

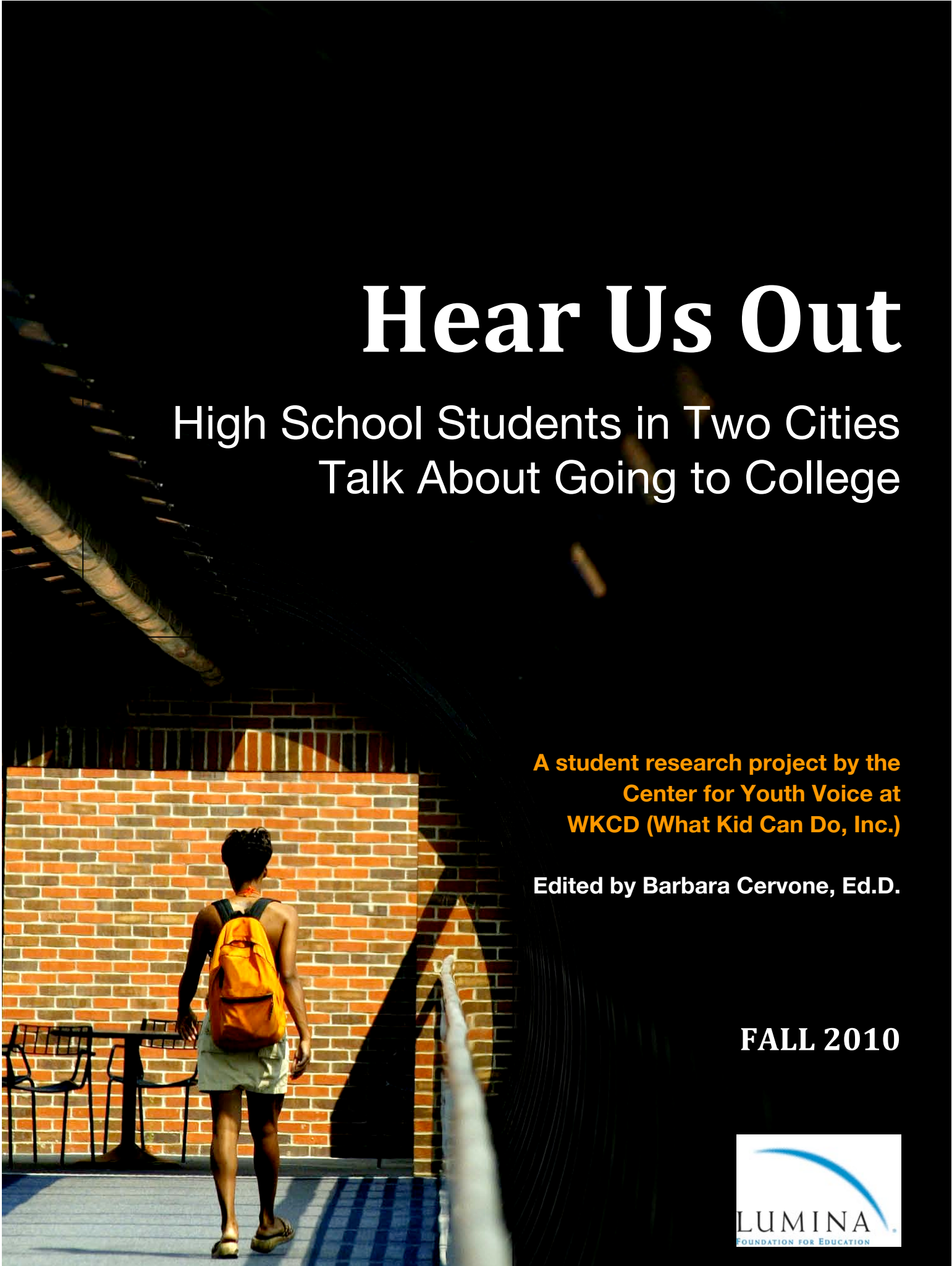
Hear Us Out

High School Students in Two Cities
Talk About Going to College

A student research project by the
Center for Youth Voice at
WKCD (What Kid Can Do, Inc.)

Edited by Barbara Cervone, Ed.D.

FALL 2010

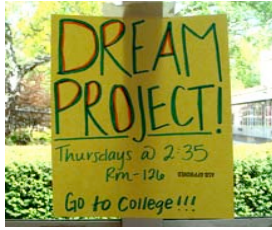


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See complementary videos of the student focus group discussions at:

http://www.whatkidscando.org/featurestories/2010/11_hear_us_out/



PREFACE

FOR NINE YEARS, the national nonprofit WKCD (What Kids Can Do) and its Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice has listened and 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 diverse group of high school students in Hamilton County/Chattanooga and another group 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, supported by the Indianapolis-based Lumina Foundation for Education.

