

# Faces of the Future: A Portrait of First-Generation Community College Students

BY TAKAKO NOMI

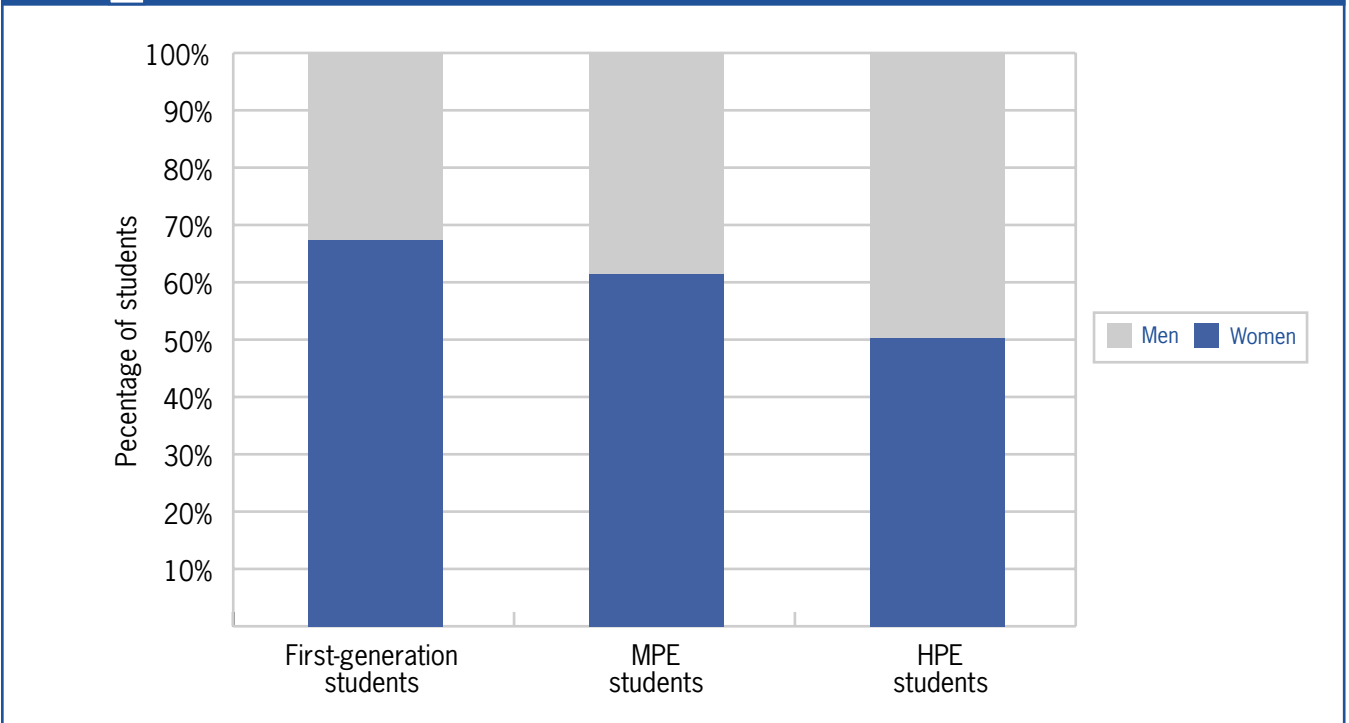
## INTRODUCTION

The Faces of the Future Survey is the first national survey developed to examine the lives and experiences of credit and noncredit community college students. This report summarizes survey findings on the demographic characteristics, goals, and college experiences of the nation’s first-generation community college students who are enrolled in credit-

bearing courses. It also reveals the problems they face while attending college, which often reflect their distinctive family and demographic backgrounds. Key findings include the following:

- First-generation community college students are more likely to be women, older than traditional college age, employed full time, and to support dependents living at home.

**FIGURE 1** Gender Distribution of First-Generation Students and Their Peers



- First-generation community college students tend to take fewer credit hours each semester and to face greater financial problems and family responsibilities.
- Financial aid is a major source of support for first-generation college students, and they are less likely to receive financial support from parents for college-related expenses.
- Most students whose parents have had high levels of postsecondary education attend community colleges for the purpose of transferring to a 4-year college. In contrast, first-generation community college students tend to attend to improve job skills and obtain an associate degree.
- The parents of first-generation community college students have less influence on their children's education decisions than do parents who have obtained postsecondary education.
- Despite the relatively greater economic and social disadvantages they face, first-generation community college students express greater satisfaction with their

