



About the Survey

[The Princeton Review](#)[®], one of the nation's best-known education services companies, created the [College Hopes & Worries Survey](#) in 2003 to report on the perspectives of college applicants and their parents navigating the college application process. Now in its 18th year, the survey has served as a unique and comparative resource with its many annually-asked questions and consistent, multiple-choice answers as well as a few questions each year that are seasonal. Year over year, it provides insights into the aspirations, concerns, and expectations of college-bound students and their parents.

The Princeton Review conducts the survey annually in February and reports the findings in March when colleges are sending applicants offers of admission and financial aid. Since its debut in 2003, more than 190,000 people have participated in the survey. About 80% each year have been students applying to colleges and 20% have been parents of applicants. Respondents have primarily been users of The Princeton Review's website and other company services. They have completed the survey online or submitted a paper version of the survey published in The Princeton Review's annual *Best Colleges* guidebook. The Princeton Review annually awards a \$2,000 college scholarship to one survey participant and Princeton Review books to 25 participants. All are selected at random.

The survey has about 20 questions with multiple-choice answers. One question, the first on the survey, invites a fill-in-the-blank answer. It asks, "*What is your (your child's) 'dream' college? What college would you most like to attend (or see your child attend) if chance of being accepted or cost were not an issue?*" Subsequent questions ask respondents what matters most in their considerations of colleges, their stress levels about the application process, their estimates of college costs, their expectations for financial aid, what factor will determine the college they ultimately chose, and more.

Reporter Resources

[Rob Franek](#), editor-in-chief of The Princeton Review, is available for interviews on the survey, advice for applicants and parents, and trends in college applications, admissions, and offerings. He is the author of four books including *College Admissions During COVID* (October 2020), and *The Best 386 Colleges* (August 2020). The release on the 2021 survey findings and an infographic depicting selected finding is [here](#). (The release is also posted in the Media Center at PrincetonReview.com.) A complete report on the survey findings follows.

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About The Princeton Review

[The Princeton Review](#)[®], is a leading tutoring, test prep, and college admission services company. Every year, it helps millions of college- and graduate school-bound students achieve their education and career goals through online and in-person courses delivered by a network of more than 4,000 teachers and tutors, online resources, and its more than 150 print and digital books published by Penguin Random House. The company's [Tutor.com](#) brand is one of the largest online tutoring services in the U.S. It comprises a community of thousands of tutors who have delivered more than 20 million one-to-one tutoring sessions. The Princeton Review is headquartered in New York, NY. The Princeton Review is not affiliated with Princeton University. For more information, visit [PrincetonReview.com](#) and the company's [Media Center](#). Follow the company on Twitter ([@ThePrincetonRev](#)) and Instagram ([@theprincetonreview](#)).

2021 College Hopes & Worries Survey Findings

The 2021 survey was completed by 14,093 people: 79% (11,133) were students applying to colleges, 21% (2,960) were parents of applicants. Respondents hailed from all 50 states and DC as well as from more than 40 countries abroad.

This report lists the survey's 20 questions, answer choices, and the percentages of respondents choosing each answer. To the left of each answer choice is the percentage of respondents overall (students plus parents) choosing the answer. To the right is the percentage of students and the percentage of parents choosing the answer.

Answers that are underlined are those chosen by the: highest percentage of respondents overall, highest percentage of student respondents, and highest percentage of parent respondents.

1) What would be your "dream" college? What college would you most like to attend (or see your child attend) if chance of being accepted or cost were not an issue?"

On this, the survey's only question inviting a "fill-in-the-blank" answer, respondents have filled in the names of hundreds of colleges, universities, and other post-secondary institutions.

In rank order:

The 10 schools most named by students as their "dream" college were:

1/ Harvard College, 2/ Stanford Univ., 3/ New York Univ., 4/ Columbia Univ., 5/ Univ. of California—Los Angeles, 6/ Princeton Univ., 7/ Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 8/ Univ. of Texas—Austin, 9/ Univ. of Pennsylvania, 10 / Yale Univ.