The 21st century has brought a push for college unparalleled in our nation’s history. President Obama has set a target of raising the nation’s college graduation rate to 60 percent in just 10 years, adding at least 8 million graduates. Lumina Foundation’s “Big Goal” aims to have 60 percent of Americans hold high quality, two- or four-year college degrees and credentials by 2025. The Forum for Youth Investment’s “Ready by 21” asks state and local leaders to change the way they do business so that all young people are ready for college, work, and life.

A rush of reports underscores the audacity of these targets. A 2009 study by ACT, for example, shows how high school achievement, certainty of career choice, and college readiness make a difference—and how all need ramping up. A 2010 report from the Education Sector finds that most high school accountability systems fail to recognize college- and career-ready goals. A recent study by the Alliance for Excellent Education points to the urgent need to build the capacity of teachers to prepare students for college and careers.

What sets this report apart is that the researchers are *students*, employing the research methods of seasoned professionals but powered by youth. Maybe this accounts for the extraordinary participation rate in **Hear Us Out**: close to 5,000 students completed the detailed survey the student researchers co-designed and distributed to classmates. Another 225 students participated in focus groups and individual interviews—all led by our student researchers.

We found, as we expected, no shortage of ambition among our high school respondents—whatever their family background, race, or ethnicity—to take on college and succeed once there. What was in short supply, we heard again and again, were the supports and resources students needed to meet the challenge.

Making college dreams come true for America’s youth requires all of us. It is a joint production. While we agree that student motivation is critical, there are so many points at which teachers, counselors, mentors and other adults—and the family members most students point to for inspiration—can make all the difference in the world.

Barbara Cervone, Ed.D., President
Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice



INTRODUCTION

AS STUDENT RESEARCHERS for the **Hear Us Out** project, we are pleased to present the thoughts of our peers about preparing for and going to college. Our diverse team of 25 students represents five comprehensive high schools in Seattle, Washington and four in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

We got involved with **Hear Us Out** because we know one of the most important tickets to success in life is a college education. Sadly, we see too many of our peers struggling to make it to college and succeed once there. Some of us are just starting the college search, while others have already applied for admission and financial aid. No matter where we are in the process, we see the difficulties many young people, including ourselves, face going to college. This project gave us a chance to hear directly from our peers about how prepared they feel for college and what role the school has—and should have—in that process. We learned a lot, both about what makes good research and what the students we questioned had to say.

We developed a written survey and then worked with our schools to administer it to as many ninth through twelfth graders as we could. What Kids Can Do did the data entry for us and we analyzed the results.

We also organized student focus groups at each of our schools. We included students from as many different backgrounds as possible: African-American, White, Asian, Hispanic, athletes, band members, males, females, honors students, leaders, and quiet kids. We asked about their preparation for college and who and what had helped them most. Even though the focus groups were filmed, we encouraged students to ignore the camera and be comfortable to say anything.

We were surprised by what students had to say, both on the survey and in the focus groups. Most want to go to college, but don't know where to go for information or think they can't afford college. We need more—not fewer—school counselors and college advisors, they said, and that college preparation should be the goal of all classes and not just the AP and Honors classes. They called for more organizations to help mentor students. Our peers, we found, were in the same boat as us: simply not knowing enough about college until senior year.

It was also an amazing experience to work with students from other schools and to see the differences and commonalities in our struggles toward college. We learned we were not alone. If the **Hear Us Out** project can improve what's happening in our schools and the whole educational system when it comes to preparing students for college, it will be a brighter day for all of us.

Hamilton County/Chattanooga: *Robin Brown, Jerlisa Harris, Lekesha Kennemore, Hilary Payton, Caleb Sanchez, Andy Sharp, Ashley Simmons, Ti Tran, Bria Williams and Edward Wood*

Seattle: *Dejahnaye "Diamnd" Austin, Jazmin Castillo, Melinda Chin, Shanquelle Fischer, Ryan Gluckman, Gustavo Gutierrez, Duron Jones, Zelah Jurado, Xenia Montesinos, Valeria Najera, John Nguyen, Chris Noll, and Carlos Padilla*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHAT WE FOUND

A total of 4,790 students completed our survey. 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

A total of 225 students at nine high schools participated in our focus groups and interviews. They talked about what motivates them towards college, what weighs them down, what helps, and about being the first in their family to attend college. They had advice for ninth graders, too.

“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.