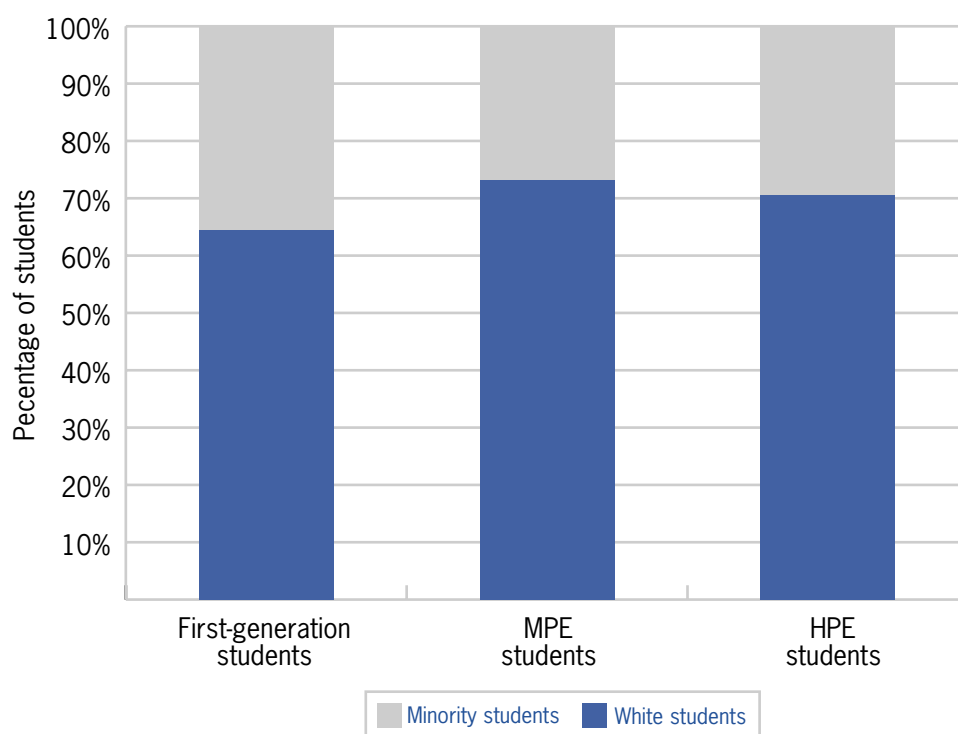
academic and nonacademic college experiences than do their peers.

- First-generation college students express greater satisfaction with their community college experiences than do other community college students.

Community college students have a wide variety of demographic characteristics, goals, needs, and life circumstances. One group of students who are especially likely to be in community colleges are students whose parents have no postsecondary education experiences—first-generation students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), in 2003 first-generation college students made up 45% of the public community college population.

Annually since 1999, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and ACT have been administering the Faces of the Future Survey. This portrait of first-generation community college students is drawn from survey responses received from 49,893 stu-

**FIGURE 2** Distribution of White and Minority First-Generation Students and Their Peers



dents enrolled in credit-bearing courses at 158 community colleges between fall 2001 and fall 2003.<sup>1</sup> To gain a clearer understanding of first-generation students as a discrete population, AACC and ACT compared the responses of first-generation students (defined as students whose parents have had no postsecondary education) with those received by their peers, defined as follows (see Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004)<sup>2</sup>:

- MPE (moderate parental education) students: At least one parent has received some postsecondary education, but either only one parent or neither parent has earned a bachelor's degree.
- HPE (high parental education) students: Both parents have earned at least a bachelor's degree.

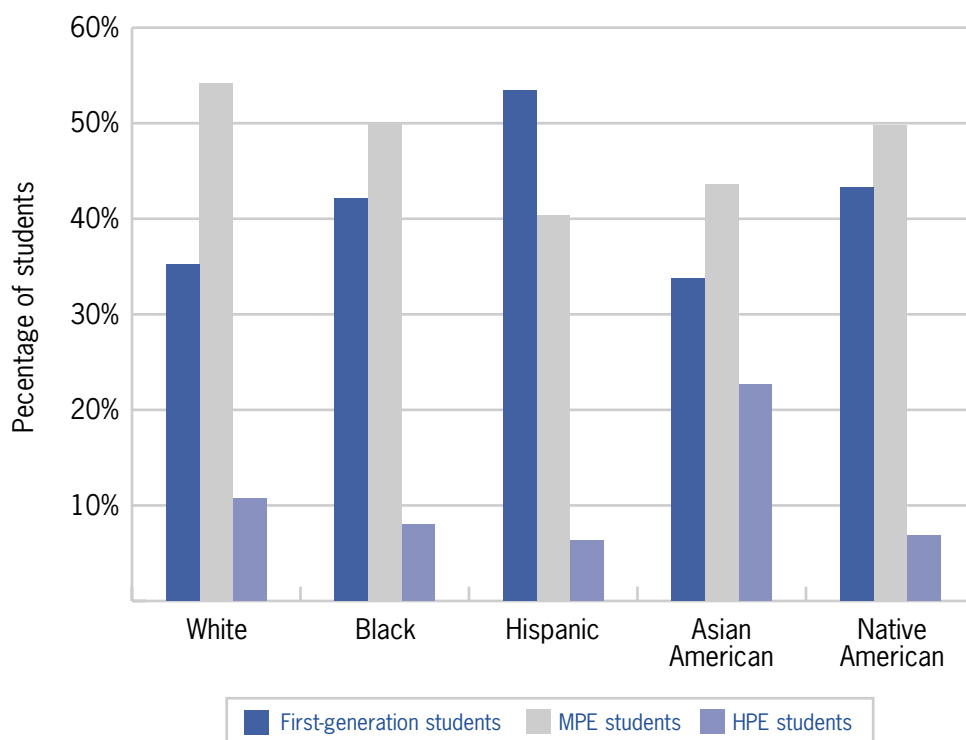
### AGE, GENDER, AND RACE/ETHNICITY

First-generation college students are less likely to be of traditional college age (17–21) than are MPE and HPE students, which suggests that they are less likely to

enroll in college immediately after completing high school. The median ages of first-generation, HPE, and MPE students are 24, 21, and 20 years, respectively. First-generation community college students are more likely to be women—approximately 67%, compared to 61% of MPE and 50% of HPE students.

