Enlace Comunitario

Identifying Opportunities to Enhance Community College Outreach and Recruitment of Latinx/a/o Students

Mayra Nuñez Martinez, Marcela G. Cuellar, Sherrie Reed and Celia Esposito-Noy

LATINX/A/O STUDENTS are vastly underrepresented in postsecondary education despite representing the majority ethnic group in California.[1] Increasing rates of college enrollment and degree attainment of Latinx/a/o students is critical for the wellbeing and prosperity of both individuals and the state's economy. To do so demands an understanding of the factors that impact Latinx/a/o college choice. Yet, little research focuses specifically on how college choice varies by race/ethnicity and by regional context.[2] This brief explores college-going patterns and the many factors influencing Latinx/a/o students' college choice in a single county in north-central California, with a particular focus on community colleges, which serve as a critical access point to higher education for Latinx/a/o youth.[3] Findings from this research aim to inform outreach and recruitment efforts for Solano Community College (SCC), though the lessons learned apply to community colleges more broadly.

Increasing Degree Attainment among Latinx/a/o Students is Critical for California

Latinx/a/o students have lower rates of degree attainment compared to students in other racial/ethnic subgroups in California.[4] While overall Latinx/a/o college enrollment rates have increased over the past decade, their enrollment declined disproportionately as a result of the pandemic.[5] Moreover, higher education institutions struggle to graduate Latinx/a/o students. Increasing rates of bachelor's degree attainment among California's sizable population of Latinx/a/o students is a key priority in meeting the state's future workforce and economic imperatives.[6] To achieve those outcomes, state, district, and college leaders must address the systemic barriers that inhibit Latinx/a/o students' success and advocate for policies and practices that make degree attainment more equitable for Latinx/a/o students.

TOPLINES

With the goal of improving outreach and recruitment of Latinx/a/o students, Solano Community College (SCC) partnered with UC Davis researchers to study regional Latinx/a/o college-going decisions and inform efforts to increase enrollment. Researchers underscored and established the following to help inform future SCC strategies:

> Latinx/a/o students statewide attend community colleges at substantially higher rates than four-year colleges.

> College-going rates for Latinx/a/o high school graduates vary by gender and English learner status.

> The majority of Latinx/a/o students in the SCC region attend one of the numerous nearby community colleges.

> Latinx/a/o students rely on college websites and social networks to obtain information about community colleges.

> Students report that academic, financial and navigational factors are important in selecting which community college to attend.

Community College Enrollment Declined During the Pandemic

The pandemic-era shift to online learning, along with job losses, financial hardships, increased family responsibilities, and uncertainty about health and well-being, resulted in significant declines in community college enrollment nationally.[7] While these declines in enrollment varied across California community colleges, some lost more than one-fifth of their pre-pandemic enrollment.[8] Latinx/a/o students had the sharpest declines, down by 17% between Spring 2020 and Spring 2021, compared to about 10% for other racial/ethnic subgroups.[9]

Community colleges that minimized declines of Latinx/a/o enrollment employed a variety of strategies to sustain students' engagement, including providing flexible, proactive, and personalized support (i.e., reaching out to students who may need help based on their attendance and course performance, expanding times for tutoring and counseling services to include evenings), adapting institutional programming to meet the needs of students (i.e., offering eight-week courses, making course materials more affordable, increasing the number of weekend/evening courses), and increasing outreach and marketing strategies focused on underserved students (i.e., tabling at community events, targeted outreach efforts in diverse schools).[10] College leaders emphasized the importance of these efforts, coupled with an unwavering focus on access and outcomes for underserved students and intentional collaboration within and outside of institutions (i.e., partnerships with local employers to tailor programs based on the labor market).[11]

College-going Patterns of Latinx/a/o Students: Imperatives for Growth

Latinx/a/o Students in Solano County Enrolled in College at Lower Rates than Neighboring Counties and California Overall

Latinx/a/o students account for more than half of all K-12 students in California and 42% in Solano County.[12] Statewide, 59% of Latinx/a/o high school graduates from 2017, 2018, and 2019 attended college in the year following graduation; 37% attended community college, 13% attended a California State University (CSU), and 5% attended a University of California (UC) (Figure 1). Patterns are similar for Latinx/a/o students who graduated from Solano County public high schools, with slightly lower overall and four-year college-going rates. Only 54% of Latinx/a/o students enrolled in college after high school; 38% enrolled in community college, 8% at a CSU, and 4% at a UC (Figure 1). Importantly, a large proportion of Latinx/a/o high school graduates did not attend college the year following graduation—41% statewide and 46% in Solano County.

A Research Collaboration Between Solano Community College and UC Davis

In Fall 2021, the Governing Board and the Superintendent-President of SCC asked Wheelhouse to partner in research to better understand the factors that affect college-going choices by the Latinx community served by the district. Findings from this research partnership shed light on how high school counselors and community colleges in the local service area, and others statewide, can work to ensure that Latinx/a/o students have the support necessary to make informed decisions about college.

SCC is situated between San Francisco and Sacramento, along Interstate 80 in Solano County. Approximately 26% of Solano County's population is Hispanic or Latinx/a/o, 38% are White, 15% are Asian, and 14% are Black or African American.[13] The college's main campus is located in Fairfield, with three satellite centers in Vallejo, Vacaville, and at Travis Force Base. Its service region includes eight sizable communities across Solano and Yolo counties. In Fall 2019, 9,544 students were enrolled in SCC, with about 33% percent of students identifying as Latinx/a/o.[14] SCC is one of a few California community colleges offering a bachelor's degree in Biomanufacturing. It provides flexible course options for students, with classes offered in the day, evening and on Saturdays. Nearby metropolitan areas and adjacent counties provide numerous college options for students, including other public community colleges and four-year universities.

