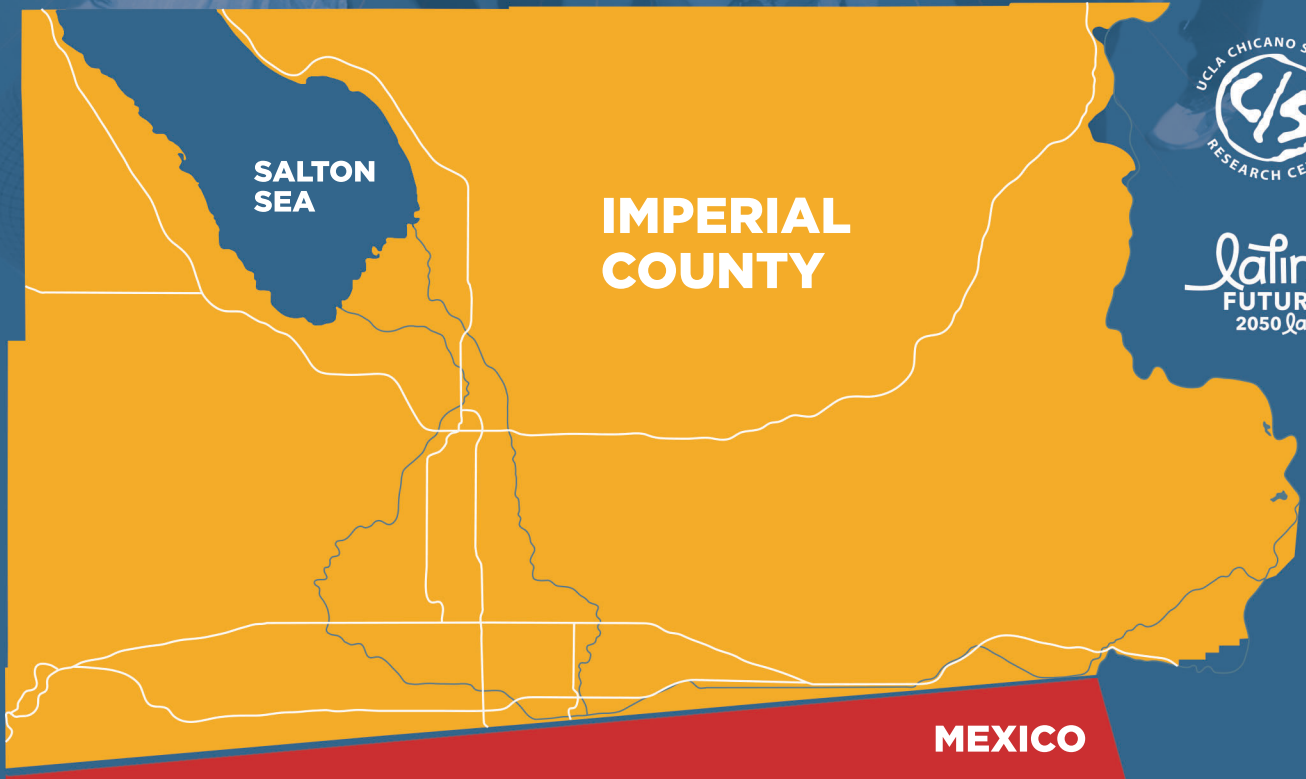


# PATHWAYS TO OPPORTUNITY

## Gender, Education, and Economic Mobility at Imperial Valley College

Veronica Terriquez (UCLA) and Victoria Ciudad-Real (UCI)

SPRING 2025



# Pathways to Opportunity

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Cover photograph by Dylan Castillo, 2024.

Located roughly twelve miles north of the US-Mexico border, Imperial Valley College (IVC) is the only community college in the Latinx-majority Imperial County. The school, which had an unduplicated enrollment of 6,099 full-time students in the 2022-2023 school year (National Center for Education Statistics 2023a), serves as a vital engine of economic mobility for its predominantly low-income and working-class population. With the development of local lithium-related industries on the horizon, IVC is well positioned to prepare students to seize the training and employment opportunities that will follow. Moreover, IVC can also provide students with the necessary knowledge and skills to guide the future of their communities.

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of IVC's student population, exploring students' demographic background, household characteristics, high school experiences, and college and career aspirations. Sponsored by the Latina Futures 2050 Lab, the report also highlights gender differences where relevant. The findings reveal the economic challenges and household responsibilities many students—particularly young women—navigate while pursuing their education.

Survey results indicate that IVC students are extremely motivated to attain a college degree and secure better job opportunities. However, they may require significant support in aligning their aspirations with viable career pathways. Young women in particular have high academic ambitions and often arrive at IVC having completed Advanced Placement (AP) or honors classes or having participated in college-preparatory programs at higher rates than their male counterparts. This can translate into differences in educational outcomes. For example, in 2023 the graduation rate for women at IVC was 50 percent, compared to 41 percent for men (National Center for Education Statistics 2023).<sup>1</sup>

IVC's work-based learning and other workforce development programs can provide a crucial pathway to employment in established and emerging industries, including those related to lithium extraction. Furthermore, the college has the potential to serve as a vital community hub, connecting students to extracurricular and civic engagement opportunities that can further their leadership in their communities and provide them with invaluable skills and access to networks.

Intended to inform college leadership and stakeholders as they continue to refine and expand programs to meet the needs of their student body, this report presents findings from the Thriving Youth Study, an original web survey conducted in the spring of 2024.<sup>2</sup> Data was collected from a representative sample of 1,274 IVC students aged eighteen and older. IVC students, faculty, and administration contributed to designing the questionnaire and leading outreach efforts. Additionally, the report incorporates data collected by the US Census Bureau in 2022 and reported in the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) to situate the experiences of IVC students within the broader context of Imperial County.