First-generation community college students are more racially and ethnically diverse than are their peers. Approximately 36% of first-generation college students are members of minorities, compared to 27% of MPE and 29% of HPE students (see Figure 2). It is also interesting to look at the distribution of parents' education levels within each racial or ethnic group. The majority of Hispanic students (53%) are first-generation, whereas 43% of Native American and 41% of Black students are first-generation. Conversely, Asian American and White students are much less likely to be first-generation and are the only two groups with more than 10% in the HPE student group (see Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3** Distribution of First-Generation Students and Their Peers, by Race/Ethnicity



## EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME STATUS

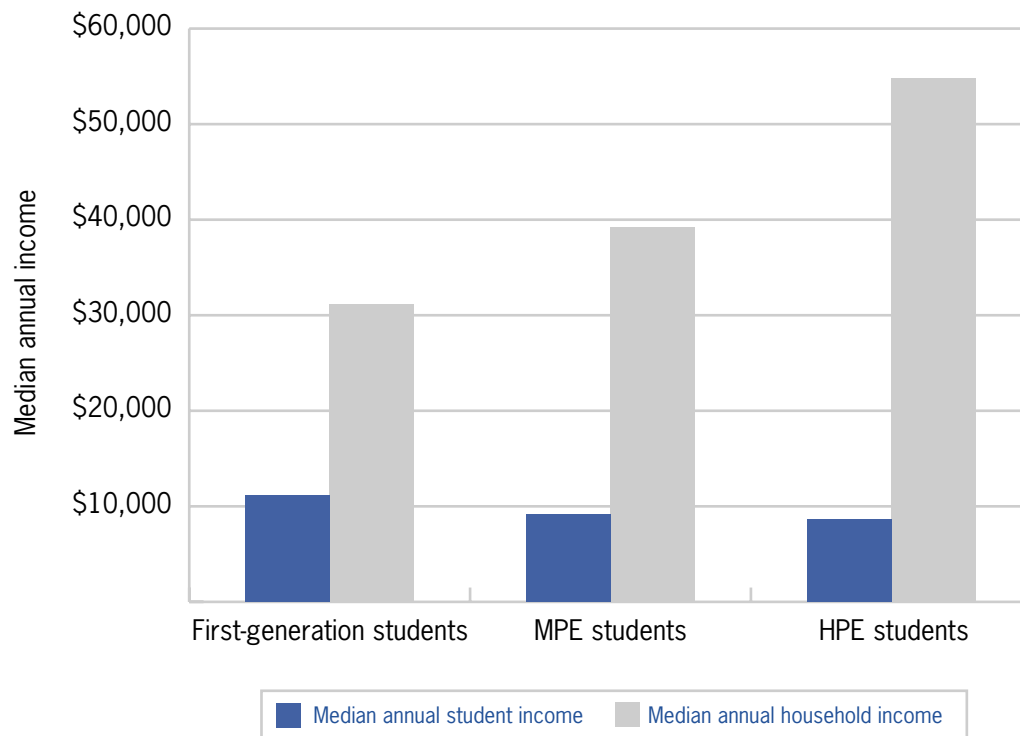
Most students attending community colleges, regardless of their parents' level of education, are employed full or part time. First-generation students, however, are more likely than are MPE and HPE students to be employed full time and to be the primary wage earners in their households. Thus it is not surprising that annual income levels are higher for first-generation students: The average annual income of first-generation college students is \$11,151, approximately \$2,000 higher than that of MPE students and \$2,500 higher than that of HPE students. When students' annual household incomes are compared, however, those of first-generation college students are much lower than those of MPE and HPE students (see Figure 4). Furthermore, a majority of first-generation students also support dependents, whereas HPE students are more likely to be dependents.

## COURSE LOADS AND SOURCES OF FUNDING

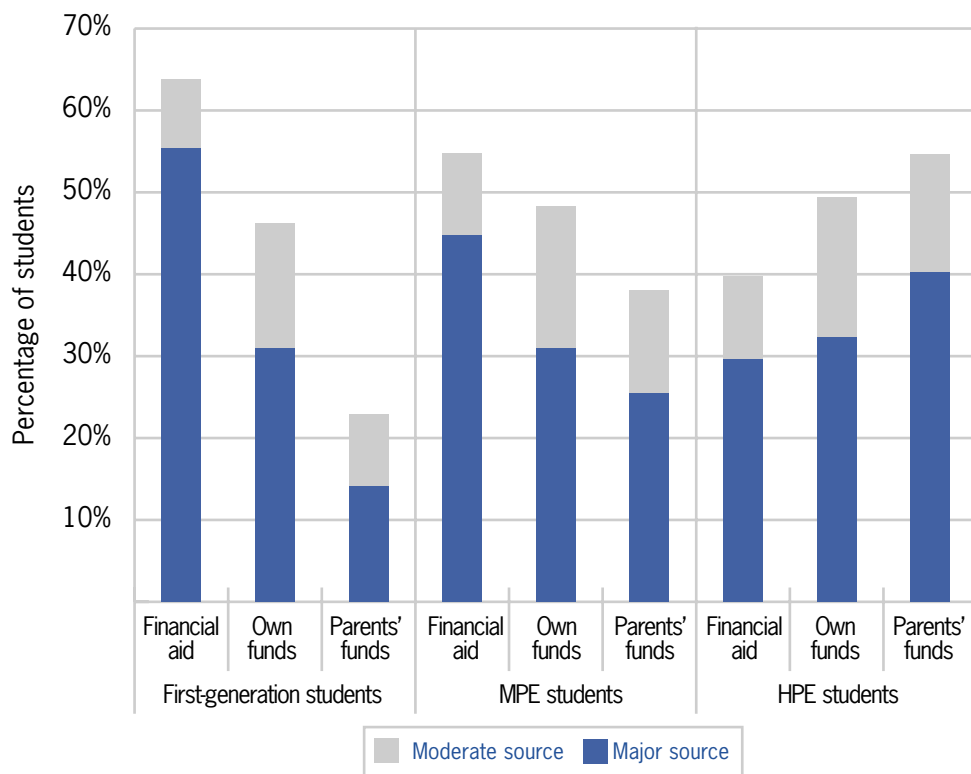
First-generation college students take fewer courses than do MPE and HPE students, which most likely reflects their additional responsibilities at home and work. College costs may also impose a financial constraint on the number of courses that students can take in a semester. Approximately 50% of first-generation college students are enrolled in three or fewer courses, compared to 42% of MPE and 40% of HPE students.

