

L.A. Unified Students' Pathways to College: Four-Year College Application Patterns



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This research brief from the LAERI research-practice partnership is the first in a series exploring Los Angeles Unified School District's (L.A. Unified) students' pathways to college. This brief focuses on students' survey reports about whether and where they applied to college.¹ It describes the percentage of twelfth graders from the class of 2017² who applied to college, where they applied to college, and how these patterns differed among young men and women and among students from different ethnic/racial backgrounds or academic preparation levels. The data for this brief come from a collaborative effort between LAERI and L.A. Unified to develop survey questions for L.A. Unified's annual surveys about students' experiences, behaviors, and supports during the college application process.

What percentage of twelfth graders applied to college?

L.A. Unified students applied to college at rates similar to their peers nationally.³ Eight out of ten L.A. Unified students reported that they had *applied to or registered*⁴ for college by January of their twelfth-grade year (see Table 1).

Another 12% of students planned to register for community college at some point after January of their senior year (when the survey was administered). Only 8% of twelfth graders did not plan to apply to or register for any college (see Table 1). We explore the post-high school plans of students who did not apply to any four-year colleges in a subsequent brief.

Table 1. Twelfth Graders' Postsecondary Actions and Plans

Percentage of twelfth graders who reported that they...	Percent
applied to or registered for college	80.8
applied only to four-year colleges	46.3
registered only for community colleges	16.8
applied to at least one four-year college and registered for community college	17.6
planned to register only for community college	11.5
had not and did not plan to apply to or register for any college	7.7

Source: LAERI's tabulations of L.A. Unified's 2016-17 secondary School Experience Survey. N=17,243. For details on the sample and analysis, see the [methods appendix](#).

What percentage of twelfth graders applied to at least one four-year college?

Sixty-four percent of twelfth-graders reported that they had applied to at least one four-year college (see Table 1). L.A. Unified students applied to four-year colleges at rates similar to their peers nationally.⁵

cause low-income students, who make up a large majority of the district's enrollment,⁷ qualify for four California State University (CSU) and four University of California (UC) application fee waivers. Twelve percent of twelfth graders applied to between one and three colleges, which suggests that some may not have used all of the waivers available to them.⁸

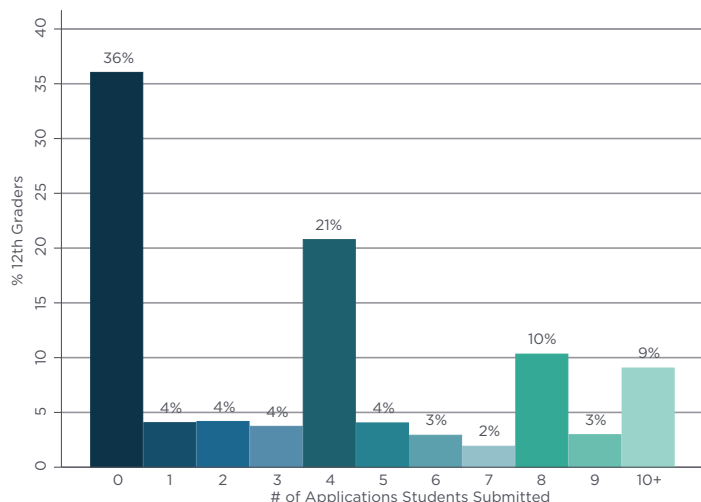
How many four-year college applications did twelfth graders submit?

L.A. Unified students reported submitting more four-year college applications, on average, than their peers nationally.⁶ Figure 1 shows that students who applied to four-year colleges typically applied to four or eight colleges, probably be-

Where did most L.A. Unified students apply?