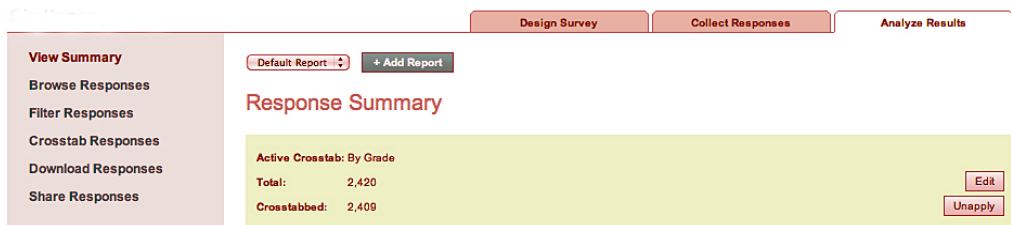
However, as our research shows, there are so many points where teachers, counselors, mentors and other adults—and the family members most students point to for inspiration—can make all the difference. We have many ideas. Some make gut sense, but cost money and challenge the status quo: for example, increasing 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
November 2010

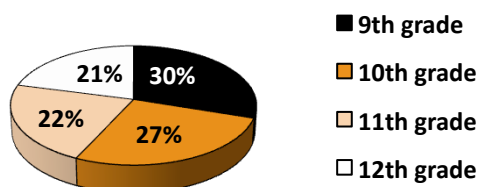


Survey Results

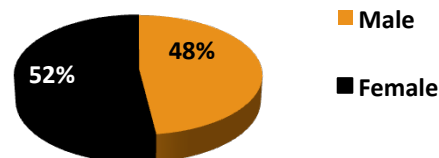


Number of Students Completing Survey = 4,790 (Hamilton County: 2,420; Seattle: 2,370)

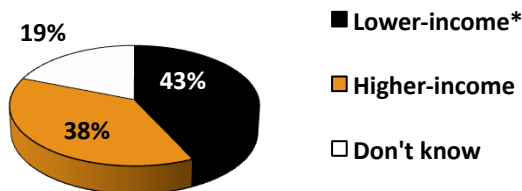
Grade level



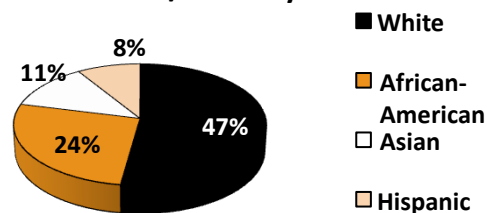
Gender



Family income



Race/ethnicity



* Eligible for free/reduced lunch

Other: 10%

First in the family to attend college: 25%

US Citizen: 90%

NOTE: Compared to national averages, Hispanic students are underrepresented in the school enrollment in Hamilton County and Seattle. Nationally, Hispanic youth have the highest school drop out rate and lowest college attendance rate of any racial or ethnic group.

THINKING ABOUT COLLEGE

“My parents have always pushed me from middle school, all the way up to high school. Every year that I was in school, they always told me, ‘Do your best in school because you want to go to college. You don’t want to sit here, working a dead-end job, wishing you had done better things with your life.’”
- Hamilton County high school junior

“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.” – Seattle high school junior

Thinking about college is clearly the first step to getting there. Sixty-eight percent of the 4,224 students we surveyed said they plan to attend college right after graduation.

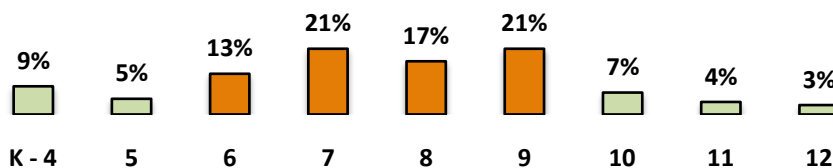
When asked the extent to which family, teachers, friends and other students, or adults in the community influenced their desire to go to college, “my family” came out on top. Seventy-six percent of the students in our survey said their family influenced them “a lot”; 43 percent cited a mentor, coach, or other adult in the community; 43 percent said a teacher. Notably, 34 percent also cited friends.

Research shows that nothing beats planning early, and our student respondents agree. When asked when someone first spoke seriously to them about attending college, 13 percent of the students said 6th grade, jumping to 21 percent in 7th grade, 17 percent in 8th, and 21 percent in 9th. In our focus groups, students urged their schools to help them start preparing for college their freshman year. “If all the counselors met with you freshmen year and talked about what classes you need to take, what the application process was like,” said one Seattle senior, “students wouldn’t feel so stressed and rushed when we got to be juniors and seniors.”

