



## **LEARNING FROM STUDENT VOICE**

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# **Class of 2022: Impact of the Pandemic on Postsecondary Decisions**

**What does the Class of 2022 have to say about their future plans? How has the pandemic impacted these graduating seniors postsecondary decisions? What changes can we see between this graduating class and previous years?**

# Introduction

The pandemic has exacerbated long standing social and economic injustices perpetrated on marginalized communities, drawing attention to disparities in health care, education, and economic opportunity. While many K-12 and higher education institutions had made efforts to close opportunity gaps and improve access to postsecondary options, much of the progress and gains witnessed over the last few decades disappeared during the pandemic. Across the nation, we've seen the significant decline in college enrollment for first time freshmen as well as the disengagement of current college students that further sets back any modern efforts to support students holistically. At San Diego State University's Center for Equity and Postsecondary Attainment, a team of researchers and practitioners set out to learn and listen to students in their senior year of high school, a critical transition point to postsecondary education.

We believe we are seeing evidence of a generational shift in young people's attitudes towards postsecondary education and the need for schools (both K-12 and higher education) to re-think how models are built to adapt to students today. Specifically, students are reporting a reluctance to take out debt to pay for college, concern about employment opportunities, and an interest in exploring multiple pathways concurrently. This report shares the students' voices and is intended to guide the development of responsive strategies and provide opportunities to redefine how we support students in their postsecondary planning.

## Key Findings

### FINDING ONE | DIRECT COVID IMPACT

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28% of respondents report that COVID19 has had a significant impact on their postsecondary plans. And echoing many national surveys, 55% of students reported they missed at least ONE college and career activity due to the pandemic.

### FINDING TWO | COLLEGE AND CAREER

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Students are opening up to MANY POSSIBILITIES and don't see their postsecondary plans as a singular option- 32% selected at least two postsecondary pathways.

### FINDING THREE | COST OF COLLEGE

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Students are questioning the value proposition of college and reject the idea that they must accumulate large amounts of debt to pursue postsecondary education. Only 27% of survey respondents believe they will use loans to pay for postsecondary education, compared to national data where 43% of college attendees report that they incurred some type of educational debt.

### FINDING FOUR | ACADEMIC PREPARATION

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Students across all academic levels reported that "Completing courses so that I can graduate" was their most urgent need.

**FINDING FIVE | UNDERUTILIZED SCHOOL STAFF**

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During the pandemic students reported that a wide variety of staff members were "always" available to them! As we consider the adults who support postsecondary planning, there is an opportunity to open the doors to include a broader group of school based and support staff to provide robust support to students.

**FINDING SIX | MENTAL HEALTH**

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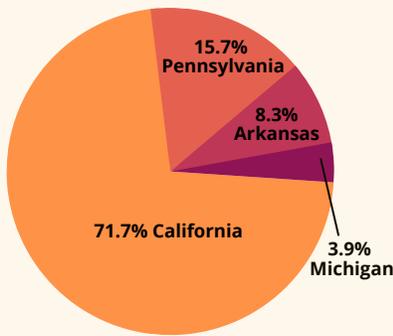
A qualitative study was completed on the final question "What do you wish adults knew about the high school experience that might help them to do their job better?" Mental health and stress were the most common answers.

# Survey Sample

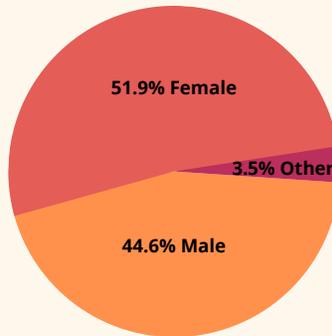
1162 Class of 2022 seniors are included in the analysis.

### Respondent Demographics

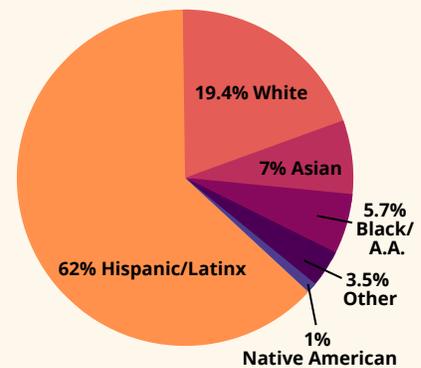
Participation by State



Participation by Gender



Participation by Race/Ethnicity



40% (4 out of 10)



of survey respondents had an older sibling who went to college or vocational school.

# Methodology

Through targeted outreach and recruitment efforts, an invitation to educators, administrators, and counselors was sent late summer through January to recruit individuals and districts interested in participating in the survey. Those who responded were given survey links.

The survey, developed by SDSU Center for Equity and Postsecondary Attainment, built on the work of McKinsey, Strada, New America, and Third Way, who have been conducting surveys throughout the pandemic to understand changing attitudes and patterns of college enrollment. This study utilized a cross-sectional design with a convenience sample for pilot implementation. It was conducted online using SDSU Qualtrics platform.

The online survey was administered to any 12th grade student from a participating school or district during October 2021- March 2022. 1493 students completed the survey. 268 were removed due to completing less than 50% of the survey, 63 were removed because they are not graduating with the Class of 2022. All surveys were confidential, no identifying information was collected and participation was voluntary. The survey took approximately 10-12 minutes to complete and asked questions related to the following topic areas:

- College and career activity participation -virtually or in-person
- Post high school plans
- College and non-college bound
- Pandemic impact on current and future postsecondary plans
- School choice, college costs, confidence in plan
- General pandemic related concerns
- Mental health, job opportunity/security, non-education related costs

Additionally, students responded to open-ended questions:

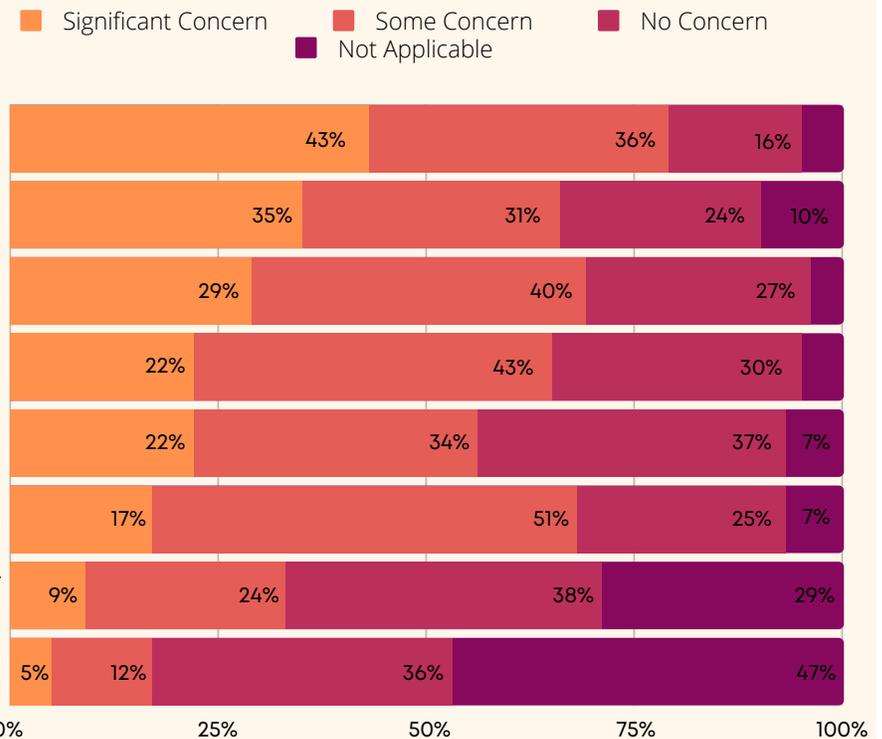
- What do you wish adults (teachers, parents, school administrators) knew about the high school experience that might help them do their job better?
- Has there been a great experience, an event, or person who was valuable in shaping your post secondary plan?

