



The College Hopes & Worries Survey 2020 Findings

About the Survey

[The Princeton Review](#)[®], one of the nation's best-known education services companies, has conducted the [College Hopes & Worries Survey](#) annually since 2003. Approximately 177,000 people have participated in the survey since its inception. (See end* of this report for numbers of respondents year-over-year.) About 80% have been students applying to colleges; 20% have been parents of applicants. Survey participants have primarily been users of the company's website and readers of its annual *Best Colleges* book in which the survey questionnaire is published every year.

The survey has 15–20 questions, the majority of which have been asked annually or for several years. The questions have multiple-choice answers with the exception of one question, "What is your 'dream' college?" that invites a fill-in-the-blank answer.

The 2020 survey findings are based on responses from 12,845 people: 80% (10,276) were students applying to colleges, and 20% (2,569) were parents of applicants. Respondents completed the survey between August 2019 and early March 2020. They hailed from all 50 states and DC. The majority of respondents completed the survey online via outreaches The Princeton Review conducted. Some respondents submitted a paper version of the survey that was published in The Princeton Review book, *The Best 385 Colleges / 2020 Edition* (Penguin Random House, August 2019).

The company awards a \$2,000 college scholarship to one survey participant and a Princeton Review book to 25 other participants (all chosen at random). Participants chosen to receive a Princeton Review book were offered their choice of either *The Best Value Colleges*, *Colleges That Create Futures*, or *Paying for College*.

[The 2020 survey finding report begins on p. 2](#)

Reporter Resources

The Princeton Review's March 17, 2020 release on the 2020 survey findings is accessible [here](#). An infographic depicting selected findings is [here](#).

Contact: Jeanne Krier, Publicist for The Princeton Review, 212-539-1350, pressoffice@review.com for:

- Reports of past years' College Hopes & Worries Survey findings.

- Interviews with The Princeton Review Editor-in-Chief Robert Franek.

Available in New York City or by phone, Robert (bio [here](#)) can discuss findings of the 2020 or past surveys and offer advice for college applicants and their parents in various stages of the application process—from researching colleges and completing applications to dealing with college decision letters and deciphering financial aid offers. He can also address student rights with respect to the May 1st National College Decision Day.

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 the largest online tutoring service in the U.S. It comprises a community of thousands of tutors who have delivered more than 18 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](#). Follow the company on Twitter [@ThePrincetonRev](#) and Instagram [@theprincetonreview](#)

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.

2020 Survey Findings

This report lists the 2020 survey's 17 questions, answer choices, and percentages of respondents choosing each answer.

The percent of respondents overall (students plus parents) choosing an answer is shown to the left of each answer choice. To the right, the percent of students and the percent of parents choosing the answer are shown in parentheses. The pluralities (answer choices selected by the highest percent of respondents) or the majorities (answer choices selected more than half (i.e. 51 percent or greater) of respondents) are underlined.

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?

For this, the survey's only fill-in-the-blank question, the names of hundreds of colleges, universities, and other post-secondary institutions were filled in by respondents as their "dream" college. Some schools were named by hundreds of respondents, others by only one.

The schools that the highest number of students named as their "dream" college were:

1. Stanford University (CA)
2. Harvard College (MA)
3. University of California—Los Angeles
4. Massachusetts Institute of Technology
5. New York University
6. Princeton University (NJ)
7. Columbia University (NY)
8. Yale University (CT)
9. University of Michigan—Ann Arbor
10. University of California—Berkeley

The schools that the highest number of parents named as their "dream" college for their child were:

1. Stanford University (CA)
2. Princeton University (NJ)
3. Massachusetts Institute of Technology
4. Harvard College (MA)
5. New York University
6. University of Pennsylvania
7. University of Michigan—Ann Arbor
8. Duke University (NC)
9. University of California—Los Angeles
10. Cornell University (NY)

For the past eight years (since 2013), Stanford has been #1 on both the student and the parent "dream" college list. From 2012 to 2019, Harvard has been #2 on both lists. In 2020, Harvard was #2 on the student list, but it dropped to #4 on the parent list (on which Princeton moved to #2 from its #3 rank on the list in 2019),

Over the years, schools that have been the #1 "dream" colleges (on the parent or student lists, or in some years: both) have included Stanford, Harvard, Princeton and New York University.

