choice-making, and nearly 80% of college



freshmen say financial aid was a key factor in their decision making. In a 2025 College Board survey, three-quarters of parents expressed concern about their children accumulating debt as a result of postsecondary education.

4 in 5



college freshmen say
financial aid was a key factor
in their decision-making

This remains the case even though a majority of students do not pay the full sticker price for college, and net college costs have stabilized (or even decreased) in recent years.¹⁷ Total annual student and parent borrowing for postsecondary education has declined by 60% since 2010, and average institutional aid per undergraduate has nearly doubled over the last 20 years, while borrowing through federal loans has fallen.¹⁸ But that decline comes after a long period of rising costs.

Taken together, it's understandable that many students and families feel uncertain about the return-on-investment of a college degree. The college planning process must help students articulate first what they're hoping to gain from their postsecondary experience, and then choose a path and program that will deliver that value.

¹⁵ Pender, M., Ma, J., Hu, X., & Edwards, A. (2026). *Education pays 2026: The benefits of higher education for individuals and society*. College Board. <https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/education-pays-2026-full-report.pdf>

¹⁶ Faber, E. (June 02, 2025). *Gen Z and millennial survey: Gen Zs and millennials at work: Pursuing a balance of money, meaning, and well-being*. Deloitte Insights. <https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/talent/2025-gen-z-millennial-survey.html>

¹⁷ Levine, P. (2026). *Is college becoming less affordable? An update*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/is-college-becoming-less-affordable-an-update/>

¹⁸ Ma, J., Pender, M., & Hu, X. (2025). *Trends in college pricing and student aid 2025*. College Board. https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/Trends-in-College-Pricing-and-Student-Aid-2025-final_1.pdf

The Power of Personal Fit



JASMINE

“If it doesn’t have a marching band, it’s not on my list.”

Ask **Jasmine**, a high school senior from rural Georgia, what she’s looking for in a college, and her first priority is crystal clear: marching band.

“Music really helped me,” Jasmine says, referring to a challenging period in her early high school years. “I’ve always intended to follow through with music in college.” Jasmine plays the clarinet in her high school wind ensemble, marches in the band, and is teaching herself to play the flute in her spare time. She also sings.

“I’ve known that I wanted to go to college since 6th grade,” says Jasmine, who will be the first in her family to attend college. “But it wasn’t until 9th grade that I really knew what I wanted to do with my degree after college.”

Jasmine’s plan now includes a career that brings together her passion for music with her interest in business: She wants to open a music store of her own one day. When she set out to explore colleges, she looked for institutions that offered strong business programs along with a marching band. She initially thought she wanted to stay close to home, but by the time she got to high school, she realized she could see herself in a city, farther from home.

Financial aid was also a concern, but Jasmine made a conscious decision to prioritize finding an institution that met her other needs first, and then tackle how to pay for it. When her financial circumstances changed after applying, and Jasmine determined that she’d be paying for college largely on her own, a financial aid officer at her chosen university helped her adjust her aid application to get the support she needed.

Fit is more than a feeling of satisfaction. It's a combination of specific factors that have a meaningful impact on college success. Simply put, when students choose an institution that is a good fit, they're more likely to graduate. Students who choose a strong academic match (based on an SAT score that falls within an institution's 25th and 75th percentile score range for first-year students) complete college in four years at a rate that's 7 percentage points higher than students who undermatch academically.¹⁹ (For context, research on a range of college completion interventions points to impacts that range from 1 to 10 percentage points, depending on the program; a good fit, in other words, works as well or better than many high-investment interventions.²⁰)

While research on fit shows that academic match is the most significant contributor to graduation outcomes, other factors like financial feasibility, campus culture, or location contribute meaningfully as well. Students with four to five matching "interest factors" graduate at rates about 4 percentage points higher than students with fewer matching interest factors.²¹

Some students might feel more comfortable in a setting with small class sizes and ready access to professors; others will prioritize a vibrant social scene with peers who share their cultural background. Campus Sonar (recently acquired by College Board) examined publicly available peer-to-peer conversations about college planning on platforms including Reddit, TikTok, and X and found that discussions about belonging have increased tenfold in the last decade.²² These conversations covered topics such as mental health, cultural fit, and student support services.

Students with a...

Strong Academic Match



percentage point higher
completion rate in four years

Strong Interest Match



percentage point higher
completion rate in four years

**Fit is more than a feeling
of satisfaction. It's a
combination of specific
factors that have a
meaningful impact on
student outcomes.**

¹⁹ Kelly, A. P., Howell, J. S., & Sattin-Bajaj, C. (Eds.). (2016). *Matching students to opportunity: Expanding college choice, access, and quality*. Harvard Education Press. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED568746>

²⁰ See Castleman, B. L., & Long, B. T. (2013). *Looking beyond enrollment: The causal effect of need-based grants on college access, persistence, and graduation* (NBER Working Paper No. 19306). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w19306>
Boatman, A., Hurwitz, M., Lee, J., & Smith, J. (2020). The impact of prior learning assessments on college completion and financial outcomes. *Journal of Human Resources*, 55(4), 1161–1193. <https://jhr.uwpress.org/content/55/4/1161.short>
Weiss, M. J., Ratledge, A., Sommo, C., & Gupta, H. (2019). Supporting community college students from start to degree completion: Long-term evidence from a randomized trial of CUNY's ASAP. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 11(3), 253–297. <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20170430>

²¹ Kelly, A. P., Howell, J. S., & Sattin-Bajaj, C. (Eds.). (2016). *Matching students to opportunity: Expanding college choice, access, and quality*. Harvard Education Press. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED568746>

²² Campus Sonar. (2025). *Attracting students in a peer-influenced market: Drivers of college choice and value perception*. <https://info.campussonar.com/2025-research>

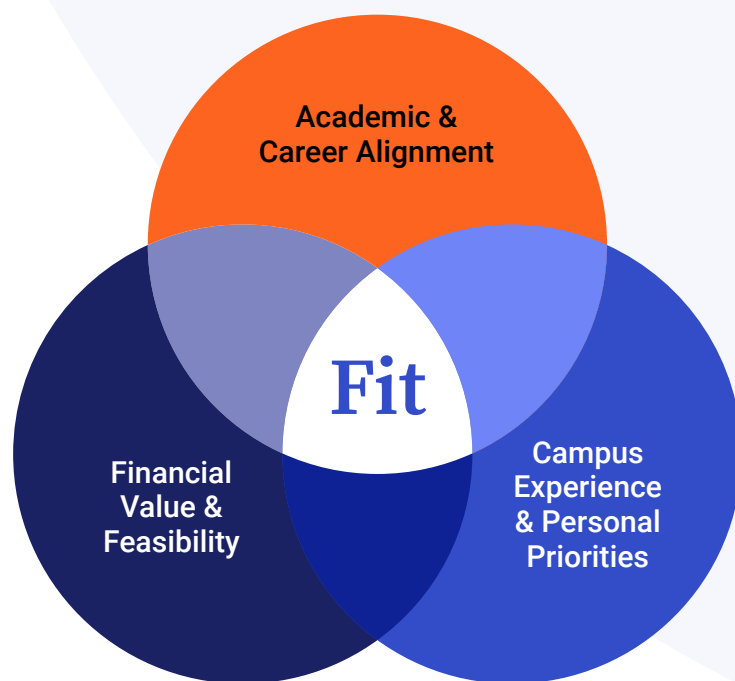
Fit, in other words, is the center of a student's personal Venn diagram: the postsecondary options that align to their academic skills and career goals, at a cost they can reasonably manage, that meet their other personal priorities.

We call these “fit factors,” and each is weighted according to an individual student's preferences.

Many counselors and college access organizations already ground their support in a fit-focused approach. But not all students have access to college planning resources, and federal cuts to education mean college planning programs are at risk.²³

Without support to find their best fit, students and their families pay the cost. Among college freshmen surveyed by College Board in 2026, less than half “completely agree” that their college is a good fit. (Another 41% somewhat agree.) These numbers indicate progress toward supporting students to find their fit, but gaps remain; given the significance of this decision for students and the investment of time and money required, we'd hope to see more students feel *strongly* that their college is a good fit. Moreover, 49% of survey respondents said they needed more help finding the right college for them, indicating that there is room to improve in terms of providing access to fit-based college planning.

Students from all backgrounds experience fit misalignment. Among the 13% of surveyed students who don't agree that they've found a fit, the most commonly cited reasons were lack of social belonging or feeling isolated (cited



by 40%) and high costs or lack of affordability (cited by 30%). These are all students who wanted to attend college and reap the benefits of it, but missed out on the best possible fit.

One student put it this way: “It’s very expensive, I’m very far away from my family, and there aren’t other people like me here. I’m very lonely.”

Those feelings have meaningful—and costly—implications for students. Students who report low levels of belonging in college are 14% less likely to persist in their degrees compared to their peers.²⁴ They’re also more likely to experience depressive symptoms. Poor fit costs students in more ways than one.

²³ Timmins, A. (2026, March 10). *Trump administration agrees to reverse cuts to TRIO programs. But it hasn't restored the funding.* New Hampshire Public Radio. <https://www.nhpr.org/nh-news/2026-03-10/trio-educational-talent-search-funding-cut-first-generation-low-income>

²⁴ Gopalan, M., & Brady, S. T. (2020). College students' sense of belonging: A national perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 49(2), 134–137. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x19897622>

The Cost of Missed Fit



ALEXIS

“It’s just not me.”

After deciding to pursue a college degree and choosing a state university in southern California, **Alexis** arrived at her institution expecting two things: adequate financial support to make the cost of college manageable for her family, and an academic program that aligned with her goals.

But the reality fell short. Due to a misunderstanding about her financial aid package, Alexis learned that she owed considerably more than she’d expected. Moreover, her expectations for the urban planning program as an option to deliver on her dreams of interior design and architecture didn’t line up with the content she found herself reading and talking about in class every day, and it wasn’t what she wanted.

“It’s just not me,” Alexis says she realized when she started classes in her first postsecondary program.

Though she could’ve switched majors, the school didn’t offer the one she’d set her heart on for her future career.

Alexis regrouped and changed course: She transferred initially to a community college back in the Bay Area, and from there to another public university closer to home. Today, she’s on her way to a bachelor’s degree that will set her up for the future she wants. But the path there cost her about two semesters and \$8,000. Ultimately, she found her way to a better fit, but not before losing time, money, and confidence along the way.

When students land in postsecondary environments that don't align well with their goals, needs, or realities, there are real costs—financial and otherwise—and they can compound quickly.

Some students discount their ability to succeed in college or don't apply to the right mix of schools

Of the high school graduates surveyed by College Board in 2025 who indicated they were not college bound, 14% reported that they chose a different postsecondary plan because they didn't think they would get in. Sixteen percent of them chose to do something else after high school because they "weren't sure what else to do," and another 6% of students went through the process but were not accepted anywhere they applied. All three groups represent students

who might have found a postsecondary program to meet their needs, if they'd been supported to assess the full range of available options.

