

# Improving Access to Financial Aid for Low Income Students By Increasing FAFSA Completion in the University of Hawai'i System

2015-16 Cohort, President's Emerging Leaders Program

Jacqueline Honda, Siddartha Savara, Kiana Shiroma

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## Abstract

Our President's Emerging Leaders Program (PELP) group decided on the topic of Equity. The group members felt that equity could be defined as equal opportunities to attend college. We know that many students do not complete college because they cannot afford to. After seeing UH System's Vice President, Risa Dickson's October 2015 presentation to the BOR, where she asked, "Given the link between Pell and graduation, how do we increase the number of students who complete the FAFSA?," we decided this topic was of great interest to our group and designed research questions around finding out the barriers to financial aid access across the UH system. Our work included interviewing individual UH campuses, surveying students and interviewing individual students to better understand the barriers to completing the FAFSA.

## Introduction

### Equity: Emphasizing Equal Opportunity for Low-Income Students

The purpose of the University of Hawai'i System (2016b) is to:

Provide all qualified people in Hawai'i with equal opportunity for high quality college and university education and training.

Last year, students in Hawai'i missed out on \$10.4 million in federal financial aid. Approximately 45% of high school students in Hawai'i do not complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (Gill, 2016).

UH Manoa and UH West Oahu Leaver's Surveys show that one of the main reasons students do not complete their education is due to financial reasons. We explored whether students were applying for and receiving the financial aid they need to continue their higher education and graduate, and if not, what the barriers are.

Our focus is on equity for low-income students and providing equal opportunity for them to attend and complete their education in the University of Hawai'i System.

### Barriers For Financial Aid Studied

Our primary research question was understanding the barriers to FAFSA completion. We researched the different phases in FAFSA completion and the reasons for non-submission at each phase.

In addition, we wanted to see if we could identify common best practices across campuses or unique strategies a subset of campuses were using that other campuses could benefit from.

Finally, from a student perspective, we wanted to learn what their reasons were for not completing the FAFSA, what they found most effective and whether there were common myths or misconceptions.

## Background/UH Strategic Initiatives

### University of Hawai'i Strategic Directions and the Hawai'i Graduation Initiative (HGI)

As part of the University of Hawai'i Strategic Directions for 2015-2021 (2016a), the Hawai'i Graduation Initiative (HGI) specifically states as a goal for the system to:

**Increase the educational capital of the state by increasing the participation and completion of students, particularly Native Hawaiians, low-income students and those from underserved regions and populations and preparing them for success in the workforce and their communities.**

Broad strategies outlined in the Hawai'i Graduation Initiative include:

#### HGI Action Strategy 1: Strengthen pipeline to improve college readiness and attendance

Strengthen the pipeline from K-12 to the university to improve college readiness and increase college attendance.

- Institutionalize early college and “bridge” programs
- Expand outreach services and support to facilitate the completion of college admissions and financial aid applications

#### HGI Action Strategy 2: Structural Improvements That Promote Timely Degree Completion

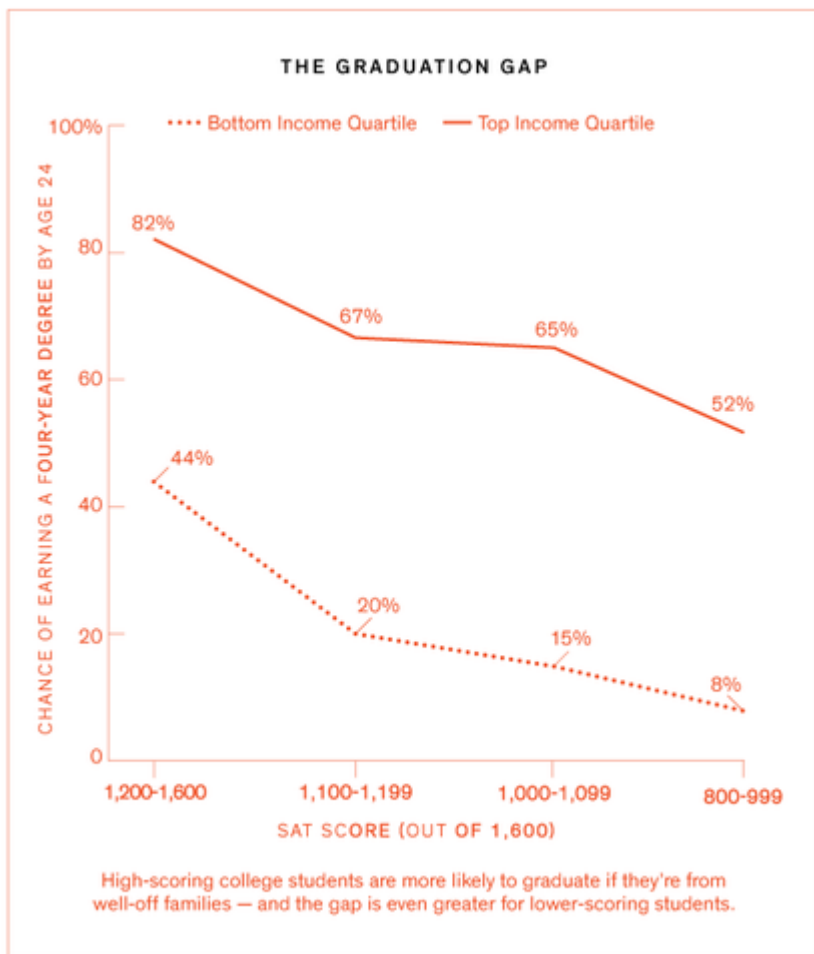
Implement structural improvements that promote persistence to attain a degree and timely completion.

- Reduce gaps in college completion for Native Hawaiians, low-income and underrepresented groups. Strengthen and align financial aid resources, policies and practices for increased access and completion.

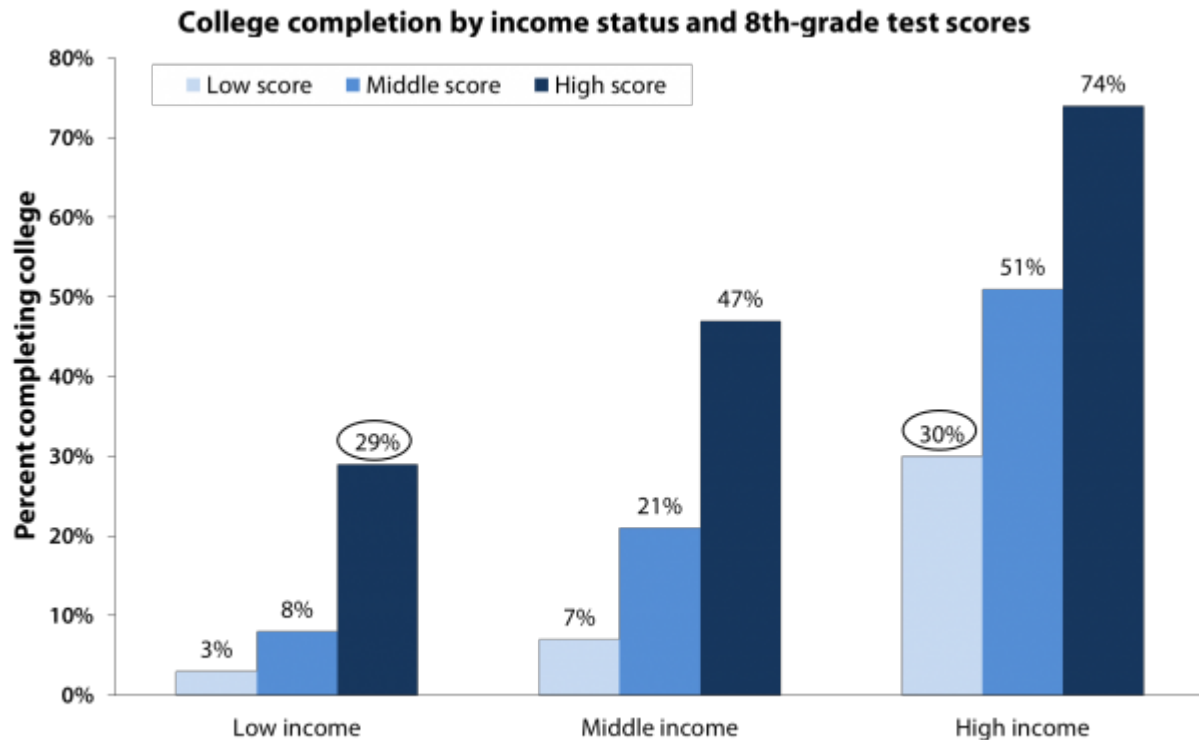
While not directly a focus of our study, some of our findings will reflect whether these strategies have been implemented successfully.

## Comparing Graduation Rates of Low-Income Vs. High-Income Students

According to Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeff Strohl in *Rewarding Strivers* (2010), the top income quintile students scoring below-average in SATs (800-999) graduate at a 52% rate, compared with 44% for bottom income quintile students scoring the highest SAT scores between 1200-1600.



These findings mirror research by Fox, Connolly and Snyder (2005), which shows that students in the top 25% of income and bottom third of test scores graduated college at a higher rate at 30% than those in the bottom 25% of income and the top third of test scores at 29%.



**Note:** Low income is defined as the bottom 25%, middle income is middle 50%, and high income is top 25%.

**Source:** Author's analysis of Fox, Connolly, and Snyder (2005)

Gould (2012).

