

L.A. Unified Students' Pathways to College: Community College Application Patterns



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This research brief from the LAERI—L.A. Unified research-practice partnership is the second in a series exploring Los Angeles Unified School District's (L.A. Unified's) students' pathways to college. The first [brief](#) focused on twelfth graders¹ from the class of 2017² who applied to at least one four-year college. This brief focuses on students from the same class who applied only to community colleges. We describe these students' educational expectations and explanations for why they did not apply to a four-year college. The data for this brief come from a collaborative effort between LAERI and L.A. Unified to gather information about students' experiences, behaviors, and supports during the college application process, using the district's annual survey from the 2016-17 school year.

What percentage of twelfth graders applied only to community colleges?

About one out of six students (17%) reported that they had applied only to community colleges as of January of their

twelfth-grade year (when the survey was administered), and an additional 12% reported that they still planned to apply to community colleges (see Table 1).³

Table 1. Twelfth Graders' Postsecondary Actions and Plans

Percentage of twelfth graders who reported that they...	Percent
applied to at least one college	80.8
applied only to four-year colleges	46.3
applied only to community colleges	16.8
applied to at least one four-year college and at least one community college	17.6
planned to apply to community college	11.5
had not applied to and did not plan to apply to 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](#).

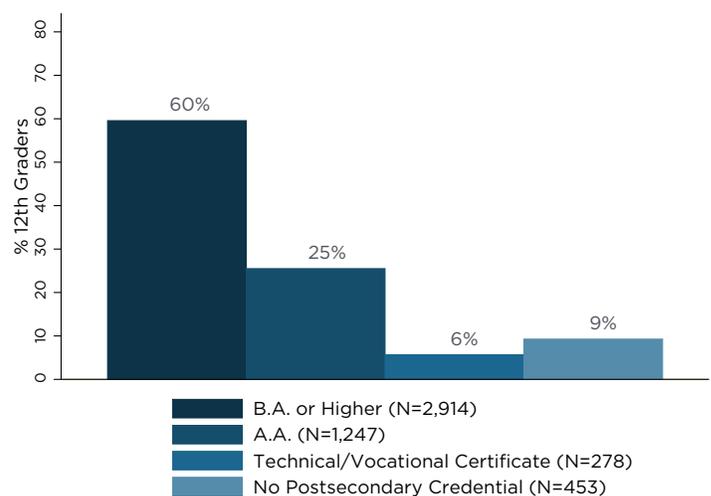
What percentage of students who applied only to community colleges planned to complete a bachelor's degree or higher?

Among students who applied only to community colleges, a majority (60%) expected to complete a bachelor's degree (B.A.) or higher (see Figure 1). Twenty-five percent planned to complete an associate's degree (A.A.), 6% planned to complete a technical or vocational certification, and 9% did not expect to complete any postsecondary credential.

Why didn't students who expected to earn a B.A. or higher apply to any four-year colleges?

Many students who did not apply to any four-year colleges but expected to earn a B.A. or higher cited concerns about their academic qualifications and

Figure 1. Educational Expectations of Students Who Applied Only to Community Colleges



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

preparation when asked why they did not apply to four-year colleges. Table 2 shows that 29% reported that they did not apply to a four-year college because they did not think they would get admitted to the college they wanted to attend, and 11% were worried that they would not do well academically at a four-year college. Our analyses of administrative data for these students indicate that very few (only about 20%) of the students who expected to earn a B.A. or higher but applied only to community colleges were on track by the end of the eleventh grade to meet the state’s course requirements for admission to a public four-year college.⁴ Students who expected to earn a B.A. or higher but applied only to community colleges also had substantially lower grades and standardized test scores than their peers who applied to four-year colleges.⁵

In addition to citing academic reasons for not applying to four-year colleges, students also attributed their decision to not having completed key steps in the four-year college application process, including not having taken the SAT or ACT (29%), not knowing how to fill out college applications (9%), and missing application deadlines (9%). Some students also felt that they could not afford a four-year college (16%) or the fees to apply to one (6%).