Other students may miss opportunities to attend selective institutions they're well-qualified for. High-achieving students from low-income backgrounds are far less likely to attend highly selective colleges than their higher-income peers with similar academic credentials, a phenomenon often referred to in research as "under-matching."²⁵ While some students undoubtedly made informed decisions to attend less selective institutions that were a better fit for their goals, others may have lacked the guidance needed to see themselves at a more selective institution or understand that financial aid could have made it an option.

Others lose time and money through unplanned transfers

The cost of misaligned fit appears in the form of unplanned transfers, too. Nearly 1.2 million college students transferred in fall 2024.²⁶ Transferring can be a viable pathway to a degree with the right guidance and planning, and many community colleges offer guidance or pathways for students who want to transfer to four-year institutions. But this path also comes with risks when students aren't sufficiently supported. Nearly 80% of students who enroll in community college say they intend to transfer to a four-year bachelor's degree, but only about 1 in 3 actually do,²⁷ and two-thirds remain without a credential six years after enrolling.²⁸ These outcomes vary depending on the nature of the transfer; students transferring from one four-year institution to another have higher completion rates than those transferring from a two-year to a four-year institution.

1 in 5



high school graduates who
aspire to college either
don't apply or don't get in

²⁵ Hoxby, C. M., & Avery, C. (2012). *The missing "one-offs": The hidden supply of high-achieving, low-income students* (NBER Working Paper No. 18586). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w18586>

²⁶ National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2025, March 5). *Transfer enrollment and pathways report (Fall 2024)*. <https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/nscblog/college-transfer-enrollment-grew-by-4-4-in-the-fall-of-2024/>

²⁷ Velasco, T., Fink, J., Bedoya-Guevara, M., Jenkins, D., & LaViolet, T. (2024). *Tracking transfer: Community college and four-year institutional effectiveness in broadening bachelor's degree attainment*. Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/tracking-transfer-community-college-and-four-year-institutional-effectiveness-in-broadening-bachelors-degree-attainment.html>

²⁸ Baker, R. (2016). *The effects of structured transfer pathways in community colleges*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 38(4), 626–646. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373716651491>

Even students who ultimately earn their degree can lose time and money along the way, often because they've enrolled in courses that don't offer transfer credit, or because they haven't had access to counseling services to support their move. Research suggests that on average, transferring costs students about one semester of lost progress²⁹ and can add up to anywhere from \$13,000 to more than \$26,000.³⁰

Too many don't complete their degree

About one in three first-time, full-time college students in four-year programs won't complete their degree within six years. These students who start college but don't finish get the worst of both worlds: They've already invested time and money in college, but they emerge without a degree to show for it. Research shows they'll earn 30% less, on average, than those with a bachelor's degree, and they are about 65% more likely to be unemployed—a significant problem for the more than 43 million Americans with some college credit but no degree.³¹

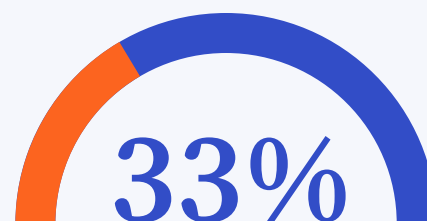
Of course, fit isn't a panacea for all of these challenges. Some students will always leave school, make unplanned transfers, or opt out of college without an alternative plan, due to reasons beyond their control. Life changes happen; students' desires evolve.

But personal fit is more than a preference, and a good fit can help students avoid costly pitfalls.

Only
1 in 3



students enrolled in community college who intend to transfer to a four-year college do



of first-time full-time college students won't complete their degree within 6 years

²⁹ Simone, S. A. (2014). *Transferability of postsecondary credit following student transfer or coenrollment* (NCES 2014-163). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014163.pdf>

³⁰ Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice. (2024, May). *The costs of today's college credit transfer system for learners and the mindsets and practices that reduce them*. https://www.chepp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CHEPP_Cost-of-Todays-College-Credit_WHITE-PAPER-003-FINAL.pdf

³¹ Pender, M., Ma, J., Hu, X., & Edwards, A. (2026). *Education pays 2026: The benefits of higher education for individuals and society*. College Board. <https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/education-pays-2026-full-report.pdf>

What Are the Current Barriers to Finding Fit?



JOSÉ

“I didn’t have anybody who could sit down and really tell me, this is what college is about.”

José, a 26-year-old from Texas, is getting his master’s degree in public administration from a large state university, where he also received his bachelor’s degree. He even works in the admissions office now, supporting transfer students. But when José looks back on himself as a high schooler, he sees a young man who didn’t know what he wanted.

“I didn’t know what I wanted to major in. Every time I thought of college, it felt aimless. I had no purpose for doing it,” José says.

At his career-connected high school, José was on a nursing pathway, but he would eventually come to the conclusion that he didn’t want to continue with medicine. He was interested in communications and people-facing roles—as a nursing student he loved talking with patients at their bedsides—but he also wondered if he should get a job in a trade straight out of high school, like most of his family did.

“I’m a first-generation student. I didn’t have anybody who could sit down and really tell me, ‘this is what college is about.’ So there was that added layer of anxiety. It was an enigma to me.”



Despite progress, students must still overcome multiple barriers to find their fit:

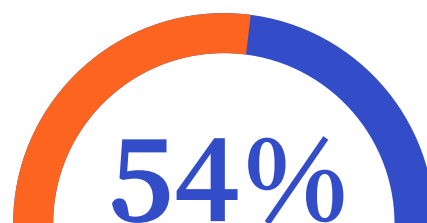
An abundance of information, but little clarity to support decision-making

High school students receive a lot of information about colleges, but 54% of college freshmen surveyed by College Board said it was difficult to find helpful information to make their college decision. Aggregated data about a college—such as ranking, program offerings, graduation and employment rates, and sticker price—are important starting points, but they don't necessarily help students decide: *Is this the right fit for me?*

To answer that, students need information that's more personally relevant to them, which allows them to assess how well a given program will set them up for their future. This includes disaggregated data on employment rates and earnings by major;

career support and resources by academic interest; and financial aid availability for students like them. Often, these data are available but complex to access, particularly without support.

This is equally important for families and caregivers, who can also find themselves overloaded with information, with little clarity on how to properly support their student to interpret it and apply it to their decision making process.



of college freshmen said it was difficult to find helpful information to make their college decision

Culture of prestige

National college rankings, of course, have a strong influence on the college planning process—even for students who aren’t applying to highly selective schools. Around 90% of high school graduates say college reputation is very important or important to them, and 90% of graduates say they’re “aware of how others perceive colleges based on their rankings,” but fewer think rankings are a useful indicator of how rigorous a school really is. In examining publicly available conversations online about college, Campus Sonar found that while prestige only comes up in about 4% of total conversations, it’s present in 46% of conversations specifically about “what makes a good college.” These conversations include debate over prestige as a deciding factor, with many students articulating it as a reason for choosing one school over another, even when peers online encourage them to consider other variables.

Rankings serve a purpose: They provide one measure by which to evaluate schools. But **media visibility centered on a narrow set of elite institutions sends the message that this handful of programs are the only ones that count.** This is the mentality Jeffrey Selingo pushes against in his book *Dream School*,³² and it’s widespread: Many high school students take into account reputation more than their personal fit factors, like availability of academic advising, career services, activities, school culture, or location.

The intense focus on elite institutions puts downstream pressure on all students. In *The Disengaged Teen*, authors Jenny Anderson and Rebecca Winthrop argue that many students operating in what they call “Achiever mode” (often aiming for highly selective institutions) equate external markers, like which colleges

they’re accepted into and the relative prestige of those institutions, as indicators of success and self-worth. This hyper-focus on elite institutions can create a wider perception that college is by default highly competitive and limited to a subset of students.³³ Many others may not see themselves as part of the college narrative, and opt out as a result.

None of this is based in reality. The vast majority of postsecondary institutions are far less competitive than the top-ranked handful, and most students will attend a far less selective school. More than 80% of students will enroll in institutions that accept more than half their applicants,³⁴ and this huge pool of institutions offers a multitude of rigorous, high-quality options in every area of study. Highly selective institutions can be excellent fits for some students. But the perception that only a narrow set of institutions lead to successful futures is problematic.

9 in 10



**high school graduates
say they’re “aware of how
others perceive colleges
based on their rankings.”**

³² Selingo, J. (2025). *Dream school: Finding the college that's right for you*. Simon & Schuster.

³³ Anderson, J., & Winthrop, R. (2022). *The disengaged teen: Helping kids learn better, feel better, and live better*. Crown.

³⁴ DeSilver, D. (2019). *A majority of U.S. colleges admit most students who apply*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/04/09/a-majority-of-u-s-colleges-admit-most-students-who-apply/>

Opaque costs and financial aid complexities

Financial strain is the most commonly cited reason students leave an institution.³⁵ Undoubtedly, some of those students have experienced unexpected financial setbacks, but lack of clarity around financial fit early in the planning process also contributes. Many students and their families are missing accessible and clear information about what college will *really* cost them, the value they'll derive from that investment, and the tools and financial literacy to assess affordability.

In part, this is because expected family contribution is a complex calculation. Net price calculators can be difficult to use, especially for students without guidance, and students don't get aid offers until after they're accepted. New research by Strada found that more than two-thirds of both college

students and their parents found the financial aid process either confusing or mixed.³⁶

Financial aid options can be hard to sort out, too. Students may receive information about competitive nationwide scholarships but they have to dig for smaller local and state-level opportunities. Even when financial aid offers come in, inconsistent terminology in award letters can make it tricky to compare offers between institutions. And many families aren't able to easily interpret college aid letters to understand how much they'll ultimately be responsible for.

Finally, timing matters. Throughout the college exploration and application process, students often have to make significant decisions about their postsecondary path before they're able to gain a full understanding of each option's affordability.

2 in 3



college students and their
parents found the financial
aid process confusing



³⁵ Cornett, A., Beckham, M., Mentzer, L., & Ashton, B. (2026). *Some college, no credential (SCNC) survey report: Spring 2025*. Trellis Strategies. <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/some-college-no-credential-scnc-survey-report-spring-2025/>

³⁶ Blanchard, K. & Ward, J.D. (2026, April). *The price transparency imperative: Rebuilding confidence in higher education*. Strada Education Foundation. https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6777c52f82e5471a3732ea25/69f4dd4324725f93711b6f8f_Strada_ThePriceTransparencyImperative_Report_Apr.2026.pdf

Uneven access to college planning support

Many students are still missing support to find their fit because there simply aren't enough counselors to go around.

High school seniors who meet one-to-one with a counselor are three times more likely to attend college and nearly seven times more likely to complete a FAFSA than their peers without counselor access.³⁷

But counselor caseloads remain enormous, far beyond the ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association of 250 students per counselor. (The national average as of the 2024-25 school year stood at 372:1.)³⁸ This leaves many students without access to counseling support that can help them make meaning of the information they've gathered in order to come to the right decision for themselves.