Figure 1: College Enrollment Patterns of California and Solano County Latinx/a/o Public High School Students
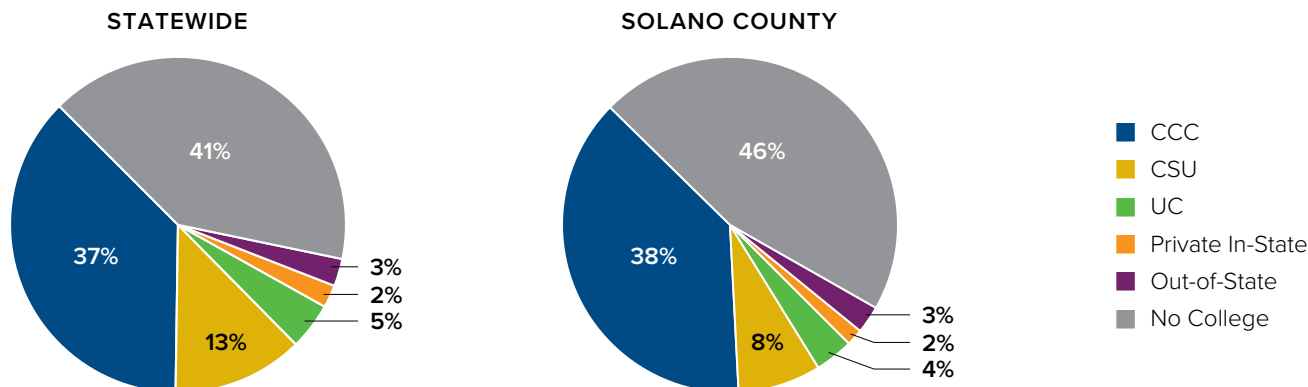
STATEWIDE

SOLANO COUNTY

- CCC
- CSU
- UC
- Private In-State
- Out-of-State
- No College

Note: College-going rates calculated by the authors from student-level college enrollment data (National Student Clearinghouse) provided by the California Department of Education (CDE). Rates include three cohorts (2017, 2018, 2019) of public high school graduates, pooled.

Across California counties, Latinx/a/o college-going rates ranged from 73% in Imperial to just 27% in Inyo (Figure 2). Among the counties neighboring Solano, Marin and Napa had the highest overall Latinx/a/o college-going rates at 70% and 65%, respectively, and Solano County had the lowest. Marin's high college-going rate was largely driven by enrollment in 4-year and out-of-state colleges, whereas Napa had much higher community college enrollment.

DATA, METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

The information provided in this brief draws on three sources of data. To investigate college enrollment patterns of California Latinx/a/o public high school students, we used student-level administrative data provided by the California Department of Education. The data include demographic characteristic variables (e.g., gender, race, socioeconomically disadvantaged status, English Learner status, etc.), and high school of graduation. These data were merged with student-term-level college enrollment information (e.g., college and term of attendance, private vs. public, in-state vs. out-of-state, etc.) obtained from the National Student Clearinghouse for the year following high school graduation. We pooled data for three high school graduate cohorts (2017, 2018, and 2019) as similar enrollment patterns were observed each year.

We also surveyed Latinx/a/o high school seniors and adult learners in Solano County and a single community in neighboring Yolo County interested in enrolling in community college for Fall 2022 to understand the factors informing their community college choice. We emailed college outreach programs to recruit Latinx/a/o participants. This survey asked students about their motivations to attend college, perceptions about SCC and important factors in deciding which college to attend. Eighty-five percent of respondents self-identified as Mexican-American, 76% were female, and 80% were first-generation.

Most respondents attended high school or recently graduated, and 70% indicated an intention to transfer to a 4-year university.

In addition, we interviewed Latinx/a/o students who attended SCC and Latinx/a/o students who graduated from Solano County high schools but attended other community colleges in the region. To recruit interview participants, we reached out to key programs in local community colleges (e.g., Puente, EOPS, TRiO, HSI initiatives, etc.) and posted recruitment flyers in libraries and local businesses.

Several limitations to this research should be considered. First, the data reflects three "pre-COVID" cohorts of high school graduates, the most recent data available to the research team during the project. Given the impact of the pandemic on college enrollment, patterns may differ for more recent high school graduate cohorts. Additionally, our survey yielded a small sample size (n=40 students) not fully representative of the Latinx/a/o population in the region. This may limit our understanding of the factors influential in college decisions for other Latinx/a/o students, such as those who are undocumented, male, student parents, foster youth, and adult learners. Furthermore, many lived in one community in Solano County, which may provide different perspectives from participants from other parts of the county.