Not surprisingly, parents' income and savings are reported as major sources of funds for college-related expenses for far fewer first-generation students (14%) than HPE students (40%). The majority of first-generation students (55%) rely on financial aid as a major source of funding for college expenses, compared to 45% of

**FIGURE 4** Median Annual Income of First-Generation Students and Their Peers



**FIGURE 5** Sources of College Funds for First-Generation Students and Their Peers



MPE and 30% of HPE students. The relative importance of the various sources of funding within each group also shows interesting trends. First-generation and MPE students are most likely to rely on financial aid rather than on their own funds as a major source of funding, whereas HPE students rely more on their parents' income than on their own funds before financial aid.

### PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED WHILE ATTENDING COLLEGE

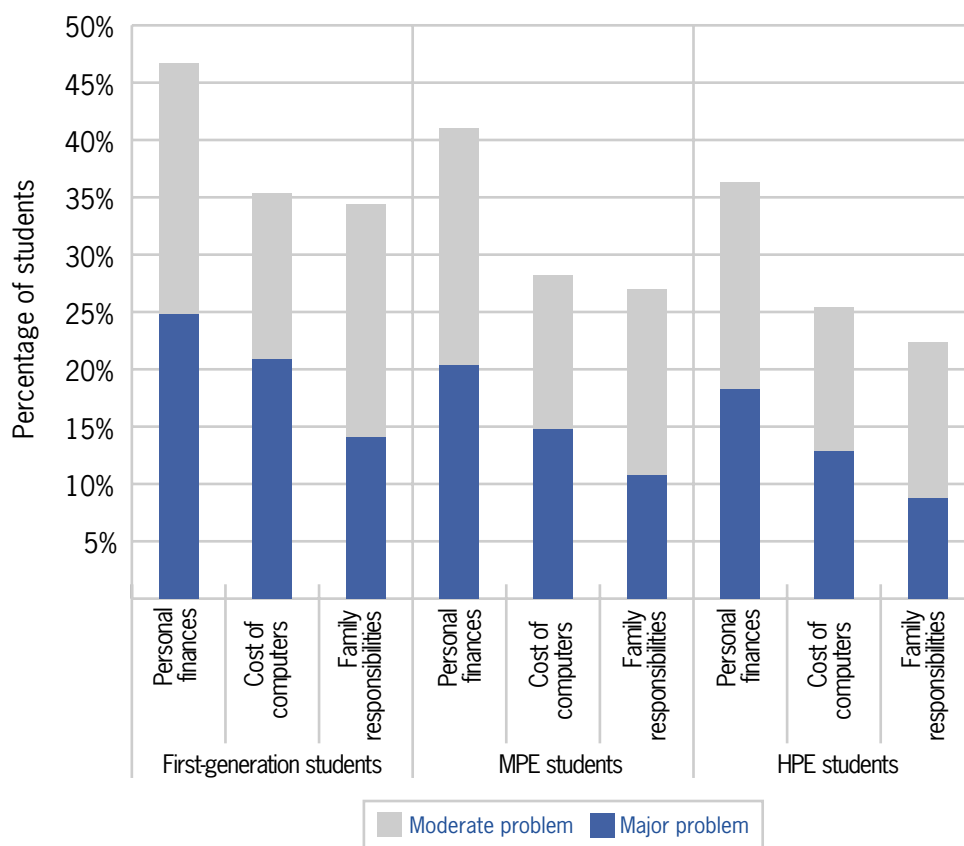
Community college students are more likely to be working full time, attending classes part time, and be older than traditional-age college students. As a result, they typically contend with a number of personal and financial problems while attending college. The Faces of the Future Survey suggests that first-generation students

are more likely to face many of these problems than are MPE or HPE students. First-generation community college students cite personal financial problems (47%), the cost of computers (35%), and family responsibilities (34%) as moderate or major problems encountered while attending college. MPE and HPE students also encounter these problems, but to lesser degrees (see Figure 6).

### ACCOMPLISHMENTS SOUGHT

Among the accomplishments typically sought by those who attend community college are having a steady, secure job; making a lot of money; and making a theoretical or practical contribution to science. The accomplishment that most students rate as being very important is to have a steady, secure job, but this is even more important to first-generation community college students: 87% of them cite this as a very important

**FIGURE 6** Problems Encountered by First-Generation Students and Their Peers While Attending College



accomplishment, compared to 82% of MPE and 77% of HPE students. First-generation students also place more emphasis on making a lot of money than do MPE and HPE students (see Figure 7).