³⁷ Velez, E. D. (2020). *How can high school counseling shape students' postsecondary attendance? Exploring the relationship between the high school counseling context and students' subsequent postsecondary enrollment*. National Association for College Admission Counseling. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED608301>

³⁸ American School Counselor Association. (2024). *Student-to-school-counselor ratios, 2024-25*.

How Can All Students Find Their Fit?



JOSÉ

“I realized that college did have something for me.”

After graduation, **José** took some time off. He was thinking of it as a “gap year,” he says. He wasn’t sure he’d ever return to school.

But through conversations with his high school advisor and his mother, José came to see himself in a college setting. “There was that self-discovery. I realized that college did have something for me.”

A four-year program seemed out of the question. He didn’t feel ready, and he didn’t know what he wanted to study. He went to his local community college, where an enrollment counselor helped him through

the application process. After a bumpy start, including transferring to a second community college during early Covid, José built strong relationships on campus and landed leadership roles at the student newspaper.

After earning his associate degree, he transferred to a four-year public university through an established partnership between the two institutions, ensuring that all his credits transferred over. He completed his bachelor’s degree in another two years. The young man who wasn’t sure if college was for him graduated with a 4.0.



The problem isn't that a college degree is worth less than it used to be; its long-term value has been stable for decades. But when we look at how students experience the college planning process, it's clear that they do not always have what they need to understand the value for themselves personally and to identify the best-fit path that will help them fully reap the benefits of their investment.

Promising practices emerging out of college access organizations today point to future planning support that helps students discover and articulate their long-term aspirations, understand their options, and identify postsecondary paths to reach those dreams. A healthy approach focused on fit is not only a college planning strategy; it's a college *completion* strategy. A better fit leads to better outcomes. All students deserve this kind of support.

Based on the promising practices we've observed across our own programs and among members and partner organizations, we believe all students need access to four core conditions of future planning in order to find their best fit: vision building, opportunities to explore skills and interests, access to relevant information, and perspective from caring adults.

With these four conditions in place, students will be better prepared to articulate and weigh their personal "fit factors," and then evaluate the pathways and institutions that align to them.

Four Core Conditions for Finding Best Fit



Vision building

A process for self-reflection



Opportunities to explore skills and interests

Insights from coursework, assessments, and experiences and taking low-stake, career-relevant test runs



Access to relevant information

Information about colleges tailored to their goals and personal priorities



Perspective from caring adults

A support team to listen, guide, and protect well-being



Future planning starts with imagining what's possible. Students need exposure to avenues beyond what they already know and aligned to what they want for themselves (caring adults, addressed below, play a key role in this). Future planning should be a hopeful, aspirational process. Of course, students will necessarily feel some stress along the way, and the future

A healthy approach to future planning is one that is less transactional and more reflective. This starts with students reflecting on who they are and what they want, not as a one-off activity, but as an ongoing process.



of teens feel pressure
to have their future
“figured out”



Sophia, 11th grade



Collin, 10th grade

25

Over the last two years, College Board test-drove a vision building process for BigFuture Ambassadors (high school students in more than 4,000 schools). With very little direction, these students produced vision boards that offered vivid pictures of their futures. Their visions were as varied as the students themselves and reflected the role of family, faith, and diverse interests, skills, and lifestyle priorities to inform their postsecondary goals and options.

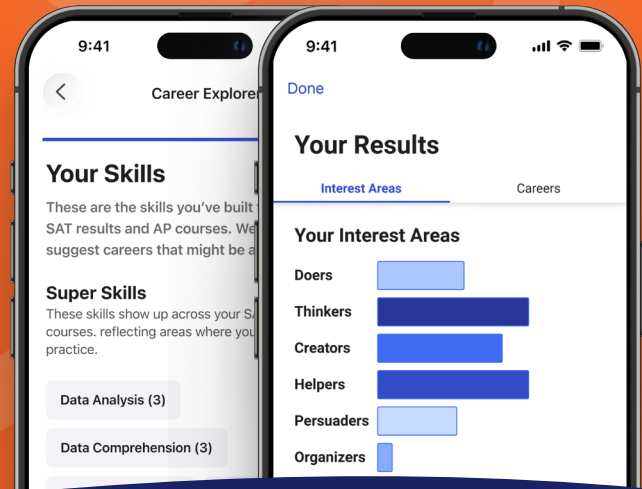




Core Condition #2 Opportunities to explore skills and interests

While most 17-year-olds don't know exactly what they want to do with their lives, they do have a sense of their priorities: 94% of high school seniors surveyed by College Board think it's somewhat or very important to find a career they're passionate about, and almost all of them (95%) think it's somewhat or very important that their careers align with their academic strengths and interests. All of that information can and should anchor the future planning process.

Once students are able to envision the kind of future they hope for, they should then be supported to connect their current interests and skills to career options and postsecondary opportunities that will help them achieve their goals. Students should look closely at what they've learned, what they're uniquely good at, and the experiences they've had in and out of school. What are the durable skills they've developed—like communication, collaboration, or critical thinking—that could be applied to a wide range of future careers? What skills pop as personal strengths, based on the classes and standardized assessments they've taken, including the PSAT/NMSQT®, SAT®, and AP® Exams? What academic strengths might they want to develop further in college, and what types of career paths align to those strengths? What are they interested in, and what types of activities and environments bring them fulfillment?



Students can explore how the types of skills demonstrated on SAT Suite assessments or developed in AP courses combine with their interests to inform personalized career and college options and decision-making.

85%



of high school students
say they want more career
exploration opportunities

71%



of high school graduates
who planned to attend
a four-year college said
that advanced high school
coursework helped
them feel prepared

Students should also have ample opportunities to grow their skills and explore their interests via low-stakes experiments as early as possible. High school is an ideal time to test-drive activities, academic subjects, and workplace environments, to spark new curiosities and better understand the types of undertakings students want to pursue in and beyond their postsecondary education.

Most students say they want more of this: 85% of college-bound students in high school surveyed by College Board/Morning Consult say they want more career exploration opportunities.⁴⁰ Internships and other work-based opportunities offer lower-stakes test runs for future career paths, as well as valuable chances to build social capital, rule out types of work they don't like, and develop durable skills needed for any job.

Advanced coursework also plays a role in helping students prepare to meet their future goals. In 2025, 71% of high school graduates who planned to attend a four-year college said that advanced high school coursework helped them feel prepared. AP offerings continue to expand to include increasingly career-relevant subjects, like AP Cybersecurity and AP Business with Personal Finance.

For Jasmine, AP courses in both micro- and macroeconomics were a chance to establish core skills that would set her up for success in her future undergraduate business program.

"As someone looking to go into business, macroeconomics is required for my major," Jasmine says. The course helped her develop

a high-level understanding of economics, while microeconomics offered more direct skills for building her own business one day. At the same time, taking on the role of the marching band's business manager helped her put those skills into practice.

High school coursework and extracurriculars provide not only the chance to prepare for the future but also to experiment and make mistakes before students have to make big decisions about their postsecondary path. A high schooler who, through school-based "small bets," rules out a handful of potential future paths will be less likely to spend time and money on a postsecondary program that turns out to be a poor fit. But students need encouragement to view high school this way. In a 2026 College Board survey of college freshmen, 70% said they were somewhat or very afraid that "a small mistake could keep me from going to college."



of current college freshmen said they were somewhat or very afraid that "a small mistake could keep me from going to college"

⁴⁰ College Board/Morning Consult. (2024, October). College Board *Career and skill-building survey*. https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/College%20Board%20Career%20Skills%20Report%20-%20October%202024_FINAL.pdf



Core Condition #3

Access to relevant information for decision making

We know that students (and their families) receive a huge amount of information throughout the college planning process. But it can be difficult for them to parse that information, zero in on the pieces that are most relevant for their circumstances, and apply them to their decision making.

Information that speaks to their personal priorities will allow them to compare their options based on what they care about most, and ultimately make a fit-based decision.

Often, the information students need *is* available, but it may be spread across multiple sources and difficult for students to discover. Students need to know where to look and what questions to ask. Instead of having to dig, students need ready access to a set of key data points and tools earlier in the college exploration process: for example, graduation rates and employment

outcomes by major, since different majors can and do lead to different earning potential,⁴¹ personalized cost estimates; insight into the academic and career support resources relevant to their intended focus; availability of mental health support services at the institution; and networks for connecting with current students who share their interests or backgrounds.

Students also need in-person opportunities to experience life on campus. Fly-in college visit programs provide students from lower-income backgrounds or first-generation students with the chance to experience a college campus beyond what's on the website. Scaling these kinds of programs is crucial to ensuring that students from all backgrounds have opportunities to access the information they need to find their fit.

As students collect and sort information from different sources, they will ideally move toward a clear definition of why a given institution might be a good fit for them—which can in turn open more possibilities and help them discover other good-fit options.



⁴¹ Morris, C., Cheah, B., & Strohl, J. (2025). *The major payoff: Evaluating earnings and employment outcomes across bachelor's degrees*. Georgetown University, Center on Education and the Workforce. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/major-payoff>



Core Condition #4

Perspective from caring adults

High school students should be prompted, early in the college planning process, to identify caring adults—school counselors, teachers, family or community members, friends—who know them well and can work together to support them. These adults play a variety of roles for students. They'll help students understand and evaluate their options; make the most out of the information they're gathering; support them to develop self-advocacy skills and a growth mindset throughout the process; and encourage students to try different things. They'll also attend to key aspects of their well-being in this transition period, supporting students to prioritize self-care, mental health, and fun while engaging fully in the future planning process.



Support that caring adults can uniquely provide based on their knowledge of the young person include:

- **Exposing students to the range of potential paths to fruitful lives and careers.** In a coaching role, adults can encourage students to see the range of diverse pathways they might take after high school, and support them to operate from a lens of exploration, following their interests and curiosities and taking small risks along the way. In *The Disengaged Teen*, the authors describe this as “Explorer mode,” and note that only about 4% of high school students have ample opportunities to operate in this way.
- **Prompting students to weigh trade-offs.** It's unlikely that any single institution will meet every need. How should students think about what matters most to them, or how they'll cope with some discomfort or unfamiliarity when they get to their destination?
- **Helping students shift from hyper-focusing on specific institutions too early.** If a student is excited about a particular institution in their community, for example, or one that is especially well-known for a particular area of study, their trusted adults can help them articulate the key qualities and characteristics that make that institution appealing and encourage them to look at other options that also meet those criteria.
- **Encouraging students to ask for help when they need it.** Students—and their caring adults—don't have to have all the answers right now. Caring adults can help students keep things in perspective and view future planning itself as an opportunity for growth and learning.

What Jasmine, Alexis, and José Teach Us About Future Planning



JASMINE

Jasmine prioritized fit in her college planning from the beginning. She considered what she needed to feel fulfilled, now and in the future. She assessed her interests and strengths, her personal aspirations, and her vision for what her future could look like. Then she looked for programs that delivered on all her prioritized fit factors.