Our research team examined all emerging observations and used an open-coding method to narrow the study to a set of 10 themes. Individual student responses were sorted using key terms and phrases and designated into one of the 10 themed categories. Not all categories were mutually exclusive (i.e. prepared for college and college pressure), yet our aim was to understand student commentary and maintain the expanse of student feedback. The themes were: College pressure, COVID recovery, Checking in, Feeling unprepared for college, Mental Health, Patience and understanding, Peer pressure and bullying, Real work applications, Stress, and Workload. 437 responses were used in the qualitative analysis.



**1** 28% of seniors report that COVID19 has had a significant impact on their postsecondary plans. And echoing many national surveys, 55% of students reported they missed at least ONE college and career activity due to the pandemic.

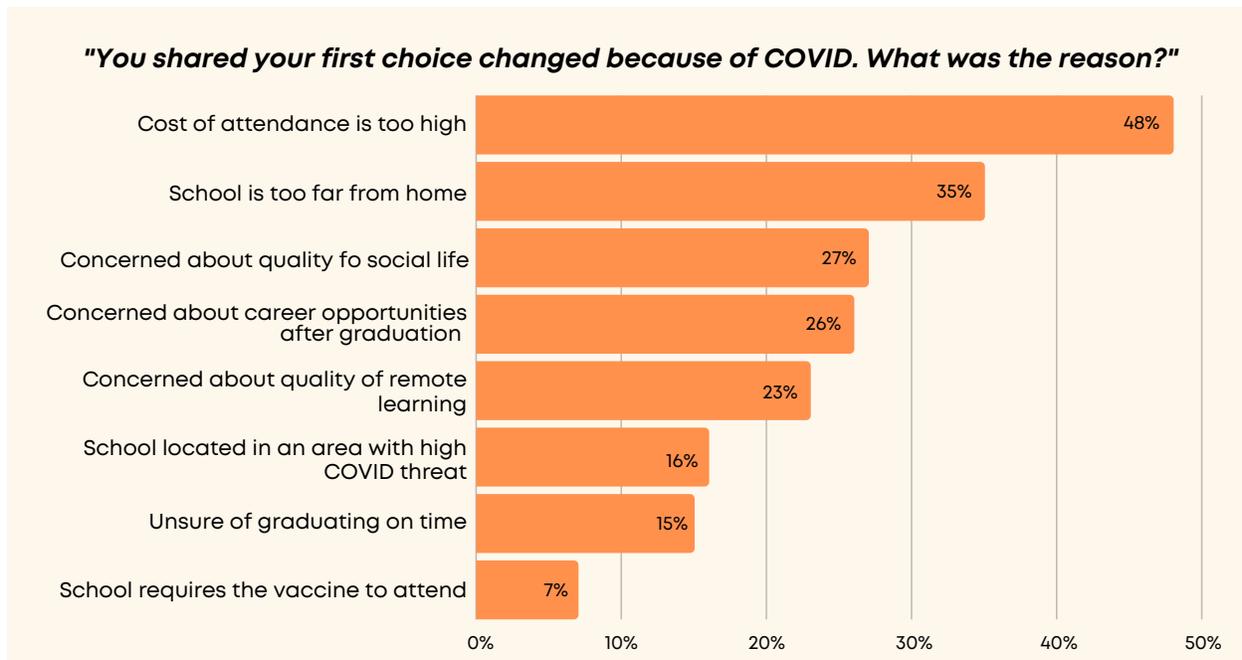
**"You shared COVID19 has impacted your post high school plans. Here is a list of concerns some have because of COVID. For each, indicate how much of a concern it is to you personally. "**



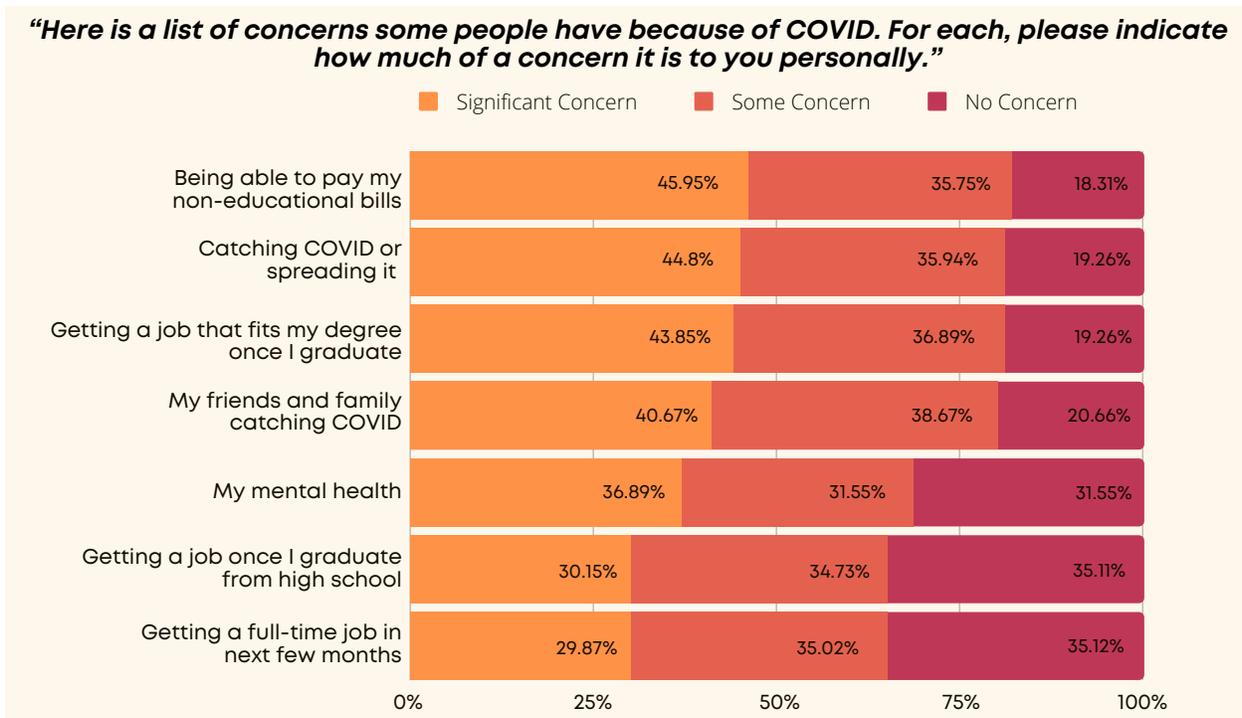
Of those who reported COVID had either "Significant" or "Some" Impact on their postsecondary decision, they were prompted with a list of concerns regarding COVID and asked how much of a concern it was to them personally. Of all the areas of significant concern, the costs of college - including tuition and room and board, were of the highest concern.

# 1

## Direct Covid Impact



In a similar finding, 21% of students report that their first choice college has changed because of COVID. Of those students whose first choice changed, 48% report that it was because the cost of attendance was too high.

