



Revealing Institutional
Strengths and Challenges

WHAT CHALLENGES TO SUCCESS DO COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS FACE?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

01

In fall 2017 and fall 2018, we administered the Revealing Institutional Strengths and Challenges (RISC) Survey at ten community colleges across the country. The survey is the first of its kind to directly ask students about the challenges they face while in college. This white paper provides the first glimpse at the challenges to success community college students face and points to important areas of policy and practice that can help these students achieve their goals.

We offer three main findings from our survey results:

- ▶ Community college students face a dizzying array of demands outside of college that affect their success. Among the top ten challenges most frequently cited, personal issues, such as balancing work and school (first most frequently cited), paying expenses (second), meeting demands of family and friends (third), and health and disabilities (eighth), all present obstacles for many students.
- ▶ Students also report obstacles in areas directly related to their college experience, including online classes (fourth), parking on campus (fifth), developmental courses (sixth), faculty (seventh), doing college-level work (ninth), and registering for courses (tenth).
- ▶ While students face challenges, they overwhelmingly report a positive community college experience. Ninety-five percent were *very likely* or *somewhat likely* to recommend their college to a friend. Ninety-six percent believe their community college education was worth what they paid or worth more than what they paid. Nearly all believe their college helped them meet their educational goals.

You can learn more about the survey at www.risc.college.

BACKGROUND

02

In fall 2017 and fall 2018, we administered the Revealing Institutional Strengths and Challenges (RISC) Survey at ten community colleges.¹ In total, we surveyed 50,097 community college students, with an average institutional response rate of 19%.

The RISC asks students about the challenges they faced during the current semester in five broad areas: academic support services, campus environment, finances and financial aid, succeeding in their courses, and work and personal issues. Each section has multiple challenges, with over 80 unique challenges to student success across the five areas, such as errors with financial aid paperwork, not being advised to take a course needed for their degree, or difficulty using course technology in online classes. We use a unique branching approach that allows students to quickly complete the survey; median response time is seven minutes.

The survey also asks about overall perceptions of the college. Students are asked if they would recommend the college to a friend, whether the college is a good value, and how well the college is helping them meet their educational goals, such as improving job and career opportunities or preparing for a four-year degree.

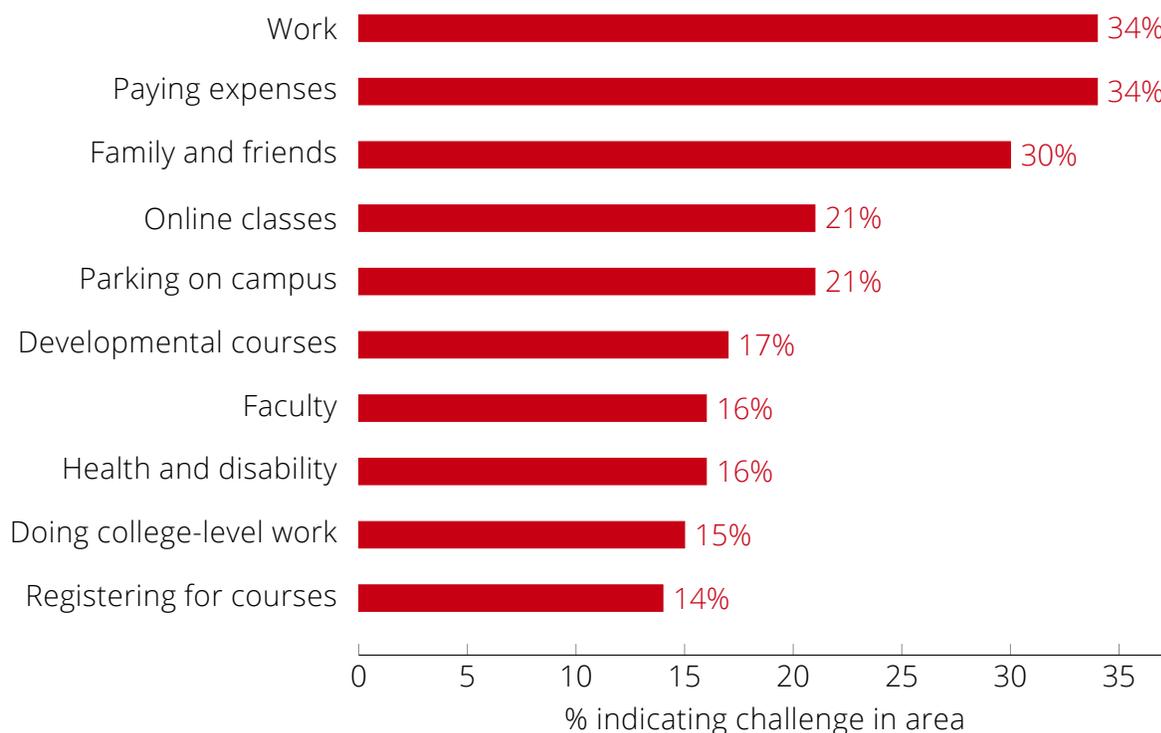
¹ Interactive and printable versions of the survey can be found at www.risc.college/two-year-survey.

