



# FACTORS AFFECTING FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS' COLLEGE CHOICES:

Insights from the 2023 CIRP  
Freshman Survey

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The UCLA School of Education and Information Studies (UCLA Ed&IS) and the American Council on Education (ACE) are in partnership to strengthen and lead the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). HERI is the longest-running, most comprehensive data collection of institutes of higher education, including data on more than 1,900 institutions, over 15 million students, and more than 500,000 faculty. CRESST, a research and development center within UCLA Ed&IS and the administrative home for HERI, partners with ACE in carrying out HERI's portfolio. Through this partnership, ACE and UCLA Ed&IS will elevate and expand HERI's research and reach through ACE's extensive capacity and expertise in faculty and presidential-level data collection and research and CRESST's knowledge and expertise in assessment and methodology. ACE and CRESST are collaborating on data sharing, research design and development, and supporting higher education institutions' leadership and the students they serve. For more information on the partnership, see the [partnership announcement](#).

*This brief was prepared by Austin Freeman, Nguyen Nguyen, and Kara Seidel, under the direction of Danielle Melidona and Hironao Okahana.*



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## Introduction

Since 1966, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey (TFS)—administered annually by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI)—has collected important insights from incoming first-year students prior to the start of their postsecondary studies. It includes a variety of topics such as academic preparedness, expectations of college, student values and goals, and interactions with peers and faculty. The survey is typically administered prior to students' first year or during orientation, usually between April and October.



**72**  
institutions<sup>1</sup>



**27**  
states<sup>2</sup>



**34,002**  
first-year  
students<sup>3</sup>

**70%**  
were accepted  
to their first  
choice college

**52%**  
were students  
of color

**23%**  
identified as  
LGBTQ+

**23%**  
had a total  
household  
income <\$60,000

**13%**  
were first-generation  
students

**5%**  
were students  
with military service

Utilizing data from the 2023 survey, this brief highlights student perspectives on making application decisions, financing college, and choosing to attend their particular institution. These data not only help senior leaders understand the key factors that contribute to students' enrollment decisions but can also be used to address challenges or barriers to postsecondary access. TFS offers a snapshot of who students are before college and acts as a baseline to assess college impact. ACE and HERI plan to release a joint publication on TFS 2024 data in early 2025. The groundbreaking 60th administration of the CIRP Freshman Survey will take place in 2025.<sup>4</sup>

- 1 The 72 institutions included 15 universities and 57 four-year colleges. There were no community colleges represented in the sample. Of the institutions within the sample, 12 were public institutions and 60 were private.
- 2 The 27 states were California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, and Washington, as well as the District of Columbia.
- 3 Data analysis for this brief was based on the 29,118 first-year students who completed 10 percent or more of the survey.
- 4 Visit <https://heri.ucla.edu/cirp-freshman-survey/> to learn more about administering TFS on your campus.

## Application, Admission, and Choice

With a variety of institution types, fields of study, and geographically diverse campuses, students have a wide range of colleges and universities from which to choose. Students were asked several questions related to their college application, admission, and choice processes, and the findings are summarized herein.

### College Choice

When asked how many colleges (other than the one they chose to attend) to which first-year students had applied for admission, over half (57 percent) had applied to six or more colleges. About one-fourth (24 percent) of students had applied to three to five additional colleges, while 11 percent had applied to one or two more colleges. Nine percent had applied to no other colleges than the one they decided to attend.

While half of White students indicated that they had applied to six or more colleges other than the one they decided to attend, a higher share (63 percent) of students of color did the same.<sup>5</sup> About one in every 10 White students (12 percent) indicated that they had not applied to any colleges beyond the institution they decided to attend, compared with 6 percent of students of color.

Seven in 10 students were accepted to their first-choice college. About three-fourths of White students (77 percent) reported that they had been accepted to their first-choice college, compared with 64 percent of students of color. Black or African American (78 percent) and White (77 percent) students composed the highest shares of students by race and ethnicity who were accepted into their first-choice college. The majority of students with military service reported that they were accepted to their first-choice college (90 percent).<sup>6</sup>

Among those who were accepted to their first-choice college, four in five students attended their first choice, while 14 percent attended their second choice, 4 percent attended their third-choice college, and 2 percent attended an institution that they had ranked beyond their third choice (see figure 1).