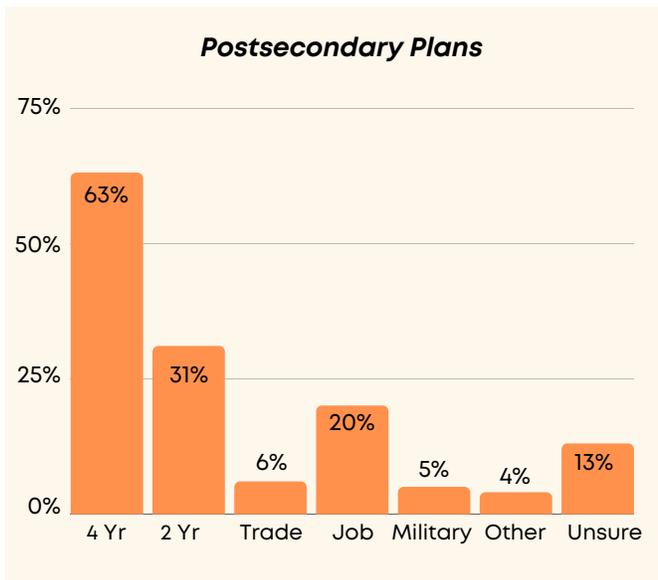


Finally, we asked students "Here is a list of concerns some people have because of COVID. For each, please indicate how much of a concern it is to you personally." The greatest concern for survey respondents was "Being able to pay my non-education related bills."



# 2

Students are opening up to **MANY POSSIBILITIES** and don't see their postsecondary plans as a singular option- 32% selected at least two postsecondary pathways.



The responses show that 83% of the Class of 2022 plan to enroll in 2- or 4-year colleges after graduation, an additional 3% plan to enroll in a trade or vocational program. Meanwhile 20% plan to work full-time after high school. Over 60% of seniors plan to work full-time AND enroll in 2- or 4-year colleges.

As we look across the pathways, students who selected "4-year college" as their postsecondary plan are less likely to have also selected another pathway- either as a combination of or a sequential step. Whereas, students who selected

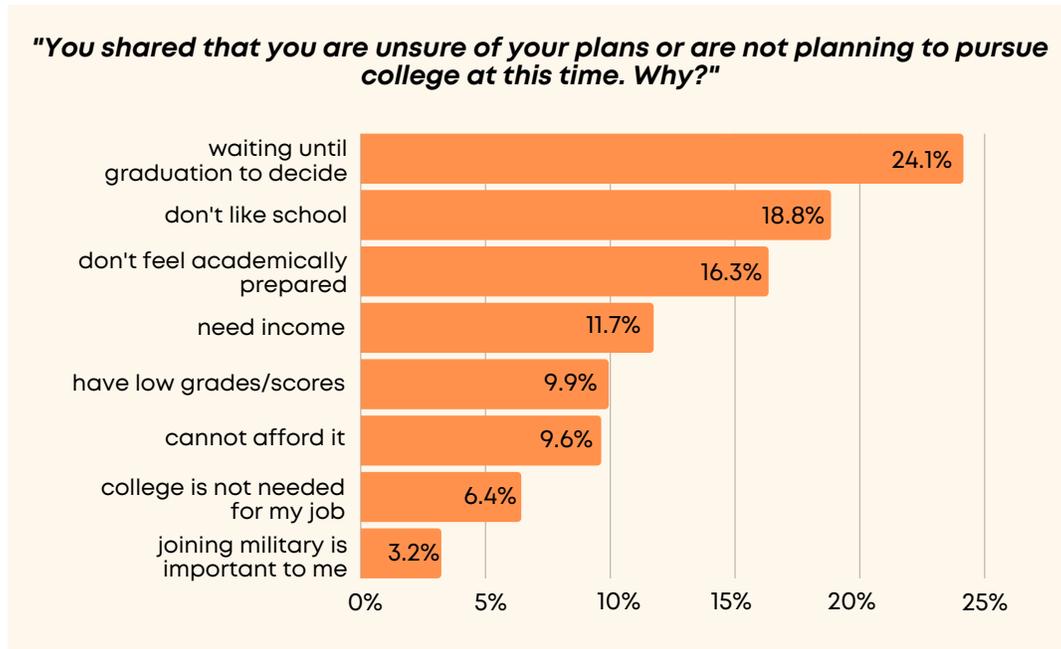
	Average # of PS Plans Selected	% who selected ONLY that option
4- Year	1.46	66%
2- Year	1.85	42%
Other	1.9	40%
Job	2.12	23%
Not Sure	2.1	39%
Trade	2.28	29%
Military	2.4	18%

"Military" as their postsecondary plan were more likely to have selected multiple postsecondary plans besides "Military". The average respondent selected 1.4 postsecondary options.

## 2 College & Career



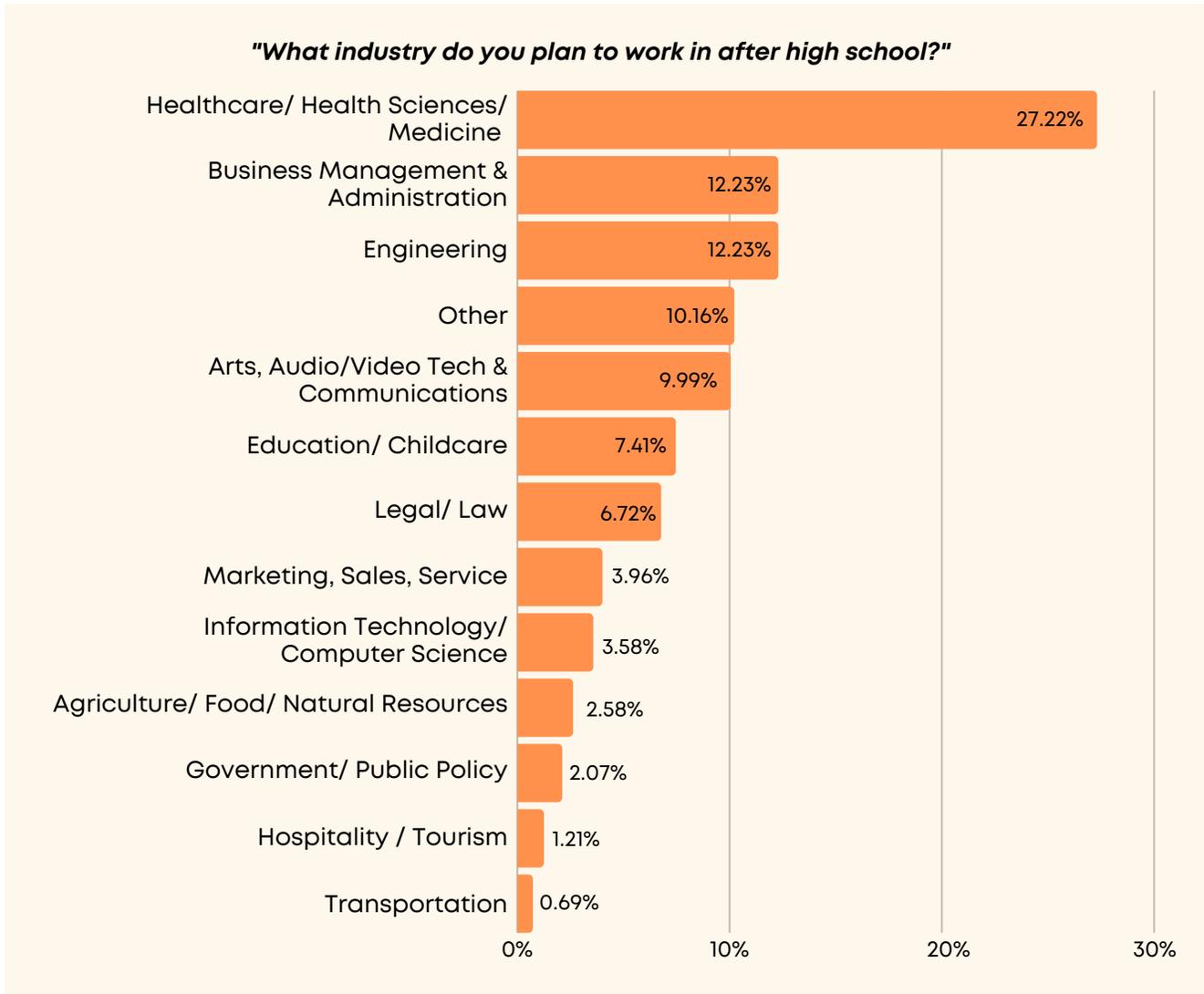
An average 73% of students report they are “Extremely Sure” or “Very Sure” about their postsecondary plan, which did not increase over time throughout the survey. Students whose pathways included “4- Year” or “Other” had the highest level of confidence in their plan (77%).