The 10 schools most named by parents as their "dream" college for their child were:

1/ Stanford Univ., 2/ Harvard College, 3/ Princeton Univ., 4/ Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 5 / Yale Univ., 6/ Univ. of Pennsylvania, 7/ Univ. of California—Los Angeles, 8/ New York Univ., 9/ Columbia Univ., 10/ Duke Univ.

From 2013 to 2020, Stanford was #1 on the top 10 student and the top 10 parent "dream colleges" lists: Harvard was #2 on lists. Over the years, schools that have been #1 on one or both of the lists are Stanford, Harvard, Princeton, and New York University.

2) How many colleges will you (your child) apply to?

"Five to 8 colleges" was the answer chosen by the plurality (41%) of respondents. In 2007, the first year this question was on the survey, 52% of respondents chose that answer.

27% One to 4 (28% Students, 24% Parents)

41% Five to 8 (40% Students, 45% Parents)

23% Nine to 12 (22% Students, 23% Parents)

09% Thirteen or more (10% Students, 08% Parents)

Combined: 32% applying to 9 or more.

3) Which of the following do you think will be the most important part of your (your child's) college application?

"High school transcript, grades, and GPA" was the answer chosen by 53% of respondents. More parents (61%) chose this answer than students (51%) did.

"SAT® / ACT® scores" was chosen by 17% of respondents. More parents (22%) chose this answer than students (16%) did. The next most chosen answers and percentages of respondents choosing them were: "Essay" (15%), "Extracurriculars" (11%), "Recommendations" (3%), and "Class Rank" (1%).

- 01% Class rank (01% Students, 02% Parents)
- 15% Essay (17% Students, 08% Parents)
- 11% Extracurricular Activities (12% Students, 05% Parents)
- 53% High school transcript, grades, and GPA (51% Students, 61% Parents)
- 17% SAT / ACT scores (16% Students, 22% Parents)
- 03% Recommendations (03% Students, 02% Parents)

4) What is/will be the toughest part of your (your child's) college application?

"Taking SAT®, ACT® or AP® exams" was the answer chosen by the plurality (38%) of respondents. It has been the answer most chosen by respondents overall for 13 of the past 15 years.

- 11% Researching colleges: choosing which schools to apply to
(10% Students, 15% Parents)
- 38% Taking SAT, ACT, or AP exams (39% Students, 35% Parents)
- 31% Completing applications for admission and financial aid
(31% Students 31% Parents)
- 20% Waiting for the decision letters; choosing which college to attend
(20% Students, 19% Parents)

5) Which college admission exam(s) have you (has your child) taken or plan to take?

"The SAT," was the answer the plurality (39%) of respondents chose—nearly three times as many as the 14% of respondents who chose the answer, "The ACT."

"Both tests" (SAT and ACT) was the answer 33% of respondents chose: 14% said "Neither test"—5% more than the 9% reporting this in 2020.

- 14% The ACT (14% Students, 13% Parents)
- 39% The SAT (38% Students, 45% Parents)
- 33% Both tests (33% Students, 33% Parents)
- 14% Neither test (15% Students, 09% Parents)

6) What do you estimate your (or your child's) college degree will cost, including four years of tuition, room & board, fees, books, and other expenses?

"More than \$100,000" was the answer the plurality (37%) of respondents chose. Twice as many parents (63%) chose this answer than students (30%) did. In the 18 years that this question has been on the survey, parents' estimates of college costs have consistently been higher than students' estimates, and generally about twice as high.

More than six out of 10 respondents (63%) estimated their (their child's) college degree will cost "More than \$75,000." In 2004, the first year this question was on the survey, 43% of respondents (20% fewer) estimated the cost to be "More than \$75,000."

- 37% More than \$100,000 (30% Students, 63% Parents)
- 26% \$75,000 to \$100,000 (28% Students, 20% Parents)
Combined: 63% estimated it to be more than \$75,000
- 21% \$50,000 to 75,000 (24% Students, 12% Parents)
- 12% \$25,000 to \$50,000 (14% Students, 04% Parents)
- 04% Less than \$25,000 (04% Students, 01% Parents)

7) How necessary will financial aid—education loans, scholarships or grants—be to pay for your (your child's) college education?