ALEXIS

Alexis experienced the sting of losing time and money when she landed initially at an institution that wasn't a good fit for her. But now she's in a better place—enrolled in an academic program that aligns to her career goals, in a financial situation she can manage, with the support of her family nearby. When Alexis describes her experience at her current university, one of the things that stands out is the large community of low-income and commuter students. As she puts it, "It's nice being surrounded with people that understand you."



JOSÉ

José wasn't sure what he wanted to do or how to get there when he first considered college, and he wasn't sure what questions to ask. With the support of his high school advisor, admissions counselors, and faculty at his higher education institutions, he's now a college graduate, on his way to a master's degree. And he's paying it forward: José works in college admissions, as a counselor focused on supporting transfer students.

Each prioritized different fit factors, but ultimately they all landed on a path and program that met their needs.

All students deserve to find a postsecondary path that gives them what they need to thrive in and beyond college. There are many more postsecondary options than high school students can see, and the greatest value comes from finding the right fit.

What's Next? Fit Is Imperative to the Work Ahead

We hope this is the beginning of an expanded conversation about how to ensure that all students have the conditions in place to find their best postsecondary fit. All of us who work with and influence young people share in the responsibility of supporting a healthy approach to future planning that enables students to identify their personal fit factors and the institutions that will fulfill them.

Our discussions with counselors and college access organizations confirmed that many already center their support in a student's personalized fit factors and those conversations informed this approach and the action guides that follow.

For our part, College Board commits to working in partnership with our K–12 and higher education members to continually evolve BigFuture programs in the months and years to come to center fit in future planning. We look forward to continuing the conversation and learning more from our members, students, and their families.

The action guides offer suggested next steps for stakeholders in different roles to help guide this work and/or strengthen efforts already underway across communities nationwide.



**Reflection Guide
for Students**



**Reflection Guide
for Families**



**Action Guide for
K–12 Schools**

APPENDIX:

College Board Data Sources

This appendix describes the primary College Board data sources used in this report. For each source, additional details are provided to support interpretation of findings.

High School Graduation Survey

Overview

In June 2025, College Board Research conducted a 15-minute survey of approximately 30,000 students graduating in 2025 to understand their high school experiences and postgraduation plans. Given the comprehensive nature of the survey, to minimize response burden, subsections were randomized; not every student saw each section, so response rates for individual items vary.

Topics Covered

- Overall high school experience
- High school courses
- Public opinion
- Post-high school plans
- Non-college-bound students
- Paying for college
- College applications
- College preparedness
- Majors and careers

Selected Respondent Characteristics

Postsecondary Plans	%
Attend a 4-year college/university	78%
Attend a 2-year college	11%
Work/employment	2%
Enlist in the military	1%
Enroll in job or skills training	1%
Serve an apprenticeship	0%

Note. Responses of “not sure” or “other” are excluded¹

Race/Ethnicity	%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%
Asian (including Indian subcontinent and Philippines origin)	14%
Black or African American	12%
Hispanic or Latino (including Spanish origin)	20%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0%
No response	10%
Two or more races, non-Hispanic	5%
White (including Middle Eastern origin)	40%

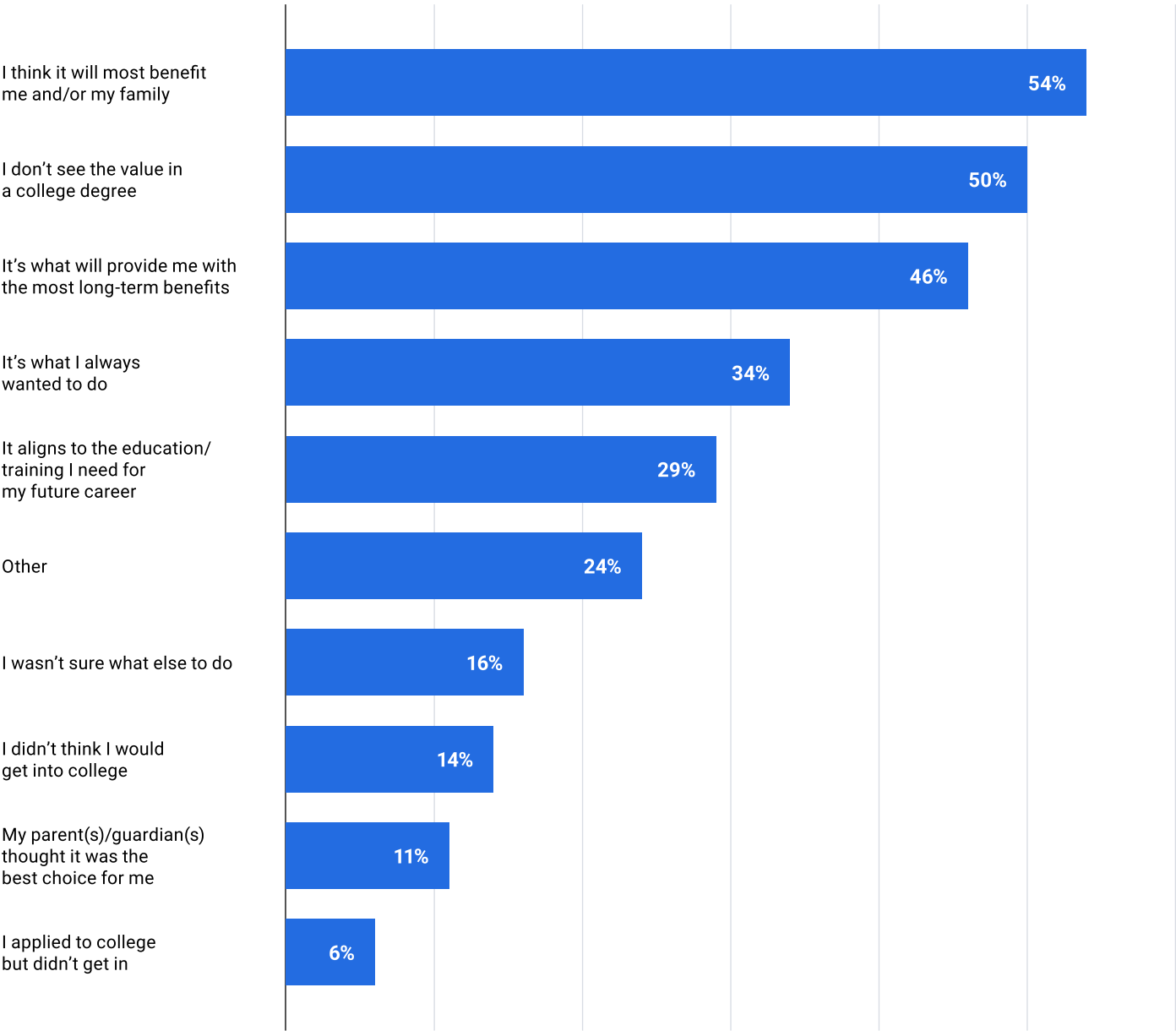
Gender	%
Female	56%
Male	42%
No response	2%

Note. Response counts vary by question due to the randomized survey design and are not reported here.

Student Perspectives Included in This Report

Figure 1: Reasons for Pursuing Chosen Post-secondary Plan Rather than Attend College

Survey question asks, “Why did you decide you want to pursue your chosen plan after high school? (Please select all that apply.)” Only students who indicated they don’t plan to attend a 2- or 4-year college at any point were asked this question.

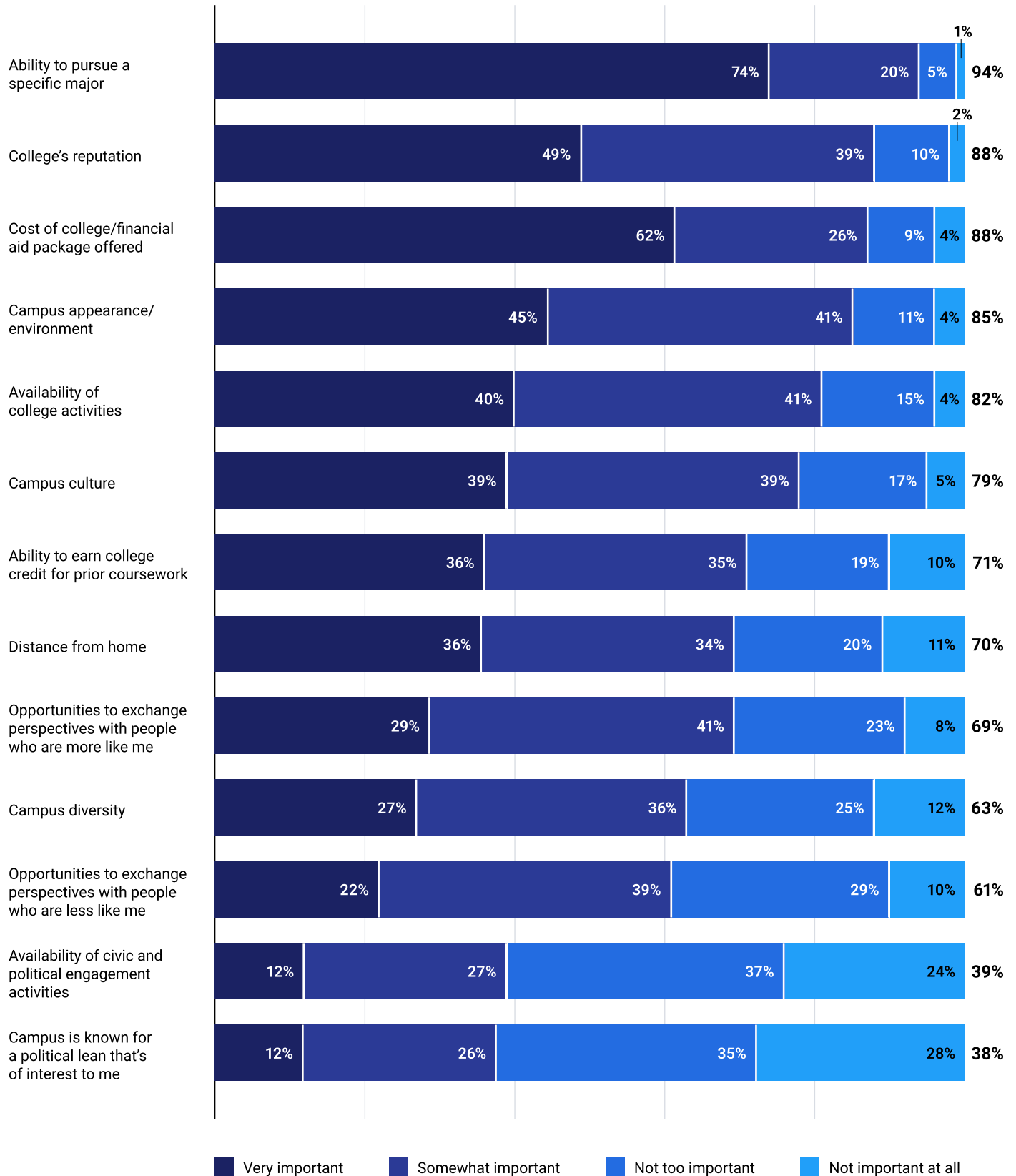


Summary of Data in Figure 1:

- 54% of students selected the reason “I think it will most benefit me and/or my family.”
- 50% of students selected the reason “I don’t see the value in a college degree.”
- 46% of students selected the reason “It’s what will provide me with the most long-term benefits.”
- 34% of students selected the reason “It’s what I always wanted to do.”
- 29% of students selected the reason “It aligns to the education/training I need for my future career.”
- 24% of students selected the reason “Other.”
- 16% of students selected the reason “I wasn’t sure what else to do.”
- 14% of students selected the reason “I didn’t think I would get into college.”
- 11% of students selected the reason “My parent(s)/guardian(s) thought it was the best choice for me.”
- 6% of students selected the reason “I applied to college but didn’t get in.”