Of those who report they are unsure of their plans or do NOT plan to pursue postsecondary education - only 9.6% report that they either (1) do not require college or postsecondary education for their career pathway or (2) plan to enroll in the military. Therefore, 90.4% of students who are unsure of their plans or do NOT plan to pursue postsecondary education are without a certain, viable plan at this stage. 24.1% reported they would wait until graduation to decide. This was followed by 18.8% saying they don't like school and 16.3% saying they don't feel academically prepared.

# 2

## College & Career

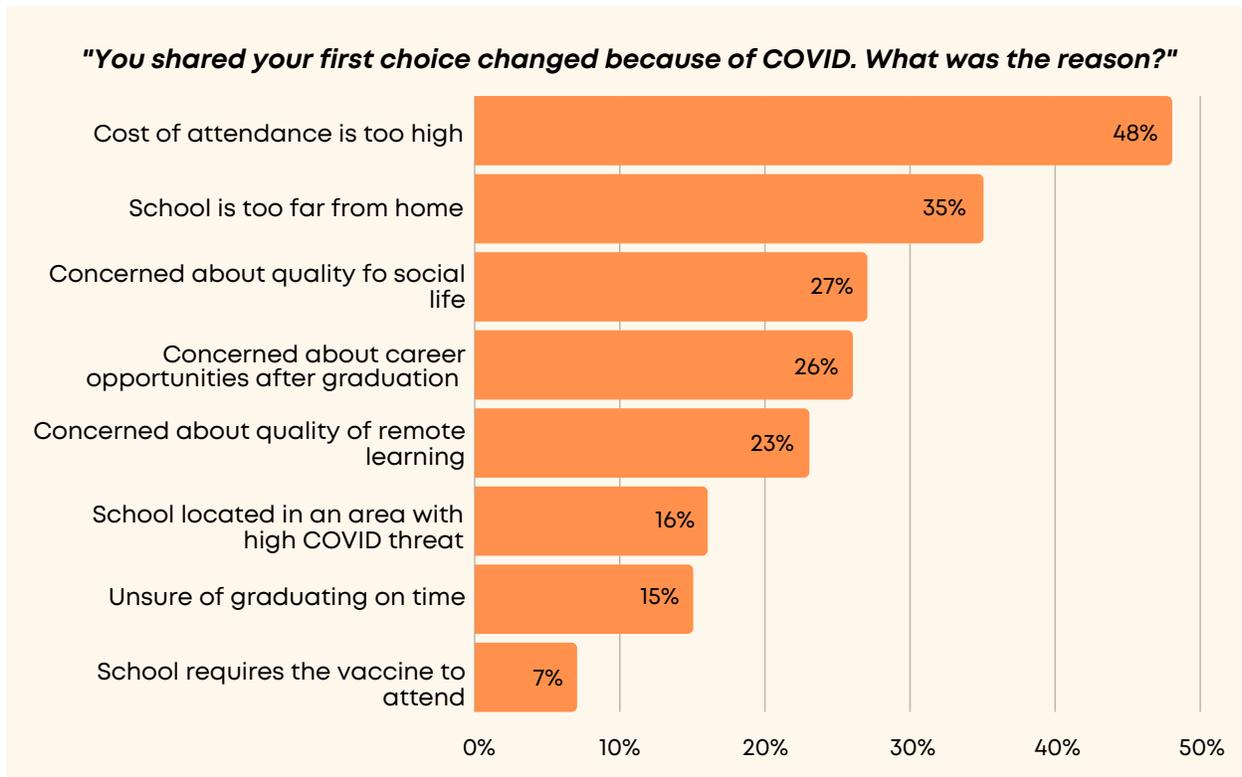


Participants were asked what industry they plan to work in after high school, with a majority (27%) reporting interest in Healthcare/Health Science, followed by Engineering (12.23%) and Business (12.23%).



### 3

Students are questioning the value proposition of college and reject the idea that they must accumulate large amounts of debt to pursue postsecondary education. Only 27% of survey respondents believe they will use loans to pay for postsecondary education, compared to national data where 43% percent of college attendees report that they incurred some type of educational debt



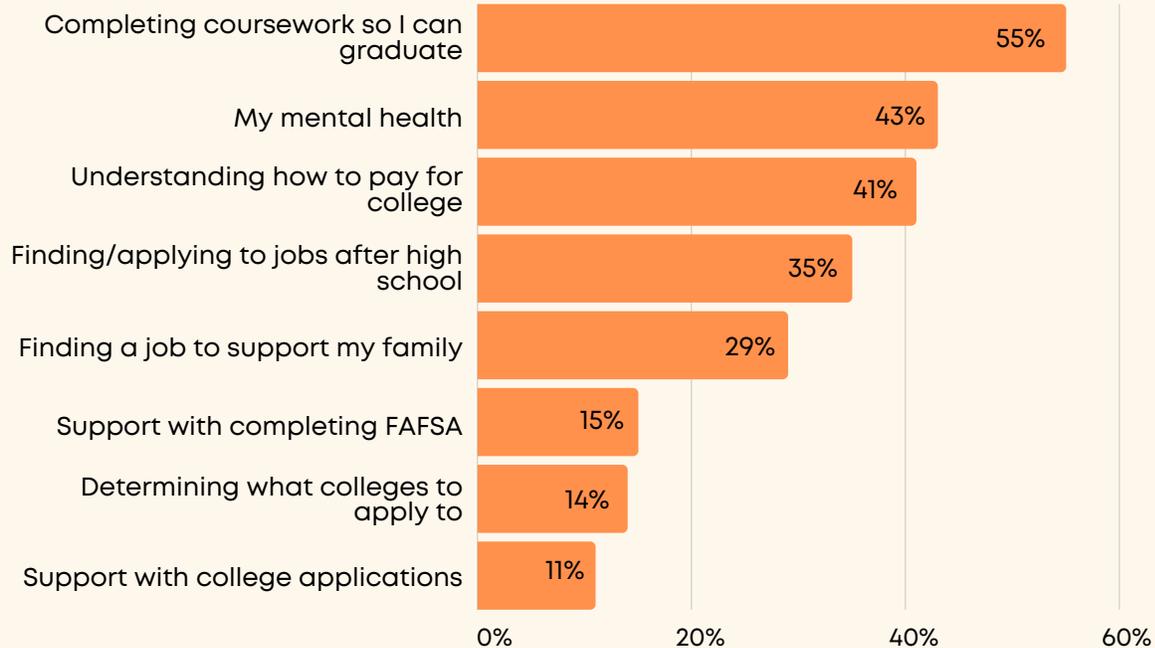
The cost of college and concern of financial responsibilities continued to come through as a significant pandemic impact. These recurring findings throughout the survey, as in relation to covid impact and urgent needs, are informative and insightful to the student mindset and predictability of college enrollment.