# Student Demographics

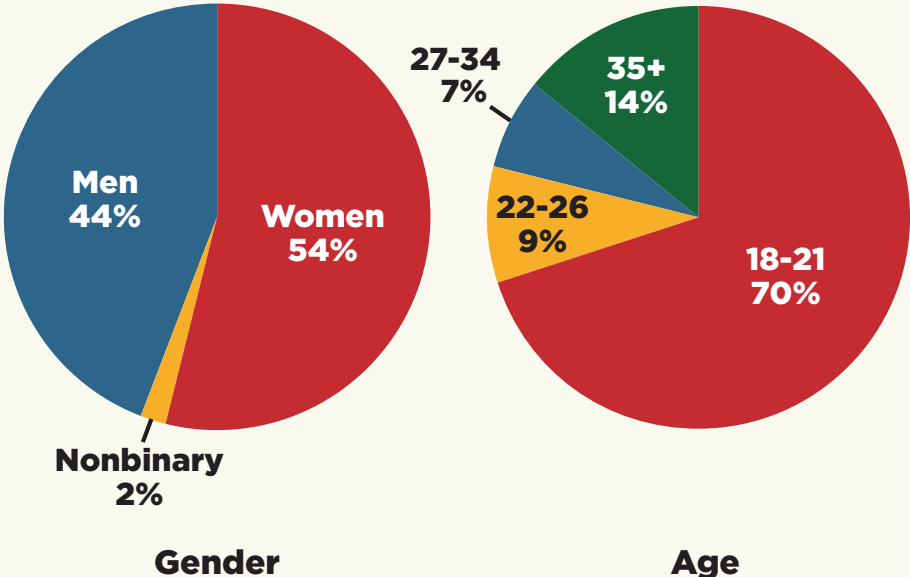


## Gender and Age Distribution

In California young men are less likely to attend college than young women, a trend that holds true for students at IVC (NCES 2023b). While men composed only 44 percent of respondents, women represented 54 percent, and nonbinary students made up 2 percent. Given the small number of nonbinary respondents, analyzing their responses separately was not statistically viable. Therefore, for the purposes of this report, their data are grouped with data gathered from students who identified as women. This decision was based on observed similarities between nonbinary respondents and women in key characteristics relevant to the study. However, we acknowledge the limitations of this approach as well as the importance of recognizing the diversity of gender identities.

As figure 1 shows, IVC serves a predominantly young population: 56 percent of respondents were aged eighteen to twenty-one at the time of the study. Male respondents had an average age of twenty-four, making them slightly younger than women and nonbinary respondents, whose average age was twenty-five. These age differences across gender were not statistically significant.

**Figure 1. Gender and Age Distribution, IVC Students Aged 18 and Older, 2024**

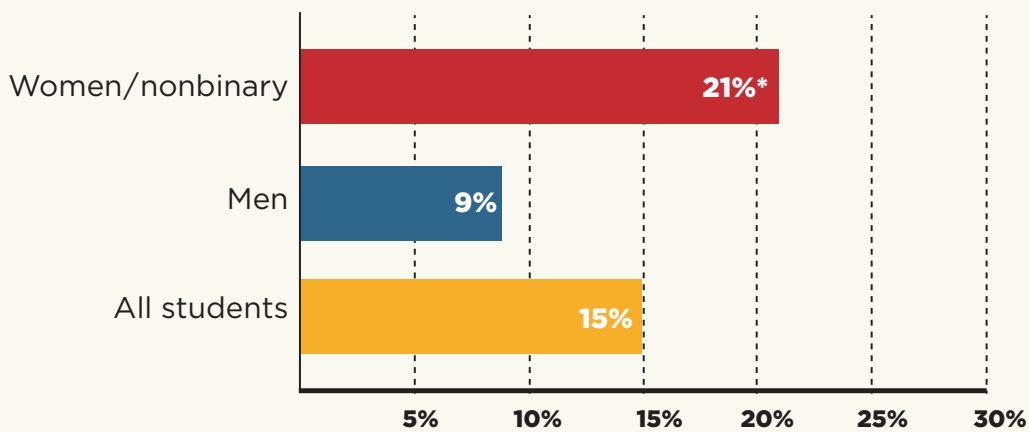


Source: Thriving Youth Study (N= 1,274)

## Sexual Orientation

Overall, 15 percent of the IVC students surveyed identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Notably, women and nonbinary students were more than twice as likely (21 percent) than men (9 percent) to identify as LGBTQ+. In the chart below and those that follow, asterisks indicate statistically significant gender differences, meaning that the observed differences are unlikely to be due to chance.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 2. LGBTQ+ Identification by Gender, IVC Students Aged 18 and Older, 2024**



Source: Thriving Youth Study (N=1,274)

\*The statistical difference between men and women/nonbinary respondents is unlikely due to chance.

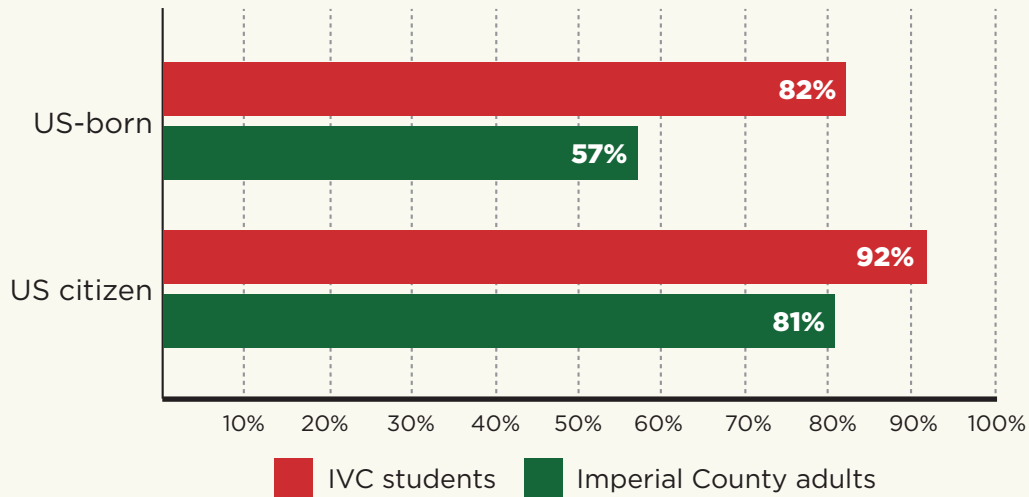
## Race/Ethnicity and Immigration Status

IVC enrollment generally reflects the racial/ethnic makeup of Imperial County (ACS 2023). Approximately 93 percent of students identified as “Hispanic/Latina/o/x,” with 6 percent of all students reporting a specific Indigenous ancestry from Mexico or Central America. Five percent of respondents identified as white and 1 percent as Asian or Pacific Islander. There was little variation in gender composition across racial/ethnic groups.