Figure 2: Latinx/a/o College Enrollment Patterns of Counties
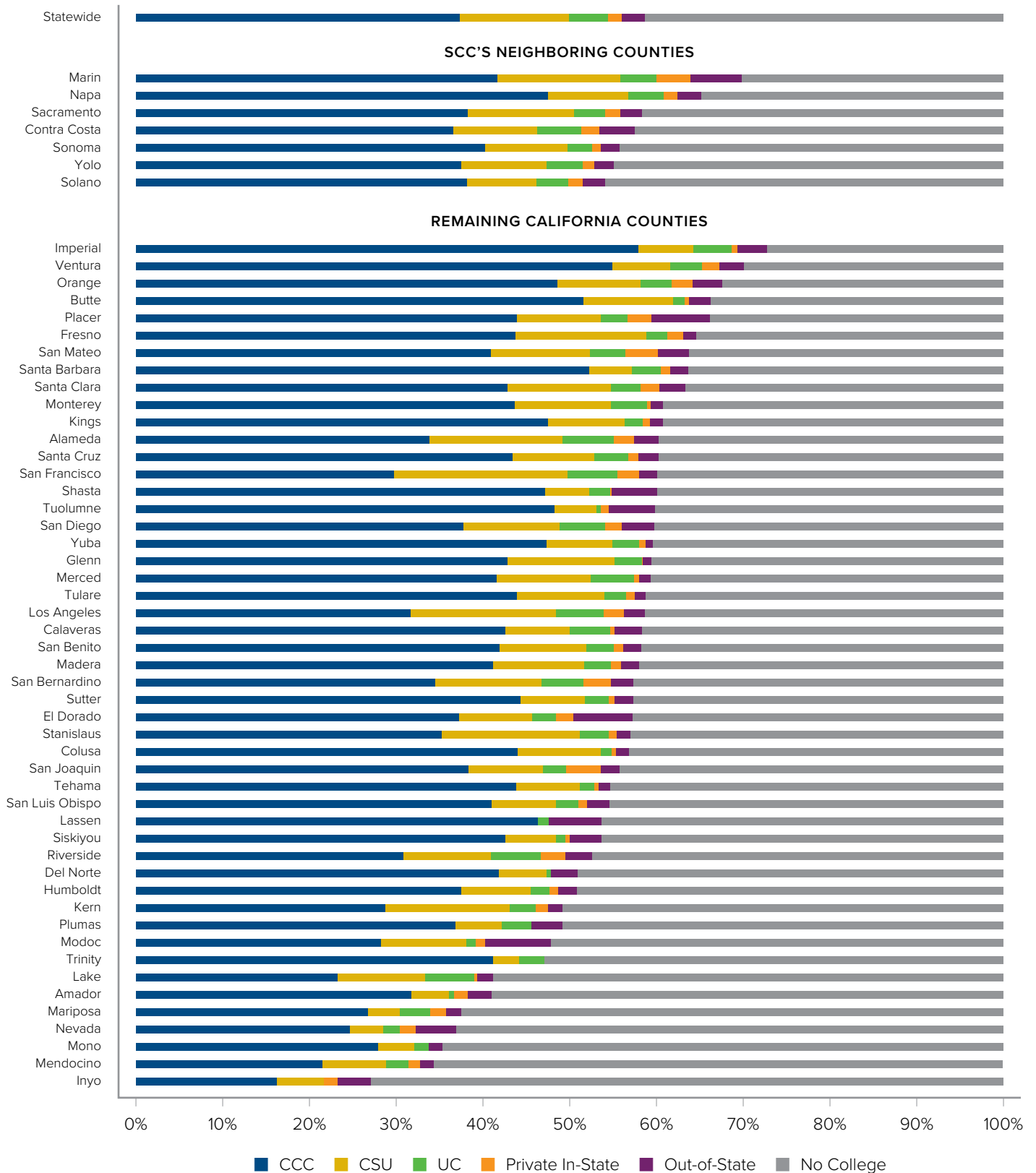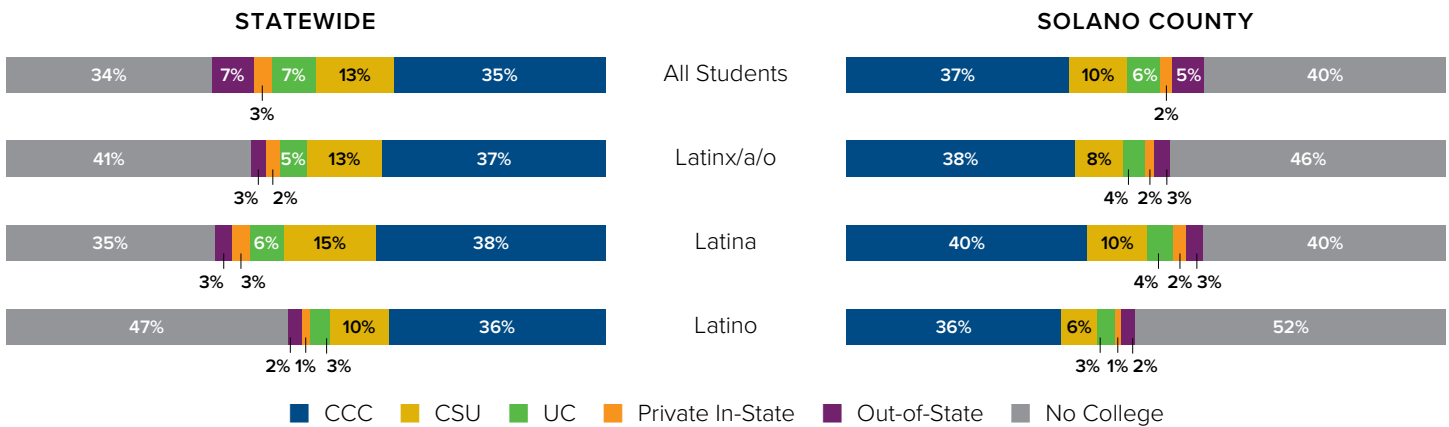

Note: College-going rates calculated by the authors from student-level college enrollment data (National Student Clearinghouse) provided by the CDE. Rates include three cohorts (2017, 2018, 2019) of public high school graduates, pooled. Alpine and Sierra County are not reported as the number of high school students within each category did not meet our minimum requirements for reporting.