"Extremely" was the answer 53% of respondents chose, while 29% chose the answer, "very." Collectively, 82% of respondents said aid would be "extremely" or "very" necessary to pay for college. Nearly all (98%) of respondents said some amount of aid would be necessary to pay for college. Only 2% said aid would not be needed.

53% Extremely (53% Students, 53% Parents)

29% Very (30% Students, 25% Parents)

Combined 82% said Extremely or Very Necessary

16% Somewhat (15% Students, 19% Parents)

Combined: 98% said Extremely, Very, or Somewhat Necessary.

02% Not at all (02% Students, 03% Parents)

8) What's your biggest concern about your (your child's) college applications?

"Level of debt...to pay for the degree" was answer the plurality of respondents (41%) chose. It has been the answer most chosen by respondents for nine years, since 2013.

From 2007 to 2012, a different answer—"Will get into their first-choice college, but won't be able to afford to attend"—was the one most chosen by the plurality (about 37%) of respondents. (In 2021, only 28% of respondents chose this answer.)

In 2003, the first year of the survey, yet a different answer, "Won't get into first-choice college" was the one most chosen, and by a majority, 52%, of respondents.

24% Won't get into first-choice college (22% Students, 30% Parents)

28% Will get into first-choice college, but won't be able to afford to attend (28% Students, 26% Parents)

41% Level of debt I (my child) will take on to pay for the degree (42% Students, 36% Parents)

07% Will attend a college I (my child) may regret (08% Students, 08% Parents)

9) How would you gauge your stress level about the college application process?

A solid majority (74%) gauged their stress levels as "Very high" or "High" with 29% reporting it as "Very high." I

In 2003, the first year of the survey, 56% of respondents (18% fewer than in 2021, yet a majority nonetheless) reported "Very high" or "High" levels of stress.

29% Very high (31% Students, 32% Parents)

45% High (46% Students, 44% Parents)

Combined: 74% Very high or High (up 18% from 2003)

23% Average (21% Students, 31% Parents)

02% Low (02% Students, 02% Parents)

<01% Very Low (<01% Students, <01% Parents)

The following four questions were added to the 2021 survey.

10) How much has the coronavirus pandemic affected your (your child's) perspective with respect to college admission and applications?

"A lot" was the answer the plurality (33%) of respondents chose while 17% said "Extremely," 30% said "Somewhat," and 9% said "A little." Collectively, 89% of respondents reported the pandemic had in some degree affected their viewpoints. Only 11% said the pandemic had not affected their college admission or application perspectives.

17% Extremely (17% Students, 18% Parents)
33% A Lot (33% Students, 31% Parents)
30% Somewhat (30% Students, 30% Parents)
 Combined: 80% Extremely, A Lot or Somewhat
09% A Little (09% Students, 09% Parents)
11% Not at all (11% Students, 12% Parents)
 Combined: 20% A Little or Not at All

11) What has been your (your child's) biggest concern/challenge with respect to college application issues you (your child) is experiencing due to the pandemic?

"Attending school remotely: possible impact on grades and participation in extracurriculars" was the answer nearly half (48%) of the respondents chose. The next most-chosen answers, "Restrictions on travel: problems visiting colleges," and "Changes in family finances: possible impact on college affordability," were each selected by 18% of respondents, respectively. Fewer respondents, (11%), chose the answer, "Problems scheduling an SAT or ACT." Fewer still (5%) reported their biggest pandemic-related challenge was "Health issues affecting member(s) of household."

48% Attending school remotely: possible impact on grades and participating in extracurriculars (49% Students, 45% Parents)
05% Health issues affecting member(s) of family household (06% Students, 04% Parents)
18% Changes in family finances: possible impact on college affordability (19% Students, 13% Parents)
11% Problems scheduling an SAT or ACT test administration (11% Students, 10% Parents)
18% Restrictions on travel: problems being able to visit colleges (15% Students, 28% Parents)

12) Has the pandemic affected your (your child's) choice of colleges to apply to?