By viewing test scores as an indicator of academic ability, students from lower income socioeconomic households graduate from college at far lower rates than students from higher socioeconomic households with similar academic abilities.

However, the disheartening lesson from the statistics is that students of superior academic ability, if they come from a lower-income household, are less likely to graduate college than students with poor or average academic ability, that come from a higher-income household.

These statistics indicate that a gap in financial assistance may be the reason for lack of college completion. This data corroborates with the results of the leaver surveys previously cited that financial reasons contribute to students not completing their degrees.

## FAFSA Completion Among Students Qualifying for Pell Grants in the State of Hawai'i

Simons and Helhoski (2016) estimated the number of graduating seniors who could have been eligible for a Pell Grant if they had filled out a FAFSA, but did not. The study assumed the rate

of Pell-eligible recipients is the same for students who didn't complete the FAFSA as for students who did. For Hawaii graduating seniors, 45% of nearly 6,000 students did not complete a FAFSA. Nerdwallet estimated that 2,847 would have been eligible, with an average award of \$3,624 based on the students who were awarded Pell Grants.

Congressman Mark Takai (2015) referenced the same statistic- 45% of high school students do not complete their FAFSA - in an email newsletter on March 4, 2016, inviting parents and students to four financial aid workshops.

## The Role of Eligibility Information vs. Assistance in FAFSA Completion

Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, and Sanbonmatsu (2009) studied the effects of two strategies to help families complete their FAFSA. They found that providing families with information only about their eligibility and options resulted in substantially worse completion than providing families with information and assistance in completing the FAFSA. From the abstract:

H&R Block tax professionals helped low- to moderate-income families complete the FAFSA, the federal application for financial aid.

Families were then given an estimate of their eligibility for government aid as well as information about local postsecondary options.

A second randomly-chosen group of individuals received only personalized aid eligibility information but did not receive help completing the FAFSA.

Comparing the outcomes of participants in the treatment groups to a control group using multiple sources of administrative data, the analysis suggests that individuals who received assistance with the FAFSA **and** information about aid were substantially more likely to submit the aid application, enroll in college the following fall, and receive more financial aid.

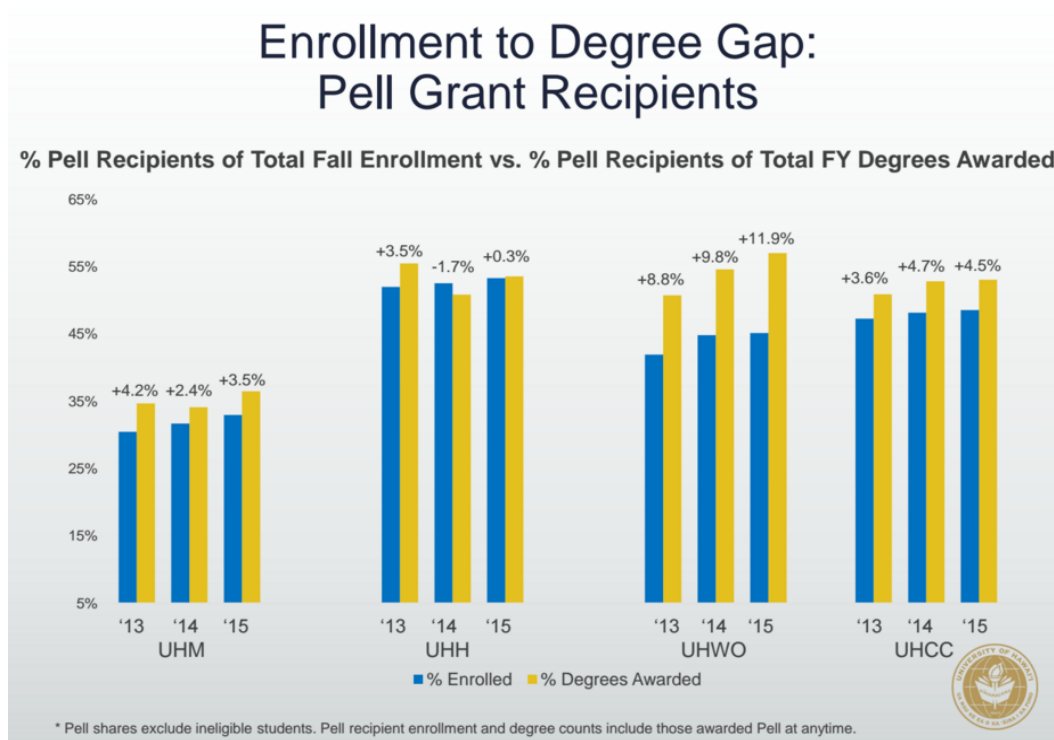
These results suggest that simplification and providing information could be effective ways to improve college access. However, only providing aid eligibility information **without** also giving assistance with the form had no significant effect on FAFSA submission rates.

## Equity in Education

A look at Pell Grant Recipients across campuses, shows that less than 30% of students at UH Manoa received Pell Grants, while nearly 50% of students at Hilo received Pell Grants, and less than 45% of students at UH West Oahu received Pell Grants. The chart below indicates that students who did receive Pell Grants were positively correlated with degree completion.



Therefore, if more students filled out the FAFSA and were eligible to receive Pell Grants, degree completion could increase.



## Methodology

We conducted individual interviews with representatives from Financial Aid Offices and students from across the UH System, as well as with P20. We also surveyed students within the UH System with an online survey.

### Interviews with Offices Across System and P20

For the one-on-one interviews, we met with someone from every campus in the system. This included offices on every island and a variety of institutions from community colleges to four-year campuses. The interviewees were all well versed in financial aid on their respective campuses.

We spoke with representatives from:

- UH-Manoa
- UH-West Oahu
- Hawai'i Community College
- Honolulu Community College
- Kapi'olani Community College
- Kaua'i Community College
- Leeward Community College
- Maui College
- Windward Community College
- P20

We asked them a variety of questions, centered around:

- What strategies were currently used to encourage students to apply for financial aid and how successful did they feel each one was?
- Were students taking full advantage of financial aid available to them?
- What were common reasons students did not fill out their FAFSA?
- Were there any common themes, myths or misconceptions students had about FAFSA/Financial Aid?

Interviews were conducted in person, on the phone and via email. We learned the common strategies and challenges faced by the campuses. In addition, we learned that campuses had unique situations based on their student population and the community they served. Follow up questions were asked and results documented.

## Interviews with Students

We met with students at the Manoa and Windward campuses. Interviews conducted with students centered around their individual experience with financial aid and FAFSA, and what kind of experiences they had with STAR and scholarships.

Follow-up questions were asked based on the students' responses, focusing on finding out what kind of knowledge they had about financial aid and FAFSA, what struggles they had, who specifically was most helpful and what parts of the process were easy or difficult. Follow-ups also encouraged more detail about other specific types of financial aid - loans, grants and working on campus.

## Online Student Survey Across the UH System

A survey was sent out across the entire system. We received nearly 2000 responses. We asked questions to gauge the students' understanding and opinions of the financial aid process. The full survey instrument and analysis can be found in the appendix.

## Results

### Interviews-System-Wide Financial Aid Offices

We reached out to individuals at every campus in the system. We received responses from and interviewed members from each island. Every campus in the system was represented.

Strategies being used on campus, in community, and main challenges are summarized below:

Table 1 - Strategies and Challenges

Campus	Campus Strategies	Community Strategies	Main Challenges Noted
Hilo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One-on-One</li> <li>Email</li> <li>Banners/Flyers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>College Goal 808</li> <li>PACFAA Workshops</li> <li>Workshop w/ HS Counselors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Application Difficult</li> <li>Eligibility Misconceptions</li> <li>Staffing for more outreach</li> </ul>
Manoa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Email</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>College Goal 808</li> <li>PACFAA Workshops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lacking/Timely Tax Info</li> <li>Don't Want Loans</li> <li>Parental Involvement</li> <li>Staffing vs Demand</li> </ul>
West Oahu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One-on-One</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PACFAA Workshops</li> <li>Workshops with accounting students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lacking/Timely Tax Info</li> <li>Don't Want Loans</li> <li>Eligibility Misconceptions</li> </ul>
Honolulu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One-on-One</li> <li>FAFSA Workshops</li> <li>Scholarship Workshops</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verification</li> <li>Application Difficult</li> <li>Eligibility Misconceptions</li> <li>Don't Know Not Just Tuition</li> <li>Not Checking Email</li> <li>Financial Aid Info siloed</li> </ul>
Kapiolani	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1-Stop Student Center</li> <li><i>Financial Aid Lab</i> Pilot</li> <li>FinAid In NSO</li> <li>Reminders</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verification</li> <li>Application Difficult</li> <li>Eligibility Misconceptions</li> <li>Don't Know Not Just Tuition</li> <li>Stigma with Financial Aid</li> <li>Don't Want Loans</li> </ul>
Windward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One-on-One</li> <li>TRIO Program</li> <li>Hulili Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TRIO at High Schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verification</li> <li>Lacking/Timely Tax Info</li> </ul>
Leeward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One-on-One</li> <li>Outreach</li> <li>FAFSA Workshops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>College Goal 808</li> <li>PACFAA Workshops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eligibility Misconceptions</li> <li>Lacking/Timely Tax Info</li> </ul>
Maui	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One-on-One</li> <li>TRIO Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PACFAA Workshops</li> <li>TRIO at High Schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Application Difficult</li> <li>Eligibility Misconceptions</li> <li>Not Checking Email</li> <li>Staffing vs. Demand</li> <li>Re-applying Yearly</li> </ul>
Kauai	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One-on-One</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>College Goal 808</li> <li>PACFAA Workshops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verification</li> <li>Not Checking Email</li> <li>Eligibility Affects Retention</li> <li>Need For Role Models</li> </ul>
Hawai'i	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Joint Workshops</li> <li>Peer Mentors</li> <li>Holistic Approach to FinAid and Enrollment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>College Goal 808</li> <li>PACFAA Workshops</li> <li>GearUp Peer Mentors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verification</li> <li>Application Difficult</li> <li>Not Checking Email (&amp; Mail)</li> <li>Stigma With Financial Aid</li> <li>Admission vs. Enrollment</li> </ul>
P20		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PACFAA Workshops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Re-applying Yearly</li> <li>Work study \$ Unused</li> <li>Completing The FAFSA</li> </ul>