Close to half of all students (48%) reported their first choice college had changed because of COVID due to "cost of attendance being too high". This ranked the highest common reason with almost half of responses, compared to other reasons like "school too far away" (35%) and "concerns about social experiences" (27%).

### 3 Cost of College



**“As you think about your plans after graduation, what are your most urgent needs for you and your classmates?”**



When students were asked to report their most urgent needs, "understanding how to pay for college" was third on the list with 41% of all responses. Additionally, in the same urgent needs question, students highly ranked urgency of financial responsibilities with "needing to find a job after high school" (4th highest need; 35%) and "needing to find a job to support their family" (5th highest need: 29%). This finding is surprising given that 72% of students talked with an adult about applying for financial aid to attend college, 59% attended a FAFSA workshop, and 69% talked with an adult about applying to specific colleges, either virtually or in-person.

“

***More knowledge about FAFSA and more talk about how to apply to college. It should be part of a class so students know more of the steps to take at first instead of being all on their own, especially if they don't have home support.***

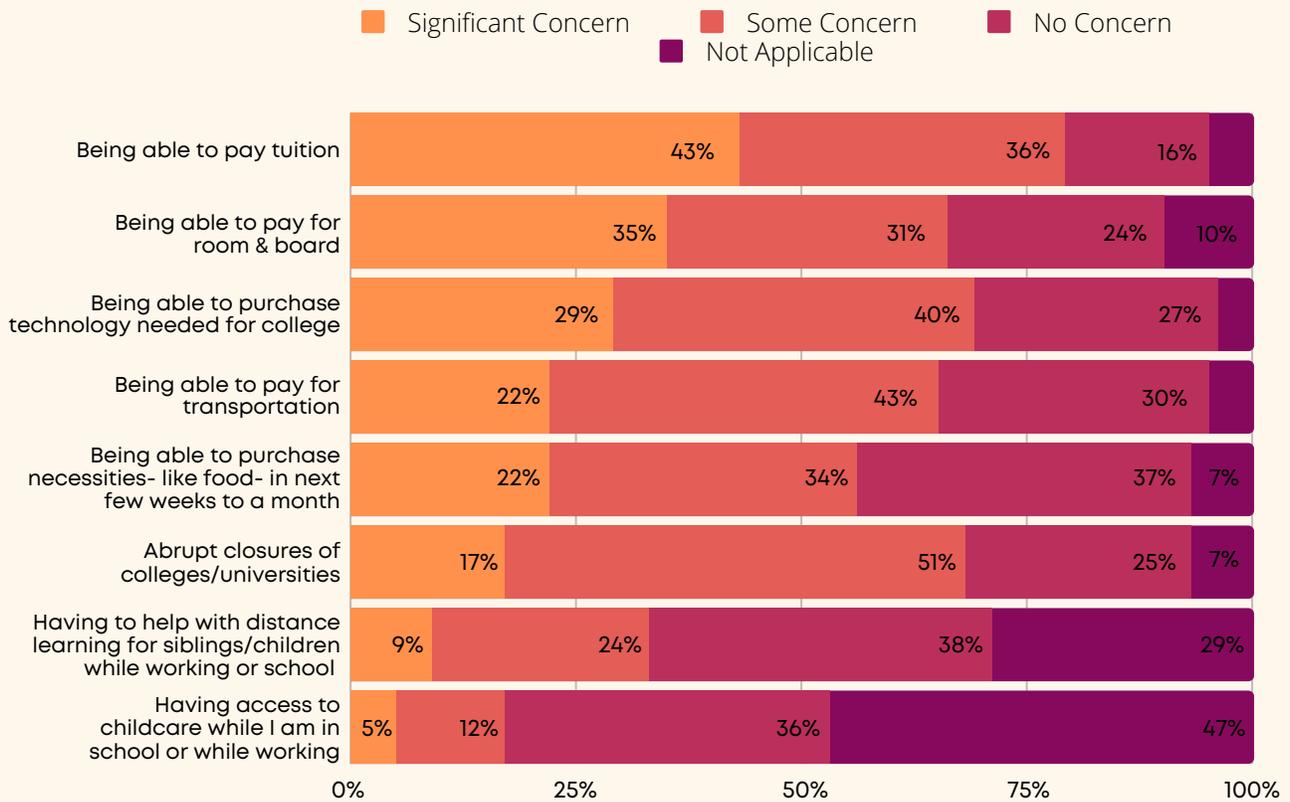
*-Class of 2022 Senior*

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### 3 Cost of College



**"You shared COVID19 has impacted your post high school plans. Here is a list of concerns some have because of COVID. For each, indicate how much of a concern it is to you personally. "**

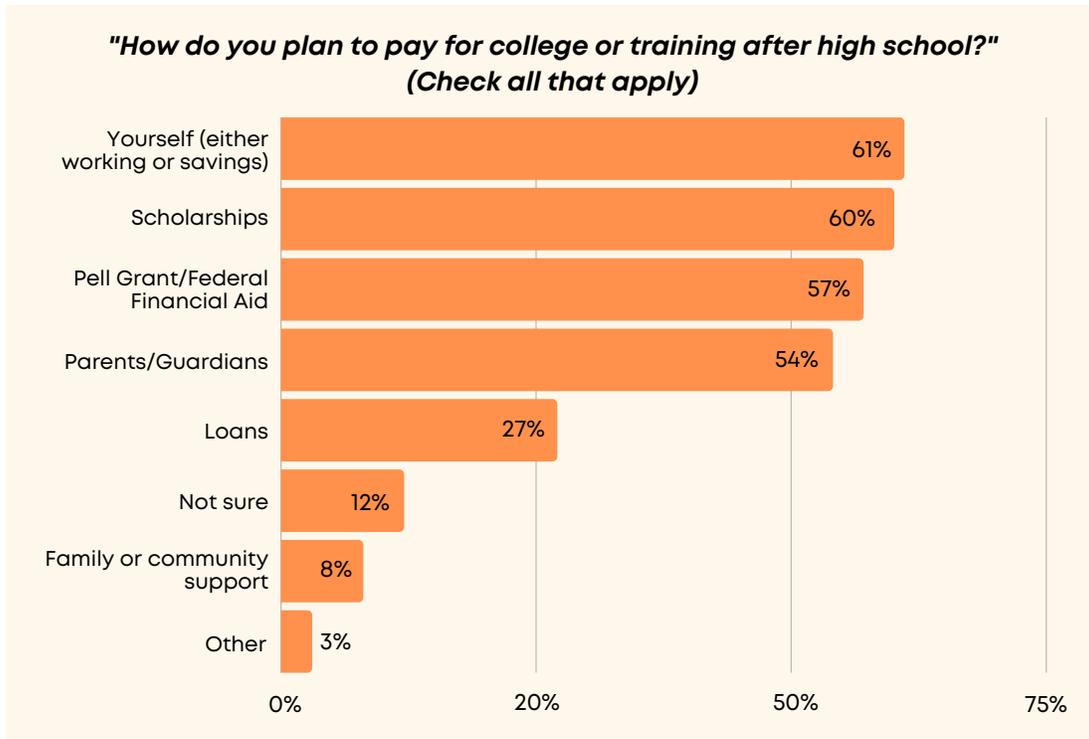


When looking at the degree of COVID's impact on post high school plans, 79% said "being able to pay my tuition bill" was their highest concern, followed by "being able to purchase technology (computer, internet, etc.) for college" (69%). "Being able to pay for room & board" was high in terms of being a "significant concern" (second to "being able to pay for tuition"), and third in terms of concern (significant and some) due to COVID.