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

33% One to 4 (34% Students, 30% Parents)

38% Five to 8 (37% Students, 43% Parents)

20% Nine to 12 (19% Students, 21% Parents)

09% Thirteen or more (10% Students, 06% Parents)

Combined: 29% applying to 9 or more.

The plurality (38%) of respondents reported they (their child) would apply to 5 to 8 colleges (that's down from 2019 when 42% so indicated). 29% said they (their child) would apply to 9 or more colleges (down 1% from 2019).

In 2007, the first year this question was asked, 52% of respondents said they (their child) would apply to 5 to 8 colleges.

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

10% Researching colleges: choosing which schools to apply to
(09% Students, 14% Parents)

40% Taking SAT, ACT, or AP exams (40% Students, 36% Parents)

30% Completing applications for admission and financial aid (29% Students 30% Parents)

20% Waiting for the decision letters; choosing which college to attend
(22% Students, 20% Parents)

The plurality (40%) of respondents said "Taking SAT, ACT or AP exams" was the toughest part of their (their child's) application experience. This was up 3% from 2019. 30% chose the answer, "Completing applications for admission and financial aid" (down 3% from 2019). More parents (14%) than students (9%) chose the answer "Researching colleges..."

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

14% The ACT(14% Students, 13% Parents)

34% The SAT(33% Students, 35% Parents)

43% Both tests (43% Students, 46% Parents)

09% Neither test (10% Students, 06% Parents)

The plurality (43%) have taken or plan to take both the SAT and the ACT. Among those who have taken (or plan to take) only one test, 34% said it was (will be) the SAT; 14% said the ACT.

This is the first year this question has been asked exactly this way.

In 2019, the survey had one question about which exam respondents planned to take, with two answer choices: the SAT (which 70% chose), and the ACT (which 30% chose). The 2019 survey also included a separate question, "How likely is it that you (your child) will take *both* the SAT and the ACT?" A majority (52%) of respondents said it was "Very" or "Extremely" likely they (their child) would take both tests.

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

02% Class rank (02% Students, 02% Parents)

16% Essay (17% Students, 10% Parents)

12% Extracurricular Activities (13% Students, 06% Parents)

45% High school transcript, grades, and GPA (43% Students, 50% Parents)

22% SAT/ ACT scores (21% Students, 29% Parents)

03% Recommendations (04% Students, 03% Parents)

The plurality (45%) of respondents chose the answer, "High school transcript, grades, and GPA," while 22% chose the answer, "SAT/ ACT scores."

A higher percentage (by 7 to 8%) of parents chose each of these two answers than students.

6) How would you rate the college application guidance and support you (your child) have (has) received from your (your child's) high school college advisor / counselor?

21% Excellent (22% Students, 19% Parents)

39% Good (39% Students, 38% Parents)

Combined: 60% Excellent or Good

29% Fair (29% Students, 30% Parents)

11% Poor (10% Students, 13% Parents)

The majority (60%) of respondents rated the guidance and support from their college advisors / counselors as "Good" or "Excellent" (with 21% rating it "Excellent").

Since 2016, when this question was introduced in the survey, respondents' ratings of their college advisors / counselors have generally been consistent and favorable.

7) 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?

35% More than \$100,000 (30% Students, 58% Parents)

25% \$75,000 to \$100,000 (26% Students, 21% Parents)

21% \$50,000 to 75,000 (22% Students, 12% Parents)

Combined: 81% estimated it to be more than \$50,000

12% \$25,000 to \$50,000 (14% Students, 06% Parents)

07% Less than \$25,000 (08% Students, 03% Parents)

Eight out of 10 respondents (81%) estimated the cost of their college degree to be more than \$50,000: 35% estimated it to be more than \$100,000.