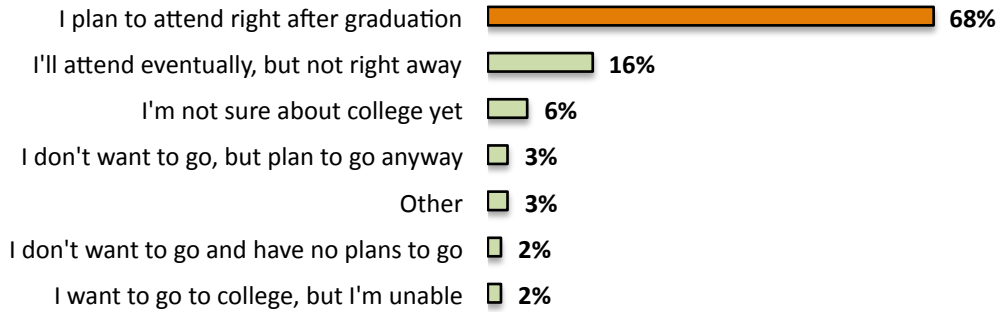
When college plans were broken down by family income, race/ethnicity, and gender, we found notable differences—a trend that continues throughout our survey results. Lower-income students (defined by eligibility for free or reduced lunch) were less likely to say they plan to attend college upon graduation (64 percent) than higher-income students (78 percent). Students who identified themselves as Hispanic or African-American were less likely to be college bound upon graduation (56 percent and 67 percent) than their Asian and white peers (79 percent and 70 percent). Fewer males (61 percent) than females (75 percent) said they plan to attend college right after graduation.

Here’s more of what we found.

What grade were you in the first time someone spoke to you about college?

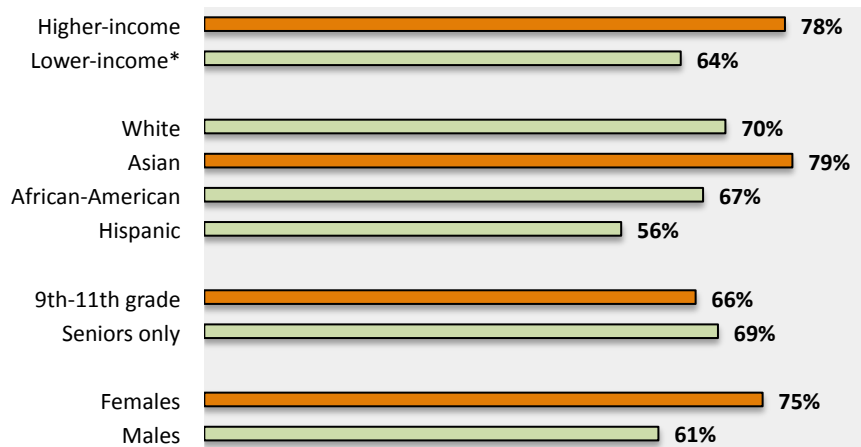


Which best describes your plans for college?



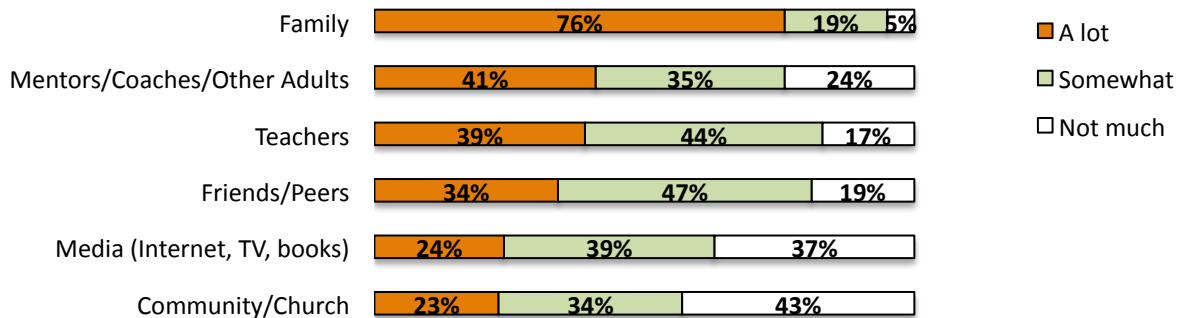
Comment: Six percent of Hamilton County students surveyed said they planned to join the military before college.

DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN: "I plan to attend [college] right after graduation"



* Eligible for free or reduced lunch ** Includes S. Asian and Pacific Islander

To what extent have the following influenced your desire to go to college?



Some demographic differences:

- Asian students were the most likely to say their family had influenced their college plans “a lot” (79%).
- For African-American students the influence of family also came out on top. However, African-American students were the most likely to say their teachers and adults outside school had also influenced their college plans “a lot” (45% and 53% respectively).