### REASONS FOR ATTENDING COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND ENROLLING IN SPECIFIC PROGRAMS

More first-generation students (46%) than MPE (43%) or HPE (36%) students attend community college for the purpose of taking courses related to a future job. And a greater percentage of first-generation students (42%) than MPE (39%) or HPE students (27%) attend community college for the purpose of obtaining an associate degree. Thus, first-generation students are more likely to attend community college to improve their job skills or

obtain an associate degree, whereas MPE and HPE students are more likely to attend community college for the purpose of transferring to a 4-year college (48% of MPE and 57% HPE students intend to transfer, compared to 35% of first-generation students).

First-generation students are less likely than their peers to cite their parents' desire for them to continue their education as a major reason for enrolling in specific courses or programs; perhaps because the parents of first-generation students are less academically oriented than are the parents of MPE and HPE students, they exert less influence on their children's education. First-generation students are more likely than their peers to enroll in specific courses and programs for career-oriented reasons. The major reasons they cite more frequently than do their peers are to meet requirements for a cho-

sen occupation, increase earning power, make a career change, develop computer or technology skills, advance in a current job, enter the workforce after children are grown, and enter the workforce after major life change.

## FACTORS INFLUENCING CHOICE OF COLLEGE

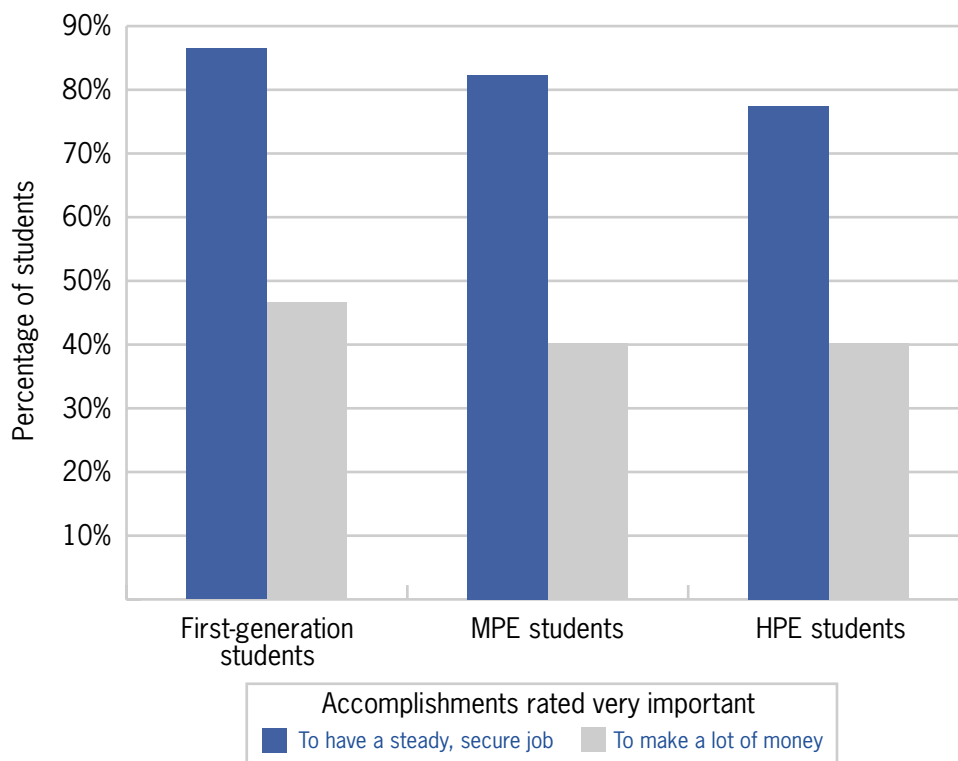
For all community college students, the cost of attending college is the most frequently cited factor influencing their choice of college, but a higher percentage of first-generation college students than MPE or HPE students cite cost as a very important factor. First-generation students also place more importance on the programs of study offered by the college: Approximately 46% rate the programs offered as being very important, compared to 40% of MPE and 34% of HPE students. Two other factors—the availability of financial aid or scholarships and academic reputation—are notably

more important among first-generation students than among their peers (see Figure 9). The importance of these factors to first-generation students is not surprising considering that these students are more likely to come from families with fewer financial resources and are less likely to depend on support from parents.

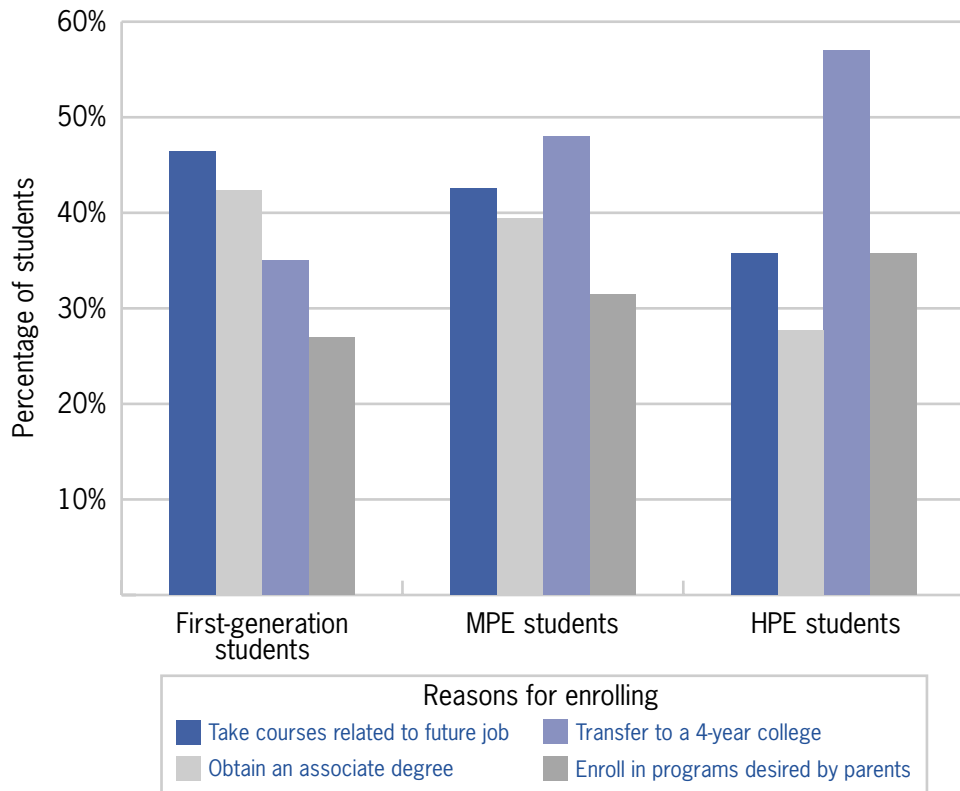
## SATISFACTION WITH COLLEGE EXPERIENCES