## Immigration and Citizenship

According to the ACS, in 2023 approximately 57 percent of Imperial County residents aged eighteen and above were born in the United States, and 81 percent were US citizens (ACS 2023). These percentages were higher among survey respondents, with 82 percent of students reporting that they were born in the United States and 92 percent reporting US citizenship. Most noncitizens reported having legal permanent residency.

**Figure 3. US Nativity and Citizenship, IVC Students and Imperial County Adults Aged 18 and Older, 2024**



Source: 2023 American Community Survey; Thriving Youth Study (N =1,274)

Nearly seven out of ten students came from an immigrant household (68 percent), meaning that they or one of their parents were born outside the United States. Interestingly, women and nonbinary students were more likely than men to come from an immigrant family (71 and 65 percent, respectively).

## Household and Financial Characteristics



The survey asked students about their family background and household to allow a broader picture of students' social and financial characteristics. Survey results reveal some important gender patterns.

### *First-Generation College Students*

One finding in particular underscores the importance of IVC as an engine for educational mobility: Only 19 percent of respondents were raised by at least one parent with a bachelor's degree or higher. These first-generation college students are likely to benefit from additional guidance and support in navigating the complexities of higher education and exploring career opportunities.



## *Parenthood Status and Caregiving*

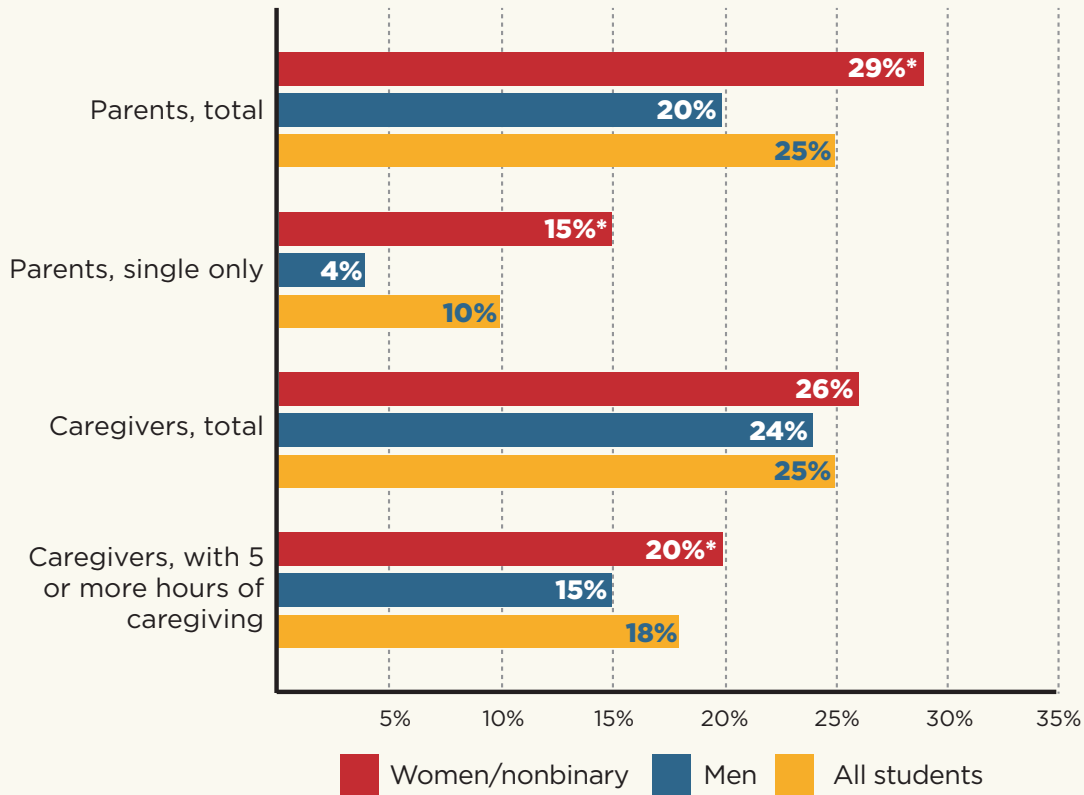
As shown in figure 4, one in four students was either a parent or a legal guardian. Notably, 29 percent of women and nonbinary students reported being parents, whereas only 20 percent of men did. Women and nonbinary students were significantly more likely than men to report being a single parent (15 percent and 4 percent, respectively). These findings highlight the reality that women often shoulder greater childcare responsibilities than their male counterparts. Moreover, as a group, single parents are disproportionately affected by financial hardship (Sawhill 2022).

Beyond taking care of their own children, many students provide care for other family members, including other children, elders, and individuals with disabilities. Survey results reveal that about one in four students took on caregiving responsibilities apart from parenting their own children. Women and nonbinary students were more likely than men to report that they regularly provided care for other family members for five or more hours per week. These findings suggest that financial constraints and inadequate social safety nets may be limiting students' ability to focus fully on their studies and careers, with women disproportionately bearing the burden of additional caregiving responsibilities.



Photograph by Gilberto Manzanarez, Valle Imperial Resiste, 2024

**Figure 4. Parenting and Caregiving Status by Gender, IVC Students Aged 18 and Older, 2024**



Source: Thriving Youth Study (N=1,274)

Note: "Parents" includes students who were legal guardians.

"Caregiving" is providing care for anyone other than parents' children.

\*The statistical difference between men and women/nonbinary respondents is unlikely due to chance.

Currently, IVC offers priority registration to student parents in acknowledgment of their schedules, which are usually less flexible than those of other students. Additionally, the college provides guidance to and additional support for student parents through its Student Equity and Achievement Program.