SCHOOL CLIMATE

“I feel like this school not only educates us, with great teachers who help us to learn so well, but there are just so many programs that help us grow....It’s not just what you do in the classroom that prepares you for college. It’s also the environment that you’re learning in. Being here has made me the person I am today.” – Seattle high school senior

“Mr. [Name] has definitely been, I can honestly say, probably the biggest influence on my life. One of the really great things about my high school is that we have teachers that genuinely care and want to help you. Mr. [Name] has always been there for me if I need advice or something, advice about the future or just any general problem.” – Hamilton County high school junior

Research shows that a supportive “school climate” feeds student success toward college. The students in our study concur. Students need teachers who believe they are college material, they said, and schools that have high expectations for all students. They need ambitious coursework so that they will, in fact, have the knowledge and skills for college. Students need encouragement to take academic risks and support when they do. They deserve a school that provides safety and order, one that rewards students who do their best.

All in all, students in our survey gave their schools good scores on school climate. Seventy-four percent agreed that their “teachers think they are college material.” Seventy-three percent said their school gives them to freedom to “take classes in areas that interest me.” Seventy-two percent agreed that their “school was preparing me well for college.”

When broken down by family income and race/ethnicity, though, the trend noted earlier continues: lower-income, African-American, and Hispanic students give their schools lower marks. For example, while 81 percent of higher-income students said they “which classes to take to be prepared for college,” this number dropped to 66 percent for lower-income students. While 76 percent of white students said their “teachers think I’m college material,” the number for Hispanic students was 59 percent.

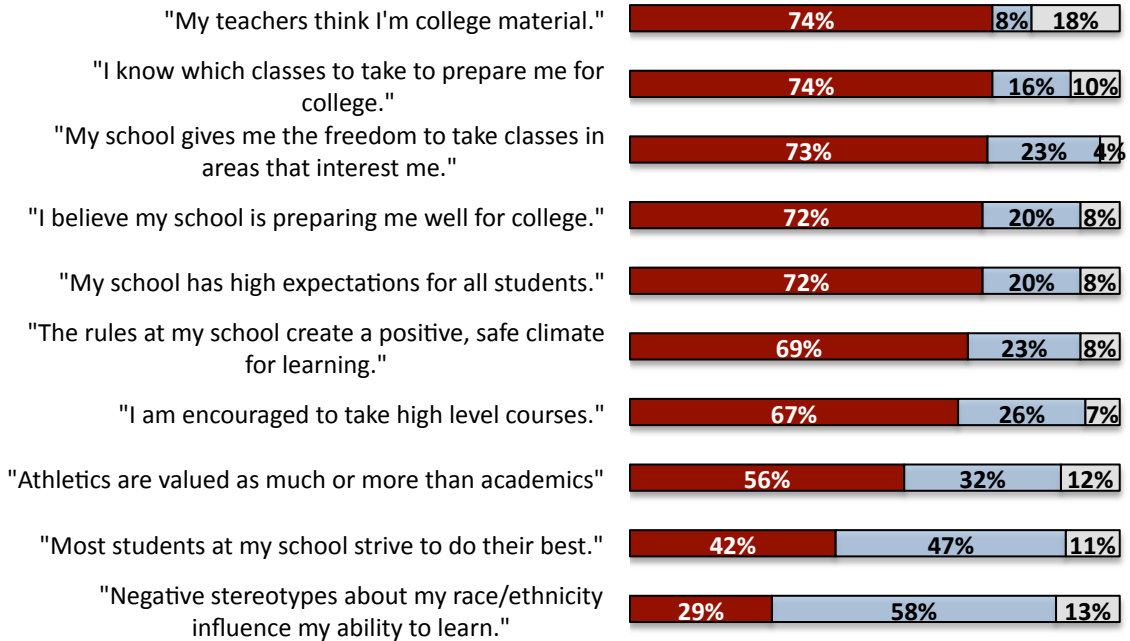
Students had less positive opinions of their classmates. Forty-seven percent of the students disagreed with the statement, “I feel that most students at my school strive to do their best.” Lower-income, African-American, and Hispanic students had higher opinions of their classmates than higher-income, white, and Asian students.

Students were of mixed minds about the impact of negative racial or ethnic stereotypes on learning. Fifty-eight percent of the students said they had no or little impact; 29 percent said they did. However, when broken down by race/ethnicity, 44 percent of African-American students and 42 percent of Hispanic students said racial and ethnic stereotypes had a negative impact on learning.

We were surprised to find that on several measures, 9th - 11th graders scored higher than seniors. For example, 73 percent of 9th – 11th graders said they were “encouraged to take advanced level classes,” compared to 62 percent of seniors. More 9th – 11th graders said they knew what classes to take for college than seniors.