CHALLENGES TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT SUCCESS

TOP TEN CHALLENGES TO SUCCESS

Our survey suggests that community college students encounter a number of obstacles to their success. Figure 3.1 presents the top ten areas where students experience challenges. Personal issues, such as balancing work, paying expenses, and meeting the demands of family and friends all present obstacles for a large percentage of community college students who responded to our survey. However, many students report obstacles in areas directly related to their academic experience, including online classes, parking on campus, developmental courses, faculty, doing college-level work, and registering for courses.

Figure 3.1 Top ten challenges to student success



Notes

Percentages do not sum to 100%, because respondents could choose more than one option. *n* = 6,079.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE TOP FIVE CHALLENGES

When we look more closely at the top five challenges reported by students (see Table 3.1), we get a deeper sense of students' lives and their college experiences. Many community college students have considerable demands of their time and resources and report that these present obstacles to their college success. For example, among the students who reported work-related challenges, 61 % indicated that their work hours did not leave enough time for study, and an additional 36 % said that work prevented them from using campus resources. Approximately half reported that their pay was not enough to cover their expenses while in school, and one-third said their work schedule conflicted with class times.

When we asked students to describe one thing they would change about their college, one student said,

- ▶ *Offer more weekend hours for the Tutoring Center and the Library – or later hours for each. With working 8-5 M-F, and classes in the evening well past 8 PM, there isn't much opportunity for me to visit the library or the Tutoring Center. These are two valuable resources I wish I could take advantage of. Saturday hours are difficult with kids/family commitments. Sunday hours would be GREAT!*

Paying expenses posed a problem for nearly as many students as did work. Among the third of respondents who faced a challenge paying expenses, 71 % reported that paying living expenses was an obstacle to their success, and 55 % indicated troubles associated with paying tuition and fees. Approximately 58 % faced challenges covering the cost of books, software, and other school supplies.

Several students commented about finances when asked about something they would change about their college:

- ▶ *We should do more to insure that students' needs outside of and off campus are better met so they can be as successful as possible while on campus*
- ▶ *A means to help students like me who are struggling to meet living expenses while taking classes.*
- ▶ *If a book is really expensive a student is not going to purchase it making them behind in classes*

Of those who had challenges related to family and friends, nearly three-quarters reported difficulty balancing the demands of family and school. Approximately one-third struggled with the health demands of family and friends.

Our focus groups suggest that many community college students spend a good deal of time looking for parking, causing them to be late to class and important on-campus appointments and meetings, or even to miss class entirely. When students have so many competing demands, this challenge is not trivial. Our survey results bear this out. Nearly one in five respondents indicated that parking presented a challenge to college success. Among those who indicated parking as a challenge, nearly all (86 %) reported difficulty parking on or near campus.