The ten most popular four-year colleges to which twelfth graders reported they applied were public, in-state colleges. Nearly six out of ten twelfth graders (57%) applied to at least one CSU

Figure 1. Number of Four-Year Colleges to Which Twelfth Graders Applied



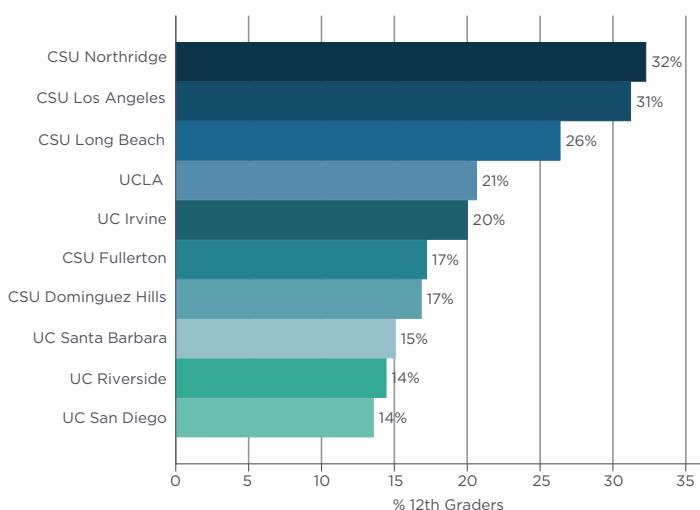
Source: LAERI's tabulations of L.A. Unified's 2016-17 School Experience Survey. N=17,243. For details on the sample and analysis, see the [methods appendix](#).

campus and one-third applied to at least one UC campus. Three out of ten students applied to both CSU and UC campuses. Approximately 17% of students applied to a least one private college and 11% applied to at least one out-of-state college.⁹ Figure 2 shows that nearly one-third of twelfth graders applied to CSU Northridge, almost one-third applied to CSU Los Angeles, and a quarter applied to CSU Long Beach. Among UCs, UCLA and Irvine were most popular, with one in five students applying to each (see Figure 2).

Which students were less likely to apply to a four-year college?

Students with lower grade point averages (GPAs) were less likely to apply to four-year colleges, as were students with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency (LEP).¹⁰ Students whose parents did not graduate from college were less likely to apply to a four-year college than students whose parents had completed a bachelor's degree or higher.¹¹ Students whose parents did not graduate from college (e.g., those whose parents did not graduate from high school, earned a high school diploma, or attended some college) applied to college at similar rates to each other.¹²

Figure 2. Ten Most Popular Four-Year Colleges to Which Twelfth Graders Applied



Source: LAERI's tabulations of L.A. Unified's 2016-17 School Experience Survey. N=17,243. For details on the sample and analysis, see the [methods appendix](#).

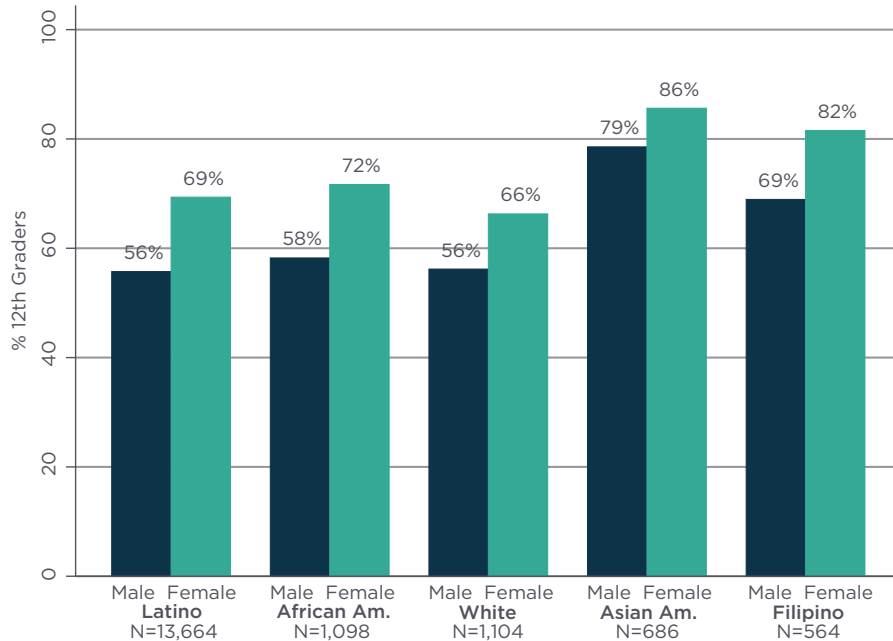
Figure 3 shows that Latino, African American, and white students were less likely to apply to four-year colleges than Asian American and Filipino students and that male students were less likely to apply to four-year colleges than their female counterparts.¹³