Figure 2: Factors Important to High School Seniors in Selecting a College

Survey question asks, “How important were each of the following factors in your decision of where to apply to college?”
 Bold percentages to the right of each bar reflect combined “Very important” and “Somewhat important” responses.



Summary of Data in Figure 2:

For the factor "Ability to pursue a specific major," a combined 94% of students selected "Very important" or "Somewhat important." 74% selected "Very important," 20% selected "Somewhat important," 5% selected "Not too important," and 1% selected "Not important at all."

For the factor "College's reputation," a combined 88% of students selected "Very important" or "Somewhat important." 49% selected "Very important," 39% selected "Somewhat important," 10% selected "Not too important," and 2% selected "Not important at all."

For the factor "Cost of college/financial aid package offered," a combined 88% of students selected "Very important" or "Somewhat important." 62% selected "Very important," 26% selected "Somewhat important," 9% selected "Not too important," and 4% selected "Not important at all."

For the factor "Campus appearance/environment," a combined 85% of students selected "Very important" or "Somewhat important." 45% selected "Very important," 41% selected "Somewhat important," 11% selected "Not too important," and 4% selected "Not important at all."

For the factor "Availability of college activities," a combined 82% of students selected "Very important" or "Somewhat important." 40% selected "Very important," 41% selected "Somewhat important," 15% selected "Not too important," and 4% selected "Not important at all."

For the factor "Campus culture," a combined 79% of students selected "Very important" or "Somewhat important." 39% selected "Very important," 39% selected "Somewhat important," 17% selected "Not too important," and 5% selected "Not important at all."

For the factor "Ability to earn college credit for prior coursework," a combined 71% of students selected "Very important" or "Somewhat important." 36% selected "Very important," 35% selected "Somewhat important," 19% selected "Not too important," and 10% selected "Not important at all."

For the factor "Distance from home," a combined 70% of students selected "Very important" or "Somewhat important." 36% selected "Very important," 34% selected "Somewhat important," 20% selected "Not too important," and 11% selected "Not important at all."

For the factor "Opportunities to exchange perspectives with people who are more like me," a combined 69% of students selected "Very important" or "Somewhat important." 29% selected "Very important," 41% selected "Somewhat important," 23% selected "Not too important," and 8% selected "Not important at all."

For the factor "Campus diversity," a combined 63% of students selected "Very important" or "Somewhat important." 27% selected "Very important," 36% selected "Somewhat important," 25% selected "Not too important," and 12% selected "Not important at all."

For the factor "Opportunities to exchange perspectives with people who are less like me," a combined 61% of students selected "Very important" or "Somewhat important." 22% selected "Very important," 39% selected "Somewhat important," 29% selected "Not too important," and 10% selected "Not important at all."

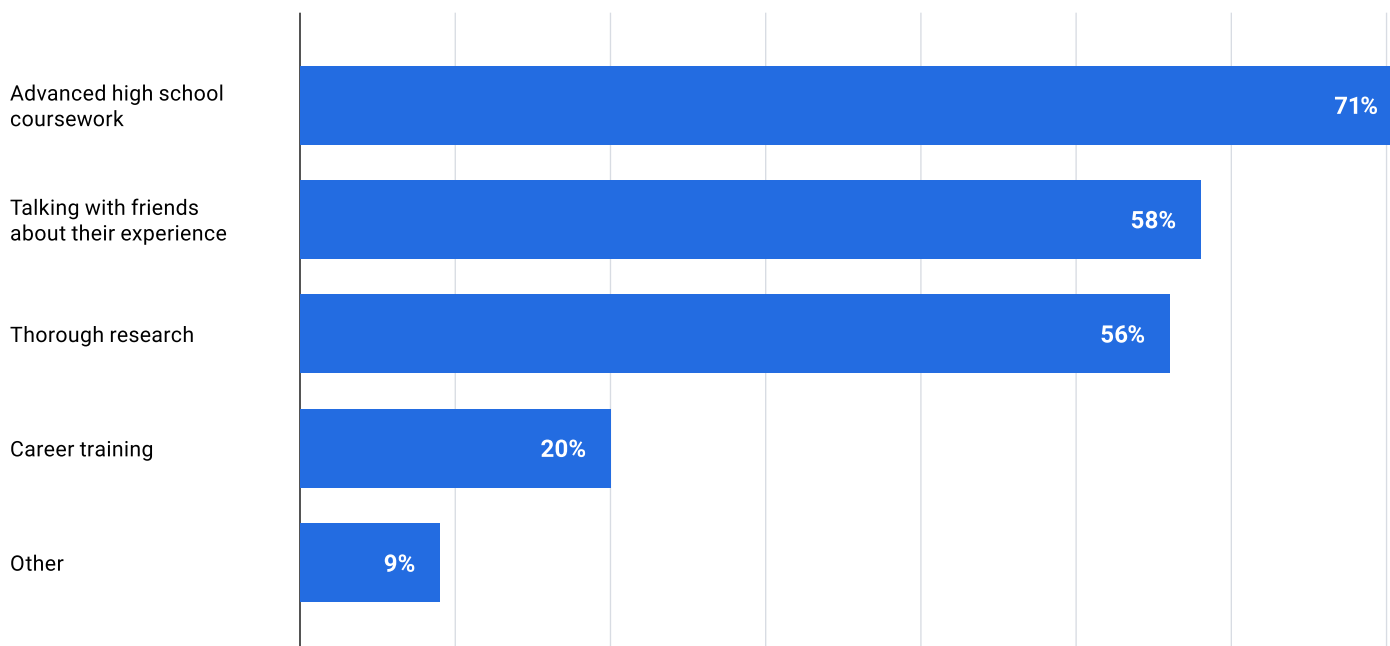
For the factor "Availability of civic and political engagement activities," a combined 39% of students selected "Very important" or "Somewhat important." 12% selected "Very important," 27% selected "Somewhat important," 37% selected "Not too important," and 24% selected "Not important at all."

For the factor "Campus is known for a political lean that's of interest to me," a combined 38% of students selected "Very important" or "Somewhat important." 12% selected "Very important," 26% selected "Somewhat important," 35% selected "Not too important," and 28% selected "Not important at all."

Figure 3: Factors Helping College-Bound High School Seniors Feel Prepared

Survey question asks, "Which of the following helped you feel prepared for college? (Please select all that apply)."

Asked of those who indicated plans to attend a 2-year or 4-year college.



Summary of Data in Figure 3:

71% of students selected the factor "Advanced high school coursework."

58% of students selected the factor "Talking with friends about their experience."

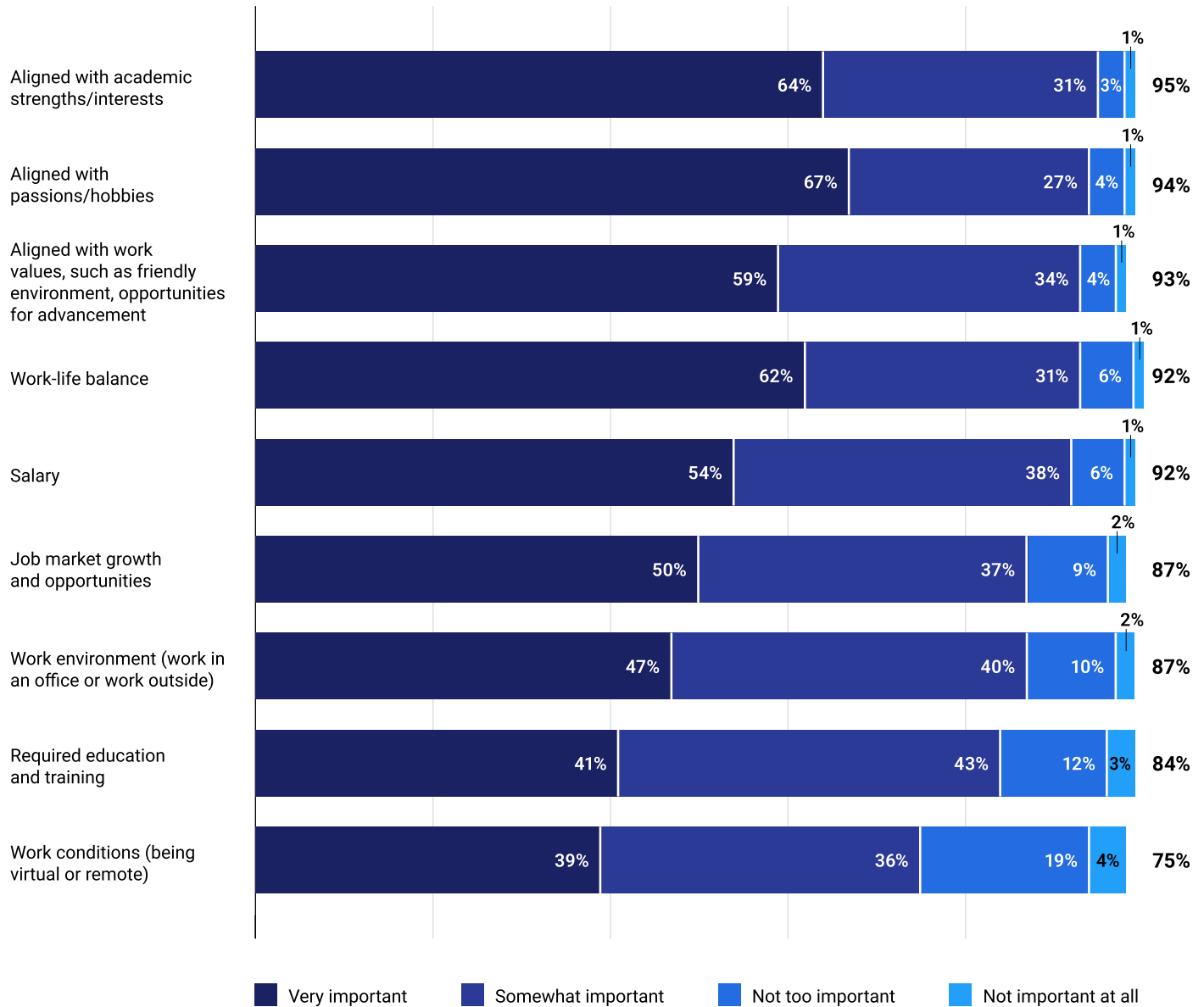
56% of students selected the factor "Thorough research."