Table 3.1 Top five challenges: detailed responses

Work	34 % (<i>n</i> = 2,095)	<i>The 2,095 students choosing "work" reported:</i>	
		Work hours do not leave time for study	61 %
		Pay not enough to cover expenses while in school	49 %
		Work schedule prevents campus resource use	36 %
		Work schedule conflicts with classes	35 %
		Work schedule not flexible during semester	26 %
Paying expenses	34 % (<i>n</i> = 2,055)	<i>The 2,055 students choosing "paying expenses" reported:</i>	
		Living expenses	71 %
		Books, software, and other supplies	58 %
		Tuition and fees	55 %
		Childcare	11 %
Family and friends	30 % (<i>n</i> = 1,844)	<i>The 1,844 students choosing "family and friends" reported:</i>	
		Difficulty balancing demands of family and college	72 %
		Difficulty dealing with health of family and friends	35 %
		Difficulty finding childcare	13 %
		Family does not support me going to college	11 %
Online classes	21 % (<i>n</i> = 1,295)	<i>The 1,295 students choosing "online classes" reported:</i>	
		Difficulty learning material on my own	53 %
		Lack of interaction with faculty	44 %
		Difficulty keeping up because of no regular class times	38 %
		Difficulty using course technology	27 %
		Lack of interaction with other students	25 %
		Difficulty taking exams at testing center	12 %
Parking on campus	21 % (<i>n</i> = 1,281)	<i>The 1,281 students choosing "parking on campus" reported:</i>	
		Difficulty finding parking on or near campus	86 %
		Parking on or near campus is too expensive	10 %
		Difficulty getting parking pass	4 %

Notes

The percentages in the second column are calculated for the entire respondent sample. The proportions in the far right-hand column are calculated only for those students reporting a challenge in one of the main areas. E.g., 34 % (*n* = 2,095) of the 6,079 students responding to the survey reported a work-related challenge to college success. Of these, 61 % (1,269/2,095) stated that work hours did not leave them enough time for study.

Not surprisingly, many students commented about parking when responding to our open-end question about one change they would make to their college:

- ▶ *Better parking. Usually spend 10 minutes looking for a spot.*
- ▶ *Make more parking available to avoid being late or searching for a spot*

One potential solution to ease the time and resource demands of college students is online class offerings. These offerings, however, present their own challenges for community college students. Of the 21 % who indicated online classes presented a challenge to their success, just over half had difficulty learning material on their own, something expected in courses delivered in an online environment. Approximately 44 % were challenged by the lack of interaction with their online faculty.

One student summarized this well:

- ▶ *From my experience, I struggle in online classes, but succeed in regular classes.*

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE NEXT FIVE CHALLENGES

The next five most frequently reported challenges largely point to course-related obstacles to success (see Table 3.2). Developmental coursework was the sixth-most cited challenge among community college students who completed our survey. Among those students, 36 % believed the developmental courses were too hard, yet only 5 % thought they were too easy. One-quarter indicated developmental courses did not prepare them for college-level coursework.

Academic under-preparedness extended beyond developmental coursework. Approximately 15 % of respondents reported they faced challenges doing college-level work. Lack of planning and time management, poor study skills, and lack of motivation were the most frequently cited obstacles among these students.

Among the 16 % of students who reported that faculty presented challenges to student success, over two-thirds said that their faculty did not teach well. They pointed specifically to issues of feedback on assignments, where the feedback was not helpful (44 %) or it took too long for faculty to grade assignments (34 %). Some students also indicated that faculty did not seem concerned about their academic success (36 %), were not responsive to email (30 %), or were not helpful outside of class (26 %).

Getting into classes at times that worked for their busy lives also presented a significant challenge to community college students. A nontrivial number of respondents (14%; tenth most frequently reported challenge) had trouble registering for courses. Among the most frequently reported reasons are courses are not offered at times they needed, courses are offered but full, or courses are not offered in the semester they wanted.