Less Than Half of Latino Young Men Enrolled in College

Among Latinx/a/o students who graduated from high school in Solano County, females had higher college enrollment rates than males, mirroring statewide patterns.[15] In Solano County, only 48% of Latino males enroll in college following high school graduation, 12 percentage points lower than Latinas and five percentage points lower than the college enrollment rates of Latinos statewide (Figure 3). Latino males, who often face gendered expectations that may challenge the pursuit of a college degree, have among the lowest rates of college enrollment and degree attainment when compared to other racial/ethnic groups.[16]

Figure 3: College Enrollment Patterns of Latinx/a/o High School Students, by Gender
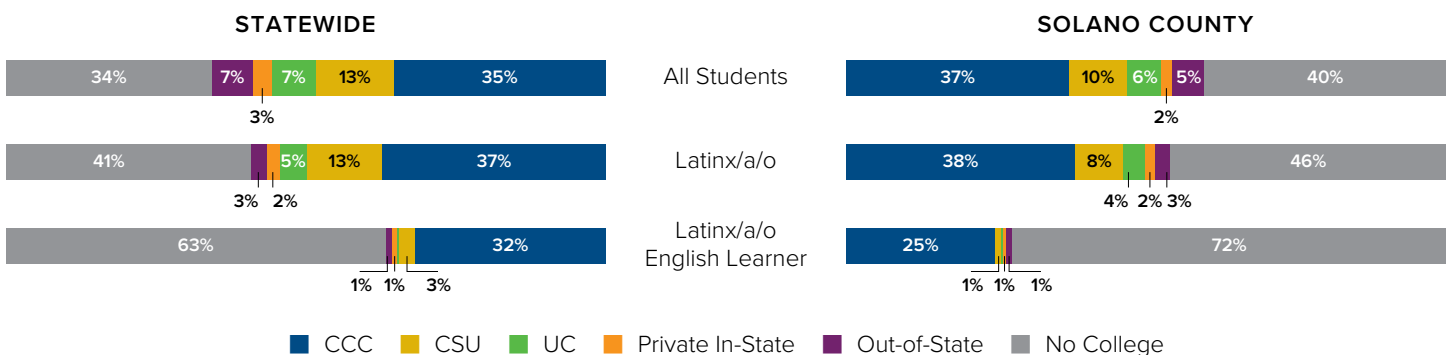

Note: College-going rates calculated by the authors from student-level college enrollment data (National Student Clearinghouse) provided by the CDE. Rates include three cohorts (2017, 2018, 2019) of public high school graduates, pooled.

A Quarter of Latinx/a/o English Learners Enrolled in College

Of the 37% English Learner (EL) Latinx/a/o college goers statewide and the 28% in Solano County, nearly all enrolled in a community college and few enrolled in a four-year institution (Figure 4). While research on college enrollment for ELs is limited, the percentage of ELs not attending college highlights the importance of understanding the factors that influence college-going decisions and institutional practices designed to increase access for these students.

Figure 4: College Enrollment Patterns of Latinx/a/o High School Students, by English Learner Status

Note: College-going rates calculated by the authors from student-level college enrollment data (National Student Clearinghouse) provided by the CDE. Rates include three cohorts (2017, 2018, 2019) of public high school graduates, pooled.

Deciding Factors: Latinx/a/o Students' Considerations in Choosing Community College

Majority of Latinx/a/o Students Attended a Nearby Community College

Research suggests that geography and proximity play an important role in Latinx/a/o students' college choice,[17] with students often enrolling in "nearby" colleges—those within 20 miles of home or work.[18] Latinx/a/o students' decisions to stay close to home when attending college are influenced by college affordability and family as a supportive factor.[19] The importance of proximity is evident among Latinx/a/o students who graduated from a public high school in Solano County and who attended a community college. The average commute was just 17 miles, with half of students commuting between six and 11 miles. Students in Solano County have access to multiple community colleges in neighboring counties and larger cities with easy access by freeway and public transit, including Napa Valley College, Diablo Valley College, Sacramento City College, Woodland Community College, and American River College. For 79% of Solano County Latinx/a/o high school graduates, SCC was the closest community college to the high school from which they graduated. Of these students, about 67% (n=846) chose to attend SCC, and about a third of students enrolled in another community college (Figure 5).

Less than 10% of Solano County Latinx/a/o high school students who attended a community college the year following graduation traveled more than 50 miles to college, and only 4% attended community colleges more than 100 miles away. For students who did not attend nearby community colleges, it is possible they enrolled in online classes, were willing to commute longer distances, and/or relocated to another region of the state.