Whereas all community college students indicate that college experiences have contributed substantially to their academic and nonacademic development, first-generation students express greater satisfaction. And, as in other comparisons of first-generation, MPE, and HPE students, the difference in satisfaction levels seem to be related to career-related goals. For example, 51% of first-generation students indicate that their college experiences

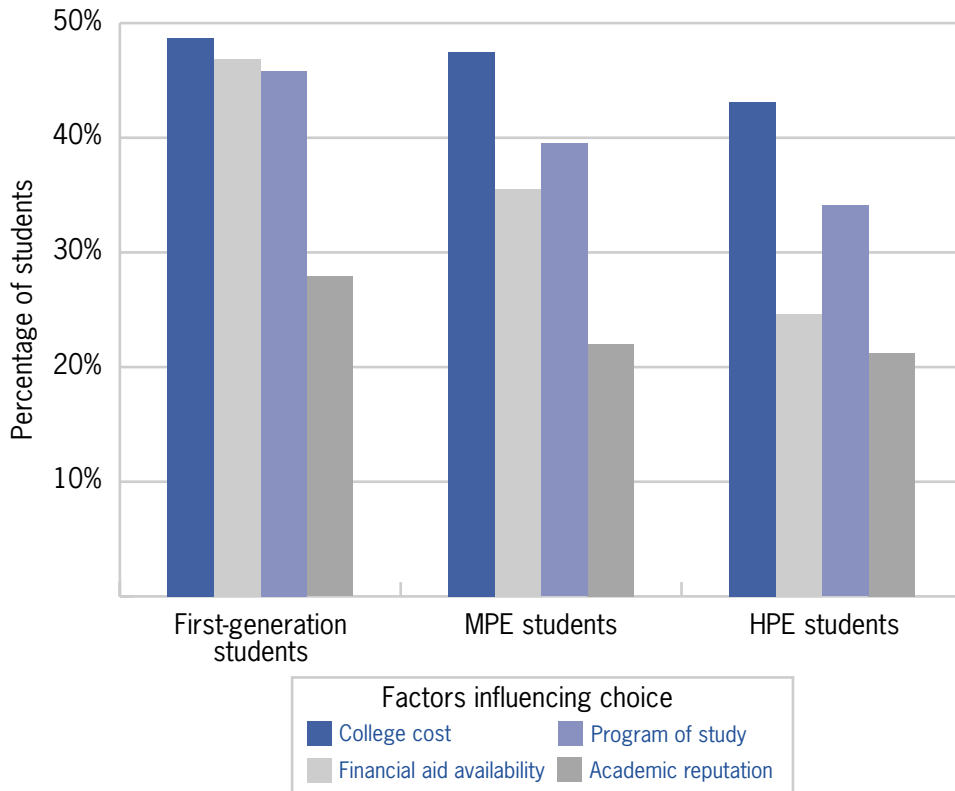
**FIGURE 7** Accomplishments Sought by First-Generation Students and Their Peers



**FIGURE 8** Reasons Why First-Generation Students and Their Peers Enroll in College



**FIGURE 9** Factors Influencing Choice of College for First-Generation Students and Their Peers





make a major contribution to learning the specific skills needed for a current or future job, compared to 42% of MPE and 36% of HPE students. And a greater percentage of first-generation students cite being satisfied with receiving the training and skills needed to advance their careers (40%) than do MPE (32%) or HPE students (29%). First-generation students also tend to be more satisfied with the opportunities to develop self-confidence and to learn to use a computer for personal tasks than are their MPE and HPE peers (see Figure 10).