59% Yes. (60% Students, 57% Parents)
41% No. (40% Students, 43% Parents)

Respondents who answered Yes to the above question were asked the following question:

13) In what way has the pandemic most significantly affected your (your child's) choice of colleges to apply to?

"Applying to colleges with lower sticker prices" was the answer 54% of respondents chose, indicating the pandemic had made them more cost-conscious about their choice of colleges. More students (58%) than parents (39%) chose this answer.

"Applying to colleges closer to home" was the answer 32% of respondents chose, indicating the pandemic had made them more location-conscious in their choice of colleges. More parents (48%) than students (29%) chose this answer.

Only 7% of respondents chose either of the other two answers: "Applying to colleges with smaller student bodies or in less densely populated areas," and "Applying to colleges with medical centers or located near hospitals."

32% Location has become more important: Applying to colleges closer to home (28% Students, 49% Parents)

54% Cost has become more important: Applying to colleges with lower sticker prices
(58% Students, 39% Parents)

07% Size has become more important: Applying to colleges with smaller student bodies or in less densely populated areas (06% Students, 08% Parents)

07% Access to health facilities has become more important: Applying to colleges with On-campus medical centers or located near hospitals
(07% Students, 05% Parents)

14) Ideally, how far from home would you like the college you (your child) attend(s) to be?

Nearly half (49%) of parents chose the answer, "Fewer than 250 miles." The majority (68%) of students selected answers in ranges *exceeding* 250 miles: 32% would like their ideal college to be "250 to 500 miles" from home; 20% would prefer one "500 to 1,000 miles" from home, and 16% envisioned their ideal college to be "more than 1,000 miles" from home.

Since 2006, when this question was first asked in the survey, parents' and students' viewpoints have not changed.

36% Fewer than 250 miles (32% Students, 49% Parents)

31% 250 to 500 miles (32% Students, 29% Parents)

19% 500 to 1,000 miles (20% Students, 20% Parents)

14% More than 1,000 miles (16% Students, 09% Parents)

Combined: Greater than 250 miles: 68% Students

15) When it comes to choosing which college you (or your child) will attend, which of the following do you think it is most likely to be?

"College that will be the best overall fit," was the answer the plurality (41%) of respondents chose, though nearly as many respondents, 39%, choose the answer, "College with best program for my (my child's) career interests." The latter had been the most chosen answer for three years, from 2018 to 2020.

Only 11% percent of respondents said they'd choose the college with the "best academic reputation"—despite the level of attention given to college rankings based exclusively on academic criteria and methodologies.

Only 9% said they'd choose the "most affordable" college—despite respondents' having indicated major concerns about the level of debt they expected to incur to pay for college. Since 2005, the percent of respondents selecting either of those two answers has ranged from 6 to 13%.

11% College with best academic reputation (10% Students, 13% Parents)

09% College that will be the most affordable (10% Students, 06% Parents)

39% College with best program for my (my child's) career interests
(40% Students, 33% Parents)

41% College that will be the best overall fit (40% Students, 48% Parents)

16) If you (your child) had a way to compare colleges based on their reputation with regard to their career services offerings, how much would this contribute to your (your child's) decision to apply to or attend a school?

Respondents' interest in colleges' career services is high and has been rising in recent years. In 2021, 73% of respondents said having information about a school's career services would contribute "Very much" or "Strongly" to their decision to apply to or choose the college—a 7% increase over the 66% so indicating in 2020. Another 23% said such information would "somewhat" contribute to their opinion of the school. In all, 96% of respondents said information about colleges' career service offerings would contribute to their decisions about the colleges.