For students who reported no intention to immediately enroll in college or were "unsure" (21%), they also report their primary reason for not enrolling in college is that they either need an income or cannot afford it.

In alignment with the federal deadline, an increase in FAFSA completion was noted over time. 47% of students had completed the FAFSA in December compared to 74% in February.

### 3 Cost of College



However, for students planning to enroll in postsecondary education, when asked how they plan to cover the costs, 61% report self-funding with either savings or working, then scholarships at 60%, and FAFSA funds rated third highest with 57%.

Overall, we are seeing students are questioning the value proposition of college and questioning the trend to accumulate large amounts of debt to pursue postsecondary education. This could explain how only 27% of survey respondents believe they will use loans to pay for postsecondary education while nationally 40% of college students have loans (Hanson, 2022).



*I wish that we can be educated about real life tasks like how to take a loan out, how to better prepare for college, and how to support yourself throughout college.*

*-Class of 2022 Senior*



*If [teachers and school staff] can interact with the students more and help them understand more about scholarships and making plans.*

*-Class of 2022 Senior*



### 3 Cost of College



**"How do you plan to pay for college or training after high school?" layering in FAFSA vs Non-FAFSA Completers**



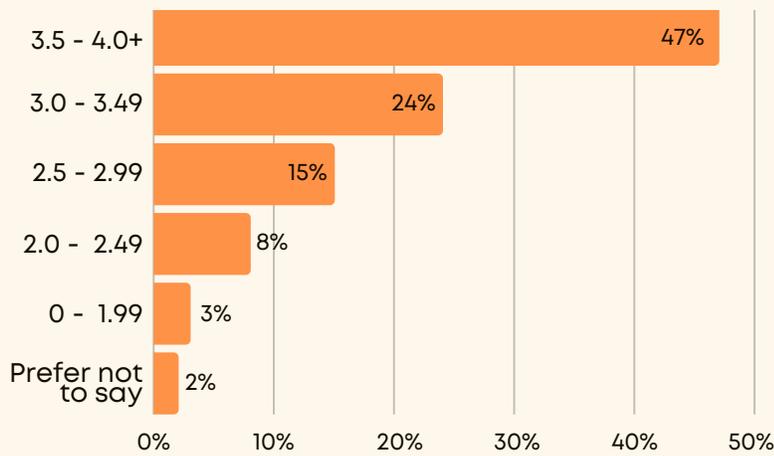
There were differences in covering college costs by FAFSA completers and Non-FAFSA completers. We found that Non-completers were 2 times more likely to report not being sure on how to pay for college (9% of FAFSA completers compared to 17% of Non-completers), not having a solid plan to make postsecondary decisions. And we continued to see 22% to 24% variance of FAFSA completers and Non-completers to report planning using scholarships or federal aid.



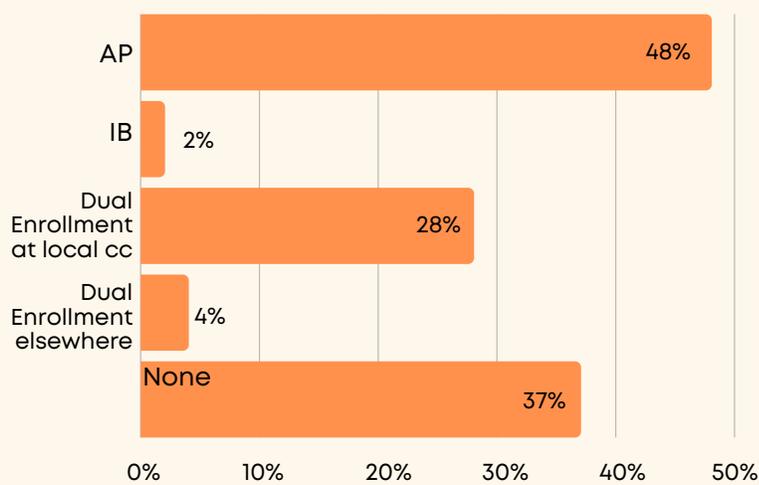
# 4

Students across all academic levels reported that “Completing courses so that I can graduate” was their most urgent need.

**Self Reported High School GPA**



**Participation in AP, IB, or Dual Enrollment**



Throughout the data, there was an emerging story of students reporting concerns about high school graduation that was unexpected given that 71% of students reported having a 3.0 GPA or higher, many of whom were in AP/IB courses or enrolled in dual community college courses (63%). And while the respondent group had strong GPAs and high participation rates in college preparation courses, only 10% reported feeling "extremely academically prepared" for college.

This was also evidenced by student comments of not knowing how to be prepared.

# 4 Academic Preparation



*They don't tell us what to do in order to prepare ourselves for college until it is too late.*  
 -Class of 2022 Senior



The most striking finding was found when broken out by gender subgroups. While men are less academically prepared, based on self reported GPA and participation in college credit coursework, 14% of men report being "extremely academically prepared", compared to women at 7.6%.