A smaller share of students of color (72 percent) than that of White students (87 percent) attended their first-choice college after they were accepted. While admitted at about the same rate (71 percent for first-generation students and 70 percent for continuing-generation students), a smaller share of first-generation students attended their first-choice institution (69 percent) when compared with that of students whose parents had completed at least some college (82 percent).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, fewer students whose total household income was less than \$60,000 (69 percent) attended their first-choice college after they were accepted, compared with students whose total household income was \$60,000 or more (84 percent). Roughly equal shares of students by gender were accepted to their first-choice college; however, larger shares of men (84 percent) and other gender identifying students (83 percent) then attended their first-choice college, compared with 77 percent of women.<sup>8</sup>

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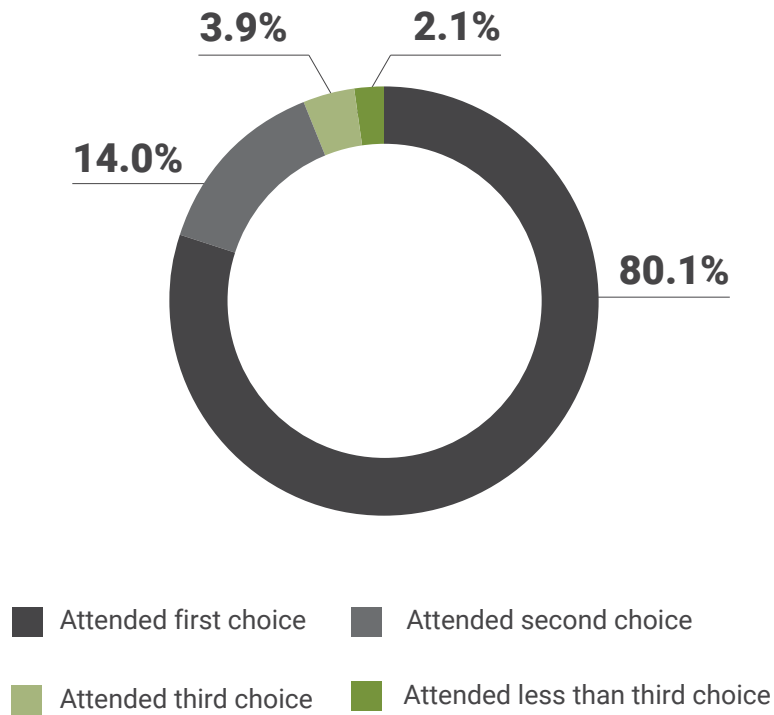
5 The term *students of color* encompasses those in aggregated groups across races and ethnicities that included Hispanic or Latino, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, two or more races or ethnicities, or other races or ethnicities not listed.

6 The term *military service* refers to any student who indicated that they were Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), a cadet, or midshipman at a service academy; in the Reserve or National Guard; on active duty; or a discharged veteran not serving on active duty or in the Reserve or National Guard.

7 The term *first-generation students* includes respondents who reported that their parents or guardians had completed less than some college. The term *some college* describes the experience of individuals who made any progress in college but did not complete their degree or credential.

8 The term *other gender identifying students* includes respondents who identified as genderqueer, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, or another gender identity.