29% Strongly (30% Students, 28% Parents)
44% Very much (44% Students, 42% Parents)
Combined 73% Strongly or Very Much
23% Somewhat (22% Students, 25% Parents)
03% Not much (04% Students, 04% Parents)
01% Not at all (<01% Students, 01% Parents)

Note: The Princeton Review's resources on colleges' career services include school ranking lists and rating scores. A ranking list in the annual *Best Colleges* book reports the 20 colleges (of the nearly 400 in the book) with "Best Career Services" based on students' ratings of their school's career services. Three ranking lists in the annual *Best Value Colleges* project name the 25 colleges (of the 200 deemed "best value colleges") for "Best Career Placement," "Best Schools for Internships," and "Best Alumni Network." The project's school profiles report facts about the schools' career services and job placement programs, graduates' employment and salaries, and school ROI (Return on Investment) ratings on a scale of 60 to 99.

17) If you (your child) had a way to compare colleges based on their commitment to the environment (e.g. practices concerning energy use, recycling, etc., or academic offerings), how much would this contribute to your (your child's) decision to apply to or attend a school?

Concerns about climate change and sustainability are rising. A majority, 75%, of the 2021 respondents (vs 66% in 2020) said having information about a college's commitment to the environment *would* contribute to their decision to apply to or attend the school. Among the 75%, 36% indicated such information would contribute "Strongly" or "Very much" to their decision about a college. Students showed higher levels of interest than parents on this topic.

12% Strongly (12% Students, 08% Parents)
24% Very much (26% Students, 20% Parents)
39% Somewhat (40% Students, 38% Parents)
Combined 75% Somewhat, Very Much or Strongly
20% Not much (18% Students, 26% Parents)
05% Not at all (04% Students, 08% Parents)

Note: The Princeton Review's resources on this include the company's annual free downloadable "Guide to Green Colleges" that the company has made available since 2009. The current edition of the guide is accessible [here](#). The Princeton Review also tallies Green Rating scores (from 60 to 99) for nearly 700 colleges that appear in the company's school profiles on www.princetonreview.com and in various Princeton Review college guidebooks.

18) If you (your child) had a way to compare colleges based on their health and wellness center services, how much would this contribute to your (your child's) decision to apply to or attend a school? (Question added to the survey in 2021.)

Eight of out 10 respondents (81%) said having information about a college's health and wellness center services would contribute in some way (strongly, very much or somewhat) to their decision to apply to or attend the college. Students were more likely than parents to value this information: 43% of students said they would be "Strongly" or "Very Much" interested in such information—11% more than the 32% of parents so indicating.

13% Strongly (14% Students, 09% Parents)
28% Very Much (29% Students, 23% Parents)
Combined 41% Very Much or Strongly
40% Somewhat (39% Students, 42% Parents)
Combined 81% Somewhat, Very Much or Strongly
16% Not Much (15% Students, 21% Parents)
03% Not at All (03% Students, 05% Parents)

Note: The Princeton Review reports two health services-related ranking lists in its annual *Best Colleges* guide. They name the top 20 schools of those in the book at which students most highly rated their school's Health Center Services and their school's Mental Health Counseling Center Services. In August 2021, The Princeton Review will publish *The College Wellness Guide: A Student's Guide to Managing Mental, Physical, and Social Health on Campus* (Penguin Random House).

19) What will be the biggest benefit of your (your child) getting a college degree?

"The potentially better job and higher income" was the answer chosen by the plurality (43%) of respondents. This has been the answer most chosen by respondents since 2010 when the question was added to the survey.

25% The education (25% Students, 23% Parents)

32% The exposure to new ideas (33% Students, 31% Parents)

43% The potentially better job and higher income (42% students, 46% Parents)

20) On the whole, do you believe college will be "worth it" for you/your child?

Since 2014, when this question was added to the survey, respondents –parents and students alike–have consistently and overwhelmingly viewed college as "worth it."

99% Yes (99% Students, 99% Parents)

01% No (01% Students, 01% Parents)

(Optional) What advice would you give to college applicants or parents of applicants going through this experience next year?

On this open-ended question, "Start early" is the advice most given by students and parents every year. See samplers of respondents' "Parent Advice" and "Student Advice" in the "College Hopes & Worries Survey" main page [here](#) .

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