## Campus Strategies

The most common on-campus strategies reported included:

- Sending emails and reminders to students.
- Posting banners and flyers on campus.
- Providing one-on-one advising, both walk-in and by appointment.
- Organizing a variety of workshops: FAFSA Specific, Scholarship Workshops, and Financial Aid embedded in other workshops such as New Student Orientation.
- Additional programs that provided on campus services supporting Financial Aid included TRIO and Hulili.

Less common on-campus strategies included:

- “Financial Aid Lab” to provide students with a place to get help specifically with FAFSA. This pilot program aims to provide more targeted resources for financial aid when students are applying for financial aid.

## Community Strategies

Common community strategies reported included:

- Community Workshops. A variety of workshops in conjunction with PACFAA (Pacific Financial Aid Association), College Goal 808, TRIO and Gear Up. It was reported that the best turnout appeared to be workshops held when the whole family was available such as on evenings and weekends, and at high schools in the community where the students are. TRIO goes into high schools during the day and was reported to be very successful.

Less common community strategies included:

- Workshops with High School counselors to prepare them to speak with high school students
- Including professors and accounting students in community workshops to assist with filling out FAFSA
- Partnering with peer mentors who go to high schools directly and work one-on-one with students. These peer mentors assist with applications as well as financial aid.

## Challenges Reported

Common challenges reported were:

- Misconceptions about eligibility. The most common concern reported was that many students thought they would not be eligible, or did not realize what was taken into account for eligibility.
- Application was difficult. The second most consistent challenge reported was that students found the application overwhelming, or difficult to fill out. It was noted this was more pronounced amongst first-generation students.

- Verifications not completed. The third most consistent challenge reported was students had many challenges with verification, such as confusing it with rejection, or not realizing additional steps were needed.
- Lack of response via email and web notifications. It was commonly reported that students were not checking email, were confused by emails they received or did not know how to check email. Similar challenges were noted regarding web notifications in the online student system.
- Timely tax information not available. Reasons varied from parents not doing their taxes, to parents not being in the picture to provide tax information, to parents having but not wanting to provide the tax information.

Less common challenges that were reported included:

- Not knowing what financial aid could be used for. Some campuses reported students did not realize financial aid was not just for tuition, but could also be used for living expenses and books.
- Stigma of financial aid. There were misconceptions reported that some students felt financial aid had a stigma of welfare, that some students felt there was a stigma associated with being poor and that some students felt a sense of pride prevented them from applying for financial aid, a sense that they should pay for school on their own.
- Staffing vs demand. Additional staff would be helpful for one-on-one advising, additional community workshops and more outreach to students. It was consistently reported that staffing was a constraining factor.

## Misconceptions Reported by Financial Aid Offices

Table 2 - Common Misconceptions and Reality

Misconception	Actual
I am not eligible. Reasons: my parent's income, VA, I have already paid tuition this semester.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students may be eligible based on a combination of income, total college expenses (not just tuition) as well as number of children in college, family size.</li> <li>In addition, rules change. Students are eligible now to use both VA as well as financial aid.</li> <li>Just because you paid tuition and fees, doesn't mean you no longer qualify. You can apply even after paying for your tuition</li> </ul>
I was not eligible before, so I will not be eligible in the future. Or, I was granted aid before, so I am done with FAFSA.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students must re-apply every year and eligibility is re-assessed every year.</li> <li>As the students' financial situation changes, they may qualify where they did not in the past.</li> </ul>
Once I submit the FAFSA, I'm done.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students need to be aware that further actions may be required such as Verification.</li> <li>A related misconception is when students are admitted but have some kind of outstanding issue with financial aid, they continue with their classes but leave it unresolved. They need to see the financial office to get it resolved, or they may end up with a hold that impacts their education and prevent registration the next semester.</li> </ul>
If I accept financial aid, it means my family is poor. It is welfare/an entitlement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is no stigma with financial aid. Part of this may stem from in other countries you don't have to apply for FAFSA or financial aid - other countries the higher ed is just free.</li> </ul>
Financial aid is only for tuition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Financial aid can be used for books, fees, tuition and also living expenses</li> </ul>
Financial aid is a separate thing I take care of.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Financial aid is part of the bigger picture which includes admissions and enrollment.</li> <li>Students need to apply for admission to the campus where you will be receiving aid. Due to federal regulations, certain information cannot be shared across campuses so students must keep this in mind for financial aid and admission.</li> </ul>
It costs money to apply	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Applying is free</li> </ul>

## Student Interview Results

We conducted four interviews with students who completed the financial aid process. The interviewees received varying amounts of Pell Grants, loans and other scholarships.

Much of the feedback we received mirrored the results of the interviews with the campus offices.

- The FAFSA process was difficult and took longer than they expected
- Workshops were helpful, but the most helpful was one-on-one advising and speaking with someone. This included the Hulili program and financial aid offices.
- One student reported that if not for their financial aid, they would not be attending school
- Getting tax information from the parents was one concern noted
- One student noted that getting help from their counselor in high school helped them to complete scholarship applications and earn scholarships
- There was a general concern about understanding the financial process. One student noted being scared and embarrassed to ask
- One student noted that it would be nice to have better reminders to know when different things were due.

## System-wide Student Survey Results

- **Income.** 70% reported household incomes of less than \$50,000 a year. 90% of students with household incomes under \$50,000 received financial aid. Students in the lowest income bracket were the most likely to stop out of college.
- **Working.** 33% percent reported working on campus while 45% said they work off campus. Around 30% said they do not work at all.
- **Financial Aid Importance.** 90% said that financial aid was very important to them when applying to college. 76% said financial aid was very important when deciding whether or not to enroll.
- **Financial Aid Difficulty.** Those who said they experienced financial difficulty reported the reasons for their situation: 64% said their family could not contribute enough and near 50% said their financial situation worsened. Another 1/3 reported that they did not qualify for financial aid and so experienced financial difficulty. 1/4 of students said they stopped out of school because of financial difficulty.
- **Cost of College.** More than 1/2 of students reported the cost of college was higher than anticipated.
- **Difficulty filling out the FAFSA.** 30% said it was not difficult at all to fill out the FAFSA form. 35% it was somewhat difficult. Only 5% said it was very difficult.
- **Taxes.** When applying for financial aid, 47% said they used their parents taxes for the FAFSA form and 53% used their own taxes. 30% reported that it was not difficult at all to file their taxes or their parents' taxes. 35% found it somewhat difficult. Only 10% found it very difficult to file their taxes.
- **Process.** The majority who did not apply for financial aid thought that they didn't qualify. A little over 1/3 did not apply because they did not understand the process. Another 20% said it was too difficult a process while another 20% missed the deadline.



- **Financial aid barriers.** The majority of students said that tax preparation was a barrier although only a third found this to be difficult. Half of the students reported that parental income information was a barrier. Being dependent to their parents was a barrier for 30%.
- **Assistance.** Near 1/2 said they received help from the Financial Aid office, 1/4 from financial aid workshops and 19% from their high school counselor. 33% reported receiving help from other sources (open-ended responses).

## Discussion

### What Is Being Done Now And How Effective Is It?

Here are some common approaches being used now, and their reported effectiveness from the campus financial offices perspective **specifically with regards to completion of FAFSA:**

- **Web-based FAFSA calculators. Not Effective.** All campuses have a web-based calculator available on their website. Consistently, they reported that the calculators were confusing for students and parents alike and they did not feel it was an effective strategy for increasing FAFSA completion. It was noted however that it was a requirement to have such a calculator available.
- **Online Notifications: Emails and Information on Student Information System when they log in. Low Effort for Staff, Low Effectiveness.** Campuses consistently reported sending some kind of follow up emails, specifically for cases such as students who filed incomplete FAFSAs, students who need to reapply, students selected for verification. Consistently, they reported a concern that students either 1) do not check their email regularly or 2) do not know what to do once they receive the email. The consensus reported was that they continue to use this tool though it is not very effective.
- **One-on-one counseling with students and/or parents. Most Effective.** Campuses consistently reported that the one-on-one advising was most effective, but the challenges noted were that not everyone comes in for one-on-one advising, and if many students did come in then staff available would be the scarce resource. Campuses also reported that parents were welcome to come with the student, though many students did not know that.
- **Financial Workshops on Campus and In Community. Highly Effective.** Held on Weekday Evenings and Weekends when parents are available to attend as well. Larger Workshops on Campus where Finances is one subject covered along with enrollment, admissions is also Highly Effective. Held on Saturdays, or in conjunction with new student orientation. Timing is at the beginning of the year (January/February). March is the Priority Deadline so try to get them before that, This works well for those who come in - but not everyone comes in. Next year, some campuses trying an April/May

workshop as well because by then most people should have filed their taxes. Before they get here – the Pacific Association for Financial Aid Administrators-College Goal 808 goes out and helps students do the FAFSA.