Table 3.2 Next five challenges: detailed responses

		<i>The 1,033 students choosing "developmental courses" reported:</i>		
Dev. courses	17 % (n = 1,033)	}	Courses were too hard	36 %
			Did not prepare me for college-level courses	25 %
			Required to take too many	25 %
			Courses were too easy	5 %
		<i>The 974 students choosing "faculty" reported:</i>		
Faculty	16 % (n = 974)	}	Did not teach well	69 %
			Feedback on assignments not helpful	44 %
			Not concerned about my academic success	36 %
			Took too long to grade assignments	34 %
			Not responsive to email	30 %
			Not helpful outside of class	26 %
			Not available to meet in person	10 %
		<i>The 973 students choosing "health and disability" reported:</i>		
Health and disability	16 % (n = 973)	}	Emotional/mental health issue	59 %
			Physical health issue	54 %
			Faculty did not provide necessary accommodations	4 %
			Pregnancy and childbirth	4 %
			Disability services did not provide support	4 %
			Campus is difficult to navigate with disability	2 %
		<i>The 893 students choosing "doing college-level work" reported:</i>		
Doing college-level work	15 % (n = 893)	}	Poor planning & time management skills	48 %
			Poor study skills	44 %
			Not motivated to study	37 %
			Reading or writing assignments were difficult	29 %
			Required level of math was difficult	27 %
			Took too many classes	17 %
			Skipped too many classes	7 %
		<i>The 855 students choosing "registering for courses" reported:</i>		
Registering for courses	14 % (n = 855)	}	Course not offered at times I needed	45 %
			Course was offered but full	35 %
			Course not offered this semester	26 %
			Had a registration hold	18 %

Notes

The percentages in the second column are calculated for the entire respondent sample. The proportions in the far right-hand column are calculated only for those students reporting a challenge in one of the main areas. E.g., 17% (n = 1,033) of the 6,079 students responding to the survey reported a developmental course-related challenge to college success. Of these, 36% (370/1,033) stated that their developmental courses were too hard.

Students often noted class schedule challenges in their open-ended responses. Many sounded like this student:

▶ *I am a student that also works. I have a full-time job. I'm usually stuck with evening classes and a lot of the classes that I need to take are only offered during the day.*

Finally, in addition to facing challenges juggling work and family lives, health and disabilities created obstacles to student success. Among the 16 % who reported a challenge in this area, more than half (59 %) indicated an emotional or mental health issue was a challenge, and more than half (54 %) had physical health issues that affected their success in college.

STUDENT VIEWS OF THEIR COMMUNITY COLLEGE: A GREAT EXPERIENCE

04

While many community college students faced challenges, they overwhelmingly reported a good experience at their college. For example, approximately 95% were *very likely* or *somewhat likely* to recommend their college to a friend (see Figure 4.1). Nearly all also believed their overall education at the college was a good investment. Ninety-six percent reported it was worth what they paid or worth more than what they paid.

When asked about their college's greatest strength, several mentioned how much people on campus cared about them.

- ▶ *How much everyone seems to care about my success. The staff, both professors and financial aid personnel, have never once showed any signs that I was not important to them. [College name] community has been the key to my success and I will never forget anyone that I have come in contact with here.*

While quite a few students mentioned affordability, many also talked about cost in relation to value. They said their college offered an:

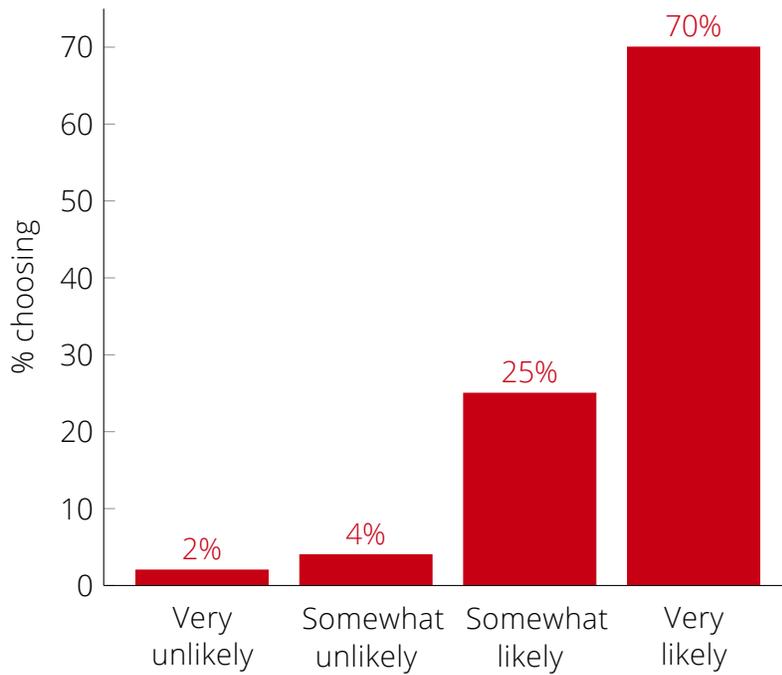
- ▶ *Affordable, quality education. I think I get better education than someone at a [four-year] school may get, who also pays over twice as much. I also like that there are smaller class sizes, allowing more of a personal connection with instructors.*

