



"Once you know someone is looking at you, expecting the best of you, that's when you start working and doing your absolute best. So it really does start with an adult, it starts with a parent, it starts with a teacher, it starts with a mentor, and then you excel off of that. They're the launching pad, you're the rocket." - **Hamilton County high school senior**

"I think it's good when people in the community set a new standard. That college is normal for everybody. That high school graduation is expected of you, just as sure as you wake up in the morning and brush your teeth." - **Seattle high school junior**

"One thing I always told myself was that I don't have to be the tail. I got to be the head. So in order for me to distinguish myself from everybody else, I need education, because I already know that education is power." - **Seattle high school senior**

Hear Us Out

High School Students in Two Cities Talk About Going to College

A student research project by the Center for Youth Voice at What Kids Can Do

Fall 2010

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FOR THE FULL REPORT AND THE ACCOMPANYING VIDEOS, PLEASE GO TO:
[http://www.centerforyouthvoice.org/Center for Youth Voice/Hear Us Out.html](http://www.centerforyouthvoice.org/Center%20for%20Youth%20Voice/Hear%20Us%20Out.html)

PREFACE

For nine years, the national nonprofit WKCD (What Kids Can Do, Inc.) and its Center for Youth Voice has talked with students nationwide about their learning, their schools, their hopes and dreams. Going to college has been a big part of these conversations. What does it take to get to college, especially if you are the first in your family to go? Where does the motivation come from? What stands in the way? What supports do students need, and where can they—do they—turn for help? How well do they feel their schools are preparing them for college?

In the spring of 2010, a group of twelve high school students in Hamilton County, Tennessee and another thirteen high school students in Seattle asked their peers these questions and more. They were part of a WKCD project called **Hear Us Out**, a collaboration with Chattanooga’s Public Education Foundation and Seattle’s Alliance for Education, funded by the Indianapolis-based Lumina Foundation for Education.

Our student researchers explain:

We got involved in the **Hear Us Out** project because we know the most important ticket to success in life is to obtain a college education—and we see too many of our peers struggling to make it. We wanted to hear directly from our classmates how well prepared they feel for college and what role the school has had—and should have—in that process.

We developed a written survey and then worked with our schools to administer it to as many ninth through twelfth graders as we could: **4,790 students in all**. Once the data had been entered, we analyzed the results. We also organized youth focus groups at each of our nine schools, including students from as many different backgrounds as possible: African-American, White, Asian, Hispanic, athletes, band members, males, females, honors students, leaders, and quiet kids. **Over 225 students** participated in these 45 – 60 minute discussions.

The demographic breakdown of the students who participated in our research reflects the urban comprehensive high schools they attend

- **Grade level:** 9th - 30%; 10th – 27%; 11th – 22%; 12th – 21%
- **Gender:** female - 52%; male – 48%
- **Family income:** lower income (eligible for free/ reduced lunch) – 43%; higher income 38% (not eligible); don’t know - 19%
- **Race/ethnicity:** White – 47%; African-American – 24%; Asian – 11%; Hispanic – Other – 10% (Note: Compared to national averages, Hispanic students are underrepresented in the school enrollments in Hamilton County and Seattle.)

WHAT WE FOUND

We found no shortage of college aspirations among Hamilton County and Seattle high school students and their families—or educators who want the best for youth. What is too often in short supply, we heard again and again, are the supports and resources students need on their path to college. We learned, for example:

- Families are the biggest source of motivation for students when it comes to college and the place they turn most for help. Three-quarters of the students in our survey put family as their top source for college support, even when parents or guardians have not been to college themselves.