## Effectiveness of Distributions

It was consistently reported that Pell Grants specifically are not all being utilized, because students are not applying for financial aid. The financial aid officers felt that campus-specific aid was being utilized. If one student did not receive the aid a different student would, and in rare cases when all aid was not expended, the money would roll over to the next year to be used.

## Recommendations

Based on the interviews we conducted with financial aid offices, students and the survey, our recommendations are:

- **Continue and expand community workshops and community outreach.** Community workshops and mentorship in the community were consistently reported as being highly effective strategies, and staffing was the limiting constraint. These workshops often take place on evenings and weekends when families are available and are done in addition to normal business hours maintained by staff. Campuses also reported getting requests each year from high school counselors, community based organizations and such to provide staff to do financial aid presentations. However, with the staff available offices cannot say yes to everyone who asks, let alone actively seeking out opportunities to educate the community on financial aid.
- **Related to the above: Community assistance for tax return completion.** There is a huge need in the community to help with the tax return before filling out the FAFSA. Probably more assistance with tax prep would be helpful, but now that the FAFSA has changed, the income tax info might not be as important.
- **Ensure financial aid is addressed as early as possible (such as in high school).** FAFSA completion strategies should be intrusive. Learning about college and financial aid should be part of the high school curriculum.
- **Provide resources to walk people through the FAFSA.** Many of the concerns came down to needing more resources for one-on-one advising and walking parents/students through the process. Some examples include initial FAFSA completion, assisting with verification, and getting current students to re-apply early. Additionally, when students ask their friends or family for help vs financial aid staff it causes misconceptions to spread - do not want them to just ask their friends.

- **Less reliance on email (unless able to somehow improve the response to email).**  
Currently the scalable solution used for many communications, including reminders, is either email or in some cases physical mail, but it was consistently reported that there is not good response from emails. It is possible that this is further complicated due to income, as it was anecdotally reported that many lower income students were not as familiar with email.

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# Appendices

Appendix A: Financial Aid Survey

Appendix B: Financial Aid Survey Results

## **Appendix A: Financial Aid Survey**

1) Please indicate which campus you are attending:

- a) UH Manoa
- b) UH West Oahu
- c) UH Hilo
- d) Hawai'i Community College
- e) Honolulu Community College
- f) Kapi'olani Community College
- g) Kaua'i Community College
- h) Leeward Community College
- i) University of Hawai'i Maui College
- j) Windward Community College

2) Please choose the appropriate household income level:

- a) Less than \$50,000 a year
- b) \$50,000 to \$74,999
- c) \$75,000 to \$99,999
- d) \$100,000 to \$149,999
- e) More than \$150,000

3) How many hours per week did you have paid employment while in college or university?

On campus:

- a) 0 to 10 hours
- b) 11 to 19 hours
- c) 20 to 30 hours
- d) Over 31 hours a week

Off campus:

- a) 0 to 10 hours
- b) 11 to 19 hours
- c) 20 to 30 hours
- d) Over 31 hours a week

2) How important was financial aid to you when you applied for college or university?

- a) Not important at all
- b) A little important
- c) Somewhat important
- d) Very important

3) How important is financial aid to you in deciding whether or not to enroll for next semester?

- a) Not important at all

- b) A little important
- c) Somewhat important
- d) Very important

4) Have you ever stopped out of school because of financial difficulty?

- a) Yes
- b) No

If yes, please describe your experience:

5) Please check the following reasons for financial difficulty:

- a) My family could not contribute enough
- b) My financial situation worsened
- c) I lost my financial aid
- d) I lost my job/could not find a job
- e) I did not qualify for financial aid

6) Have you ever applied for financial aid?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) I'm not sure

7) Why haven't you applied for financial aid?

- a) I didn't think I would qualify or receive financial aid
- b) I didn't think I would need financial aid
- c) It was too difficult a process
- d) I did not understand the process
- e) I missed the deadline

8) Did you turn in your application by the deadline?

- a) Yes
- b) No

If not, please describe why you did not apply on time:

9) Did you receive financial aid?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) I'm not sure

10) How difficult was it to fill out the financial aid form (FAFSA)?

- a) Very difficult
- b) Somewhat difficult
- c) A little difficult
- d) Not difficult at all

Comments (if any):

11) When applying for financial aid whose taxes did you use for the FAFSA?

- a) Parents' taxes
- b) My own taxes

12) Are you claimed on someone else's taxes or are you independent?

- a) I am a dependent
- b) I am independent

13) How difficult was it to file your parents' / your taxes?

- a) Very difficult
- b) Somewhat difficult
- c) A little difficult
- d) Not difficult at all

Comments (if any):

14) What were the barriers to applying for financial aid?

- a) Tax preparation
- b) Parental income information
- c) Not knowing where the forms are
- d) Being claimed as a dependent by a parent/guardian

15) How likely are you to apply for financial aid in the future?

- a) Not likely at all
- b) A little likely
- c) Somewhat likely
- d) Very likely

16) Please tell us any sources of help when filling out the FAFSA. Check all that apply.

- a) High school counselor
- b) High school teacher
- c) Financial aid workshop
- d) College Financial Aid office
- e) College faculty
- f) Other: please describe

17) In what ways could UH have offered more support to you to encourage/help you to apply for financial aid?

18) How familiar are you with the following types of financial aid?

- Scholarships/grants from a university or college
- Student loans (Federal Stafford loans, Federal PLUS loans, private loans)
- Pell Grants
- Federal Work Study
- Tax credits



- VA Educational Benefits
- Supplemental Education Opportunity Grants
- Hawaii Community Foundation scholarships
- Hawaii businesses/Kamehameha schools etc.

- a) Not familiar at all
- b) A little familiar
- c) Somewhat familiar
- d) Very familiar

19) What types of financial aid did you expect to receive? Check all that apply.

- a) Scholarships/grants from a university or college
- b) Student loans (Federal Stafford loans, Federal PLUS loans, private loans)
- c) Pell Grants
- d) Federal Work Study
- e) Tax credits
- f) VA Educational Benefits
- g) Supplemental Education Opportunity Grants
- h) Hawaii Community Foundation scholarships
- i) Hawaii businesses/Kamehameha schools etc.
- j) Not sure
- k) Decline to answer

20) What types of financial aid did you receive/are you receiving? Check all that apply.

- a) Scholarships/grants from a university or college
- b) Student loans (Federal Stafford loans, Federal PLUS loans, private loans)
- c) Pell Grants
- d) Federal Work Study
- e) Tax credits
- f) VA Educational Benefits
- g) Supplemental Education Opportunity Grants
- h) Hawaii Community Foundation scholarships
- i) Hawaii businesses/Kamehameha schools etc.
- j) Not sure
- k) Decline to answer

21) How did the actual cost of college compare with what you originally anticipated?

- a) A lot less than I anticipated
- b) Less than I anticipated
- c) About what I anticipated
- d) Higher than I anticipated
- e) A lot higher than I anticipated

22) How familiar were you with deadlines for applying for financial aid?

- a) Not familiar at all
- b) A little familiar
- c) Somewhat familiar
- d) Very familiar

23) How did you find out about financial aid opportunities?

- a) High school counselor
- b) Online search engine
- c) College or university website
- d) Brochures or printed material from a college or university
- e) College or university admissions office
- f) College or university financial aid office
- g) Family
- h) Friends
- i) Teachers
- j) Other: please describe
- k) I didn't look for financial aid information

24) How helpful were each of these sources of information in finding out about financial aid opportunities?

- High school counselor
- Online search engine
- College or university website
- Brochures or printed material from a college or university
- College or university admissions office
- College or university financial aid office
- Family
- Friends
- Teachers
- Other: please describe

- a) Not helpful at all
- b) A little helpful
- c) Somewhat helpful
- d) Very helpful

25) How easy was it to find information about financial aid for college?

- a) Very easy to find
- b) Easy to find
- c) Difficult to find
- d) Very difficult to find

26) How would you rate the quality of information about financial aid that you found?

- a) Excellent
- b) Good
- c) Fair
- d) Bad
- e) Terrible

27) How would you rate the amount of information about financial aid that you found?

- a) Too much information
- b) Just the right amount of helpful information
- c) Not enough information

28) What would you have liked to have more information on or help with when researching financial aid?

- a) Application process
  - i) Tax returns
  - ii) FAFSA
- b) Deadlines and other requirements
- c) Scholarships and financial aid options
- d) Tuition and other college costs
- e) Repayment of finances

## **Appendix B: Financial Aid Survey Results**

### **Executive Summary**

Financial aid is an important factor in students' decisions to attend and stay in college. However institutional data across the University of Hawai'i system shows that the percentages of students receiving financial aid are low in comparison to the population of students who are more likely to qualify for financial aid. Because of the positive effects of financial aid on student retention, this survey was designed to investigate student financial aid experiences and why some students do not apply.