ALL STUDENTS: Opinions on "school climate"

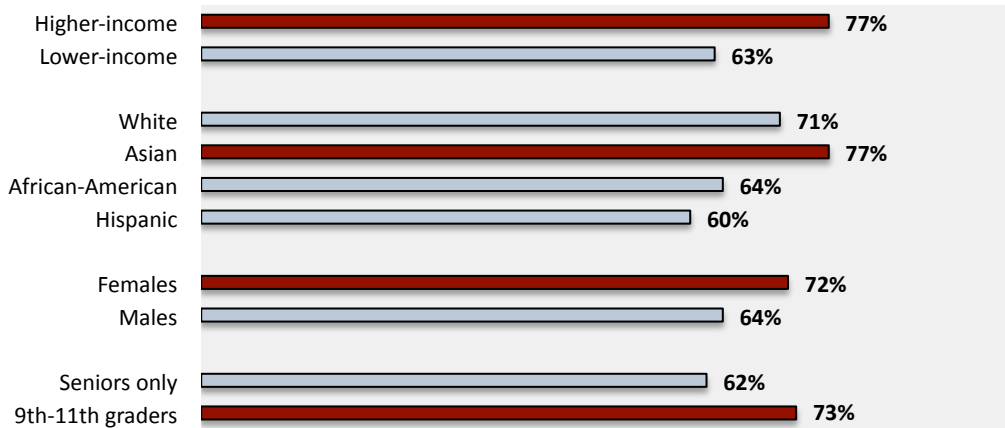
■ Agree □ Disagree □ Don't know



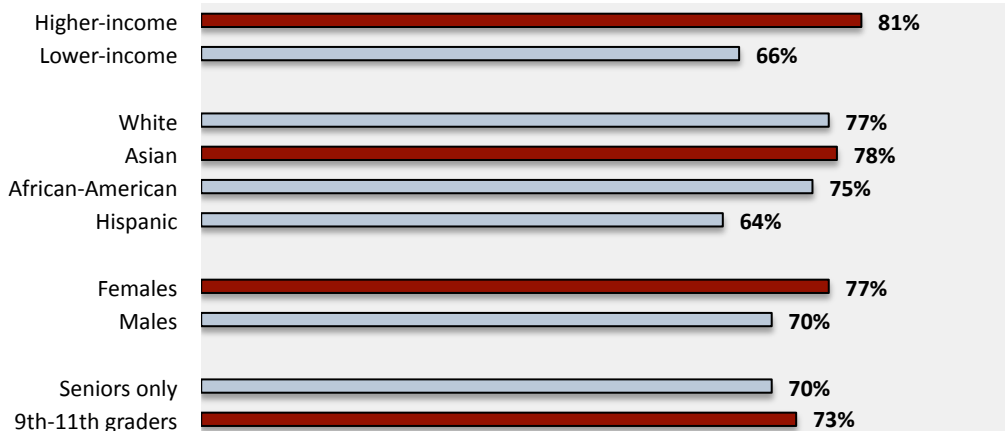
DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN: "My teachers think I am 'college material.'" (Agree)



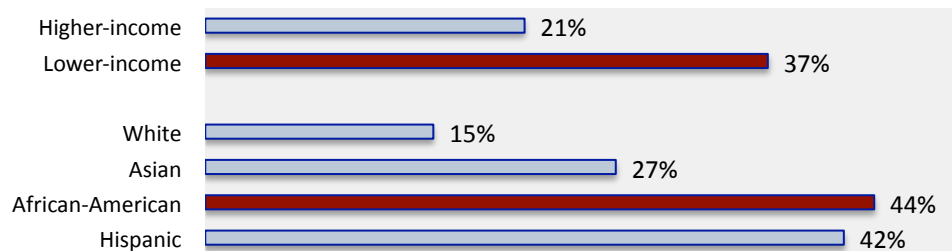
DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN: "I am encouraged to take advanced level classes." (Agree)



DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN: "I know which classes to take to be prepared for college." (Agree)



DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN: "I feel that negative racial or ethnic stereotypes influence my ability to learn" (Agree)



THE APPLICATION PROCESS

"It's a lot of stuff to handle during the school year, especially when you work like I do. I just had so much going on, I was rushing myself, I didn't have enough time for my college application papers."

"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."

"You know how we have electives at school, I think they should have a class that gets us ready for college, that gives us the information we need. I think that would be pretty good."

- West Seattle High School students

Most students—whether or not they are the first in their family to attend college—find the process of applying to college overwhelming. "There are so many details." "You have to break it down into steps." "You can't start early enough." "You need an adult to help you." "You gotta let everyone know you want to go to college."