**FIGURE 1. STUDENT ATTENDANCE BASED ON ACCEPTANCE TO FIRST-CHOICE COLLEGE**



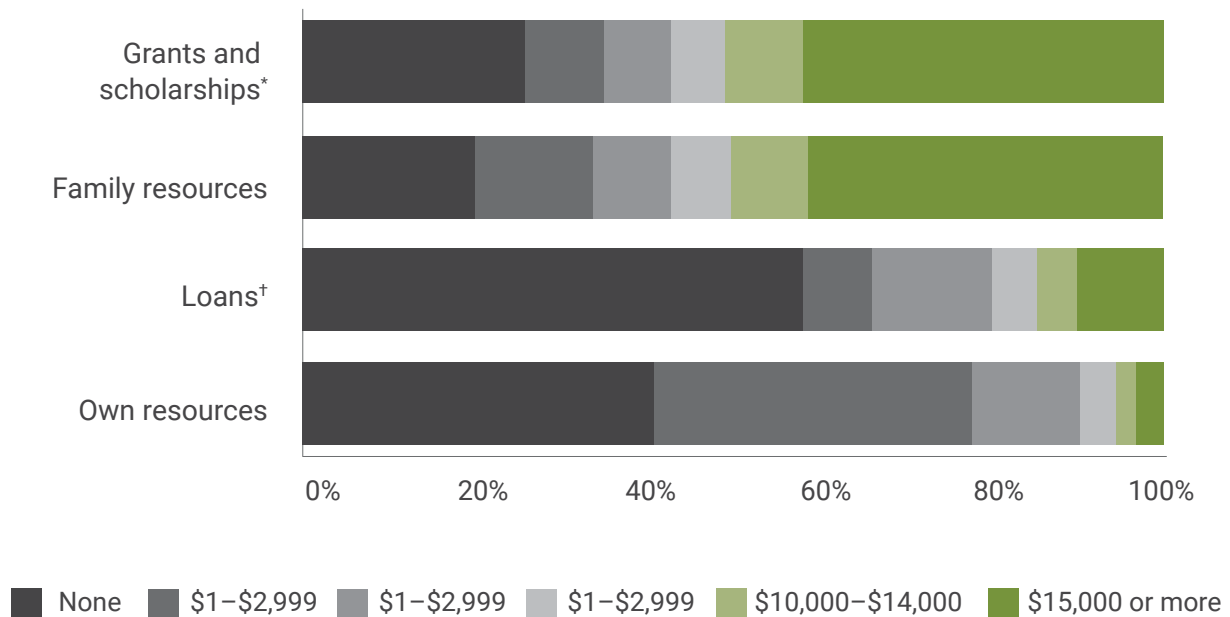
### Communications and Logistics

Incoming first-year students were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with various statements about communications and logistics related to their admission and enrollment. Regarding communications with admissions staff, most students (81 percent) either somewhat (40 percent) or strongly (41 percent) agreed that admissions staff had responded to their questions in a timely manner. In comparison, 8 percent somewhat (6 percent) or strongly (2 percent) disagreed with this statement. Among all first-year students, 86 percent either somewhat (40 percent) or strongly (46 percent) agreed that the communications they had received from the institution in regard to enrollment were clear. More than two-thirds of students somewhat (34 percent) or strongly (35 percent) agreed that the financial aid office staff had explained the details of their financial package.

## Financing College

Higher education financing is an ongoing, complex process that is impacted by a range of variables, such as sources of financial aid, annual cost of attendance, family background and income levels, and type of degree program. This was true for the first-year students who completed the survey in 2023, as their financing included their own resources, family resources, aid that need not be repaid, and student loans that do require repayment (see figure 2).

**FIGURE 2. EXPECTED COVERAGE OF EDUCATIONAL EXPENSES, BY SOURCE**



\* Aid that need not be repaid (e.g., grants, scholarships, military funding) | † Aid that must be repaid (e.g., loans)

### Types of Financial Aid and Amount of Aid Received

In financing their first year of college, 20 percent of students reported that they had not expected to cover any educational expenses via family resources (e.g., resources from parents, relatives, spouse). Lack of family resources was reported more frequently by Hispanic or Latino (33 percent) and Black or African American (32 percent) students than by White (17 percent) and Asian or Pacific Islander (13 percent) students. In contrast, half of all Asian or Pacific Islander (52 percent) and White (50 percent) students had expected to cover \$15,000 or more of their first-year educational expenses from family resources, compared with Black or African American (14 percent) and Hispanic or Latino (13 percent) students.

One-third of first-generation students (34 percent) had not expected to cover any educational expenses with family resources, compared with a much smaller share of students whose parents completed at least some college (18 percent). Additionally, about one-quarter of students whose total household income was less than \$60,000 (28 percent) as well as of Hispanic or Latino (28 percent), first-generation (27 percent), and Black or African American (25 percent) students had expected to cover from \$1 to \$2,999 of educational expenses with family resources.