Figure 5: Community Colleges Attended by Latinx/a/o High School Students in Solano County
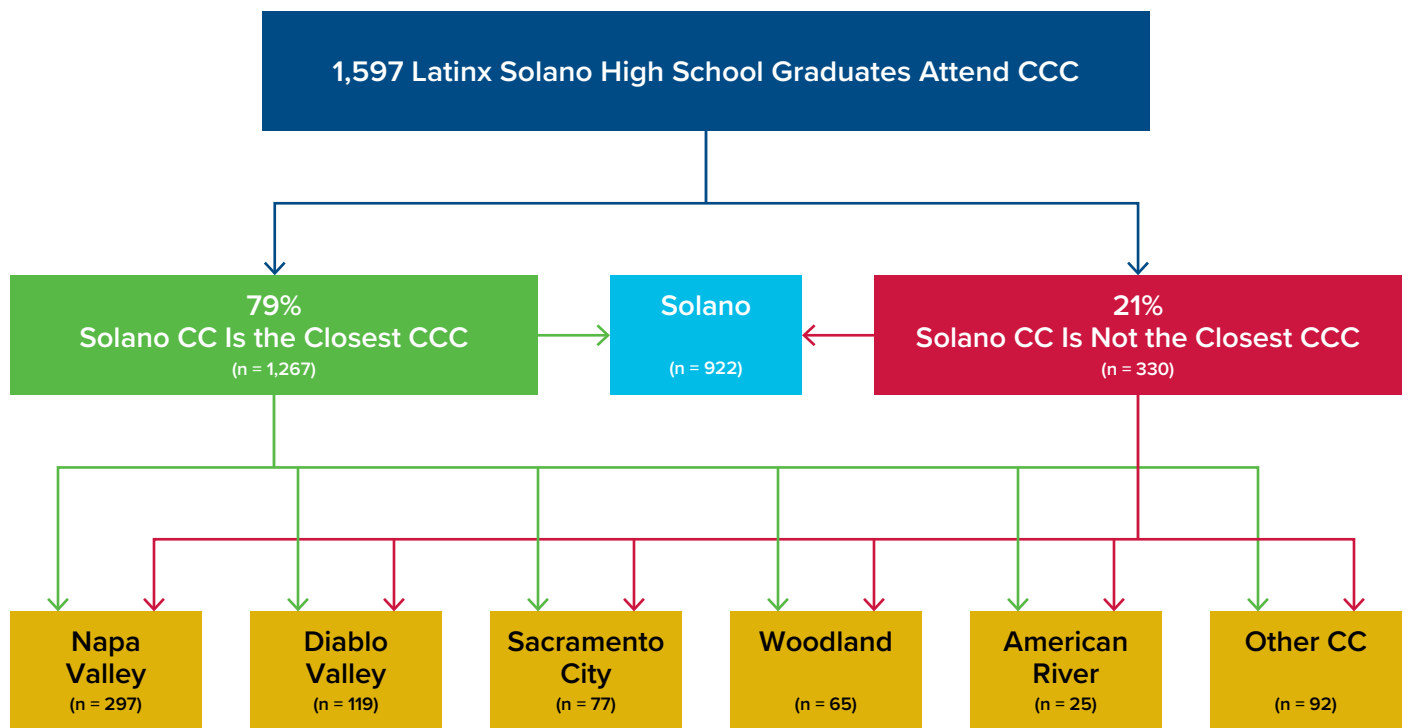
Note: Percentages calculated by the authors from student-level college enrollment data (National Student Clearinghouse) provided by the CDE. Rates include three cohorts (2017, 2018, 2019) of public high school graduates, pooled.

Student Perspectives: Emphasis on College Websites and Social Networks

Having limited access to college information in K-12 has been a significant barrier for Latinx/a/o students.[20] It is therefore important to understand what sources of information are most helpful for Latinx/a/o students when learning about college. Both survey responses and interviews affirmed the importance of information about a particular college in students' decision making. Moreover, many students may not be able to visit a college prior to applying or attending. For example, only six of the 19 students interviewed in this project had visited the campus they ultimately decided to attend. This demonstrates the strong impact that information gathered from other sources may have on students' perceptions of a college.

Nearly all survey participants (94%) indicated that high school counselors/staff were either "very important" or "somewhat important" in providing information about SCC (Figure 6). This sentiment was echoed in student interviews. Students who did not enroll in college immediately after high school graduation, however, had less access to information about colleges in the community as they were outside of the high school setting.

Survey respondents indicated that the second most helpful source of information was the college website, with 93% ranking it as "very important" and "somewhat important." In an interview, Joaquin,[21] who moved to Fairfield as an adult, said:

"I actually didn't hear anything about Solano. I didn't even know Solano had a community, like I knew there was a college here. At least we would always drive by the campus. I didn't know that it was a community college. And as I started researching more into the school, it seemed like a great fit because they pride themselves in diversity. I remember, like, on their website, they have, like, their land agreement website with the Native tribes here. So that was also a big plus for me to know that the school has at least the idea of representation in mind."