### *In-Person Class Attendance*

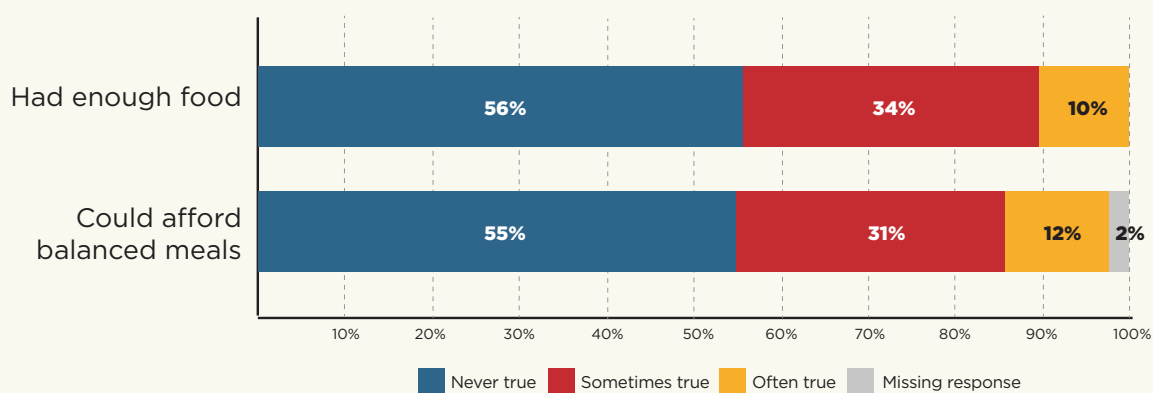
Women and nonbinary students were less likely than men to report attending at least one in-person class. Approximately two-thirds (67 percent) of women and nonbinary respondents attended at least one in-person class, whereas 74 percent of men did so. This pattern may be attributed to the caregiving responsibilities that disproportionately affect women and can require them to stay home. Additional analysis shows that students without children were more likely to take in-person classes than those with children. While there may be additional reasons that impact in-person attendance (such as choice of major), our findings suggest that caregiving roles are one important factor in determining students' access to in-person learning opportunities.



## Food and Housing Insecurity

Survey results highlight the financial hardships faced by many IVC students. Strikingly, a large share of students experienced some level of food insecurity. When asked if their household had enough food, 34 percent of students responded that this was “sometimes true,” and 10 percent said it was “often true.” Additionally, when asked if their household could afford balanced meals, 31 percent of students indicated this was “sometimes true,” while 12 percent said it was “often true.” Survey data did not reveal gender differences in food insecurity.

**Figure 5. Food Insecurity, IVC Students Aged 18 and Older, 2024**



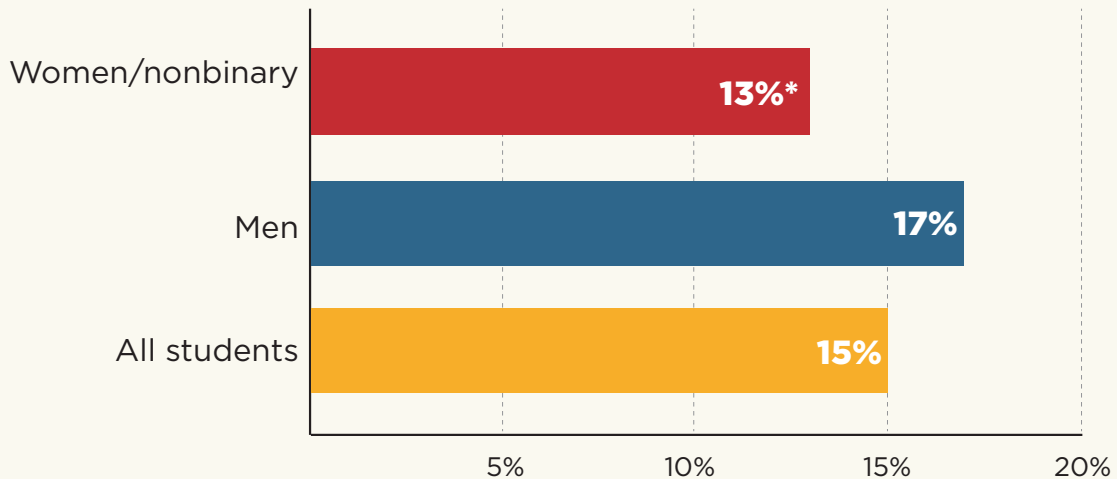
Source: Thriving Youth Study (N=1,274)

Students and their families in Imperial County face challenges with housing affordability as California grapples with rising housing costs. Nearly half (47 percent) of IVC respondents reported difficulty paying for housing. Tentative evidence suggests that women are slightly more likely to report higher rates of housing vulnerability. Specifically, 50 percent of women and nonbinary students in our sample reported housing difficulties, compared to 44 percent of men.<sup>4</sup> Housing demand and costs will likely continue to rise as economic development occurs in the region, further increasing the need for policies that ensure housing affordability for existing Imperial County residents.

## Health Insurance Coverage

Most IVC students reported that they had some form of health insurance, with 15 percent reporting that they were uninsured. Men were more likely to lack health coverage, with 17 percent uninsured compared to 13 percent of women and nonbinary students. Among the uninsured (n=183), the most commonly cited reason for not having health insurance was its high cost.

**Figure 6. Lack of Insurance by Gender, IVC Students Aged 18 and Older, 2024**



Source: Thriving Youth Study (N=1,274)

\*The statistical difference between men and women/nonbinary respondents is unlikely due to chance

## High School Academic Experiences



Students' high school experiences offer valuable insights into their college preparedness. To explore this topic, the survey asked students about their academic performance, coursework, and participation in various academic programs in high school. The findings reveal gender differences in academic achievement and indicate that women and nonbinary students are more likely than their male counterparts to participate in programs designed to enhance academic achievement.

Survey responses suggest that most students, particularly women and nonbinary students, performed well in high school. Approximately two-thirds of respondents (66 percent) reported earning mostly A's and B's (fig. 7). Another 25 percent earned mostly B's and C's, while the remaining 9 percent received lower grades. Survey results also provide indicators of college readiness. For example, 40 percent of respondents participated in Advanced Placement (AP) or honors courses, and 18 percent reported involvement in the AVID college-preparatory program.