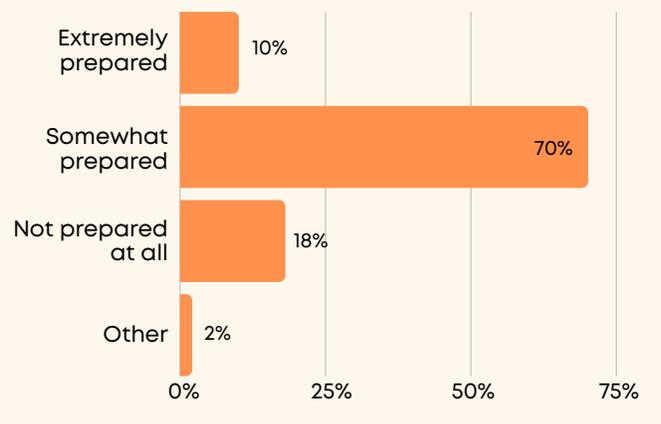
**Men:**

- 59% participated in college credit courses
- 65% report a GPA of 3.0+

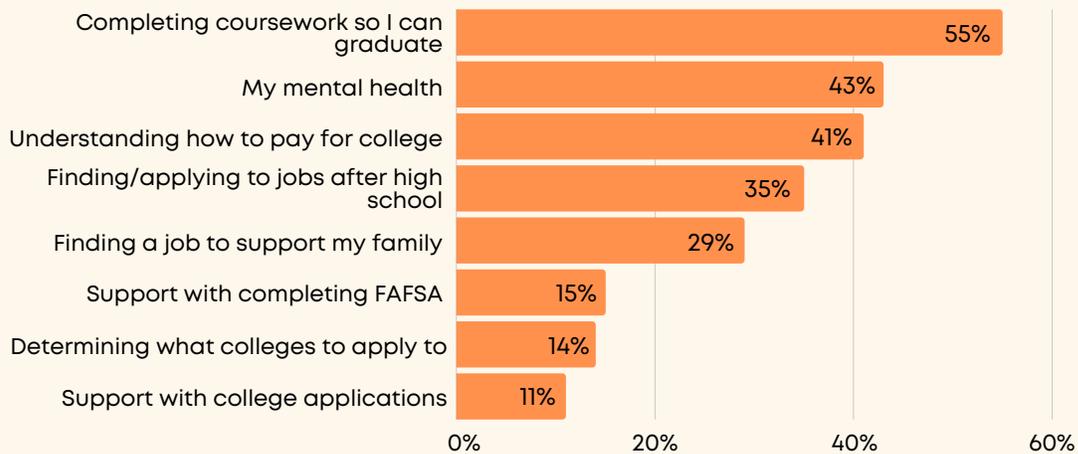
**Women:**

- 67% participated in college credit courses
- 87% report a GPA of 3.0+

**"How academically prepared do you feel for your first year of college?"**



**"As you think about your plans after graduation, what are your most urgent needs for you and your classmates?"**



## 4 Academic Preparation



These findings were disquieting for students across all academic levels, especially when the highest reported need was "completing courses so that I can graduate" (494 students). In the qualitative responses there was an overwhelming student response that homework should not be burden, busy work, or 'packed on' unnecessarily. Moreover, students report having to take care of family, having job commitments, and being involved in sports- continuing to manage it all during a time of crisis and uncertainty. The responses referenced stress, pressure, mental health concerns, and lack of motivation when referring to workloads.

***"We are all very tired and fatigued, majority of us are going through severe mental health crisis, packing on unnecessary work isn't helping whatsoever don't overload us with work especially if it's not an AP class, advanced course, or a college course."***  
-Class of 2022 Senior

***"When we have jobs, sports, and 7 hours of school, we don't need homework on top of it. School should be our place to do school, outside of school should be personal time to focus on things other than school. Homework makes life so much more stressful, especially for kids that are involved in so much."***  
-Class of 2022 Senior

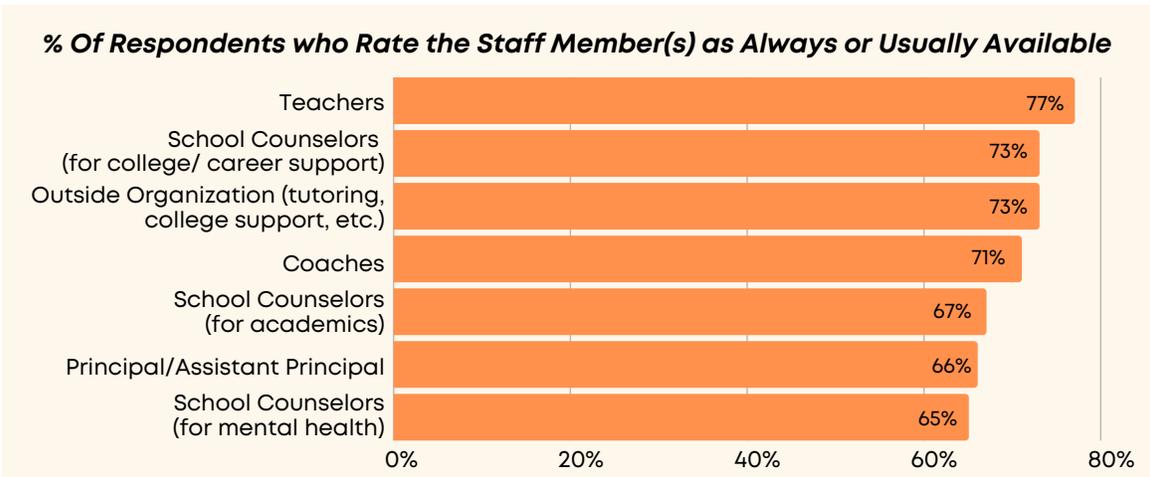
For students opting to not enroll in postsecondary education or an unsure of their plans after high school, their perspective was also notable. We saw that 18% of students reporting they don't like school, 16% who don't feel academically prepared, and 9% who say they have low grades. Thus creating a disenfranchised group of youth.

***"Not everyone has university in mind for their career goals and there should also be programs and help available for these students."***  
-Class of 2022 Senior



**5**

During the pandemic students reported that a wide variety of staff members were "always" available to them! As we consider the adults who support postsecondary planning, there is an opportunity to open the doors to include a broader group of school based and support staff to provide robust support to students.



In addition to school counselors, other educators (teachers, coaches and principals) are among the most available staff to school during the pandemic. There is an opportunity to more intentionally engage these staff members in supporting student postsecondary planning. When schools think about the adults who provide postsecondary advising to students, we often focus on counselors and teachers. Yet, the results from the survey are a reminder that there are other staff members who have regular interactions with students and should be included as partners in postsecondary advising, specifically coaches and principals. Coaches (71%) and principals (66%) were consistently in the top group of most accessible staff members during the pandemic.

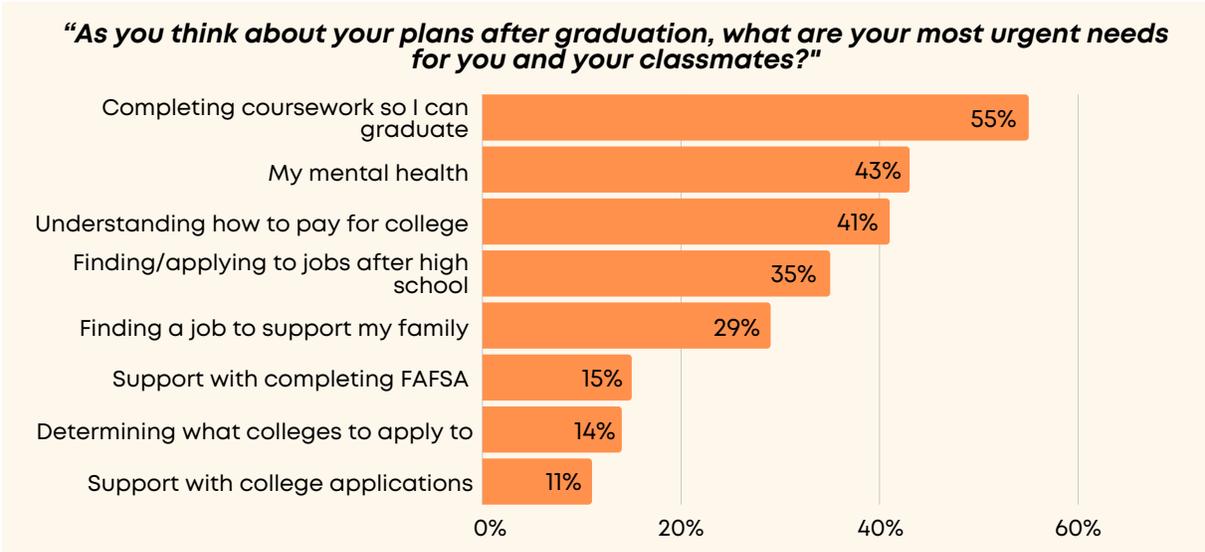
Additionally, when the results are separated out by the state of the respondent, we see that while outside organizations are the “most available” in California, they do not make the top group for Pennsylvania or Arkansas.