- In contrast, almost a third of the students said they had never spoken with a school counselor about college. The numbers improve for seniors, only; still 12 percent of seniors reported they had never spoken with a school counselor about college.
- Eighty-six percent of the students report that the idea of going to college had been planted before their sophomore year, starting in elementary school and peaking in grades 6 – 9. But they wish these early conversations about college had been followed up with concrete advice and help as soon as they entered high school, instead of junior or senior year.
- Sixty-eight percent of the students indicated they planned to attend college right after graduation. Sixty-eight percent of 9th-11th graders and 92 percent of seniors had researched colleges on the web; 52 percent of 9th-11th graders and 84 percent of seniors had looked into the SATs and ACTs; and 74 percent of all students had visited a college campus, most often with their family.
- More than two-thirds of the students said the cost of college was their biggest hurdle. Grades were second. Sixty percent said they knew “some” or “a lot” about financial aid; 40 percent said they knew “little” or “nothing.”
- Eighty-six percent of the students said they would turn to a parent or guardian if they were having a problem moving forward with their college plans, 38 percent said a school counselor, 33 percent a teacher. Twenty-eight percent of the seniors said they had completed their college application “mostly on my own.”
- On almost every measure, lower-income students (those eligible for free or reduced lunch) faced more obstacles and less support than higher-income students. It starts at the planning stage, when 78 percent of higher income students say they expect to attend college right after graduation, compared with 64 percent of lower-income students.
- Comparable gaps show up when the responses of white and Asian students are compared with African-American and Hispanic students. While, for example, 79 percent of Asian students expect to attend college right after graduation, the number drops to 56 percent among Hispanics.

WHAT WE HEARD

The 225 students in our focus groups and individual interviews talked about what motivates them towards college, what weighs them down, what helps, and about being the first in their family to attend college.

“I’ve always had high expectations for myself. When I was five, I told my mom I wanted to go to Harvard. When I was seven, I knew I wanted to become a pediatric surgeon. Now I want to be a lawyer. College has always been part of my plan.”

“My family motivated me, inspired me, for college, because they told me their stories of how they struggled with not going to school. My aunt got married at 18 and then she got pregnant. She just finished college right now. I’ve watched her struggle with two jobs and her family, and I don’t want to do that. My aunt, my uncles, my family, seeing them has convinced me going to college is the way to go.”

“I usually don’t like asking for help, but when someone comes up to you, even just a counselor, and says, ‘Hey, check this out, I don’t know if you’ll like it, but you should look at it anyway,’ that goes pretty far. Having someone working with you without you asking for it, that means a whole lot.”

“Financial aid, that’s my big obstacle. I’ve been looking for scholarships, but it’s harder than people think. I did a huge search for colleges and programs and internship options that I thought would best fit me. From that, I figured out my financial stuff. I was determined that the cost of college wasn’t going to block my dream. But, my, it’s been tough. And I’ve had to do it mostly on my own.”

“A lot of people think your grades don’t count until junior or senior, but every year the college competition gets rougher. You have to be on top of yourself freshman year, then your cumulative GPA will reflect that and you’ll get into better colleges. People think junior year, “Let me start focusing on my work now,” or “Let me start doing this.” But you need to be doing that starting in seventh grade.”

“The best thing a mentor can do is show students different paths and opportunities they can do, based on their interests. Instead of me going around to find new opportunities, they lay it out. ‘There’s this cool program you can join because I know that you like to do this.’”

WHAT WE ASK

Behind big goals for college attendance by America’s high school students lie big questions. Of course, the first question we ask is how can we better insure that each and every student that enters college has the academic preparation to succeed once there. We have seen too many of our classmates make it to college, only to leave after a year. We also ask:

- How can we better support parents and guardians in their role as key players in their child’s college dreams and plans?
- How can we better provide students the in-school college supports they need—being aware of the constraints posed by overloaded counselors, stretched teachers, and shrinking school budgets?
- What does it mean to create a “college-going” culture in schools?
- What roles can and should the community play to support students in the college equation? Who are the critical community partners and what resources can they provide?
- How can we provide many more students with the mentors they need, especially “near peers” (college students from similar backgrounds) with wisdom to share?
- How can we better help students get over the hurdle of the high cost of college?
- How do we keep the issue of equity front and center in our drive to help all students, regardless of family income, go to college and succeed once there?

WHAT WE NEED

Making college dreams come true for our nation's youth requires all of us. It's a joint production. We know student motivation is critical: students need to push themselves academically, set goals, ask questions, seize opportunities, take positive risks.

However, as our research shows, there are so many points where teachers, counselors, mentors and other adults—and the family members most students point to for inspiration—can make all the difference. We have many ideas. Some make gut sense, but cost money and challenge the status quo: for example, increasing rather than decreasing the number of college and career specialists in our schools. Other ideas cost nothing, but challenge public will: for example, encouraging more adults in to become friends, mentors, and coaches to young people.

If it is true, as we believe, that a college education is vital to making headway in the 21st century, as individuals and a nation, then we all must join the conversation—and the action.

Hear Us Out Project Team
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