We wondered how much support students were receiving in the application process, and from whom. **Students reported talking about college "many times" with a parent or guardian (72 percent), friends or other students (52 percent), or a relative (40 percent). For teachers and school counselors, the numbers dropped to 30 percent and 27 percent respectively, but rose for seniors—45 percent said they had spoken about college "many times" with a counselor and 42 percent had spoken many times with a teacher.**

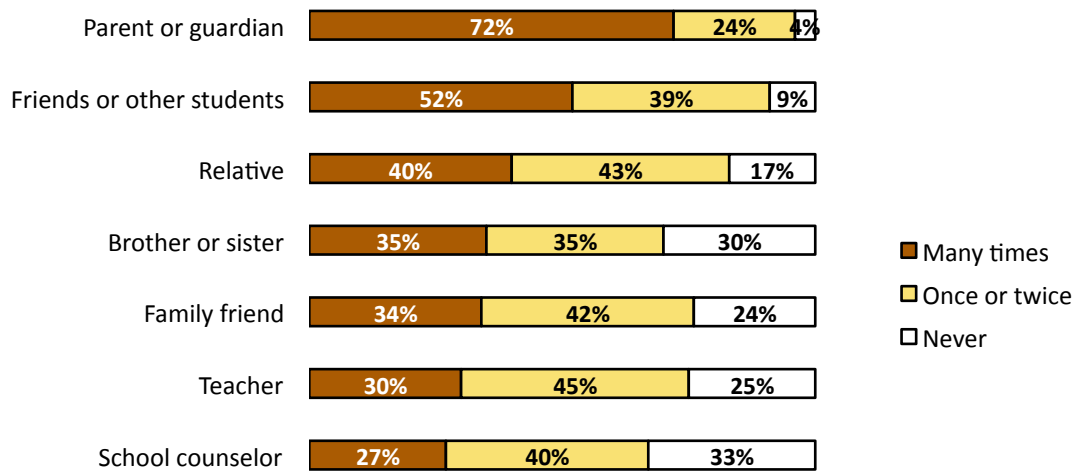
Strikingly, 33 percent of the students in our survey said they had never spoken with a school counselor about college; 25 percent had never spoken about it with a teacher. In our focus groups, students spoke bluntly about the difficulties of getting a counselor's attention. "Every time I walk in there," one Hamilton County junior said, "all of them are swamped. They're just covered."

We asked students whether they had researched colleges on the web, made a list of colleges that interested them, looked into standardized tests required to apply to college and taken any, or looked at what a college application essay involves. The majority had. For example, **92 percent of the seniors and 68 percent of the 9th - 11th graders said they had researched colleges on the web; 80 percent and 55 percent, respectively, had made a list of colleges that interested them.**

We asked students how much they knew about the costs of college and applying for financial aid. **Sixty percent of the students said they knew "some" or "a lot" about college costs; 40 percent said "nothing" or "little."** When one of our focus group leaders asked her classmates how their school might help them with college costs, one student quipped: "Can they pay our tuition?"

We asked students if they had ever visited a college campus and, if so, how many campuses they visited and who had gone with them. **Seventy-four percent of the students said they had visited at least one college campus, most often with a family member (59 percent) or friends (52 percent).**

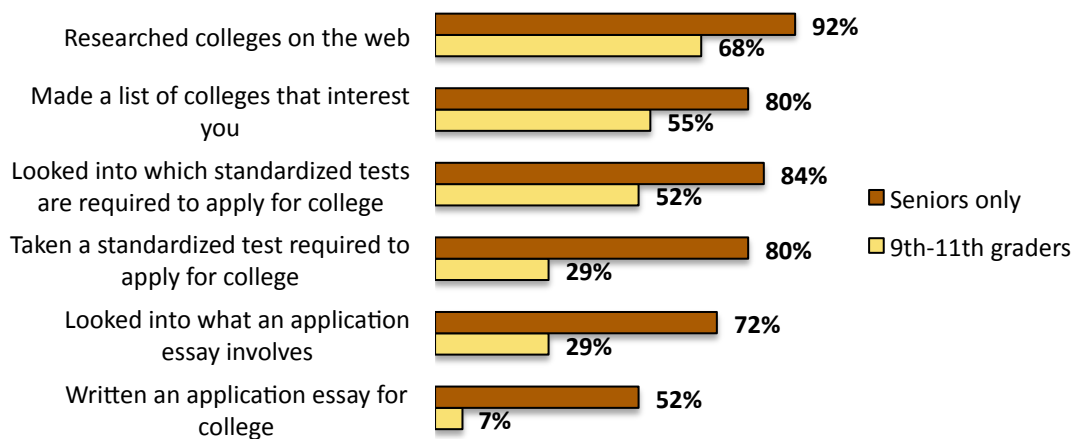
How often have you seriously talked about going to college with each of the following individuals?