Figure 6: Most Helpful Sources of Information about Solano Community College
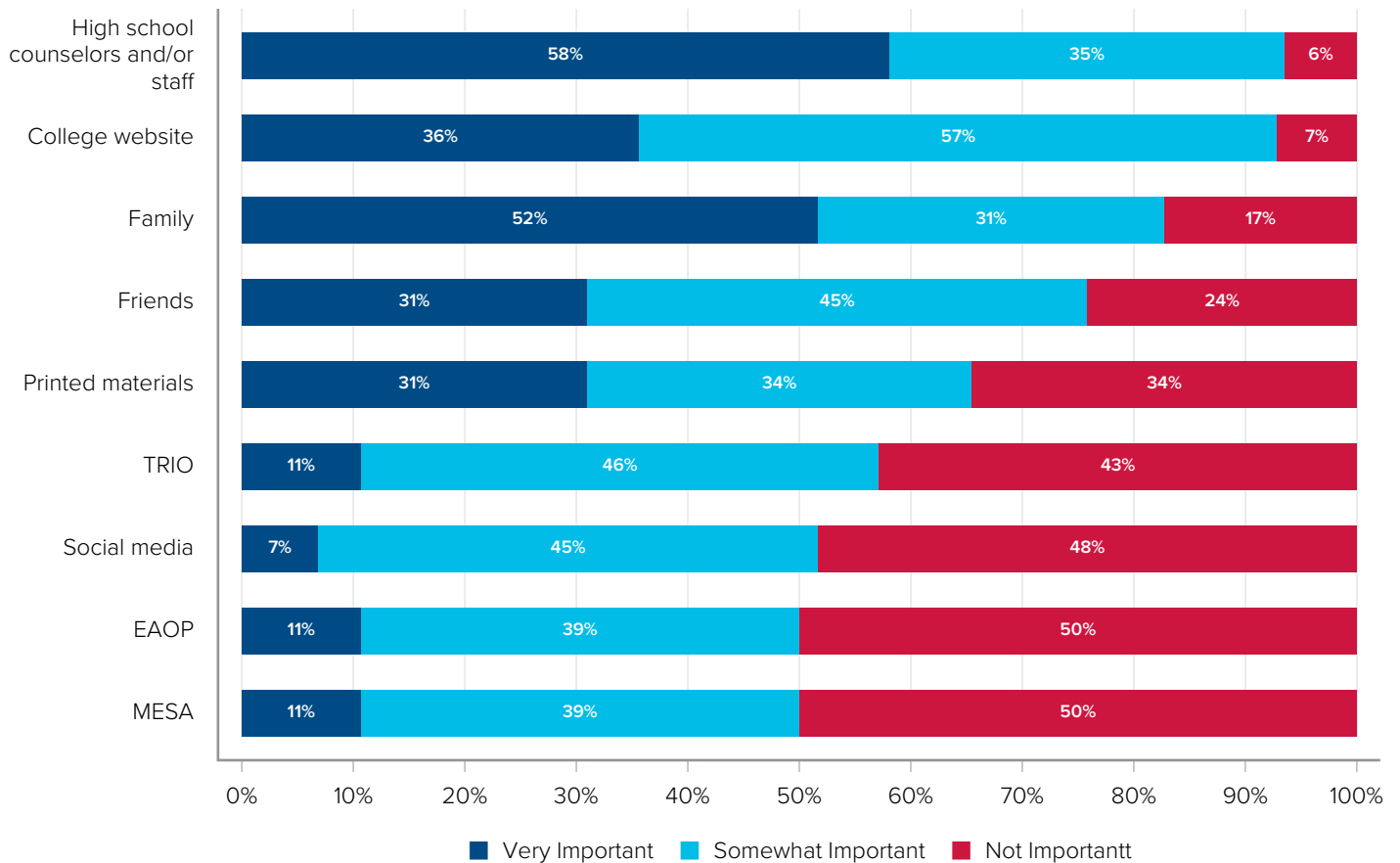
Note. Percentage reporting tabulated by authors from student survey responses (n=40).

A large majority of survey respondents (83%) indicated that family was a source of information about SCC, with about half (52%) ranking it "very important" and 31% as "somewhat important." Several interview participants highlighted families' role. Nancy, from Fairfield, attended a community college other than Solano despite its close proximity to home. She shared the important role that her brother played in her decision:

"Well, I kind of thought Solano or [other college]. But, since my brother was at [other college],²² he knew a couple programs that were there. It kind of set me up to kind of have an idea of where to go to find help or, like, what teachers to take, and then that gave me the opportunity to also share with my friends about stuff like that. They actually ended up going to [other college] with me."

Nancy's experience also highlights the role of friends in providing college information. She expressed that knowing about college allowed her to share this information with her friends. About three-quarters (76%) of survey participants ranked friends as an important source in obtaining information about the college.

Students also expressed the importance of personal connections to college personnel in their decisions. When reflecting on what influenced her, Denise, from Fairfield, shared her experiences when she connected with a staff member who supported her:

"… I think that influenced me a lot, making the decision where to go, because then, I met [staff member], he was, like, ok. Since I was like, 'I don't know how to. I don't even [know] how to say, that I didn't know how to even register or how to apply.' He just sat with me and started explaining."