Our findings paint a similar picture when we look at whether community colleges are helping students meet their educational goals. When asked about their primary purpose for taking courses at their community college, 53% said to increase job and career opportunities, 38% said to prepare for a four-year degree, and 9% said self-improvement. Among students whose primary goal was to increase job and career opportunities, 85% said that their college was preparing them *fairly well* or *very well* for the labor market (see Figure 4.2). For those whose primary purpose was to prepare for a four-year degree, approximately 88% reported their community college education was preparing them *fairly well* or *very well* for transfer. As one student noted,

- ▶ *[College name] was a great choice for my advancement. I am learning hands-on and extremely pertinent skills for my career choice.*

Figure 4.1 Student views of their community college

(a) Would student recommend their community college to a friend?



(b) Overall value of education at community college?

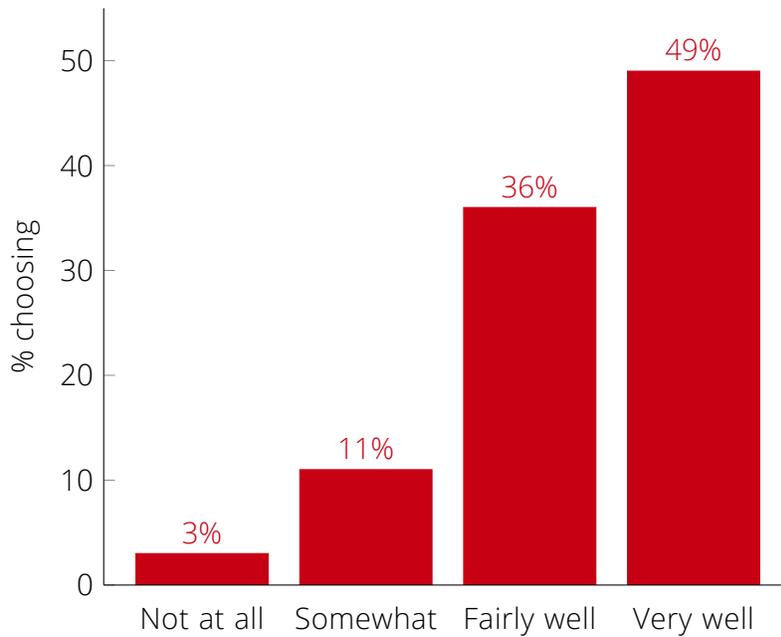


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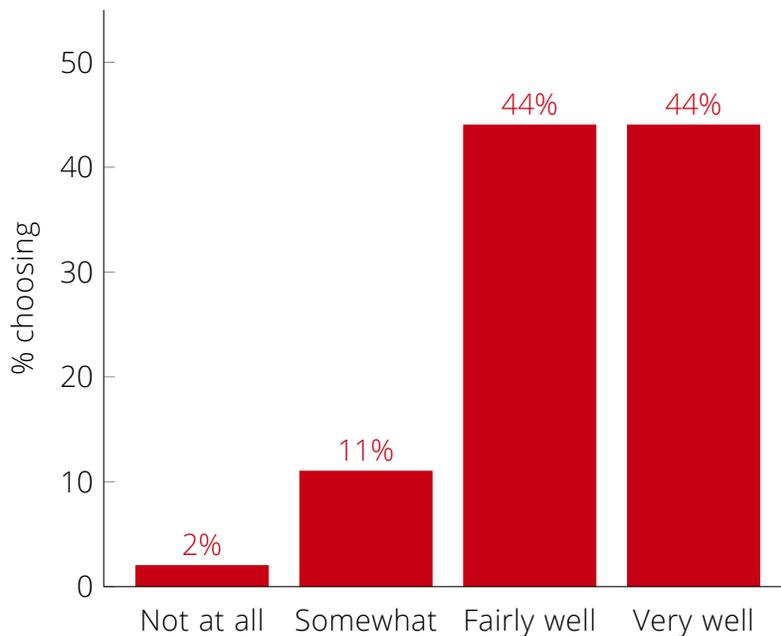
Panel (a) $n = 6,019$. Panel (b) $n = 6,023$

Figure 4.2 Student views of their community college

(a) How well is education at the community college increasing your job and career opportunities?



