



## 2021 COLLEGE HOPES & WORRIES SURVEY REPORT

---

Contact: Jeanne Krier, Publicist for The Princeton Review, [pressoffice@review.com](mailto:pressoffice@review.com)

### About the Survey

[The Princeton Review](#)<sup>®</sup>, one of the nation's best-known education services companies, created the [College Hopes & Worries Survey](#) in 2003 to gather insights into the perspectives of college applicants and their parents as they navigate the college application process. More than 190,000 people have participated in the survey which is now in its 18<sup>th</sup> year. About 80% of the respondents each year are students applying to colleges; 20% are parents of applicants.

The Princeton Review conducts the survey annually in January / February and reports the findings in March when colleges are sending applicants offers of admission and financial aid.

Respondents have primarily been users of The Princeton Review's free website and other company services. Survey participants have completed either an online version of the survey or a paper version which is published in The Princeton Review's annual *Best Colleges* guidebook.

The survey has about 20 questions with multiple-choice answers. Many of the questions have been on the survey annually or for several years. Among them, the first question which 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?*" The Princeton Review reports the 10 schools named as "dream" colleges" by the highest number of student respondents and the 10 named as "dream" colleges by the highest number of parent respondents . Other questions ask respondents what matters most in their selections of colleges, their college cost estimates, their expectations for financial aid, their stress levels about application process, and more.

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.

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 from respondents overall.

### Reporter Resources

The March 9, 2021, release on the 2021 survey findings is accessible [here](#).

[Rob Franek](#), editor-in-chief of The Princeton Review, is available for interviews on the survey findings, trends in college applications and admissions, and advice for applicants and parents. He is the author of four books including *College Admissions During COVID* (October 2020), and *The Best 387 Colleges* (August 2020), all published by Penguin Random House.

## **About The Princeton Review**

[The Princeton Review](#)<sup>®</sup>, 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](#)).

---

## **Findings**

This report lists the 2021 survey's 19 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, the highest percentage of student respondents, and the 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?*** (Fill in the blank.)

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

In the 2021 survey, Harvard College was the school students most named as their "dream" college. Stanford University was the school parent respondents most named as their "dream" college for their child.

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 and Harvard was #2 on the lists. Over the years, schools that have been #1 on one or both of these 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 those (14%) that 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 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 form 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 choice of the plurality (about 37%). (Only 28% of

respondents in the 2021 survey chose this answer.) In 2003, the first year of the survey, "Won't get into first-choice college" was the answer 52% of respondents chose.

- 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." In 2003, the first year of the survey, considerably fewer respondents: 56% (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. "Restrictions on travel: problems visiting colleges," and "Changes in family finances: possible impact on college affordability," were the next most chosen answers, 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 application-related challenge due to the pandemic 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?**

"Yes" reported 59% of respondents.

59% Yes. The pandemic has affected my (my child's) college considerations.  
(60% Students, 57% Parents)

41% No. The pandemic has not affected my (my child's) college considerations.  
(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 it to be "500 to 1,000 miles" from home, and 16% wished they could attend a college "more than 1,000 miles" from home.

These findings have been evergreen. Since 2006, when this question was first asked in the survey, parent respondents have wanted their children to attend a college relatively close to home, Student respondents have wanted to attend a college relatively far from home.

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 that are 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 annually been low and in a range 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 has risen 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—7% greater than 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 student and parent resources on colleges' career services include ranking lists and rating scores. A ranking list published in the annual *Best Colleges* book names the 20 colleges in the book with "Best Career Services" based on students' ratings of their school's career services. Ranking lists in the annual *Best Value Colleges* project name the 25 colleges the company recommends for "Best Career Placement," "Best Schools for Internships," and "Best Alumni Network." The Princeton Review school profiles report career services and placement related facts and stats about the schools including statistics on graduates' employment, job placement and salaries, and an ROI rating score that the company tallies for each school on a scale from 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?**

A solid majority, 75%, of the respondents (vs 66% in 2020) chose answers indicating that having information about a college's commitment to the environment *would* contribute to their decision about whether to apply to or attend the school. Students showed higher levels of interest than parents did on this topic.

Among that cohort of 75%, 36% indicated such information would contribute "Strongly" or "Very much" to their decision about a college.

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 for parents and students on this subject include: Green Rating scores (from 60 to 99) that the company annually tallies for nearly 700 colleges. The scores appear in school profiles at [www.princetonreview.com](http://www.princetonreview.com), in various Princeton Review books, and in the company's annual downloadable "Guide to Green Colleges" that has been available for free since 2009. The current edition of the guide is accessible [here](#).

**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 about whether to apply to (or attend) the college. Students were more likely than parents to value having this information: 43% of students indicating they would be strongly or very much interested in such information, as compared with 32% of parents.

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-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 most highly rated their school's Mental Health Counselling Center Services. The Princeton Review will publish *The College Wellness Guide: A Student's Guide to Managing Mental, Physical, and Social Health on Campus* in August 2021.

**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.) "The exposure to new ideas," was the answer chosen by 32% of the respondents as the biggest benefit of earning the degree while 25% considered the primary benefit as "The education."

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 first asked on the survey, respondents 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" has been the advice most given by students and parents every year. About 50% of respondents who offer advice say this. Peruse samplers of respondents' advice by clicking on the tabs, "Parent Advice" and "Student Advice" in the "College Hopes & Worries Survey" main page [here](#).

---

SAT® and AP® are trademarks registered and owned by the College Board, which is not affiliated with and does not endorse this survey.

ACT® is a registered trademark of ACT, Inc., which is not affiliated with and does not endorse this survey