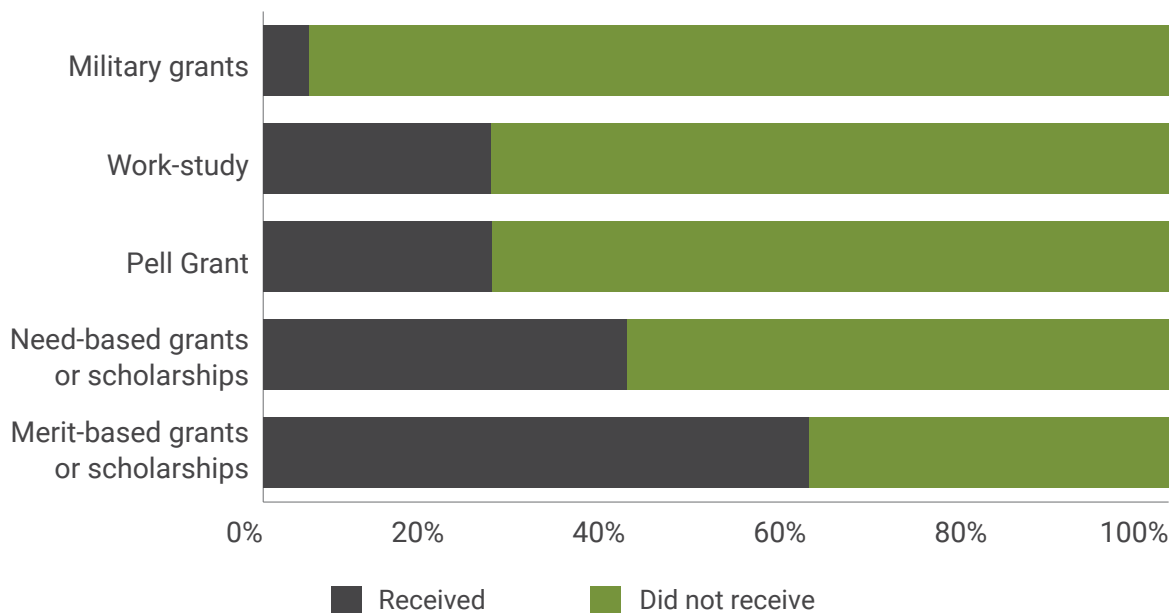
Two in five students (41 percent) reported that they had not expected to cover any educational expenses with their own resources, such as savings from work, work-study, or other income. Two in five students of color (41 percent) had expected to cover from \$1 to \$2,999 with their own resources, compared with one-third of White students

(33 percent). When compared with students whose parents had completed at least some college (58 percent), two-thirds (67 percent) of first-generation students had expected to cover at least some educational expenses with their own resources.

Three in four first-year students (74 percent) indicated that they had expected to cover some educational expenses via grants, scholarships, or military funding, with 42 percent who expected this aid to cover \$15,000 or more in educational expenses. The largest shares of student populations who had expected to cover \$15,000 or more in educational expenses with aid that did not need to be repaid included Hispanic or Latino students (52 percent), students whose total household income was less than \$60,000 (49 percent), and first-generation students (48 percent). Additionally, more than half (52 percent) of first-year students with military service reported that they had expected to cover \$15,000 or more of educational expenses through grants, scholarships, and military funding.

Only 42 percent of all first-year students expected to cover any educational expenses with student loans. Nearly half of first-generation students had expected to use aid that must be repaid to cover educational expenses, compared with 41 percent of students whose parents had completed at least some college. Similarly, about half (47 percent) of the students whose total household income was less than \$60,000 had expected to cover educational expenses with loans, compared with 41 percent of students whose total household income was \$60,000 or more.

**FIGURE 3. FORMS OF FINANCIAL AID RECEIVED**



First-year students utilized a variety of need-based aid, merit-based aid, and other student aid options to pursue their postsecondary education (see figure 3). One-quarter of all first-year students received work-study awards, with Hispanic or Latino students (44 percent), students whose total household income was less than \$60,000 (42 percent), and first-generation students (41 percent) who reported higher utilization of work-study awards when compared with other student populations. One in four students also indicated that they had received a federal Pell Grant, which included two-thirds of all students whose total household income was less than \$60,000. Over half of all Hispanic or Latino (60 percent) and Black or African American (52 percent) students reported that they had received a federal Pell Grant award. Two-fifths of students indicated that they had received a need-based grant other than the Pell Grant. However, specific student populations represented a higher share of students who had received need-based grant aid, which included students whose household income was less than \$60,000 (69 percent) as well as first-generation (66 percent) and Hispanic or Latino (65 percent) students. Six in 10 students

received merit-based aid, compared with over half of students of color (55 percent) and two-thirds of White students (66 percent) who did so.

## Financial Concerns

Three in five first-year students (60 percent) indicated they had some (49 percent) or major (11 percent) concern about their ability to finance their college education. Nearly seven in 10 students of color (69 percent) expressed some (54 percent) or major (15 percent) concern, with the majority of Hispanic or Latino (83 percent), Black or African American (72 percent), and Asian or Pacific Islander (63 percent) students who indicated that they had either some or major concern about their ability to finance their education.