The survey was sent out to approximately 50,000 students of University of Hawai'i universities and community colleges who are at least 18 years old during the Spring 2016 semester. Of 1948 respondents across the UH system, 1890 students consented to participate in the survey. Highlights from survey findings include:

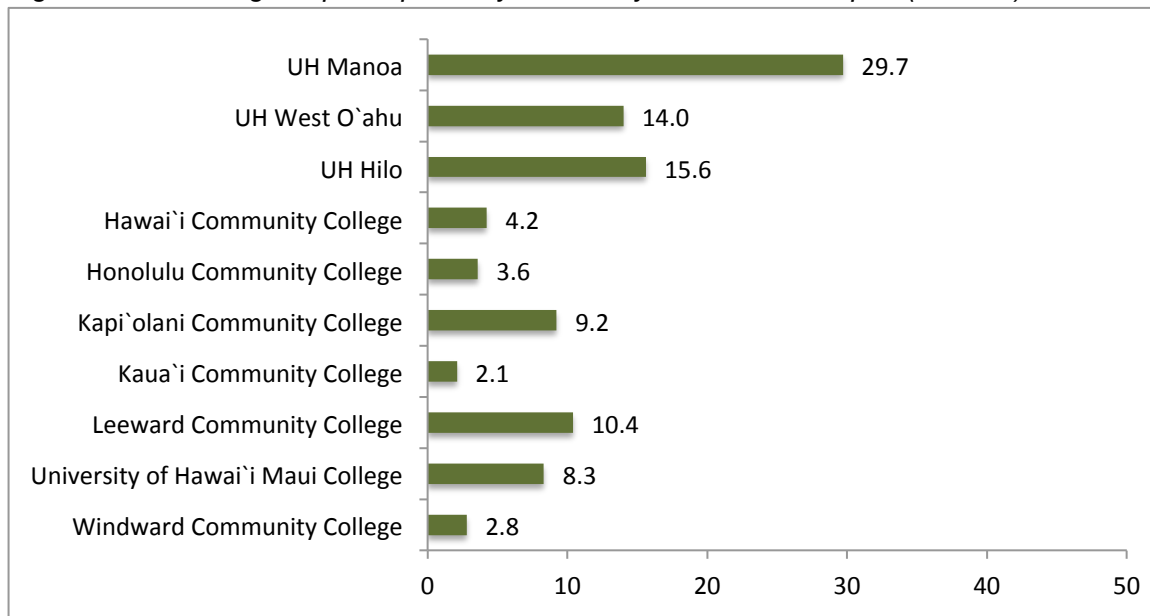
- The majority of students (69 percent) reported household incomes less than \$50,000 a year.
- Financial aid is important to 90 percent of students when applying to college. A quarter of students reported they stopped out of school because of financial difficulty, most commonly because student families could not contribute enough, financial situations worsened, or they did not qualify for aid. Many of these students noted that attending college would be impossible for them without financial assistance.
- 95 percent of students said they applied for financial aid; others did not apply because they did not think they would qualify for or receive financial aid or because they did not understand the process.
- 96 percent of students who applied reported that they turned in their application on time. Most students who missed the deadline did so because taxes were not filed in time, especially parents' taxes.
- 87 percent of students received financial aid, while 11 percent did not. Majority of students expected to receive federal grants and university aid but fewer students actually received these types of aid.
- About two-thirds of students found the FAFSA form to be at least a little difficult to fill out, primarily because of the tax portion and finding the form confusing in general.
- The majority of students said that tax preparation and reporting parental income information were barriers in the financial aid process. Being considered a dependent of their parents was also a barrier although about 52 percent of students said they are independent and used their own tax information when applying for aid.
- Students received help in the application process mainly from the Financial Aid office with fewer students reporting help from financial aid workshops, high school counselors, family members, and friends.

- The majority of students wanted more information and help with scholarships and financial aid options, filing taxes, and understanding deadlines, requirements, and tuition and other college costs. They find financial aid and admissions offices, family, and the internet at helpful sources of information.

## Student Participants

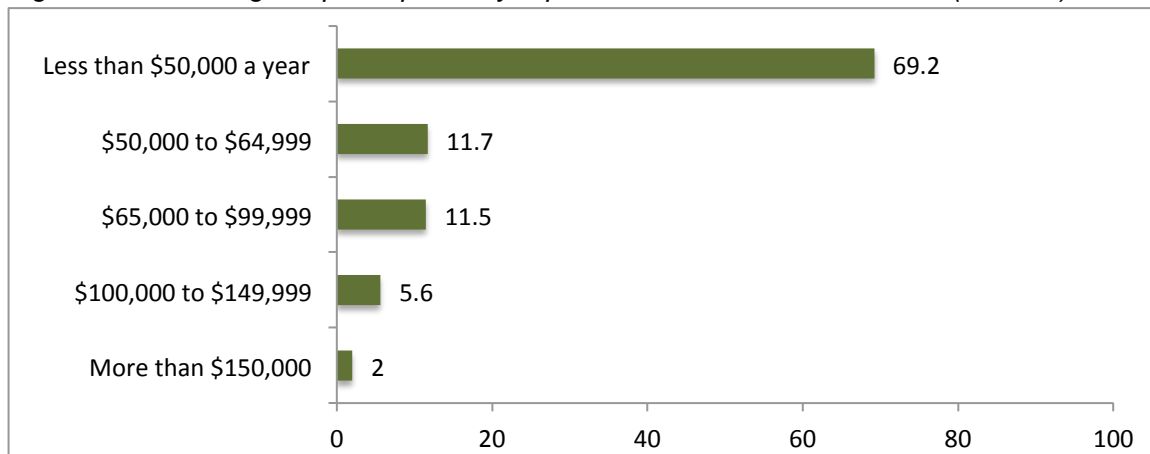
Of 1948 respondents across the UH system, 1890 students consented to participate in the survey. 1786 participants identified which campus they are attending. Almost a third of the participants attend UH Manoa, 15 percent attend UH Hilo, and 14 percent attend UH West O`ahu. Leeward had the most participants amongst the community colleges.

*Figure 1. Percentage of participants by University of Hawai`i campus (n=1786)*



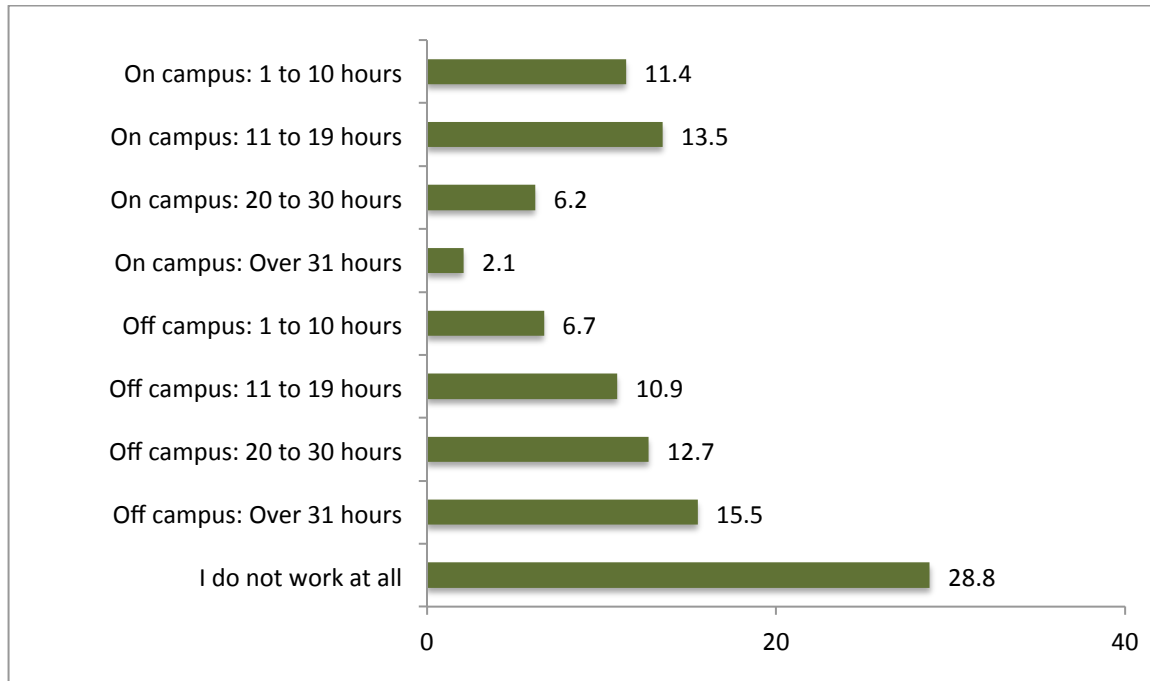
The majority of students, or 69 percent, reported household incomes of less than \$50,000 a year. Almost 8 percent of students surveyed report household incomes above \$100,000 a year.

*Figure 2. Percentage of participants by reported household income level (n=1759)*



About 33 percent of participants reported working on campus while 45 percent said they work off campus. Approximately 100 students work multiple jobs, both on and off campus. Another 29 percent said they do not work at all (see Figure 3 on the next page).