Parents' estimates of the cost have been higher than students' estimates. This year, 58% of parents estimated the cost to be more than \$100,000, while only 30% (about half as many) of students estimated the cost to be that high.

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

62% Extremely (62% Students, 63% Parents)

25% Very (25% Students, 22% Parents)

Combined 87% said Extremely or Very

12% Somewhat (12% Students, 12% Parents)

Combined: 99% said Extremely, Very, or Somewhat

01% Not at all (01% Students, 03% Parents)

87% of respondents said financial aid would be "Very" or "Extremely" necessary. 62% of them deemed it "Extremely" necessary. (Thirteen years ago, in 2007, the first year this question was on the survey, 51% said "Extremely" necessary.)

99% of respondents said some form of aid would be necessary to pay for college.

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

- 20% Won't get into first-choice college (20% Students, 19% Parents)
- 29% Will get into first-choice college, but won't be able to afford to attend (28% Students, 31% Parents)
- 44% Level of debt I (my child) will take on to pay for the degree (45% Students, 43% Parents)
- 07% Will attend a college I (my child) may not be happy about (07% Students, 07% Parents)

The plurality (44%) of respondents said the "Level of debt...to pay for the degree" was their biggest concern---the answer chosen by the plurality for eight years (since 2013). From 2007 to 2012, the answer chosen by the plurality was "Will get into their first-choice college, but won't be able to afford to attend."

In 2003 (the first year of the survey), the answer chosen by the majority (52%) was "Won't get into first-choice college."

10) How much has the 2019 college admission scandal, "Varsity Blues," affected your (your child's) perspective about applying to college?

- 03%. Extremely (03% Students, 03% Parents)
 - 09% A lot (10% Students, 07% Parents)
 - 24% Somewhat (25% Students, 20% Parents)
 - 26% A little (28% Students, 20% Parents)
 - 38% Not at all (34% Students, 50% Parents)
- Combined: 64% said "A little" or "Not at all."

The plurality (38%) said the college admission scandal had not affected their (their child's) perspective about their applications. 64% of the respondents (62% of students, 70% of parents) gauged the affect of the scandal on their application perspectives as "Not at all" or "A little."

Note: This question was asked only on the 2020 survey.

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

- 29% Very high (30% Students, 24% Parents)
 - 43% High (44% Students, 41% Parents)
- Combined: 72% Very high or High
- 26% Average (24% Students, 32% Parents)
 - <01% Very Low (<01% Students, <01% Parents)

The majority (72%) reported "Very high" or "High," levels of stress: 29% reported it to be "Very high."

Stress levels have consistently been high among respondents and grown considerably over the past 17 years. In 2003, the first year of the survey, the percentage of respondents reporting "Very high" or "High" levels of stress was 56% (16% fewer than in 2020).

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

- 37% Fewer than 250 miles (34% Students, 48% Parents)
- 30% 250 to 500 miles (29% Students, 31% Parents)
- 18% 500 to 1,000 miles (20% Students, 13% Parents)
- 15% More than 1,000 miles (17% Students, 08% Parents)

While the plurality (37%) overall would like to attend (or see their child attend) a college "Fewer than 250 miles" from home, parents and students have significantly different viewpoints on this. Parents want their children to attend a college nearer to home than their children do.

Among parents, the plurality (48%) said they would like their child to attend a college fewer than 250 miles" from home.

Among students, the majority (66%) said they would like to attend a college more than 250 miles from home. 37% would prefer to attend a college "500 to 1,000 miles" from home, and 17% wish they could attend a college farther still: "More than 1,000" miles" from home.

This distinction has been a consistent finding since 2006, when the question was added to the survey.

13) 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?

- 08% College with best academic reputation (08% Students, 08% Parents)
- 09% College that will be the most affordable (09% Students, 08% Parents)
- 44% College with best program for my (my child's) career interests (45% Students, 39% Parents)
- 39% College that will be the best overall fit (38% Students, 45% Parents)

Since 2018, the plurality of respondents (44% this year, up 2% from 2019) have chosen the answer, "College with best program for my (my child's) career interests." (From 2005 to 2017, the plurality chose the answer, "College that will be the best overall fit.") 39% chose in 2020.