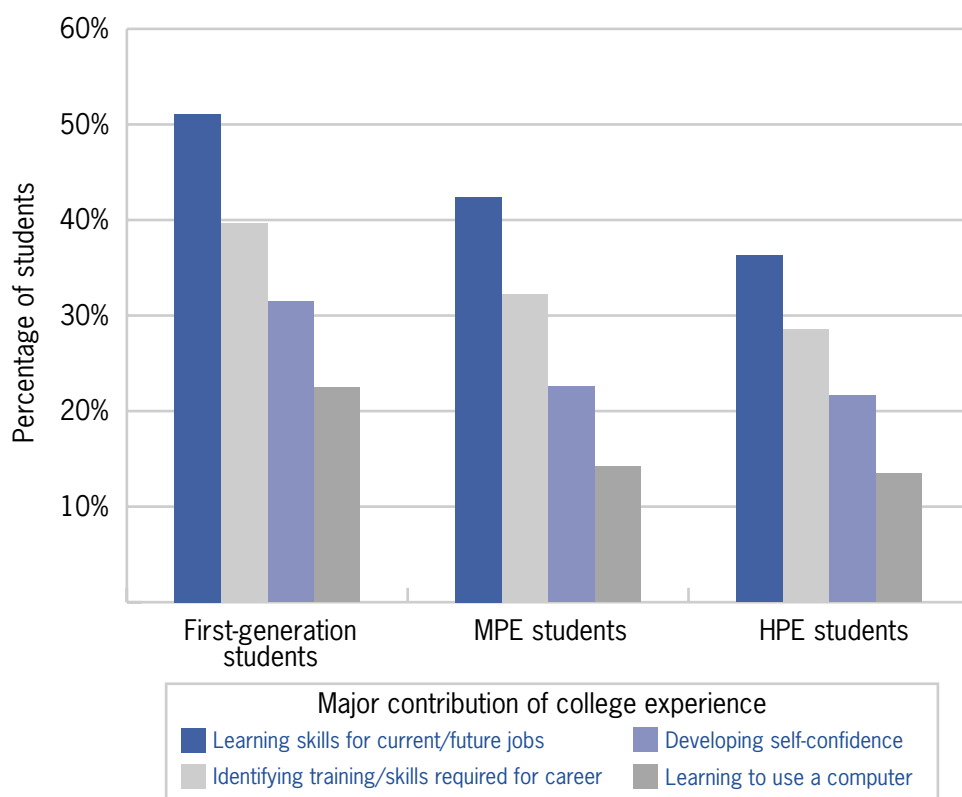
## SATISFACTION WITH COLLEGE ATTENDED

Overall, first-generation college students are slightly more satisfied with their colleges than are their peers: 38% of first-generation students indicated being very satisfied, compared to 29% of MPE and 26% of HPE students. In rating their opinions of the communi-

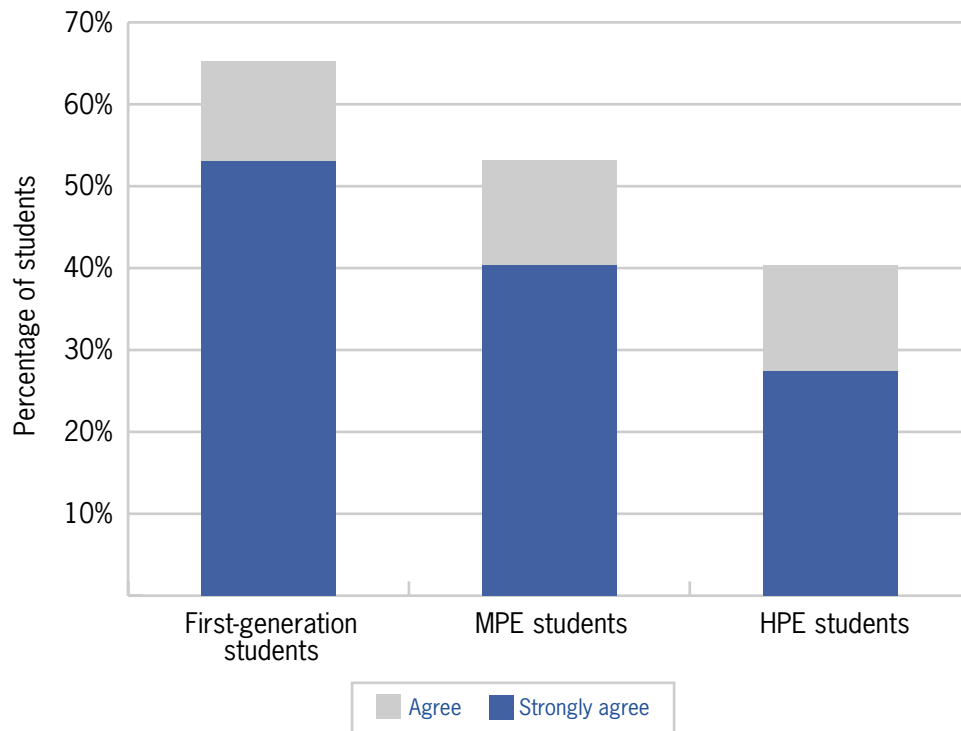
ty colleges they attend, first-generation students appear to be most appreciative of the availability of financial aid and the assistance they receive from community college personnel to access that aid: 65% of first-generation college students agree (12%) or strongly agree (53%) that they could not have attended college without financial aid (see Figures 11 and 12).

Satisfaction levels also vary according to the main reasons for attending community college: developing career skills, obtaining an associate degree, and transferring to a 4-year college. First-generation college students are generally more satisfied than are their peers in all three categories. However, all students attending community colleges to develop job skills and obtain an associate degree are more satisfied than are students who intend to transfer to a 4-year institution.