Additionally, four in five (81 percent) first-generation students indicated that they had some (59 percent) or major (22 percent) concern about their ability to finance their college education, compared with 56 percent of students whose parents had completed at least some college (47 percent with some concern and 9 percent with major concern). The majority of students whose total household income was less than \$60,000 also expressed some (58 percent) or major (24 percent) concern for their ability to finance their college education, compared with fewer students whose total household income was \$60,000 or more (46 percent some concern and 7 percent major concern).

Almost two-thirds (65 percent) of women indicated they had some (52 percent) or major concern (13 percent) about their ability to finance their college education, compared with men (44 percent some concern and 8 percent major concern, respectively) who expressed the same worry. An even higher percentage of other gender identifying students also expressed some (55 percent) or major (17 percent) concern with their ability to finance their education. Seven in 10 students who identified as LGBTQ+ reported some (55 percent) or major (15 percent) concern about their ability to finance their college education, which was about 11 percentage points higher than that of non-LGBTQ+ students (49 percent some concern, 10 percent major concern).<sup>9</sup>

## Factors That Affect Attending and Choosing a College

Each prospective student considers a unique set of factors when deciding on whether to attend college and, ultimately, which college to attend. These summarized findings capture differences in the choices students consider.

### Reasons to Attend

Students were asked how important different reasons were in their decision to go to college. Among these reasons, students most frequently rated learning more about their interests (84 percent), securing a better job (80 percent), gaining a general education and appreciation of ideas (76 percent), obtaining training for a specific career (74 percent), and earning more money (72 percent) as very important to their decision to go to college.

Students of color, first-generation students, and students whose total household income was less than \$60,000 shared similar motivations for attending college, and the majority of these groups considered employment, financial gain, and career training to be very important factors. More than four-fifths (82 percent) of students of color viewed getting a better job as very important, compared with 79 percent of White students; in contrast, 77 percent of students of color prioritized earning more money in their decision-making, compared with 67 percent of White students. Students whose total household income was less than \$60,000 (78 percent) emphasized that higher earnings were very important to their decision—a larger share than that of students whose total household income was \$60,000 or more (70 percent). More than four in five (84 percent) first-generation students viewed the ability to get a better job as a very important reason to attend, which was a slightly higher share than that of

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<sup>9</sup> The term *LGBTQ+* includes respondents who identified as bisexual, gay or lesbian, transgender, or queer or other identity.



students whose parents had completed at least some college (80 percent). The majority of first-generation students (81 percent) also stated that the ability to make more money was a very important reason to attend college, compared with 71 percent of students whose parents completed at least some college.

By gender, a greater share of women (87 percent) and other gender identifying students (91 percent) than that of men (80 percent) considered learning more about things that interest them to be a very important factor in their decision to attend college.

Six in 10 students with military service (61 percent) indicated the ability to make more money as a very important reason to attend college—a lower share than that of students without military service (72 percent). Similar shares of students with military service (79 percent) and students without military service (80 percent) considered getting a better job as very important to their decision to attend college. However, a slightly higher share of students with military service (78 percent) than that of students without military service (74 percent) stated that training for a specific career was a very important reason to attend college.