20% of students selected the factor "Career training."

9% of students selected the factor "Other."

Figure 4: Aspects Important in Deciding Whether a Career is Interesting

Survey question asks, “How important are each of the following aspects in deciding whether a career is interesting to you?”
 Bold percentages to the right of each bar reflect combined “Very important” and “Somewhat important” responses.



Summary of Data in Figure 4:

For the aspect “Aligned with academic strengths/interests,” a combined 95% of students selected “Very important” or “Somewhat important.” 64% selected “Very important,” 31% selected “Somewhat important,” 3% selected “Not too important,” and 1% selected “Not important at all.”

For the aspect “Aligned with passions/hobbies,” a combined 94% of students selected “Very important” or “Somewhat important.” 67% selected “Very important,” 27% selected “Somewhat important,” 4% selected “Not too important,” and 1% selected “Not important at all.”

For the aspect “Aligned with work values, such as friendly environment, opportunities for advancement,” a combined 93% of students selected “Very important” or “Somewhat important.” 59% selected “Very important,” 34% selected “Somewhat important,” 4% selected “Not too important,” and 1% selected “Not important at all.”

For the aspect “Work-life balance,” a combined 92% of students selected “Very important” or “Somewhat important.” 62% selected “Very important,” 31% selected “Somewhat important,” 6% selected “Not too important,” and 1% selected “Not important at all.”

For the aspect “Salary,” a combined 92% of students selected “Very important” or “Somewhat important.” 54% selected “Very important,” 38% selected “Somewhat important,” 6% selected “Not too important,” and 1% selected “Not important at all.”

For the aspect “Job market growth and opportunities,” a combined 87% of students selected “Very important” or “Somewhat important.” 50% selected “Very important,” 37% selected “Somewhat important,” 9% selected “Not too important,” and 2% selected “Not important at all.”

For the aspect “Work environment (work in an office or work outside),” a combined 87% of students selected “Very important” or “Somewhat important.” 47% selected “Very important,” 40% selected “Somewhat important,” 10% selected “Not too important,” and 2% selected “Not important at all.”

For the aspect “Required education and training,” a combined 84% of students selected “Very important” or “Somewhat important.” 41% selected “Very important,” 43% selected “Somewhat important,” 12% selected “Not too important,” and 3% selected “Not important at all.”

For the aspect “Work conditions (being virtual or remote),” a combined 75% of students selected “Very important” or “Somewhat important.” 39% selected “Very important,” 36% selected “Somewhat important,” 19% selected “Not too important,” and 4% selected “Not important at all.”

College Freshman Survey

Overview

In February 2026, College Board Research conducted a 20-minute survey of approximately 18,000 students who graduated high school in spring 2025 and enrolled in a 2- or 4-year college in fall 2025 or spring 2026 to understand their transition to college. Given the comprehensive nature of the survey, subsections were randomized to minimize response burden; not every student saw each section. An incentive of \$20 was offered to the first 1,300 students who completed the survey.

Topics Covered

- Value of college
- College experience to date
- Openness and public opinion
- College fit
- College preparedness
- Advanced coursework in high school
- College entrance exams
- Financial aid
- Generative AI
- Course relevance

Respondent Characteristics

Type of College Currently Attending	%
4-year public college	57%
4-year private college	25%
2-year college	17%

Size of College	%
Large (more than 15,000 undergraduate students)	43%
Medium (5,000–15,000 undergraduate students)	31%
Small (fewer than 5,000 undergraduate students)	18%
Not sure	8%

Commuter Student Status	%
Commuter student (Yes)	35%
Non-commuter (No)	65%

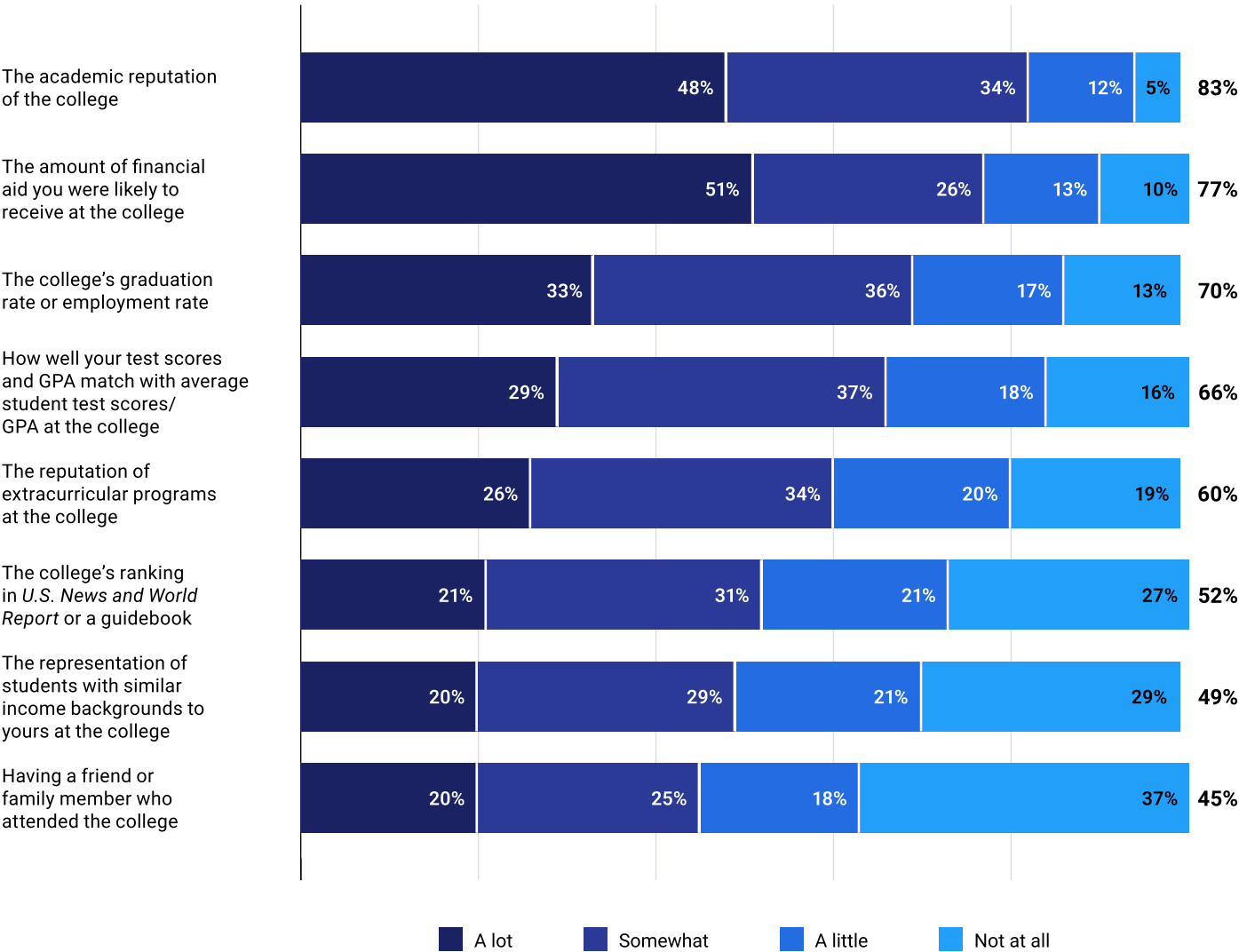
Race/Ethnicity	%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%
Asian (including Indian subcontinent and Philippines origin)	18%
Black or African American	10%
Hispanic or Latino (including Spanish origin)	21%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0%
No response	8%
Two or more races, non-Hispanic	5%
White (including Middle Eastern origin)	37%

Note. Response counts vary by question due to the randomized survey design and are not reported here.

Student Perspectives Included in This Report

Figure 5: Degree to which Factors Influenced Where to Apply to College

Survey question asks, “To what degree did each of the following influence where you applied to college?”
Bold percentages to the right of each bar reflect combined “A lot” and “Somewhat” responses.



Summary of Data in Figure 5:

For the factor “The academic reputation of the college,” a combined 83% of students selected “A lot” or “Somewhat.” 48% selected “A lot,” 34% selected “Somewhat,” 12% selected “A little,” and 5% selected “Not at all.”

For the factor “The amount of financial aid you were likely to receive at the college,” a combined 77% of students selected “A lot” or “Somewhat.” 51% selected “A lot,” 26% selected “Somewhat,” 13% selected “A little,” and 10% selected “Not at all.”

For the factor “The college’s graduation rate or employment rate,” a combined 70% of students selected “A lot” or “Somewhat.” 33% selected “A lot,” 36% selected “Somewhat,” 17% selected “A little,” and 13% selected “Not at all.”

For the factor “How well your test scores and GPA match with average student test scores/GPA at the college,” a combined 66% of students selected “A lot” or “Somewhat.” 29% selected “A lot,” 37% selected “Somewhat,” 18% selected “A little,” and 16% selected “Not at all.”

For the factor “The reputation of extracurricular programs at the college,” a combined 60% of students selected “A lot” or “Somewhat.” 26% selected “A lot,” 34% selected “Somewhat,” 20% selected “A little,” and 19% selected “Not at all.”