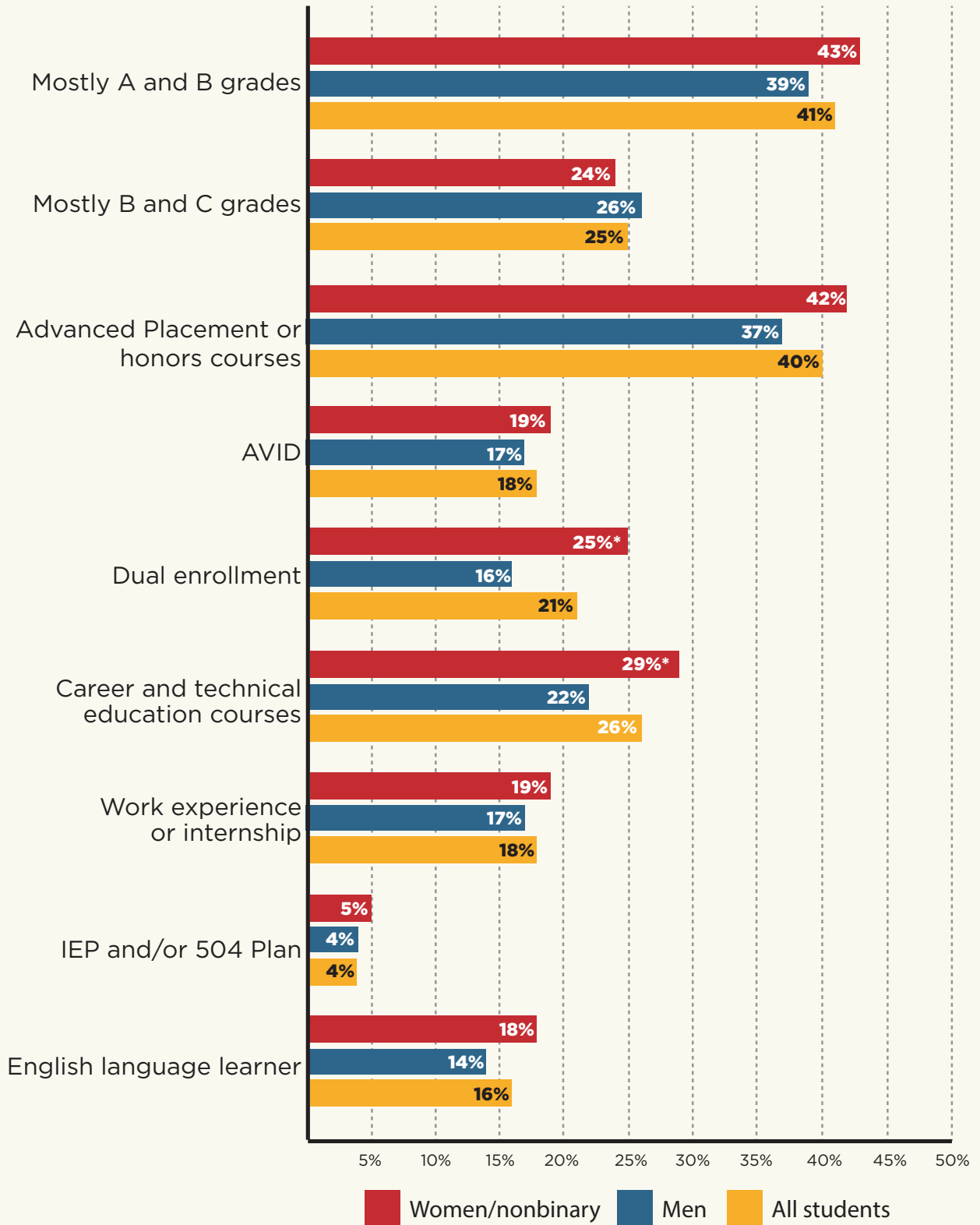
A notable segment of respondents had been exposed to college coursework while enrolled in high school. Twenty-one percent participated in college dual-enrollment programs while still in high school, with women and nonbinary students participating at higher rates than men. Similarly, just over a quarter of students took career and technical education (CTE) courses, with women and nonbinary students again having a slightly higher participation rate. Meanwhile, 18 percent of students took part in work experience programs, internships, or job placement programs during high school.

Some IVC students also received support from specialized high school programs. Four percent reported having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and/or a 504 plan, both of which are designed for students with disabilities. Additionally, roughly 16 percent of students participated in English language learner (ELL) programs, with slightly higher participation rates among women and nonbinary students when compared to men.



Photograph courtesy of Imperial Valley Equity and Justice Coalition.

**Figure 7. High School Program Participation by Gender, IVC Students Aged 18 and Older, 2024**



Source: Thriving Youth Study, (N=1,274)

\*The statistical difference between men and women/nonbinary respondents is unlikely due to chance.

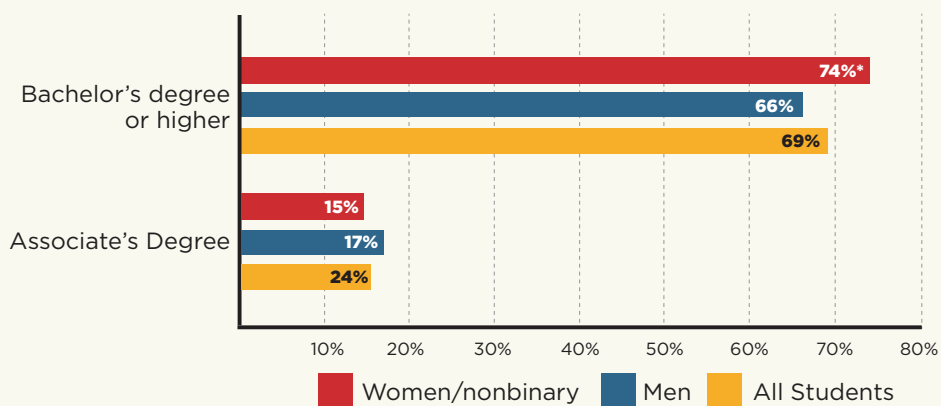
# Educational and Career Expectations



The survey asked students about their educational and career goals, and findings reveal that IVC students, particularly women and nonbinary individuals, have high educational aspirations. At the same time, results suggest that respondents may need tailored guidance in setting and achieving their educational and career goals.