Among students with similar GPAs¹⁴, racial and ethnic differences in applying to a four-year college were relatively small, with the exception of white students with GPAs below 3.5. Except for students in the top GPA category (i.e., 3.5-4.0), white students were less likely to apply to a four-year college than students from other racial/ethnic groups in their GPA band (see Figure 4).

Among students of the same race or ethnicity with similar GPAs, Latino and African American males were less likely to apply to a four-year college than were Latinas and African American females.¹⁵

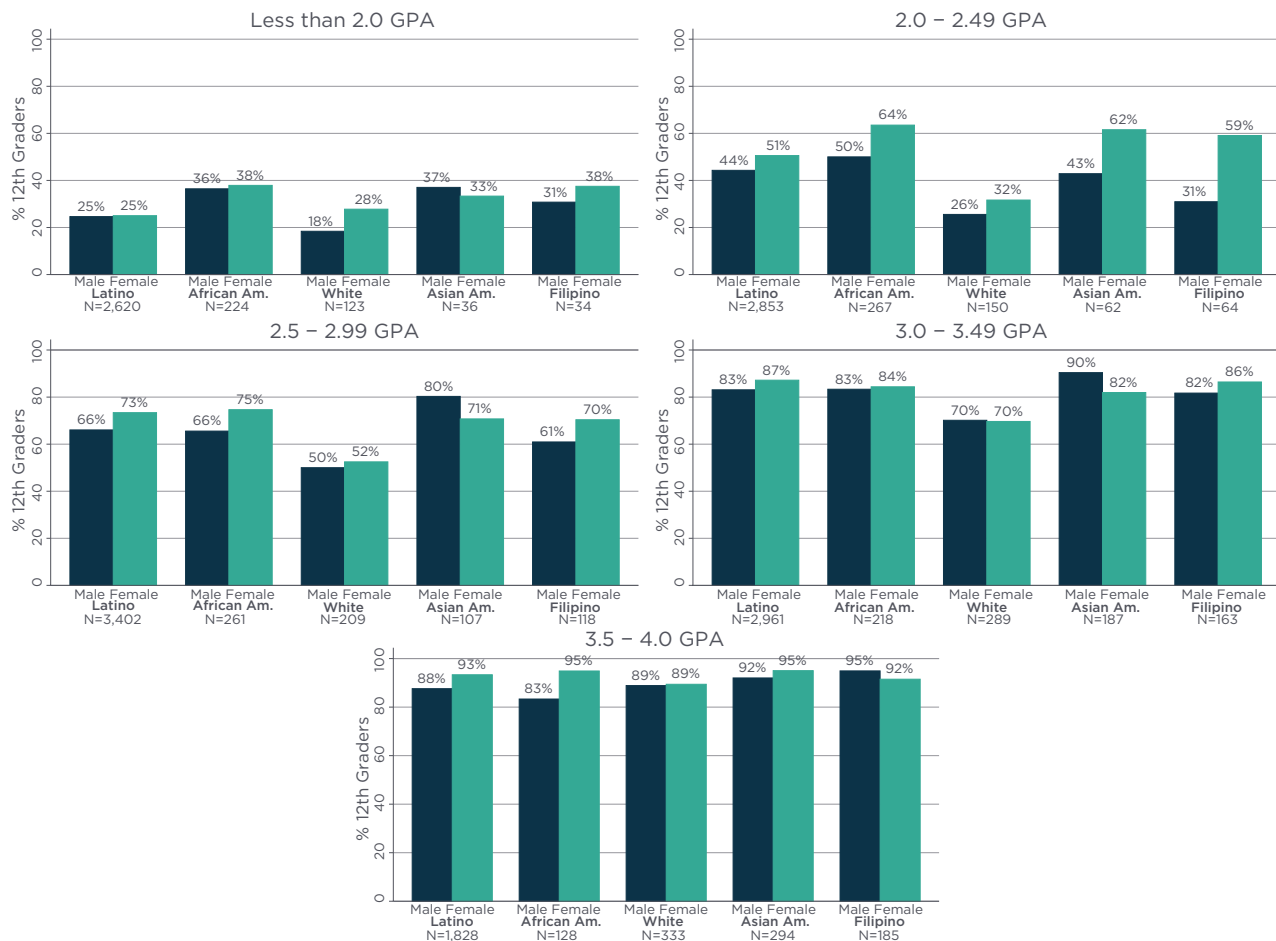
Gender differences for other racial/ethnic groups were less consistent, with females having higher college application rates in some GPA ranges and males having higher rates in others.¹⁶