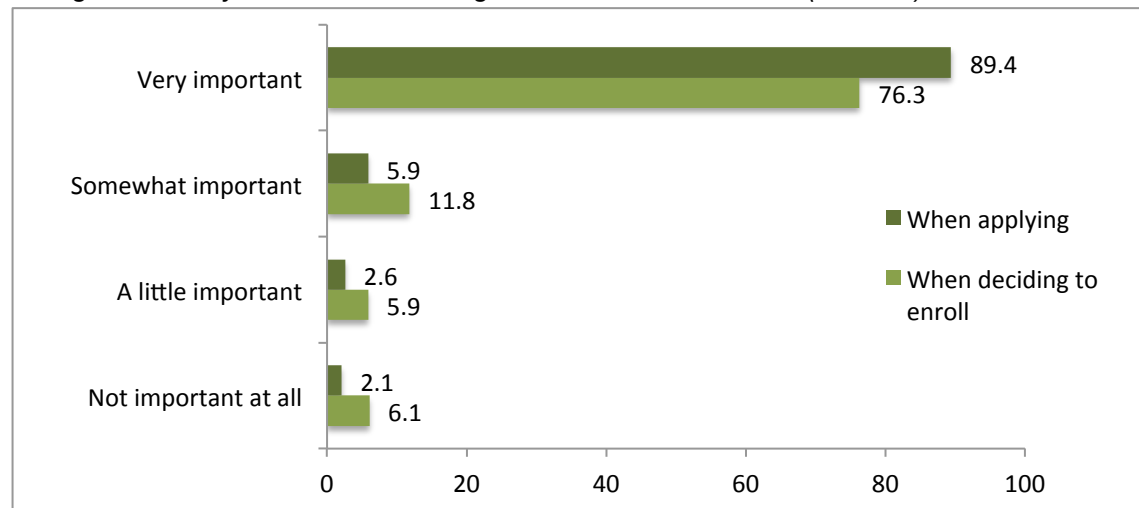
*Figure 3. Percentage of students reporting paid employment (n=1775)*



### **Importance of Financial Aid**

About 90 percent of students said that financial aid was very important to them when applying to college. Slightly fewer students (76 percent) said financial aid was very important when deciding whether or not to enroll.

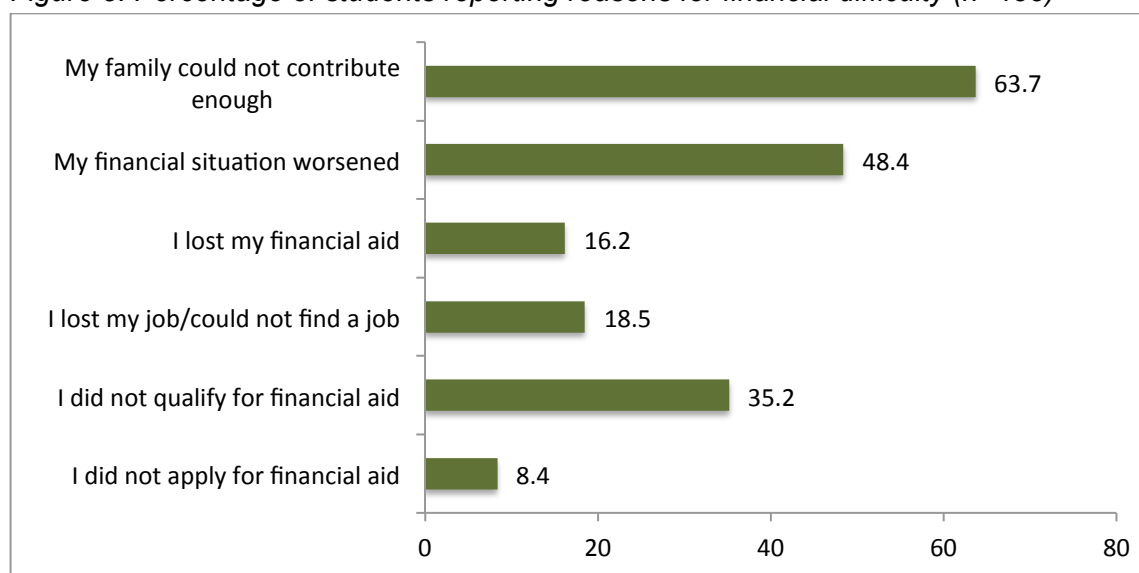
*Figure 4. Percentage of students reporting importance of financial aid when applying to college/university and when deciding whether or not to enroll (n=1780)*



Financial aid was so important that a quarter of students reported they stopped out of school because of financial difficulty. Those who said they experienced financial difficulty reported the reasons for their situation and had a chance to comment on their answer. The top reasons for financial difficulty were that student families could not contribute enough (64 percent) or that their financial situation worsened (48 percent). Many students noted in the comments that attending college would be impossible without financial assistance. Highlights from student comments include:

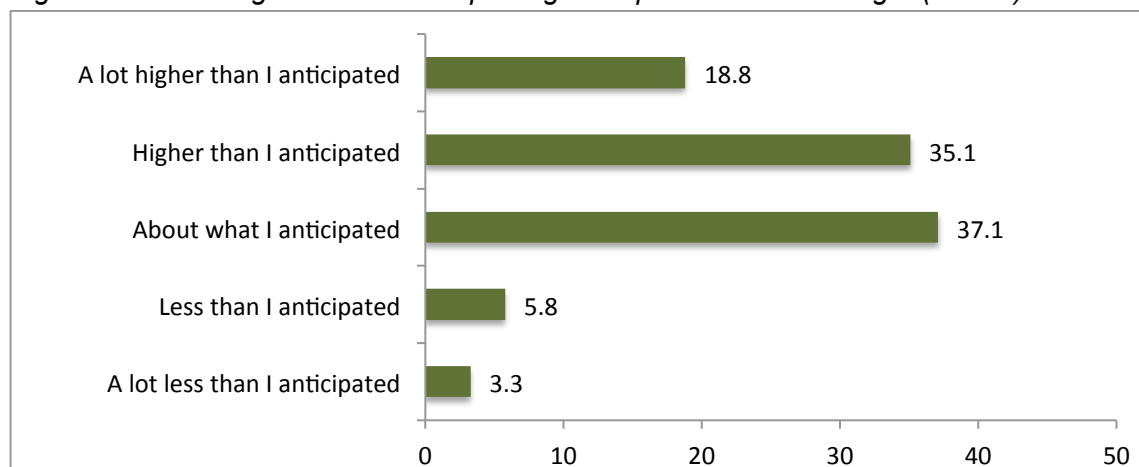
- Students reported that their parent income was too high to receive aid and their families either could not afford school or would not pay for school. Some students were independent but their parents' income was still considered in financial aid decisions.
- Nearly 170 students said they dropped out because they could not afford going to school due to the cost of living, bills, not receiving enough aid, not wanting to take out loans, and needing to take time off to work to pay for school again. Some students would take just a semester off while it took others years to come back to school after working and saving up. The relationship between school and work was difficult for a majority of students. Students could not afford school with only part-time jobs but could also not focus on school and succeed while working fulltime.
- About 50 students shared that they had to stop school in order to work and/or support their families, either children or ailing parents and family.
- Students who did not qualify for financial aid said it was due to parent income but also low grades, previous degrees, or their part-time student status.
- Small groups of students said they experienced difficulty and dropped out because of bad experiences with their financial aid office, being unaware of financial aid opportunities, or personal health issues.

*Figure 5. Percentage of students reporting reasons for financial difficulty (n=438)*



All students reported how their anticipated cost of college compared to the actual cost. More than half reported it was higher than anticipated. Just over a third of students felt that it was about what they anticipated.

*Figure 6. Percentage of students reporting anticipated cost of college (n=438)*



## The Application Process

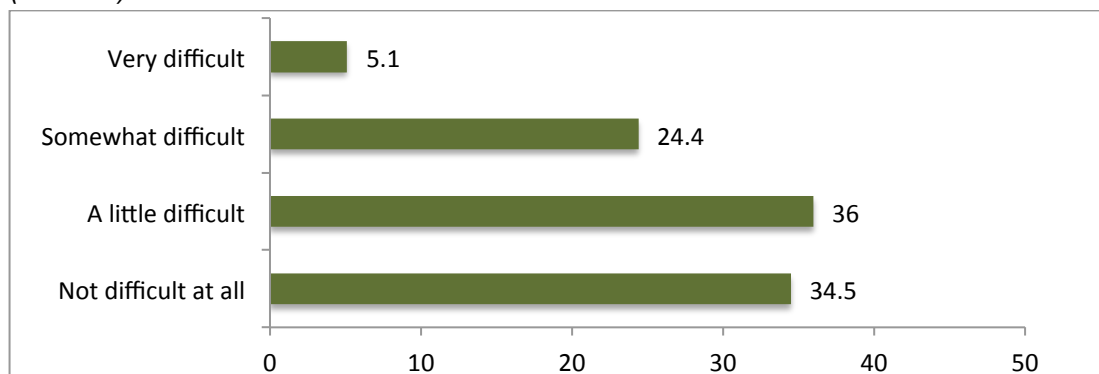
Students were asked a series of questions describing their application process and experience. The following describes the findings from these questions:

- **Application:** Of 1776 students, 95 percent reported that they applied for financial aid. About 4 percent said that they have never applied and 2 percent said they were unsure.