To contextualize IVC students' educational expectations, it is important to note that ACS estimates indicate that only 10 percent of Imperial County residents aged twenty-five and older held a bachelor's degree in 2023 (ACS 2023). Meanwhile, according to data collected in 2021 by the Chancellor's Office Management Information System, only 8.6 percent of IVC students eventually transferred to a four-year university and thus pursued their studies beyond an associate's degree.<sup>5</sup> However, when survey participants were asked about the highest level of education they expected to complete, approximately seven in ten responded that they aspired to attain at least a bachelor's degree. Notably, nearly one in four hoped to obtain a master's degree, a professional degree, or a JD (24 percent), and 9 percent aimed for a PhD, MD, or other doctoral degree. Women and nonbinary students expressed somewhat higher educational expectations than men. Given that these students' educational aspirations significantly exceed current patterns of educational attainment among Imperial County residents, it is essential to provide high school and community college students with tailored guidance to help them pursue their goals effectively, while also offering them support to reassess and adjust their plans as needed to align with their academic progress and circumstances. Tailored guidance is especially important given that IVC serves many first-generation college students who may not have access to social networks that offer up-to-date and reliable information.

**Figure 8. Expectations for Degree Attainment by Gender, IVC Students Aged 18 and Older, 2024**



Source: Thriving Youth Study, (N=1,274)

\*The statistical difference between men and women/nonbinary respondents is unlikely due to chance.



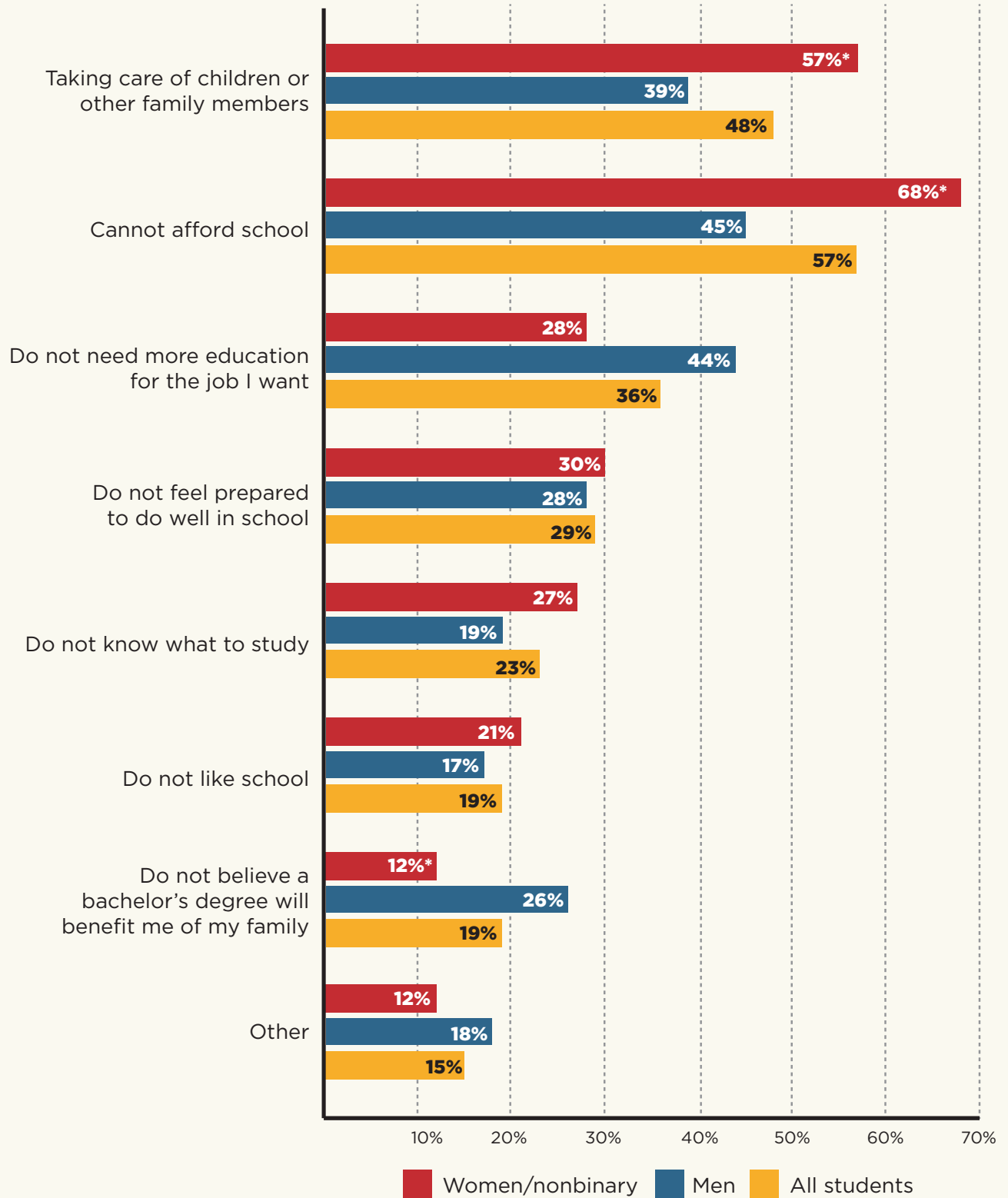
Students not planning to pursue a bachelor’s degree or higher were asked why they were not seeking to further their education. The most common reasons cited were affordability and caregiving responsibilities. Specifically, 57 percent of these students responded, “I can’t afford paying for school.” This response was more common among women and nonbinary students (68 percent) than men (45 percent). Additionally, 48 percent reported that caregiving responsibilities for children or other family members were a barrier, with far more women and nonbinary students (57 percent) citing this reason than men (39 percent). Interestingly, only 19 percent of students indicated that a bachelor’s degree would not benefit them or their family. Women and nonbinary students (12 percent) were much less likely to hold this belief than men (26 percent).