Denise's description demonstrates the importance of having individuals who are willing to support and answer the questions Latinx/a/o students may have about college, especially critical if they are the first in their family to attend.
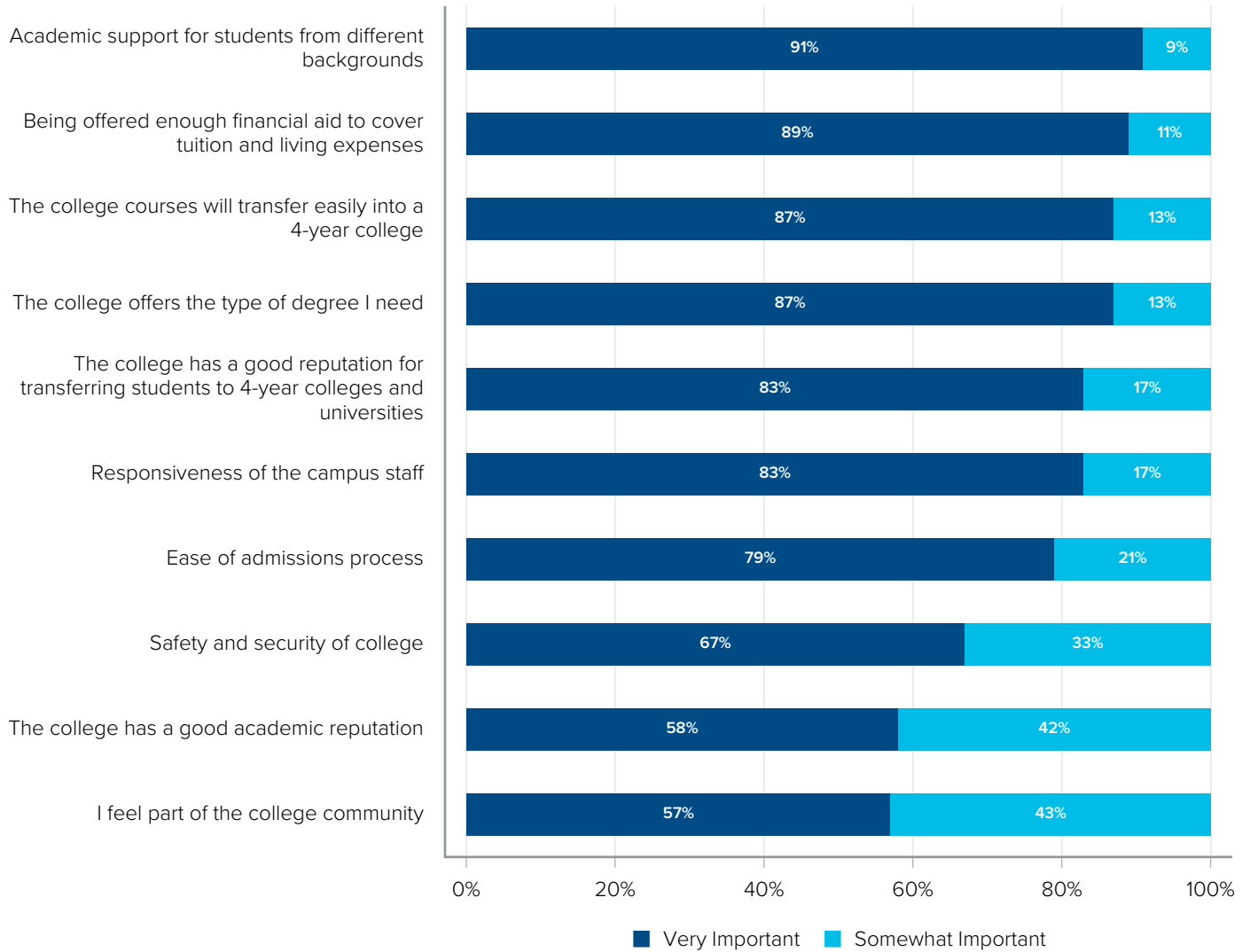
Asked how SCC could improve its outreach and recruitment of Latinx/a/o students, more than half of respondents (62%) indicated they would like the college to provide bilingual workshops for parents and families, highlighting once again the importance of family and also the importance of providing linguistically relevant information.

Students Considered Academic, Financial and Navigational Factors in College Decision-Making

Students also indicated that academic, financial, and navigational factors played a role in their decision (Figure 7). Nearly all survey respondents identified "academic support for students from different backgrounds" (91%) and "being offered enough financial aid to cover tuition and living expenses" (89%) as "very important" reasons for their decision of where to attend college. Academic factors, including knowing that college courses would easily transfer to 4-year institutions, were also important. Flexibility of college courses was particularly important as 80% of survey respondents indicated that knowing that the college provides a variety of course offerings (e.g., in-person, online, hybrid, etc.) would be helpful in their choice.

Other academic factors, such as the availability of specific degrees and the college having a strong reputation for transferring students to 4-year colleges and universities, were also important to students. Seventy percent of survey respondents indicated intentions to transfer to a 4-year university, which may explain the emphasis they placed on some of these factors. Students also identified factors related to ease of the application and admissions process and transitioning into the community college—including responsiveness of staff and feeling part of the community—as important to their decision-making.

Figure 7: Top 10 Reasons for Choosing a College

	Very Important	Somewhat Important
Academic support for students from different backgrounds	91%	9%
Being offered enough financial aid to cover tuition and living expenses	89%	11%
The college courses will transfer easily into a 4-year college	87%	13%
The college offers the type of degree I need	87%	13%
The college has a good reputation for transferring students to 4-year colleges and universities	83%	17%
Responsiveness of the campus staff	83%	17%
Ease of admissions process	79%	21%
Safety and security of college	67%	33%
The college has a good academic reputation	58%	42%
I feel part of the college community	57%	43%

Note. This figure includes only the top 10 reasons for choosing a particular college as reported by survey respondents (n= 40) from a list of 28 potential reasons. No respondents indicated "not important" for any of the top 10 reasons.

Considerations for Outreach and Recruitment of Latinx/a/o Students

Collectively, findings from this research collaboration offer several recommendations – for SCC and potentially other community colleges – to improve outreach and recruitment of Latinx/a/o students:

1. Be intentional and consistent in conducting outreach to potential students who have already graduated from high school.