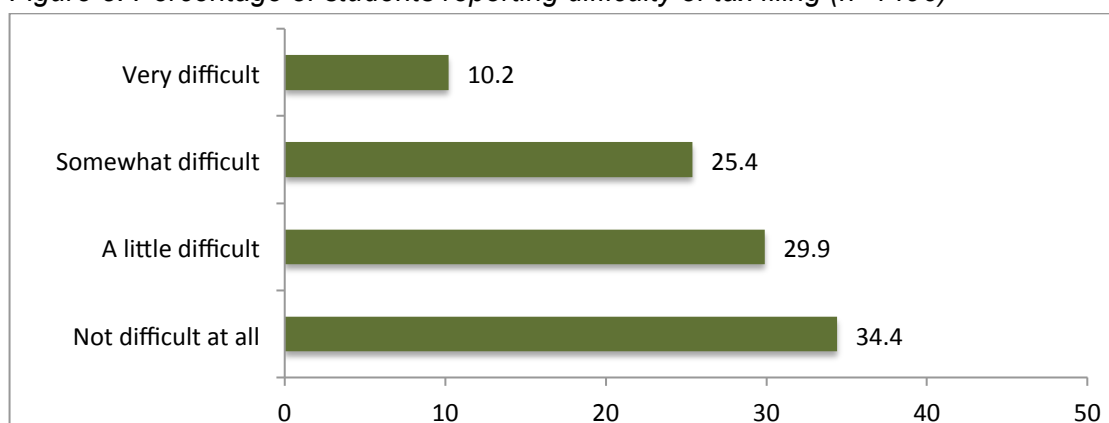
- **On-time application:** 96 percent of students who applied reported that they turned in their application by the deadline. The majority of those who did not apply on time were still waiting for their or their parents' taxes to be filed. Some parents filed for an extension or W-2 forms did not come in on time. Some students noted that having the financial aid deadline before the deadline for tax filing created problems for them. Other reasons for missing the deadline included not knowing about the deadline or having to reapply ever year, late application to school or late acceptance notice, questioning if they would qualify for aid and so not applying, and mistakes on application forms.
- **Difficulty of FAFSA:** Students did not find the FAFSA form to be very difficult to complete. About a third of students said it was not difficult at all to fill out the FAFSA form. Another third felt it was a little difficult and a quarter reported it being somewhat difficult. Only 5 percent said it was very difficult (see Figure 7 on the following page). Students said the FAFSA form was difficult mostly because of the tax portion and waiting for parents' taxes to be filed. Supplying parent information was difficult for some because their parents do not support their schooling or they are independent. Other students said it was confusing and time consuming.

*Figure 7. Percentage of students reporting difficulty of filling out the FAFSA form (n=1607)*



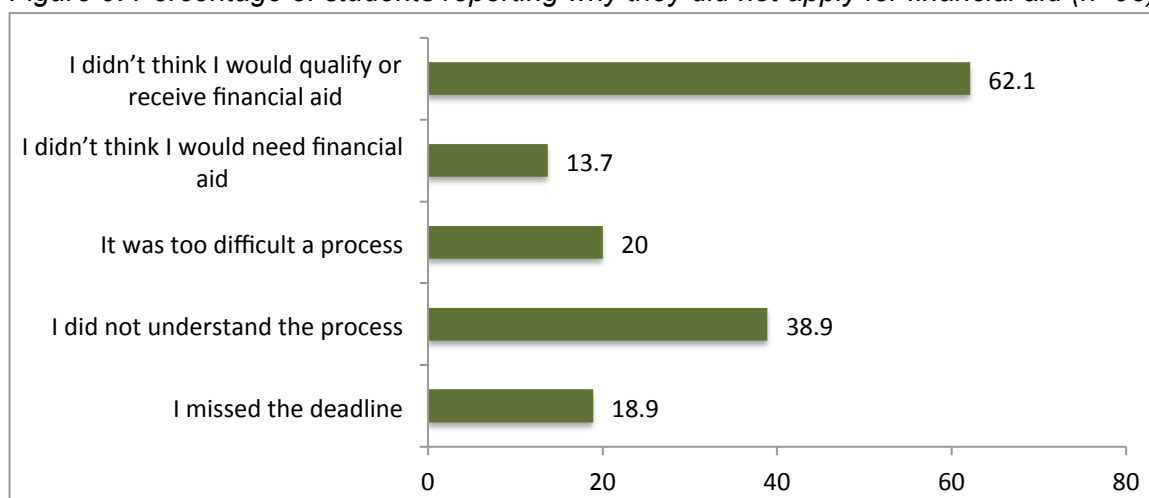
- **Tax Filing:** When applying for financial aid, 47 percent said they used their parents' taxes for the FAFSA form and 53 percent used their own taxes.
  - Related to this, 52 percent said they are independent and are not claimed on another's tax forms while 48 percent are dependents and claimed by someone else.
  - A third of students reported that it was not difficult at all to file their taxes or their parents' taxes. A third found it difficult and a quarter found it somewhat difficult. Only 10 percent found it very difficult to file their taxes. Problems with filing taxes were due to disability, not being able to afford tax preparation help, being inexperienced or a first time filer, not receiving W-2s in time, and complications with military tax filing or VA paperwork.

*Figure 8. Percentage of students reporting difficulty of tax filing (n=1496)*



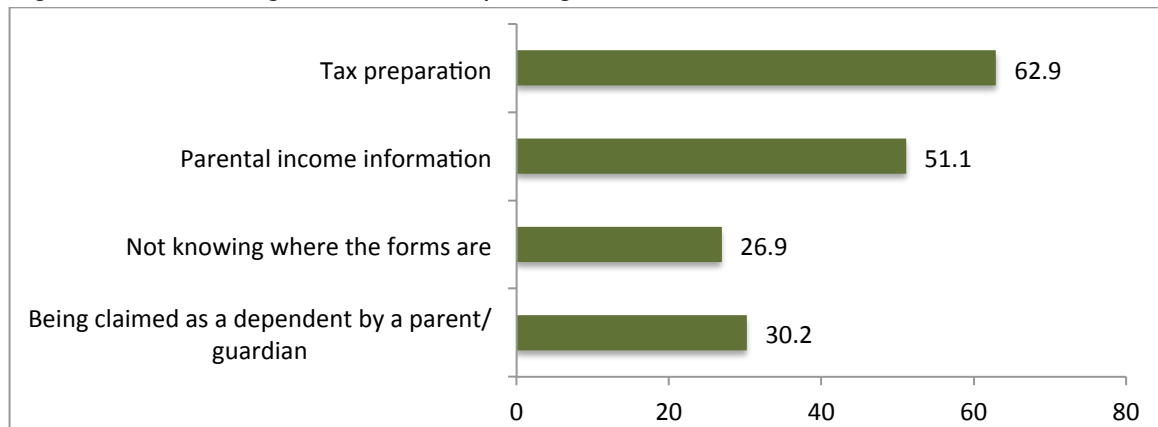
- **Reasons for not applying:** Only about 5 percent of students did not apply for financial aid. They did not apply because they did not think they would qualify for or receive financial aid (62 percent) or because they did not understand the process (39 percent). Figure 9 shows why students did not apply for aid.

*Figure 9. Percentage of students reporting why they did not apply for financial aid (n=95)*



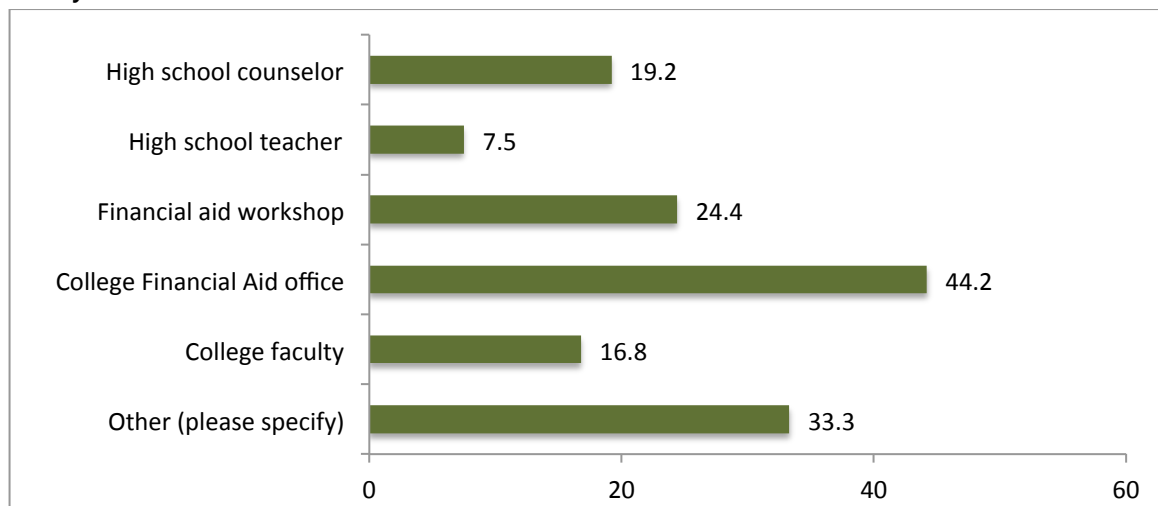
- **Barriers to financial aid:** The majority of students said that tax preparation was a barrier although only a third found this to be difficult. Students said it was difficult because they had to wait for W-2s and tax filings, especially for their parents. Half of the students reported that parental income information was a barrier. Being dependent to their parents was a barrier for 30 percent. Some students said that things weren't as difficult once they were over 24 years old so they did not have to include parent information anymore.