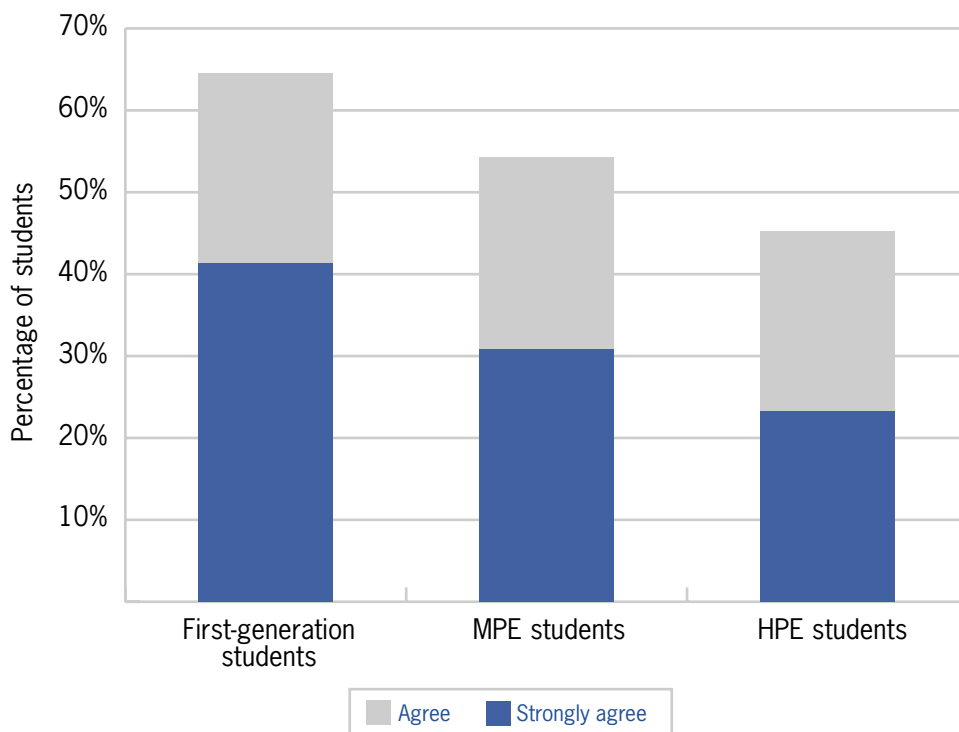
**FIGURE 10** Satisfaction With College Experiences Among First-Generation Students and Their Peers



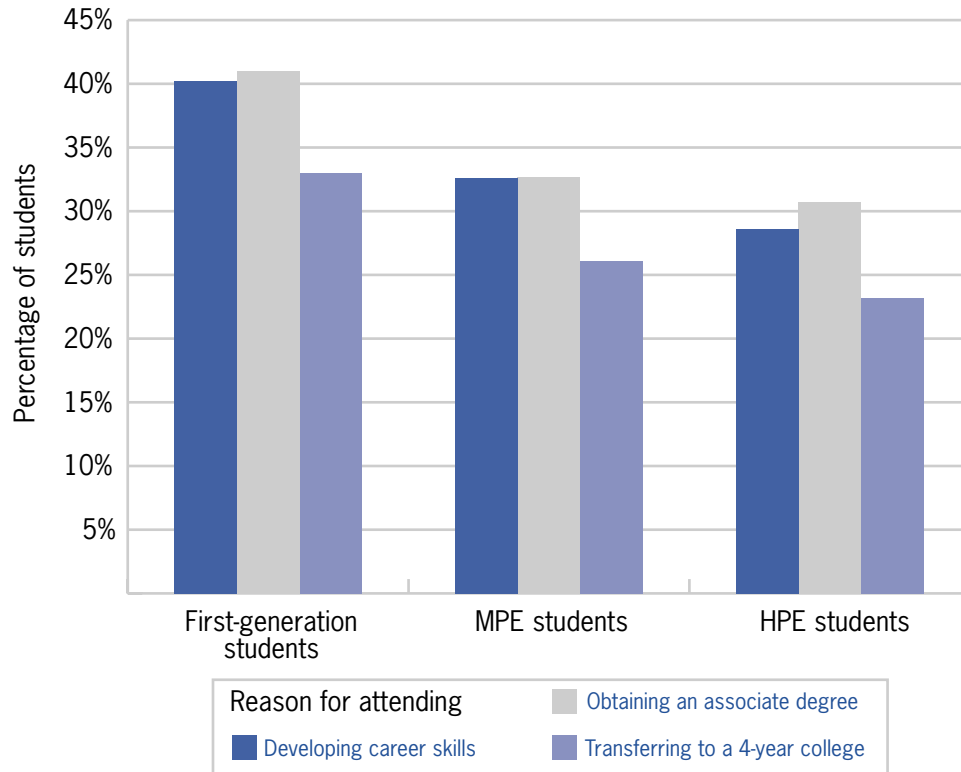
**FIGURE 11** Percentage of Students Agreeing That They Could Not Have Attended College Without Financial Aid Received



**FIGURE 12** Percentage of Students Agreeing That They Got All The Help They Needed From the Financial Aid Office



**FIGURE 13** Percentage of Students Very Satisfied With College, by Reason For Attending



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## REFERENCES

National Center for Education Statistics. (2005).

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- <sup>1</sup> Because the survey was administered to randomly selected classes—not randomly selected students—students who took more classes were more likely to have completed a survey and are, therefore, overrepresented. First-generation students, who took fewer classes, make up a larger percentage of the total population than is represented in these findings. As a result, caution should be exercised in comparing the number of first-generation students to other student populations presented in this report.
  - <sup>2</sup> When students provided information for only one parent's level of education, they were classified as first-generation, MPE, or HPE students based on only that parent's education attainment.

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**Takako Nomi** is a doctoral candidate majoring in educational theory and policy at Pennsylvania State University. In 2004, Nomi was selected for ACT's Summer Internship Program. Research for this brief was conducted during her tenure at ACT. Nomi was recently awarded a dissertation grant from the American Educational Research Association.

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