## Selection Factors for Choosing Their Particular College

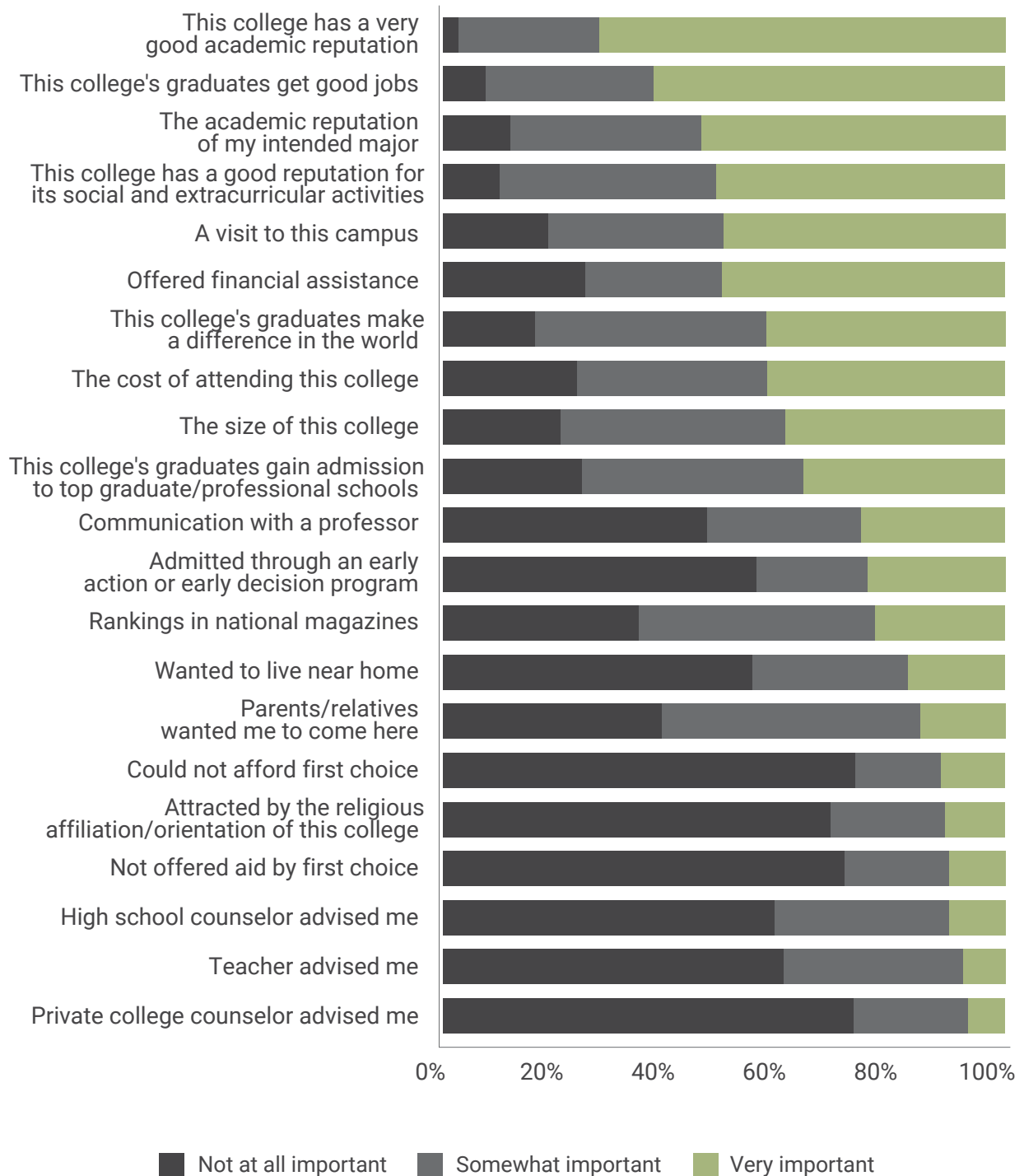
When surveyed about factors that influenced their decision to attend their college, first-year students rated the college's overall academic reputation (72 percent), the potential to secure a good job after graduation (62 percent), the academic reputation of their intended major (54 percent), and the college's reputation for social and extracurricular activities (52 percent) as very important (see figure 4). Additionally, over half of students considered a campus visit and an offer of financial assistance (both 51 percent) as very important.

Most students of color reported that college cost (50 percent) and financial assistance (56 percent) were very important when choosing a college—larger shares than those of White students (34 percent and 45 percent, respectively). More specifically, larger shares of Hispanic or Latino students reported college cost (67 percent) and financial assistance (76 percent) as very important to their decision to attend their college, followed by the shares of Black or African American students (59 percent and 65 percent, respectively) who indicated the same factors. The majority of White students reported the reputation of social and extracurricular activities (55 percent) and campus visits (60 percent) as very important to their decision to attend their college—larger shares than those of students of color (48 percent and 42 percent, respectively).

First-generation students and students whose total household income was less than \$60,000 shared similar priorities in their selection of a college; both groups placed high value on financial considerations and location. Seven in 10 first-generation students (70 percent) and low-income students (73 percent) considered financial assistance as very important in their decision to attend their college, compared with less than half of students whose parents had at least some college (48 percent) and those whose total household income was \$60,000 or more (44 percent). Regarding location, 27 percent of first-generation students reported that the ability to stay near home was very important in their decision to attend their college, compared with a smaller share of students whose parents had completed at least some college (16 percent). Similarly, one-quarter of students whose total household income was less than \$60,000 indicated that the ability to stay near home was very important to their decision to attend their college—a larger share when compared with that of students whose total household income was \$60,000 or more (15 percent).