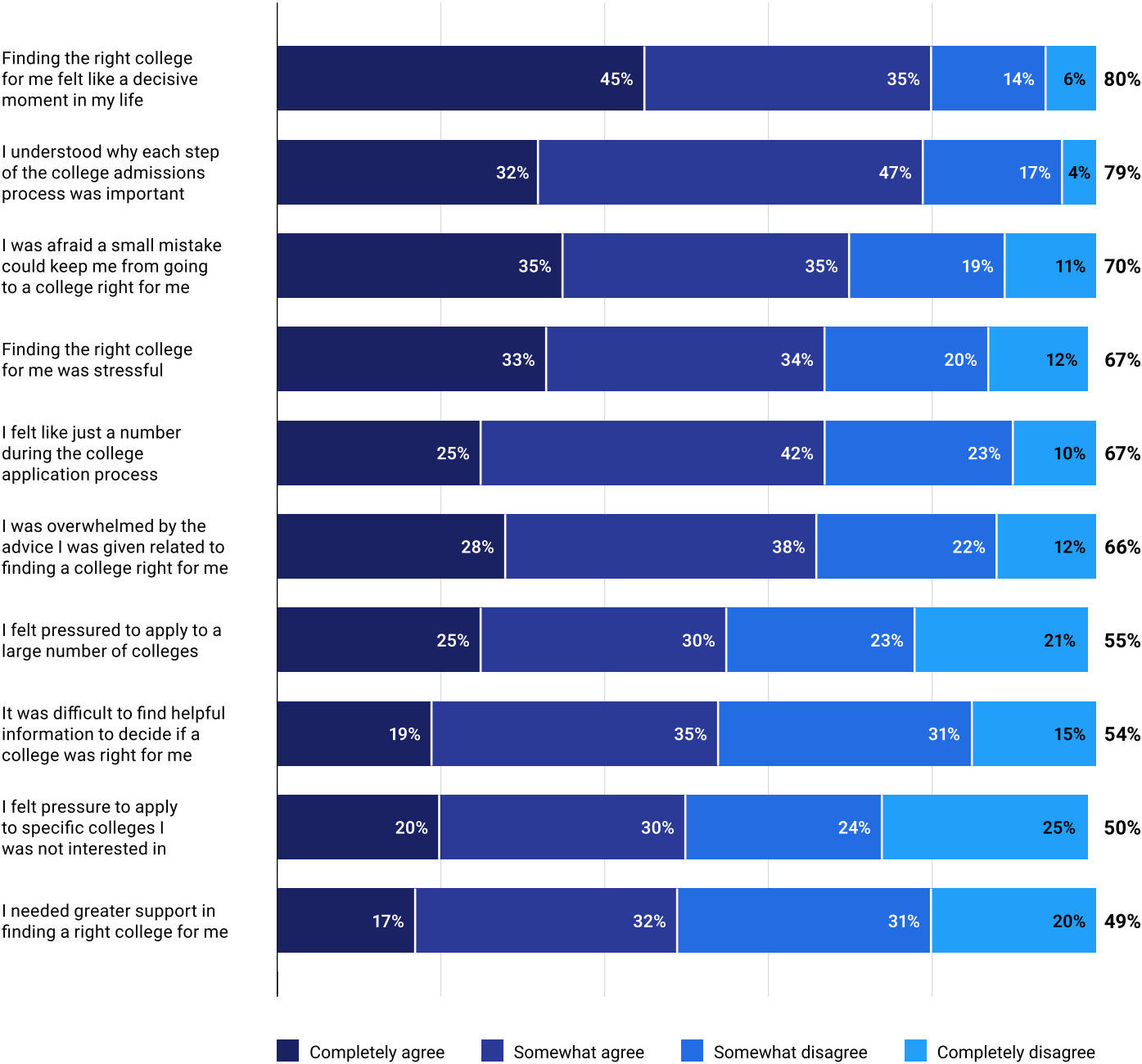
For the factor “The college’s ranking in *U.S. News and World Report* or a guidebook,” a combined 52% of students selected “A lot” or “Somewhat.” 21% selected “A lot,” 31% selected “Somewhat,” 21% selected “A little,” and 27% selected “Not at all.”

For the factor “The representation of students with similar income backgrounds to yours at the college,” a combined 49% of students selected “A lot” or “Somewhat.” 20% selected “A lot,” 29% selected “Somewhat,” 21% selected “A little,” and 29% selected “Not at all.”

For the factor “Having a friend or family member who attended the college,” a combined 45% of students selected “A lot” or “Somewhat.” 20% selected “A lot,” 25% selected “Somewhat,” 18% selected “A little,” and 37% selected “Not at all.”

Figure 6: Agreement with Statements about the College Exploration and Application Process

Survey question asks, “Thinking back on your college exploration and application process, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” Bold percentages to the right of each bar reflect combined “Completely agree” and “Somewhat agree” responses.



Summary of Data in Figure 6:

For the statement "Finding the right college for me felt like a decisive moment in my life," a combined 80% of students selected "Completely agree" or "Somewhat agree." 45% selected "Completely agree," 35% selected "Somewhat agree," 14% selected "Somewhat disagree," and 6% selected "Completely disagree."

For the statement "I understood why each step of the college admissions process was important," a combined 79% of students selected "Completely agree" or "Somewhat agree." 32% selected "Completely agree," 47% selected "Somewhat agree," 17% selected "Somewhat disagree," and 4% selected "Completely disagree."

For the statement "I was afraid a small mistake could keep me from going to a college right for me," a combined 70% of students selected "Completely agree" or "Somewhat agree." 35% selected "Completely agree," 35% selected "Somewhat agree," 19% selected "Somewhat disagree," and 11% selected "Completely disagree."

For the statement "Finding the right college for me was stressful," a combined 67% of students selected "Completely agree" or "Somewhat agree." 33% selected "Completely agree," 34% selected "Somewhat agree," 20% selected "Somewhat disagree," and 12% selected "Completely disagree."

For the statement "I felt like just a number during the college application process," a combined 67% of students selected "Completely agree" or "Somewhat agree." 25% selected "Completely agree," 42% selected "Somewhat agree," 23% selected "Somewhat disagree," and 10% selected "Completely disagree."

For the statement "I was overwhelmed by the advice I was given related to finding a college right for me," a combined 66% of students selected "Completely agree" or "Somewhat agree." 28% selected "Completely agree," 38% selected "Somewhat agree," 22% selected "Somewhat disagree," and 12% selected "Completely disagree."

For the statement "I felt pressured to apply to a large number of colleges," a combined 55% of students selected "Completely agree" or "Somewhat agree." 25% selected "Completely agree," 30% selected "Somewhat agree," 23% selected "Somewhat disagree," and 21% selected "Completely disagree."

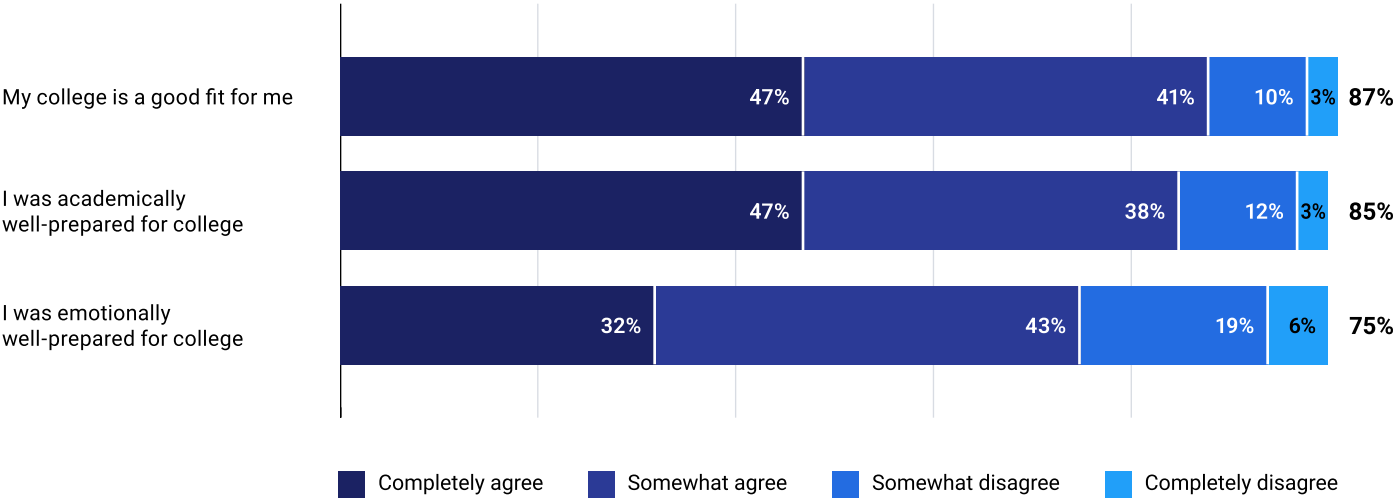
For the statement "It was difficult to find helpful information to decide if a college was right for me," a combined 54% of students selected "Completely agree" or "Somewhat agree." 19% selected "Completely agree," 35% selected "Somewhat agree," 31% selected "Somewhat disagree," and 15% selected "Completely disagree."

For the statement "I felt pressure to apply to specific colleges I was not interested in," a combined 50% of students selected "Completely agree" or "Somewhat agree." 20% selected "Completely agree," 30% selected "Somewhat agree," 24% selected "Somewhat disagree," and 25% selected "Completely disagree."

For the statement "I needed greater support in finding a right college for me," a combined 49% of students selected "Completely agree" or "Somewhat agree." 17% selected "Completely agree," 32% selected "Somewhat agree," 31% selected "Somewhat disagree," and 20% selected "Completely disagree."

Figure 7: Perceptions of College Fit

Survey question asks, “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?”
Bold percentages to the right of each bar reflect combined “Completely agree” and “Somewhat agree” responses.



Summary of Data in Figure 7:

For the statement “My college is a good fit for me,” a combined 87% of students selected “Completely agree” or “Somewhat agree.” 47% selected “Completely agree,” 41% selected “Somewhat agree,” 10% selected “Somewhat disagree,” and 3% selected “Completely disagree.”

For the statement “I was academically well-prepared for college,” a combined 85% of students selected “Completely agree” or “Somewhat agree.” 47% selected “Completely agree,” 38% selected “Somewhat agree,” 12% selected “Somewhat disagree,” and 3% selected “Completely disagree.”

For the statement “I was emotionally well-prepared for college,” a combined 75% of students selected “Completely agree” or “Somewhat agree.” 32% selected “Completely agree,” 43% selected “Somewhat agree,” 19% selected “Somewhat disagree,” and 6% selected “Completely disagree.”

Students Weigh in on Perceptions of College Fit

Approximately 13% of students (n = 589) indicated that they somewhat or completely disagreed that their college was a good fit for them. Qualitative analysis of their open-ended feedback sharing more reflections on the reasons their college was not a good fit resulted in the following themes. At times, comments were coded to multiple themes given the content.

Students cited a lack of **social fit and belonging**, as well as **feeling isolated** (40%)

Students referred to **high costs and a lack of affordability** (30%)

The following student feedback illustrates these themes.

Social Fit and Belonging

“I’m a minority in many ways so I don’t feel like I can be myself often, there are hardly any extracurriculars that appeal to me, my main interests aren’t well represented academically, the location isn’t great, the people are not my kind of people, etc.”

“...[J]ust general culture of the students.”

“It can be lonely and it is small and hard to find people who match your energy.”

“I feel like a lot of people aren’t very social in between classes so it gets kinda lonely at times.”

Financial Fit

“The community and the affordability to live there.”

“The price is overwhelming.”

Dual Themes

“It’s very expensive, I’m very far away from my family, and there aren’t other people like me here so I’m very lonely.”

College Board Parent Survey

Overview

Four times a year, College Board Research partners with a third-party commercial survey panel provider to conduct a 20-minute survey of approximately 1,100 parents who have at least 1 child in high school. Results of the December 2025 survey are reported here. The goal of this survey is to collect feedback from parents about college, work, and other postsecondary options. To avoid confusion, respondents with more than one child in high school were advised to answer survey questions as they pertain to their *oldest* child in high school.