 Photograph courtesy of Imperial Valley College



**Figure 9. Reasons for Not Pursuing a Bachelor's Degree by Gender, IVC Students Aged 18 and Older, 2024**

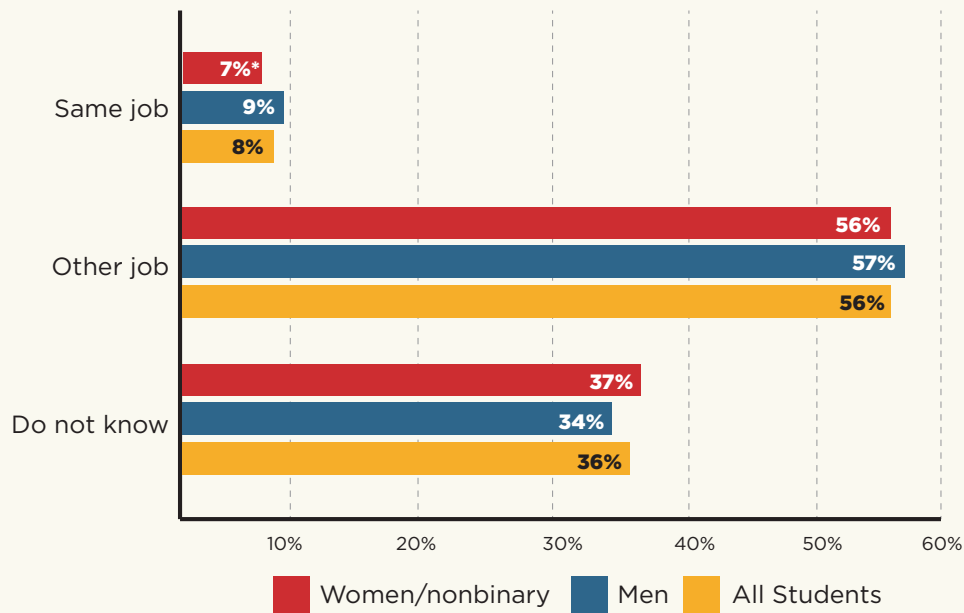


Source: Thriving Youth Study, (n= 218)

\*The statistical difference between men and women/nonbinary respondents is unlikely due to chance.

When asked about the job they expected to have in five years, 8 percent of students said they wanted to keep their current job, and 56 percent hoped to transition into another role. Career goals varied by gender. Among women and nonbinary students, nursing (12 percent) and teaching (8 percent) were the most commonly reported occupations. Men most frequently identified law enforcement (7 percent) as their career goal. Meanwhile, a significant portion of students (36 percent) said they did not know, highlighting the need for expanded career guidance and training.

**Figure 10. Job Expectations by Gender, IVC Students Aged 18 and Older, 2024**



Source: Thriving Youth Study, (N=1,274)

\*The statistical difference between men and women/nonbinary respondents is unlikely due to chance.

## Student Interest in IVC Career Training Programs




Lithium deposits beneath the nearby Salton Sea present significant opportunities for local economic growth, which would drive demand for skilled workers in lithium-related and adjacent industries. In response, IVC has developed the Lithium Industry Force Training program, otherwise known as “LIFT the Valley.” LIFT consists of a one-year training program involving certification in one of the following three occupations: 1) plant operation, focused on operating and monitoring equipment in geothermal plants and mineral extraction facilities; 2) chemical lab technician, conducting laboratory testing and analysis related to lithium extraction and processing; and 3) instrumentation technician, developing expertise in maintaining and calibrating industrial instruments. The survey asked students about their interest in the three program tracks. It also

explored student interest in two other lithium-related job-training programs for becoming electrical technicians or administrative assistants.

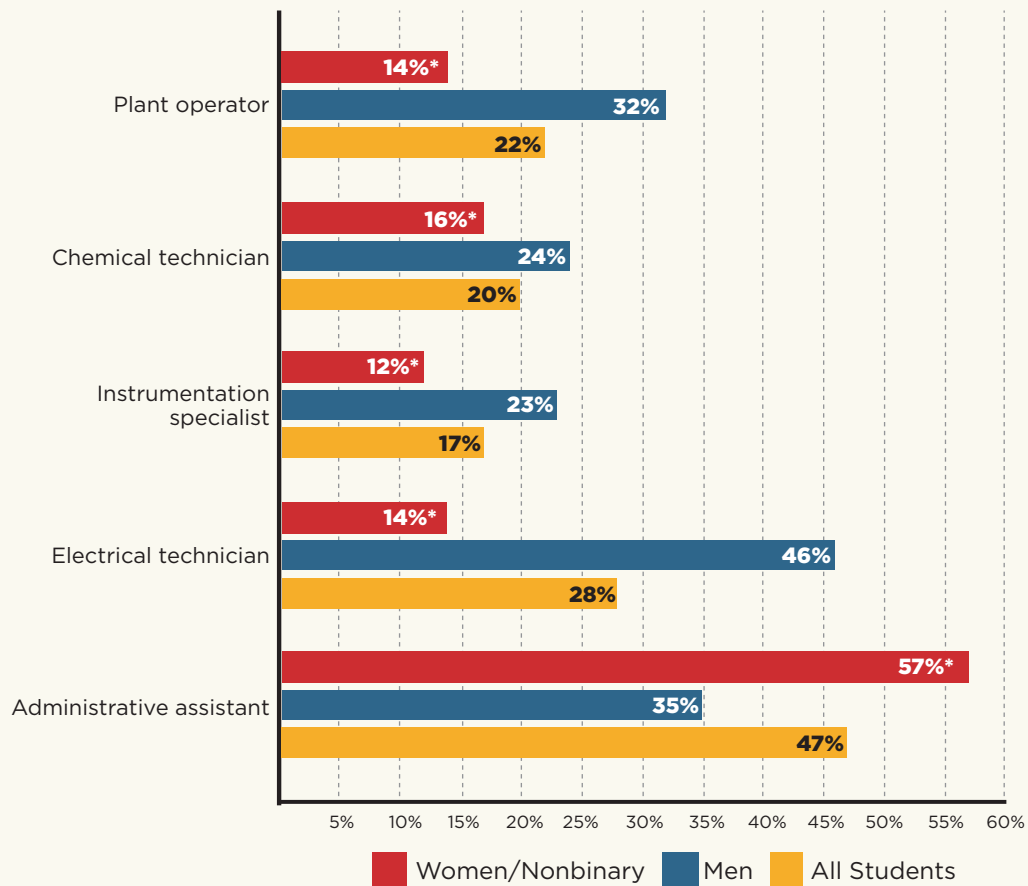
Survey findings indicate that many students have a strong interest in vocational training programs and that patterns are gendered. Young men were especially interested in LIFT the Valley as well as in becoming electrical technicians, with 32 percent expressing an interest in plant operator roles, 24 percent in chemical technician roles, and 23 percent in instrumentation specialist positions. Meanwhile, an impressive 46 percent of men demonstrated an interest in electrical technician positions. Just over a third were interested in administrative assistant training.