*Figure 10. Percentage of students reporting various barriers to financial aid*



- **Help in the application process:** Students shared where they received help when applying for financial aid (see Figure 11). Near half of the students said they received help from the Financial Aid office, a quarter from financial aid workshops and 19 percent from their high school counselor. 33 percent reported receiving help from other sources, most often from family members but also from friends, online sources, workshops, and even tax preparers, accountants, and bank officers. Many students said that they figured things out on their own.

*Figure 11. Percentage of students reporting receiving help when applying for financial aid by source*



## Financial Aid Awarded

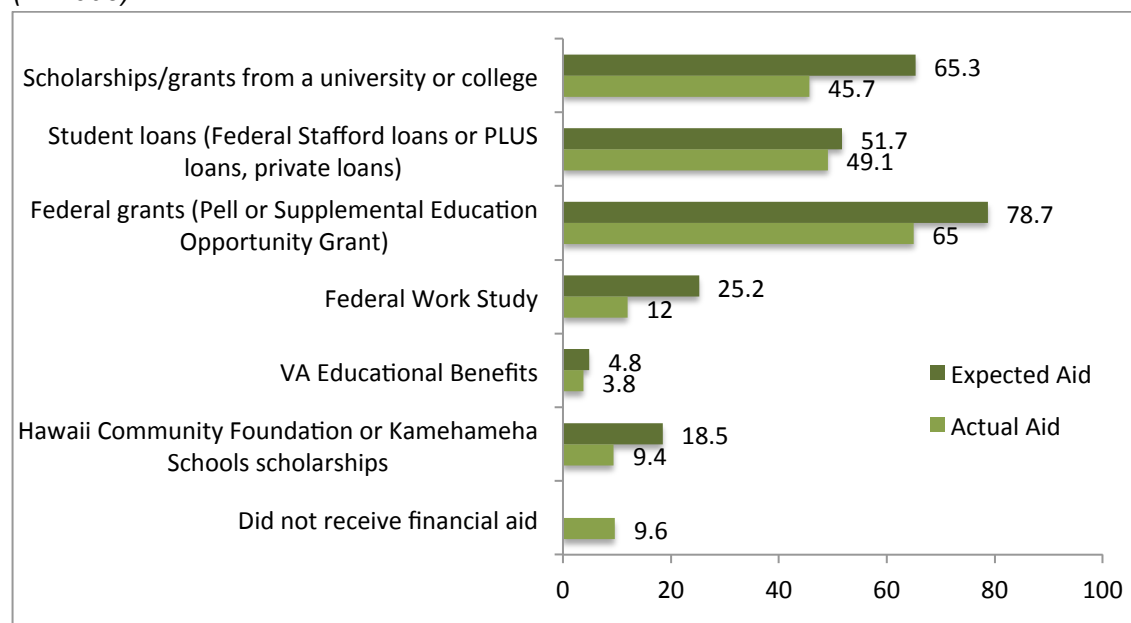
About 87 percent of students received financial aid, 10.8 percent did not receive aid, and 2.4 percent were not sure. Reasons reported for not receiving financial aid include:

- Parent income too high
- Ineligibility due to low GPA/grades, too many credits, or already possessing a degree
- Not meeting financial aid or tax filing deadlines
- Still waiting for financial aid decision or dispersal

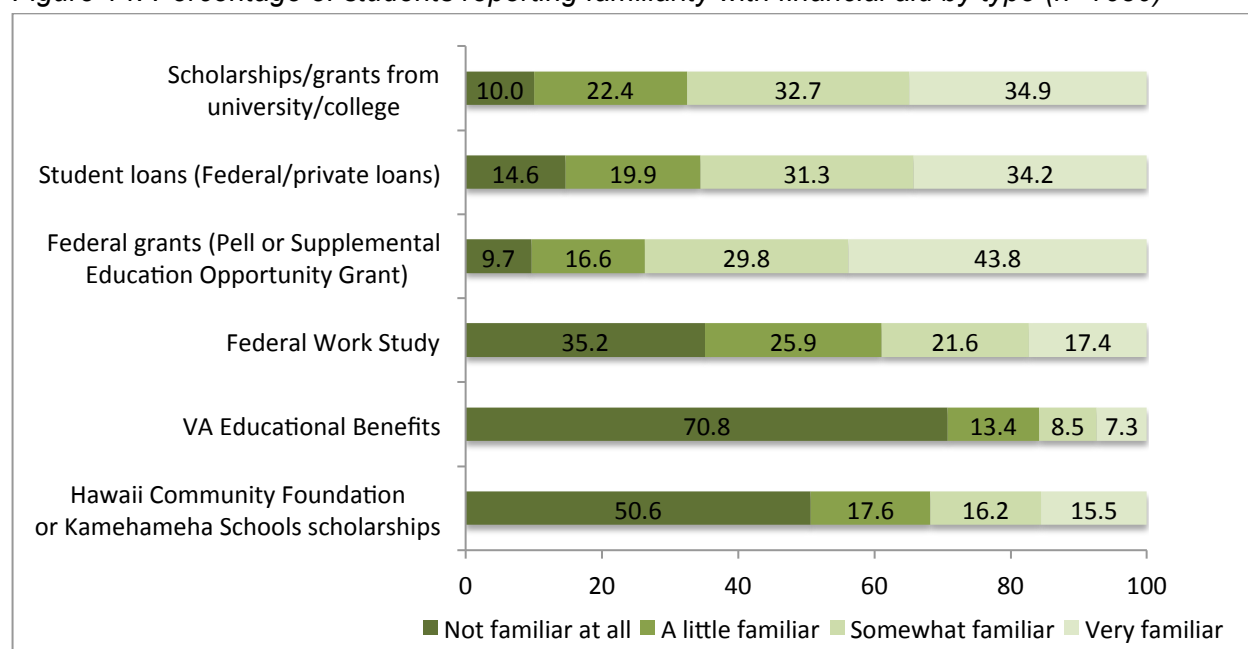
Students were also asked about what aid they expected to receive and what aid they actually did receive. About 79 percent of students expected to receive federal grants while only 65 percent reported receiving it. 65 percent expected to receive financial aid from their university but only 46 percent did receive it. Students' expectations and receipt of loans were nearly the same at about 50 percent (see Figure 13).

Almost half of students were very familiar with federal grants while a third were very familiar with scholarships and student loans. Students were the least familiar with VA educational benefits followed by Hawaii Community Foundation and Kamehameha Schools scholarships (see Figure 14).

*Figure 13. Percentage of students reporting expected aid and actually received aid by type (n=1605)*



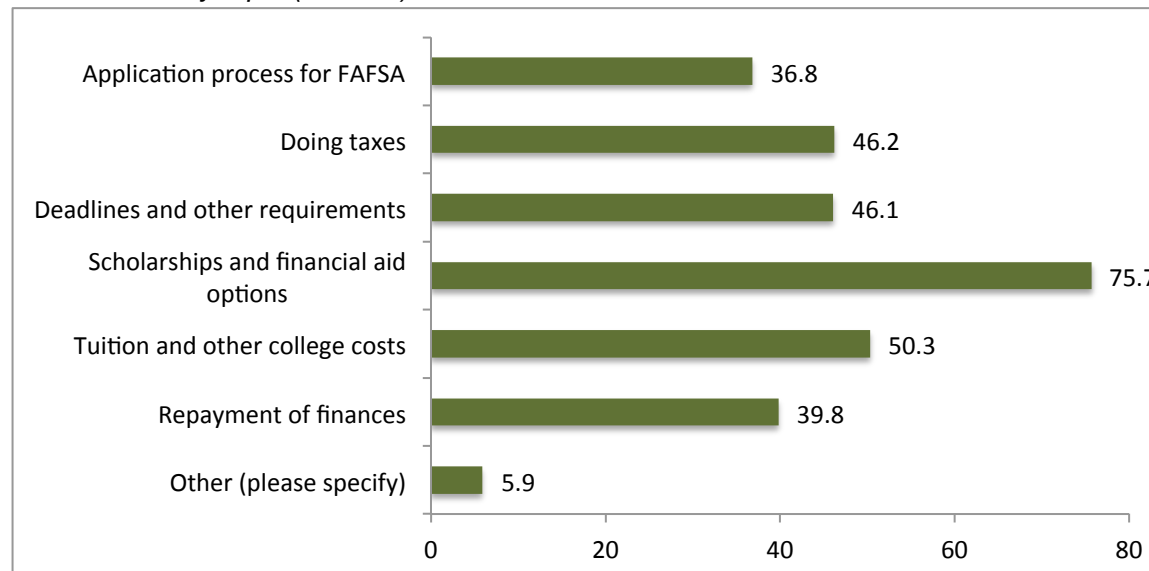
*Figure 14. Percentage of students reporting familiarity with financial aid by type (n=1630)*



### Improving Assistance with Financial Aid

Students would have liked more information or more help with scholarships and financial aid options. About half wanted help and information regarding filing taxes, deadlines and other requirements, and tuition and other college costs (see Figure 15). Some students requested more information on eligibility requirements for aid and scholarships (i.e. credit maximums, minimum credit loads per semester, etc.) and more information on the financial aid decision process and timing, especially when aid or loans are dispersed late and/or at different times.

*Figure 15. Percentage of students wanting more information and help when researching financial aid, by topic (n=1516)*



Students want to know more information about financial aid processes and opportunities. Figure 16 shows students find financial aid offices, online search engines, family, and admissions offices the most helpful to find out financial aid information.

*Figure 16. Percentage of students reporting how helpful various sources are in informing about financial aid opportunities, by source (n=1582)*