California (71.7% of Survey Respondents)	Pennsylvania (15.7% of Survey Respondents)	Arkansas (8.3% of Survey Respondents)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outside Organizations (Tutoring, College Support, Etc.)- 78%</li> <li>• Teachers- 78%</li> <li>• School Counselors (for college or career support)- 74%</li> <li>• Coaches- 70%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers- 78%</li> <li>• Coaches- 77%</li> <li>• School Counselors (for college/career support)- 70%</li> <li>• Principal/ Assistant Principal- 68%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers- 77%</li> <li>• School Counselors (for college or career support)- 74%</li> <li>• School Counselors (for academic)- 72%</li> <li>• Coaches- 71%</li> </ul>



# 6

A qualitative study was completed on the final question “what do you wish adults knew about the high school experience that might help them to do their job better?” Mental health and stress were the most common answers.



43% of students report that “My mental health” is one of the greatest concerns when asked what are your most urgent needs. Ranking second, under "completing coursework so I can graduate". Which our qualitative responses closely tie mental health issues (anxiety, stress, and lack of motivation) with coursework and the amount of workload students are being given.

Class of 2022 Seniors were asked "What do you wish adults (teachers, parents, school administrators) KNEW about the high school experience that might help them do their job better?" Mental Health was the most commonly represented theme in the qualitative analysis. 94 student responses (22% of all comments) contained a key term or phrases about student mental health.

**“ I wish they knew the pressures that students face to accomplish certain tasks and meet (sometimes) unreachable expectations without sufficient mental support. A mere mental health week doesn't cut it. ”**  
-Class of 2022 Senior

**“ COVID-19 has decimated many people's mental health and it will take a long time to recover. ”**  
-Class of 2022 Senior

# 6 Mental Health



**“ I guess coming back from quarantine, not many of us came with a positive mindset and went through anxiety and depression through our time off school. With that, I wish more teachers can be more supportive and understanding!  
-Class of 2022 Senior**

**“ Understand that many struggle with mental health and not blame us for not completing homework when there are bigger personal situations going on that we have to focus on first.  
-Class of 2022 Senior**

Student comments with STRESS as a key term or phrase accounted for a close second to mental health, with 93 students reporting; 21% of all comments.

**“ How difficult and stressful it is. I feel like after some time adults may forget that the times we are currently living in are very different compared to the times they may have lived in with covid and being quarantined for a year. We may be reacting to college and life after high school in a different way. Maybe trying to understand us more.  
-Class of 2022 Senior**

**“ School isn't the only thing that has us students worried and stressed, we have a life outside of school.  
-Class of 2022 Senior**

**“ It is a lot more stressful than we make it seem. We are constantly trying to impress and meet the expectations of the adults around us but sometimes we can't handle the stress and we're tired, especially us that do sports and have jobs as well. Take it easier on us. Most of us are trying our best.  
-Class of 2022 Senior**

Student comments with WORKLOAD as a key term or phrase accounted for a close third to mental health, with 89 students reporting; 20% of all comments. There was also great overlap between comments about WORKLOAD and mental health, stress, and pressure.

**“ Sometimes school is overbearing and can lead to mental health issues. Numbers of assignments may be too high to the point where you don't have any life outside of school. Teenagers should be in school and learning but at the same time have enough freedom to develop other hobbies and explore themselves.  
-Class of 2022 Senior**

## 6 Mental Health



***“ I wish they knew how draining it can be mentally, sometimes when it seems like students are not trying just because. It’s really because they could most likely be drained and unmotivated especially after covid. Lots of teachers give too much work daily and forget we have other classes too. Most students can agree that we are not learning from the homework, but we are just trying to complete it by the deadline. Maybe less work, but have assignment be actually helpful & something we can learn from. More assignments does not mean we are learning more. It means more stress and less time to complete them.  
-Class of 2022 Senior* ”**

Students are openly sharing the level of mental health concern, stress, and workload expectations as the most important information for adults to know. And it’s not from a lack of working hard or balancing responsibilities, narratives of hundreds of students sharing they are truly trying their best. Yet the level of homework expectation, task completion, test-taking (while online), the ‘piling on the busy work’ are associated with mental health, stress, and work overload. In essence, students are telling the adults to stop with the busy work, give meaningful learning experiences, allow time for enrichment, take it easier on them, and try to understand them more.

***“ That high school isn't easy and it's stressful. High school affects your mental health tremendously in a bad way and sometimes we just need a break or help.”  
-Class of 2022 Senior* ”**

***“ That sometimes they will unknowingly put too much pressure on students to get things done along with piling work on to students that feel more like “busy-work” than stuff useful for learning the course.  
-Class of 2022 Senior* ”**

What’s interesting is the degree to which students point to mental health as an urgent need and its connection to academics, college preparation, and future planning. This has been a dominant finding amongst the intended measures of determining the COVID impact on postsecondary plans, perceived financial burden, and other COVID variables such as committing to universities that might be online only. Mental and behavioral health, reported with stress, workload, needing patience and understanding, and more was a prominent finding overall. We would be remiss to not be listening wholeheartedly to student voices and recognize that we asked for their thoughts and opinions, they reported loud and clear, and now we need to respond accordingly.

# Conclusion

These findings are an indicator of the changing trends of young people towards postsecondary education and career pathways. And while much of the relevant research shows these trends to have existed before the pandemic, the study results are a reminder of necessity to adapt practices, routine mindsets, and educational and racial systemic barriers for underrepresented communities.

We must support students as they explore the myriad of opportunities available to them and THEN consider the postsecondary education necessary to manifest the realization of their dreams for a bright and successful future. We must consider how to dismantle the old systems and work to find new models that are adaptive to how students wish to both work and continue their education. Models that will support students seeking to avoid financial debt as a requirement to successfully progress through college, and do not put rigid barriers on requirements of full time enrollment, daytime courses, and having the 'college experience'. We are beginning to more fully understand the unique challenges faced by each high school graduating class and their needs.

Students are pushing back on the long standing "college for all" message that silenced the realities and circumstances that low income and marginalized students experience navigating an educational system that has privileged the wealthy and elite, while problematizing the students who were intentionally left behind. Students are drawing attention to the need for nuanced advising practices that recognize and center historically marginalized student and parent voices, celebrate inclusive practices that seek input from all community members, understand nontraditional pathways, and recognize funding remains a substantial barrier for many students. In combination with student mental and behavioral health concerns, postsecondary advising must address all of this in a holistic approach- not a segmented process.

Follow the Center for Equity and Postsecondary Attainment (CEPA) through our [website](#), [blog](#), [social media](#), and sign up for our [listserve](#) to access up to date practitioner resources, tools, and tips to create an inclusive, equity driven postsecondary advising space, one that does not create binary choices, but is student centered and inclusive of multiple concurrent options.

# Reference

Hanson, M. (2022, July 29). Student loan debt statistics. *EducationData.org*.  
<https://educationdata.org/student-loan-debt-statistics>

**When citing this report, please use:**

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