(b) How well is education at the community college preparing you for a four-year degree?



Notes

Panel (a) $n = 3,177$. Panel (b) $n = 2,312$

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

05

These findings support the growing literature that describes the incredible demands that students face while in college. Our findings provide an important counter-narrative to what many believe is the traditional college experience where young students' only responsibilities are to attend class and study. The lives of community college students are very complicated in ways that present meaningful challenges to their success. Students have to juggle work, family, friends, and school, all while struggling to pay their bills. On top of that, they struggle doing college-level work and know they have poor time management and study skills.

Many enroll in online or developmental courses that also create challenges. These courses should provide flexibility for busy students and help prepare them for college-level work, but instead present new challenges. Some students in online courses are challenged by learning material on their own and miss the interaction with faculty and peers. A substantial number of developmental students believed developmental courses were too hard or did not prepare them for college-level work.

Seemingly small things like parking and registering for courses created challenges for community college students we surveyed. With the demands these students face, limited class availability and spending considerable time finding parking can pose very real problems for them.

While community college students face many challenges to their success, it is important to note that they also overwhelmingly report a positive college experience. Nearly all would recommend their college to a friend, believe their college is a good value, and think their college is helping them meet their educational goals.

These findings have important implications for policy and practice. First, the current system of how students finance college appears to be outdated and broken. Despite working while in college, today's community college student faces challenges paying their bills. This, along with other demands of their time, prevents them from being able to dedicate the time to school in order to be successful.

Second, convenient online classes are not necessarily the answer to making things better for busy students. Our findings suggest that online courses are not without their problems. An investment in online instructional support may help improve these classes and alleviate some of the concerns students have about them.

Third, we need to re-think how colleges are helping those who are not ready for college-level work. Many of the innovative remediation practices will likely help here, but content mastery is not the only academic challenge students face. It is not clear that we have effectively figured

out how to systematically help those who have poor study and time management skills, and we should focus some attention on interventions that help students without these skills.

Finally, community colleges appear to be doing a lot with very little. While students face many challenges, these traditionally under-resourced institutions are creating a positive experience for students. Imagine if these colleges were adequately resourced!

APPENDIX: SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

Ten community colleges from California, Michigan, Nebraska, North Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Virginia, Wisconsin and Wyoming participated in the survey. Their characteristics are presented in Table 6.1.

The ten colleges are diverse in terms of their mission, urbanicity, and student enrollments. For example, four colleges' missions focused on high career and technical programs, three were high transfer colleges, and three were a mix of high transfer and career and technical. The study also included two urban colleges, two colleges located in towns, three suburban colleges, and three rural colleges. Among participating colleges, most were mid-size, ranging in student enrollments between 2,500 and 9,999. One college was small and two were large with 10,000 or more students.

Table 6.1 Characteristics of participating community colleges

<i>Mission</i>	
High career & technical	4
Mixed	3
High transfer	3
	<hr/> 10
<i>Urbanicity</i>	
City	2
Town	2
Suburban	3
Rural	3
	<hr/> 10
<i>Student enrollment</i>	
Less than 2,500	1
Between 2,500 and 4,999	4
Between 5,000 and 9,999	3
10,000 plus	2
	<hr/> 10

More than half of the respondents were full-time students (enrolled in 12 or more credit hours) and nearly two-thirds were female. Approximately 70% identified as White. Respondent characteristics are presented in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2 Characteristics of student respondents

<i>Attendance status</i>		
Part-time (< 12 credit hours)	41 %	2,445
Full-time (\geq 12 credit hours)	59 %	3,535
		<hr/> 5,980
<i>Gender identity</i>		
Female/Woman	64 %	3,825
Male/Man	35 %	2,074
Another gender identity	1 %	80
		<hr/> 5,979
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>		
African-American	5 %	304
Asian	4 %	209
Latinx	12 %	737
Native American	1 %	55
Other/multi-racial	8 %	483
White	70 %	4,176
		<hr/> 5,964