Because they play a critical role in supporting the social and economic mobility of historically underserved students,[23] community colleges should be intentional and consistent in their outreach and recruitment to students who would not otherwise go to college. Analysis of college-going patterns indicate that a substantial population of Latinx/a/o students do not enroll in college following high school. Particularly low enrollment rates among Latino males and English Learners reveal opportunities for targeted outreach and recruitment. While high schools are unquestionably an important setting, survey and interview data indicate that outreach and recruitment should also elevate the college presence in the community and at community-based events. Evidence suggests that Latinx/a/o

students rely heavily on information from their friends and family, as well as personal connections with college personnel. An enhanced community presence will ensure that college information is widely available—to potential students, their family members and their peers—and facilitate connections between college personnel and potential students. To attract and serve Latinx/a/o students, events should cater to the Latinx/a/o community.

While our study is limited to understanding the specific experiences of Latinx/a/o students, community colleges should also enhance outreach and recruitment for other underserved racial/ethnic subgroups. Additionally, colleges should consider the intersecting identities of students in their outreach and recruitment efforts. For example, student parents attending community colleges, 48% of whom are Latinx/a/o,[24] are less likely to complete a degree or certificate compared to their non-parenting peers.[25, 26, 27] Similarly, foster youth, who are majority Latinx/a/o in California, are less likely to attend college than their peers.[28] Furthermore, undocumented Latinx/a/o students also face particular challenges, such as financial barriers and inability to gain lawful employment, that influence their participation in higher education.[29]

2. Ensure college websites and marketing/advising efforts embody factors important for Latinx/a/o students in their college decision.

Students report that college websites serve as a critical source of information for prospective students. As such, colleges should ensure that their websites provide comprehensive information about the primary factors in students' decision-making—academic programming, financial aid, student supports—and vivid descriptions of what it feels like to be a part of the college community. Some research participants recommended SCC advertise academic programs and resources more prominently, including sharing information about educational pathways and their connection to the local labor market, as well as messaging that students can work and go to school. Others suggested more instances in which Latinx/a/o students can see themselves represented on campus, through descriptions of specific programs to support them on campus (e.g., Puente, EOPS, undocumented student services, etc.) and enabling them to hear students' experiences and learn about college resources through student panels. While the specific recommendations from research participants were directed at SCC, the broader takeaways apply to community colleges statewide.

3. Build community partnerships and increase institutional capacity through intra-campus collaborations to enhance outreach/recruitment.

Partnerships with local schools and the broader community are essential in connecting students to college experiences. Interview participants suggested providing a college fair on campus that is open to the public, creating pop-up events at farmer's markets and libraries, and publicizing campus events (e.g., transfer fairs) to the community. This includes building partnerships with community leaders, teachers/counselors at the local high schools, and students/parents through dual enrollment opportunities.

Institutional capacity for effective outreach and recruitment does not have to be a stand-alone effort. These activities can be connected with other campus initiatives (e.g., social justice efforts and ethnic studies courses) that align with increased awareness of and advocacy for underserved communities. Community colleges may also consider exploring Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) status as a resource to enhance capacities to serve the Latinx/a/o community; step one is to establish an HSI task force that includes internal (staff, faculty, and students) and external (alumni, community leaders) stakeholders to guide possible initiatives. For community colleges that are HSIs, informing the campus and community about the designation is also important, as it signals a commitment to serving Latinx/a/o students. In turn, HSIs may apply for Title V funding to support outreach and recruitment efforts.

Solano Community College leverages research to enhance and improve outreach and recruitment

As this research collaboration progressed, findings were shared with college leaders and stakeholders throughout the process and in a culminating presentation. Findings were well received and spurred conversations about areas for growth at SCC. College leaders report that the research has been integral in their strategic planning and efforts to provide equitable access to college in the community. Specifically, the following efforts have resulted directly from the work of the research partnership:

- Hired full-time, bilingual/bicultural outreach staff to better serve the Latinx/a/o students and their families.
- Hired local media company to provide materials in Spanish and increase SCC's presence in Spanish language publications.
- Requested greater participation in events with local high school districts serving Latinx/a/o students and their families.
- Hired a full-time Director of Basic Needs to partner with outreach and DACA Center staff.
- Focused outreach efforts on the 40% of students in the service area who have not enrolled in any college, with intent to further explore where these potential students are, what they are doing, and encourage them to take a class.
- Reviewed DACA Center capacity to reach out to those who are not currently enrolled.
- Addressed gaps and duplication of information within programs and services; identified a single point of contact for students to gather information and receive recommended services.
- Promoted Ethnic Studies classes as 21st century essential skills.
- Retained a researcher to work with outreach staff to better connect with and serve Latinx/a/o students and their families.
- Highlighted state recognition of SCC's Latinx/a/o students' English course completion rate.

Acknowledgments

Endnotes

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8   Linden et al., 2022

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11 Moore & Reddy (2022)

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13 American Community Survey. (2019). American community survey (ACS). U. S. Census Bureau. data.census.gov/table?q=DP05&g=0500000US06095&tid=ACSDP5Y2019.DP05

14 These numbers reflect pre-COVID enrollment numbers during Fall 2019 and are obtained from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Management Information Systems Data Mart. datamart.cccco.edu/Students/Student_Headcount_Term_Annual.aspx

15 We use binary gender indicators when describing findings from the quantitative research as the administrative data we leverage includes only a binary indicator. This limitation stems from historic and current data collection practices in statewide K-12 enrollment data. When reporting qualitative findings, we use Latino and Latina to describe participants as most students self-identified as male or female. The number of respondents self-identifying as transgender/non-binary did not meet our minimum requirements for reporting.

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21 To protect the confidentiality of research participants, all names used in this brief are pseudonyms.

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