Figure 3. Percentage of Twelfth Graders Who Applied to at Least One Four-Year College, by Race/Ethnicity and Gender



Source: LAERI's tabulations of L.A. Unified's 2016-17 School Experience Survey. For details on the sample and analysis, see the [methods appendix](#).

Figure 4. Percentage of Twelfth Graders Who Applied to at Least One Four-Year College, by GPA, Race/Ethnicity, and Gender



Source: LAERI's tabulations of L.A. Unified's 2016-17 School Experience Survey. For details on the sample and analysis, see the [methods appendix](#).

Summary and Conclusions

Our analyses indicate that most L.A. Unified twelfth graders complete an important step on the pathway to college: submitting a college application or registering for a community college. By January of their senior year, about 80% of L.A. Unified twelfth graders in the class of 2017 had applied to or registered for at least one college. Nearly two-thirds had applied to at least one four-year college, and more than half had applied to four or more four-year colleges. As would be expected, students with higher GPAs were more likely to apply to four-year colleges, with nearly 92% of those with GPAs of 3.5 or above applying to at least one four-year college.

Nonetheless, the data also suggest that some students may be applying to fewer four-year colleges than may be optimal for their admissions chances, especially considering the availability of application fee waivers for low-income students. The data also suggest that particular subgroups of students—Latino and African American males, in particular—may need more support during the college application process to ensure that they apply to four-year colleges at the same rate as other students with similar grade point averages. The data also indicate that white L.A. Unified students (male and female) with GPAs below 3.5 are substantially less likely than students from other ethnic/racial backgrounds to apply to a four-year college. A question we pursue in an upcoming brief is whether some students who do not apply to four-year colleges are more likely than others to plan to attend a community college first, and then transfer to a four-year college.

Applying to college is, of course, just one step toward college enrollment and college graduation. Upcoming briefs will explore other aspects of this process, including college acceptances and enrollment.

Endnotes

¹ Our analytic sample includes twelfth graders who were enrolled in traditional high schools and affiliated-charter high schools (i.e., not special education center, community day, options, or home hospital schools) during the survey administration window and had district survey, demographic, program, and academic achievement data (for more details, see the [methods appendix](#), a separate document describing the sample and methods used for these analyses). Students in our sample represent approximately 60% of twelfth-grade students enrolled in the district's traditional and affiliated-charter high schools. For more details about the sample and how the sample differs from all twelfth graders who attended traditional and affiliated-charter high schools, see the [methods appendix](#). The twelfth graders described in this brief have slightly higher GPAs (.05 standard deviations) and are slightly more likely to be academically eligible (3 percentage points) for four-year colleges and to have taken the SAT or ACT (4 percentage points) compared to all twelfth graders at their schools. Thus, given what we know about students who are and are not in the sample, we believe the college application percentages reported for the sample in this brief are likely somewhat higher than they are for all twelfth graders in these schools.