A higher share of women (54 percent) and other gender identifying students (57 percent), when compared with that of men (45 percent), reported that financial assistance was very important to their decision to attend their college. Similarly, a larger share of women (45 percent) than that of men (39 percent) considered the cost to attend their college as very important. Over half of women (55 percent) and other gender identifying students (52 percent), compared with a smaller share of men (46 percent), also indicated that campus visits were very important to their decision to attend their college.

**FIGURE 4. REASONS STUDENTS CHOSE TO ATTEND THEIR PARTICULAR COLLEGE**



Four-fifths of students with military service (82 percent) considered academic reputation as very important, compared with 72 percent of students without military service. Similarly, 63 percent of students with military service valued their college's social and extracurricular activities as very important to their decision to attend, which represented a higher share than the 51 percent of students with no military service who indicated the same. Students with military service also placed a strong emphasis on job outcomes; 81 percent of students in this group rated the potential to secure a good job after graduation as very important, compared with only 62 percent

of students without military service. College costs were also selected by a higher share of students with military service (62 percent) as very important to their decision to attend their college, compared with just 41 percent of students without military service.

## Consideration of Whether a College Degree Is Worthwhile

When asked to what extent first-year students considered whether a college degree is even worthwhile before choosing to attend college, three in five considered it to a very large (37 percent) or large (24 percent) extent. In comparison, one-quarter considered it to some (15 percent) or a small extent (10 percent) and 14 percent did not consider whether it was worthwhile at all. Two-thirds of students of color considered whether a college degree is even worthwhile to a very large (41 percent) or large (26 percent) extent, compared with White (54 percent) students (32 percent and 22 percent, respectively). About 68 percent of first-generation students also considered this to a very large (40 percent) or large (28 percent) extent, versus 59 percent of students whose parents had completed at least some college (36 percent and 23 percent, respectively). Students whose total household income was less than \$60,000 (69 percent) also had a larger share who considered whether a college degree was worthwhile to a very large (40 percent) or large (29 percent), compared with that of students whose total household income was \$60,000 or more (58 percent total; 34 percent to a very large extent and 23 percent to a large extent).

## Considerations for Senior Leaders

As senior leaders contend with concerns around enrollment, perceptions of college value, and issues of college affordability, data from the CIRP Freshman Survey can provide insights into what factors impact students' decisions to apply for, enroll in, and attend postsecondary education. Posing the following questions to cabinet members and other campus stakeholders can improve understanding of prospective students' expectations and the factors that impact their decisions:

- How has data informed recruitment and retention strategies at your institution, and how has data helped in tailoring these strategies to different student groups?
- With overwhelming financial anxiety among students of color, first-generation students, and low-income students, what bold actions will your institution take to ensure your policies do not perpetuate inequity or deter talented students?
- How does your institution align its degree programs with emerging workforce needs and student interests?

Raising these questions among institution leaders and stakeholders can unlock new opportunities to understand the factors students weigh in making college decisions and to better align student expectations with institution services and offerings.

As college presidents and senior executives navigate these conversations, it may also be useful to consult these resources:

- *What Works for Improving Mental Health in Higher Education?*—This brief provides insights on effective resources, practices, and policies to promote well-being among all students and offers recommendations to help higher education leaders make evidence-based investments in student mental health.
- *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: 2024 Status Report*—This report examines over 200 indicators to determine who accesses a variety of educational environments and experiences in order to explore how student trajectories and outcomes differ by race and ethnicity.

- **High School Benchmarks**—This series of annual reports from National Student Clearinghouse offers the latest data on outcomes of high school graduates from their postsecondary enrollment through attainment.
- **“How High School Students Are Thinking About Higher Ed”**—This Third Way article discusses how high school students recognize the value of college yet remain concerned about costs and career outcomes, which emphasizes the need for institutions to better understand students’ expectations.
- **Trends in Higher Education**—This series of annual reports from College Board includes **Trends in College Pricing** and **Trends in Student Aid**, which document changes in the costs associated with attending postsecondary education and the aid students receive to help pay for college.