The percentages of women and nonbinary students interested in lithium-related and electrical technician training programs were significantly lower at 14 percent for plant operator, 16 percent for chemical technician, and 12 percent for instrumentation specialist. The majority of women and nonbinary students (57 percent) expressed an interest in administrative assistant training. These results demonstrate the need for IVC leadership to attend to gender inclusivity so that all students who are interested in vocational tracks feel welcome and can thrive as they pursue training.



 Photograph by Shutterstock

**Figure 11. Interest in Job Training by Gender, IVC Students Aged 18 and Older, 2024**



Source: Thriving Youth Study, (N= 1,274)

\*The statistical difference between men and women/nonbinary respondents is unlikely due to chance.

## Extracurricular Involvement and Civic Engagement



Extracurricular and civic activities play a crucial role in expanding students’ skills, networks, and engagement with their local communities. Our survey findings show that 71 percent of respondents who were no longer in high school had previously participated in extracurricular activities—including sports, arts, and leadership initiatives—or civic groups through school, religious organizations, or community programs. Among this group of respondents, however, only 44 percent remained engaged in such activities after high school. Furthermore, just 25 percent had collaborated with others on a community issue in the past year. Notably, these patterns showed no significant gender differences.

These findings suggest that many students lack a sustained connection to school- or community-based activities that could deepen their understanding of local issues. This trend aligns with Imperial County’s comparatively low voter turnout rates during government elections.<sup>6</sup> Since IVC offers a point of connection for an important segment of the county’s young population, it can play a pivotal role in fostering student participation in civic groups and other extracurricular activities within their community.

## Recommendations



As the Imperial Valley’s economy evolves, Imperial Valley College will play a central role in helping local residents thrive. As Imperial County’s sole community college, IVC provides accessible education and career pathways for students from predominantly low-income backgrounds—students who represent the region’s future workforce and civic leadership. Should funding become available, IVC’s commitment to student success can be strengthened through the following investments.

1. **Broadening access to resources for low-income students.** IVC attracts students who seek to grow their skills, talents, and career opportunities despite facing economic hardship. IVC has already established several resources for students, including assistance with acquiring textbooks, food, and housing; therefore, if more resources become available, the college should consider expanding outreach efforts and financial support services to help students overcome economic barriers and maximize their educational potential.
2. **Expanding childcare services.** Many IVC students, particularly women, balance academic responsibilities with significant family caregiving responsibilities. While IVC has allocated resources to support student parents, greater access to affordable on-campus childcare would enable more students to attend in-person classes and engage in academic and career-enriching activities. Expanding childcare services and outreach to students with caregiving responsibilities would further promote student retention, academic achievement, and transfer rates.
3. **Strengthening transfer pathways.** IVC students have high educational aspirations that exceed regional trends. To support their academic goals, IVC should continue collaborating with four-year institutions to enhance transfer policies and practices. As an accessible and affordable institution, IVC serves as a critical entry point for many local high school graduates and community members seeking a bachelor’s degree. Strengthening transfer pathways will help more students successfully transition to four-year colleges and universities.
4. **Enhancing workforce development for all students.** IVC should continue investing in workforce development programs while ensuring inclusivity for all students. Programs that prepare students for jobs in lithium-related industries, such as LIFT the Valley, should be designed to support all students, including women, who are invested in their chosen career tracks. As career training programs expand, the college could seek to strengthen

partnerships with high-road employers—those offering living wages and benefits—to provide students with internships that enhance their job prospects. Given the large number of students balancing caregiving responsibilities, career technical education should also be structured to meet their needs, improving economic opportunities for IVC’s entire student body.

5. **Expanding civic engagement and professional networking opportunities.** IVC is a key institution serving young adults in the region, and it already hosts a range of student organizations and community-based activities. However, it has the potential to further connect students, civic organizations, and local businesses. Expanding networking and civic engagement initiatives will provide students with valuable experiences, mentorship, and increased leadership development opportunities.

## Conclusion



Investing in IVC is essential to equipping students with the career-based skills and knowledge needed to pursue diverse career paths, whether or not they require a bachelor’s degree. The college’s programs also have the potential to bolster civic engagement and leadership development in the region. By helping students establish and achieve viable academic and career goals, IVC can contribute to equitable economic growth and an improved quality of life for students, their families, and their communities. As future leaders in local industries, public institutions, and civil society, IVC graduates represent an investment in the future of the Imperial Valley.

## Notes

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1. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is conducted annually by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). For how the graduation rate is determined, see <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/survey-components/9>.
2. The survey is part of the CSRC’s Thriving Youth Study. The response rate for this survey was 18 percent. Responses were weighted to reflect the race, gender, age composition, and in-person enrollment of the student population. A separate online technical report published on the CSRC website describes the data and methodology.
3. A single asterisk represents statistical significance of  $p < 0.05$ .
4. Gender differences found for housing affordability are statistically significant:  $p < 0.10$ .
5. California Community Colleges’ (CCC) Chancellor’s Office Management Information System (COMIS) collects data on completion rates, transfer rates, student services, for example, from colleges in the CCC system. For how the transfer rate is determined, see [https://www.calpassplus.org/Launchboard/Student-Success-Metrics-MDD#\\_Toc138667046](https://www.calpassplus.org/Launchboard/Student-Success-Metrics-MDD#_Toc138667046)
6. For example, in the 2022 midterm elections only 37 percent of all registered voters in Imperial County voted, compared to 52 percent statewide. In the same election, only 20 percent of young adult registered voters (aged 18–34) in Imperial County cast ballots. This compares to 30 percent of their same-aged peers across the state (Target Smart 2024).



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