Only 9% of respondents said they'd choose the "most affordable" college, while only 8% said they'd choose the college with the "best academic reputation."

14) 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?

- 23% Strongly (22% Students, 25% Parents)
- 43% Very much (43% Students, 44% Parents)
Combined 66% Strongly or Very Much
- 29% Somewhat (30% Students, 27% Parents)
- 04% Not much (04% Students, 03% Parents)
- 01% Not at all (01% Students, 01% Parents)

The majority (66%) of respondents said having information about colleges' career services would contribute "Very much" or "Strongly" to their decisions about applying to or attending a college (this figure was down 2% from the 68% so indicating in 2019): 23% said such information would contribute "Strongly." The question was not asked in previous years.

Note: The Princeton Review's resources for students and parents on college career services include four topic-related ranking lists. One, published in *The Best 385 Colleges*, names the 20 colleges in the book with "Best Career Services." Others, published in *The Best Value Colleges*, name the 25 colleges the company recommends for "Best Career Placement," "Best Schools for Internships," and "Best Alumni Network." Each school profile in The Princeton Review's *Best Value Colleges* project also has career information 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.

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

07% Strongly (08% Students, 06% Parents)
18% Very much (18% Students, 16% Parents)
41% Somewhat (41% Students, 39% Parents)
 Combined 66% Somewhat, Very Much or Strongly
26% Not much (26% Students, 27% Parents)
08% Not at all (07% Students, 12% Parents)

The majority (66%) of respondents said having information about a college's commitment to environmental issues *would* contribute "Somewhat," "Very Much," or "Strongly" to their application and enrollment decisions, with 25% indicating it would contribute "Strongly" or "Very much." (This has been a consistent survey finding since 2008 when this question was first on the survey.)

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 more than 600 colleges. The scores appear in school profiles at 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 guide is accessible [here](#).

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

21%. The education (21% Students, 23% Parents)
34% The exposure to new ideas (35% Students, 29% Parents)
45% The potentially better job and higher income (44% Students, 48% Parents)

The plurality (45%) viewed the biggest benefit of a college degree to be "The potentially better job and higher income." (This has been the answer choice of the plurality of respondents for the past 10 years, since 2010, when this question was added to the survey.) 34% chose the answer, "The exposure to new ideas," and 21% chose "The education," down 4% from 2019 when 25% of respondents so indicated.

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

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

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

Since 2014, when this question was first on the survey, respondents have consistently and overwhelmingly viewed college as worth their investment.

(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" on the "College Hopes & Worries Survey" main page [here](#) .

*Survey respondents – year over year:

2019–20 / 12,845 people:	10,276 students and 2,569 parents
2018–19 / 11,900 people:	9,282 students and 2,618 parents
2017–18 / 10,958 people:	9,345 students and 1,613 parents
2016–17 / 10,519 people:	8,499 students and 2,020 parents
2015–16 / 10,434 people:	8,347 students and 2,087 parents
2014–15 / 12,062 people:	9,650 students and 2,412 parents
2013–14 / 14,150 people:	10,116 students and 4,034 parents
2012–13 / 14,125 people:	9,955 students and 4,170 parents
2011–12 / 10,650 people:	7,455 students and 3,195 parents
2010–11 / 12,185 people:	8,219 students and 3,966 parents
2009–10 / 12,174 people:	9,132 students and 3,042 parents
2008–09 / 15,722 people:	12,715 students and 3,007 parents
2007–08 / 10,388 people:	8,776 students and 1,612 parents
2006–07 / 5,854 people:	4,594 students and 1,260 parents
2005–06 / 4,902 people:	3,890 students and 1,012 parents
2004–05 / 3,930 people:	2,885 students and 1,045 parents
2003–04 / 3,339 people:	3,036 students and 303 parents
2002–03 / 1,003 people:	901 students and 102 parents

SAT® and AP® are trademarks registered and owned by the College Board, which is not affiliated with and does not endorse this survey project. ACT® is a registered trademark of ACT, Inc.