Table 2. Most Common Reasons That Twelfth Graders Who Expected to Earn a B.A. or Higher Did Not Apply to Any Four-Year Colleges

Why didn't you apply to any four-year colleges?	Percent
I didn't think I would get into any four-year colleges	29.1
I didn't take the SAT or ACT	29.0
I can't afford to attend a four-year college	15.5
I didn't think I would get into a college that I wanted to go to	12.1
I am worried that I won't do well academically at a four-year college	11.3
I didn't finish the applications before the deadlines	9.5
I didn't know how to find and fill out the applications	9.4
I couldn't afford the application fees	6.4

Source: LAERI’s tabulations of L.A. Unified’s 2016-17 secondary School Experience Survey. N=2,683.

Categories were not mutually exclusive. For more details on the sample and analysis, see the [methods appendix](#).

What percentage of students who expected to earn a B.A. or higher but applied only to community colleges planned to transfer to a four-year college? More than two-thirds (67%) of students who expected to earn a B.A. or higher but applied only to community colleges planned to transfer to a four-year college to complete their degree. Students who reported they did not plan to transfer may not have known they would probably need to transfer to a four-year college to complete a bachelor’s degree, or they may have planned to enroll in one of the bachelor’s degree programs offered by some California community colleges.⁶

Summary and Conclusions

A substantial portion of twelfth graders in the class of 2017 (29%) applied exclusively to community colleges. A majority of these students (60%) reported having plans to complete a B.A. or higher, while a little less than a third (31%) planned to complete a vocational or technical certificate or an associate’s degree. Our analyses suggest that students who expected to earn a B.A. or higher but applied only to community colleges may have encountered challenges in meeting four-year college eligibility requirements or completing key steps in the application process that limited their educational options immediately after high school. Some students also felt they could not afford a four-year college.



These data suggest that some students need additional academic supports earlier in their academic careers to ensure they are aware of and have the academic skills to meet four-year college eligibility requirements. Eleventh and twelfth graders with lower grades or those who are off-track to complete required college preparatory coursework may benefit from guidance to help them identify four-year colleges for which they are still eligible or community colleges with strong transfer pathways, so that they understand the full range of options available to them. Additionally, some students may need more support during the college application process to help them understand that financial aid may make four-year colleges affordable and to help them complete college application tasks. In upcoming research, we will explore the college-going supports available in the district's high schools and how the availability of those supports is related to whether and where students apply to and enroll in college.

Endnotes

¹ Our analytic sample includes twelfth graders who were enrolled in traditional high schools and affiliated-charter high schools (i.e., not in special education centers, community day, options, or home hospital schools or independent charter high 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). These students represent approximately 60% of 12th-grade students enrolled in the district's traditional and affiliated-charter high schools during the survey administration window. For more details about the sample and how the sample differs from all 12th graders who attended traditional and affiliated-charter high schools, see the [methods appendix](#). The 12th graders in the analytic sample have slightly higher GPAs (.05 standard deviations) and are slightly more likely to be academically eligible for four-year colleges (3 percentage points) and to have taken the SAT or ACT (4 percentage points) compared to all 12th 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 analytic sample are likely somewhat higher than they are for all 12th graders in these schools.

² For this brief, we considered students members of the class of 2017 if they were 12th graders during the 2016-17 academic year, regardless of whether they were first-time twelfth graders.

³ 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. However, some community college programs have additional admissions requirements and the California Community College system refers to the process as an application process. We coded students as having applied to a community college if they indicated that they had already applied to or registered for a community college as January of their twelfth-grade year or planned to apply to or register for a community college at some point after January (when the survey was administered).

⁴ To be eligible to attend a four-year public college in California, students must complete a college preparatory curriculum, the A-G requirements, composed of 15 courses with a "C" or better, and meet specific GPA and SAT or ACT score benchmarks (University of California Office of the President, 2018).

⁵ The average 10th and 11th grade GPA of students who expected to earn a B.A. or higher but applied only to community colleges was 2.3, compared to 2.7 for students who applied to both community colleges and four-year colleges. On their 11th-grade English language arts and math standardized tests, students who expected to earn a B.A. or higher but applied only to community colleges scored approximately two-tenths of a standard deviation below students who applied to both community colleges and four-year colleges.

⁶ In 2017, fifteen California community colleges offered bachelor's degree programs (California Legislative Analyst's Office, 2017).

References

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Disclaimer

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LAERI is a Los Angeles-based research-practice partnership that uses a cumulative program of research and a collaborative inquiry process to inform policy and practice and, ultimately, contribute to improvements in students' educational success.

The research described in this brief represents a collaboration among researchers from UCLA, CGU, LAERI, and central office staff from the Los Angeles Unified School District (L.A. Unified).

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