² For this brief, we considered students members of the class of 2017 if they were twelfth graders during the 2016-17 academic year, regardless of whether they were first-time twelfth graders.

³ Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics' High School Longitudinal Study (HSLs) show that 83% of high school graduates in the class of 2013 applied to or registered for at least one college by the fall following their normative twelfth grade year. (Source: LAERI's tabulations of the HSLs public use data file. For more details, see the [methods appendix](#).) Among L.A. Unified twelfth graders in our analytic sample who then graduated in 2017 (94% of the analytic sample), 83% had applied to or registered for college by January of their twelfth-grade year.

⁴ The survey questions that we used in these analyses asked students about applying to or registering for college because California community colleges have open enrollment for California high school graduates and some Californians think of the community college admissions process as a registration process rather than an application process. Note, however, that some community college programs have additional admissions requirements and that the California Community College system refers to the process as an application process.

⁵ Data from the HSLs show that 63% of high school graduates in the class of 2013 applied to a four-year college (Source: LAERI's tabulations of the HSLs public use data file. For more details, see the [methods appendix](#)). This percentage is similar to NCES's findings from earlier studies using the Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) sample. Approximate-

ly 62% of students who were in the twelfth grade in 2004 applied to a four-year college by 2006. (This figure is based on LAERI's calculations using data presented in Chen, et al. (2010), specifically, tables 5 and 6. Table 5 shows that 83% of students reported applying to or registering for at least one college and table 6 shows that 75% of students who applied to or registered for any college applied to at least one four year college [$.83 \times .75 = .62$ or 62%]. See pages 16-21.)

⁶ Fifty-two percent of L.A. Unified students in the sample submitted four or more college applications (see figure 1). HSLs data from 2013 show that 21% of students in a national sample applied to four or more colleges.

⁷ In 2016-17, approximately 79% of L.A. Unified students districtwide were eligible for subsidized meals (California Department of Education, 2017).

⁸ Sixty-four percent of students who submitted between one and three four-year college applications were eligible for subsidized meals. We considered these students likely to be eligible for a CSU or UC fee waiver. (The CSU and UC do not publish the criteria they use to determine whether students are eligible for fee waivers, but state the program is for low-income students as determined by family size and income [CSU, 2018; UC, 2018].)

⁹ Results not shown.

¹⁰ Students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency (LEP) as of twelfth grade were 33 percentage points less likely to apply to a four-year college than other students (students with disabilities: 34% vs. 67%; LEP students: 33% vs. 66%). For more detail about the percentage of students who applied to four-year colleges by GPA, see Figure 4.

¹¹ Students whose parents completed a bachelor's degree or higher were 10 percentage points (73% vs. 63%) more likely to apply to a four-year college than other students.

¹² Sixty-two percent of students whose parents did not graduate from high school, 62% whose parents graduated from high school, and 64% whose parents completed some college applied to at least one four-year college. (The two percentage point difference between the students whose parents attended some college versus no college is not statistically significant.)

¹³ Sixty-six percent of African American students, 63% of Latino students, and 61% of white students applied to at least one four-year college compared to 75% of Filipino students and 82% of Asian American students.

¹⁴ For details about how we calculated students' GPAs, see the [methods appendix](#).

¹⁵ Gender differences in African American students' four-year college application rates are only statistically significantly different in the 2.0-2.49 and top GPA bands. The gender differences in Latino and Latina students' four-year college application rates are statistically significantly different for all GPA bands with the exception of below 2.0.

¹⁶ It is important to note that students from the various racial/ethnic subgroups are not evenly distributed

across the GPA bands. One-fifth of Latino and African American students and 11% of white students had tenth and eleventh grade GPAs below 2.0, compared to five and six percent of Asian American and Filipino students, respectively.

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Disclaimer

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