Topics Covered

- Value of college and other postsecondary outcomes
- Choosing a college
- College entrance exams
- High school course-taking and course-specific skills
- Use of technology and generative AI
- Challenges faced by high school students

Respondent Characteristics

Parent Education Level	%
Pre-K to 8th grade	1%
Some high school, no diploma	4%
High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent	24%
Some college credit, no degree	15%
Trade/technical/vocational training	4%
Associate degree	12%
Bachelor’s degree	21%
Master’s degree	13%
Professional degree	3%
Doctorate degree	3%

Grade Level of Oldest Child	%
8 th	4%
9 th	19%
10 th	24%
11 th	24%
12 th	28%

Race	%
Asian	4%
Black or African American	21%
Other	8%
Prefer Not to Say	2%
White	68%

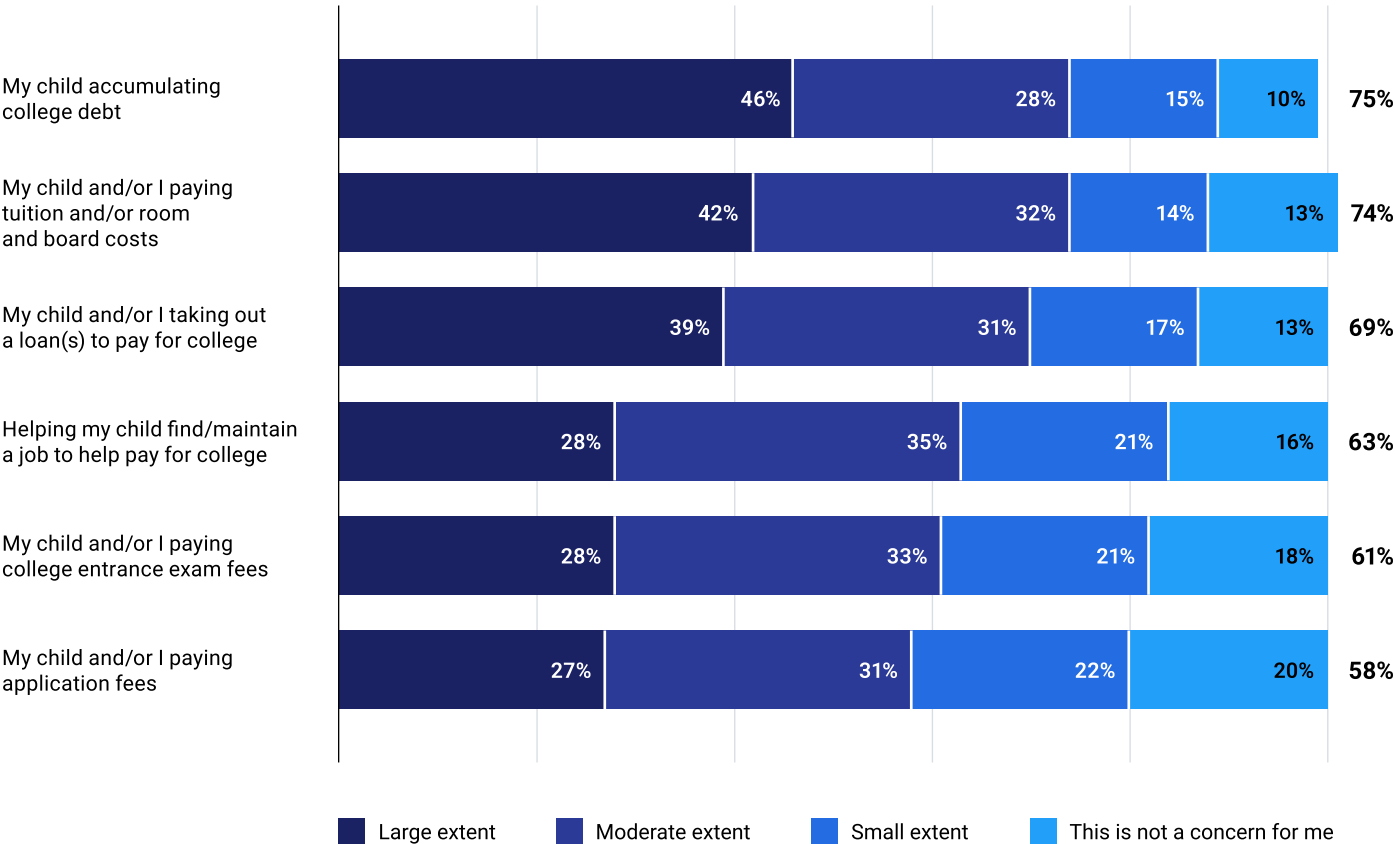
Ethnicity	%
Hispanic or Latino	22%
Non-Hispanic or Latino	78%

Note. Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Parent Perspectives Included in This Report

Figure 8: Percentage of Parents Concerned with Factors Related to College Affordability

Survey question asks, “To what extent do each of the following factors about college affordability concern you?”
Bold percentages to the right of each bar reflect combined “A large extent” and “Moderate extent” responses.



Summary of Data in Figure 8:

For the factor “My child accumulating college debt,” a combined 75% of parents selected “Large extent” or “Moderate extent.” 46% selected “Large extent,” 28% selected “Moderate extent,” 15% selected “Small extent,” and 10% selected “This is not a concern for me.”

For the factor “My child and/or I paying tuition and/or room and board costs,” a combined 74% of parents selected “Large extent” or “Moderate extent.” 42% selected “Large extent,” 32% selected “Moderate extent,” 14% selected “Small extent,” and 13% selected “This is not a concern for me.”

For the factor “My child and/or I taking out a loan(s) to pay for college,” a combined 69% of parents selected “Large extent” or “Moderate extent.” 39% selected “Large extent,” 31% selected “Moderate extent,” 17% selected “Small extent,” and 13% selected “This is not a concern for me.”

For the factor “Helping my child find/maintain a job to help pay for college,” a combined 63% of parents selected “Large extent” or “Moderate extent.” 28% selected “Large extent,” 35% selected “Moderate extent,” 21% selected “Small extent,” and 16% selected “This is not a concern for me.”

For the factor “My child and/or I paying college entrance exam fees,” a combined 61% of parents selected “Large extent” or “Moderate extent.” 28% selected “Large extent,” 33% selected “Moderate extent,” 21% selected “Small extent,” and 18% selected “This is not a concern for me.”

For the factor “My child and/or I paying application fees,” a combined 58% of parents selected “Large extent” or “Moderate extent.” 27% selected “Large extent,” 31% selected “Moderate extent,” 22% selected “Small extent,” and 20% selected “This is not a concern for me.”

BigFuture.org Student-Created College Lists

Overview

BigFuture.org is a free College Board website that helps students envision their future and make a plan to get there. Students can explore colleges, career options, scholarships, and free planning resources for guidance.

Student ‘College List’ Creation Data

Data for the analysis related to students’ “college list” exploration were sourced from students saving colleges via the College Search and College Quiz features on bigfuture.org. College list creation has long been identified as an important phase of the college search process.⁴² A college list is the set of institutions a student is actively considering applying to, typically developed during the college search process and often categorized into tiers based on the student’s likelihood of admission: commonly referred to as reach, match, and safety schools.

The student data included information from 1.1 million bigfuture.org accounts where a college list had been saved. Students included in the analysis were those who had created a College Board account, were in cohorts 2026–2029 (those currently in high school at the time of analysis), and had saved at least one college to their list. Approximately 626,000 students in the 2026 cohort (estimated to be approximately 37% of students who are likely to enroll in college for the first time in fall 2026⁴³) have created a college list on bigfuture.org.

The average college list for these students contained six institutions. Approximately 40% of students returned to their list at least 1 time after creating the list.

Use in This Report

To analyze college list saves, we merged data collected via account creation and student engagement from bigfuture.org to identify institutions included in student-generated, saved college lists. The analysis also draws on publicly available data related to enrollment and rankings for higher education institutions, sourced from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and *U.S. News & World Report’s* (USNWR) Top Colleges list.

The analysis demonstrated that the 10 most frequently saved colleges appear on approximately 42% of student-created college lists, while those schools only enrolled approximately 3% of the national fall 2024 cohort.

When we look at the 100 most frequently saved institutions, we see that they appear on 81% of lists while representing approximately 29% of the national fall 2024 enrollment.

Overall, this analysis shows that a select few schools are being saved by the majority of students, while other schools that collectively enroll the majority of students nationally are not being saved as often.

⁴² See, e.g., Avery, C. (2010). *The effects of college counseling on high-achieving, low-income students* (NBER Working Paper No. 16359). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w16359> or Hoxby, C. M., & Avery, C. (2012). *The missing “one-offs”: The hidden supply of high-achieving, low-income students* (NBER Working Paper No. 18586). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w18586>

⁴³ For purposes of this analysis, drawing on the most recently available first time college enrollment data (NCES IPEDS, Fall 2024), we estimate that approximately 1.7 million students will enroll in college for the first time in Fall 2026.

Campus Sonar Social Listening Analysis

Overview

Campus Sonar partners with higher education leadership teams to guide research-led planning and implementation. Insights drawn from Campus Sonar data rely on social listening, a research methodology utilized in studies spanning education, healthcare/public health, marketing, and public policy. Social listening methodology is the practice of collecting and analyzing what people are saying in online conversations, such as social media posts and forum discussions, to understand sentiment and identify trends, rather than just tracking that the conversations exist.⁴⁴

Data Collection, Analysis, and Use in this Report

Our research drew from a range of online forums and community platforms to capture college admissions-related conversations across themes of belonging, outcomes, resources, and institutional quality. The analysis covers a 12-month period from May 16, 2023, through May 15, 2024, and was limited to English-language content and forum conversations.

Reddit served as the primary source of online discussions. Within Reddit, analysis was further refined at the subreddit level, with ApplyingToCollege, College, MBA, MedicalSchool, and PreMed representing the highest-volume communities. Additional forums were utilized, including The Student Room, The Student Doctor Network, College Confidential, AllNurses, The Grad Café, and DC Urban Moms and Dads.

There were 630,045 total mentions across these platforms incorporated in this analysis. Prior to analysis, conversations were screened to include only those referencing U.S. college admissions or enrollment decisions, to ensure findings reflected meaningful admissions-related discourse.

In social listening methodology, “mentions” refer to the quantity of instances where a brand, product, or service is referenced in online conversations across social media platforms, blogs, forums, or review sites, with “conversations” describing a related group of mentions. “Mentions” for this analysis were identified using Brandwatch Consumer Research, which aggregates publicly available online information from social media, forums, news sites, and blogs.

In this analysis, conversations were categorized using a thematic framework of keywords and phrases, organized into four areas: outcomes, belonging, resources, and perceptions of institutional quality. Because individual mentions can speak to more than 1 theme simultaneously, proportional breakdowns across themes sum to greater than 100%. This reflects the interconnected nature of how prospective students and families evaluate higher education options rather than a methodological limitation.

This report incorporates the findings related to how often perceived institutional prestige was identified in conversations about college admissions.

⁴⁴ Hahn, A. (2024). *Social listening*. EBSCO Research Starters. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/marketing/social-listening>

About BigFuture

BigFuture® helps students take their first step after high school. We help you plan for college, pay for college, and explore careers. Whether you're interested in a four-year university, community college, or career training, BigFuture has what you need to start planning your future, your way.

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