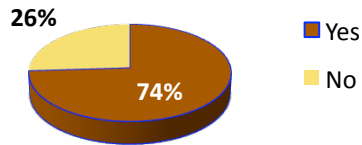
Some demographic differences:

- There is a slight uptick among seniors in the rate of conversations with all of the above: e.g., 82 percent say they've spoken many times about college with a parent or guardian, 45 percent say they've spoken many times with a counselor, 43 percent they've spoken many times with a teacher.
- Lower-income students are less likely to report speaking many times with a parent or guardian about college (66 percent versus 79 percent for higher-income students). Overall, lower-income students, when compared to higher-income students, report fewer conversations about college with any of the above.
- Females report more conversations about college with everyone on the list; when it comes to friends or other students, 70 percent of the females say they've spoken many times with their peers compared to 56 percent of the males. However, females edge out boys only slightly in relation to having had many conversations with counselors and teachers (28 percent for females versus 26 percent for males in relation to counselors; 31 percent for females compared to 28 percent for males in relation to counselors).

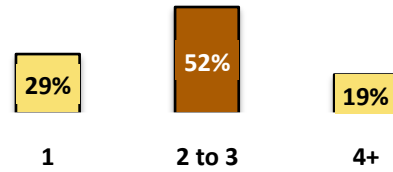
Have you ever...?



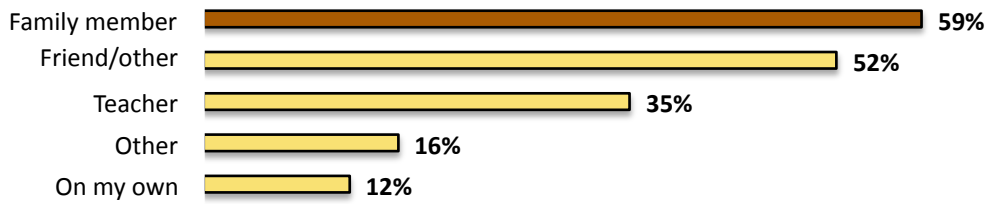
Have you ever visited a college campus?



If yes, how many colleges did you visit?

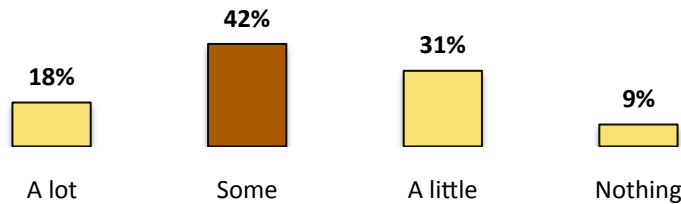


If yes, who has gone with you? (mark all that apply)



Comments: The “other” category included grandparents, aunts and uncles, social workers, boyfriends/girlfriends, neighbors, coaches, church members, and military recruiters.

How much do you feel you know about the costs of college and getting financial aid?



Comments: Thirty percent of seniors said they knew “a lot” about college costs and financial aid. Analyzing by family income, race/ethnicity, and gender, no differences stood out.

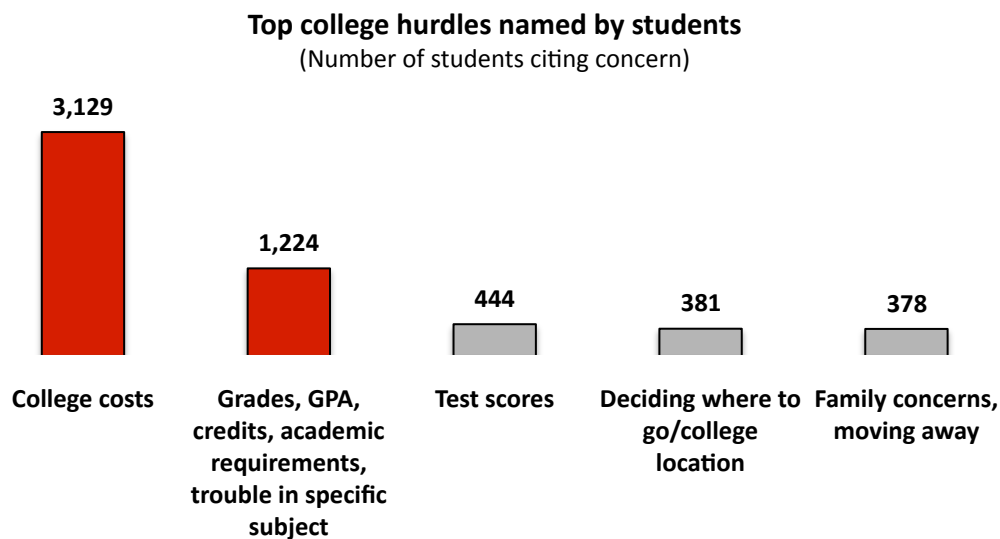
HURDLES

“Financial aid, that’s my big obstacle. I’ve been looking for scholarships, but there’s just so many people applying to the same scholarships at the same time. It’s really hard, harder than people think to get a scholarship.” – Seattle high school senior

“I basically failed all of my classes freshmen year. I made like ‘C’s’ and ‘D’s’ my sophomore year. And then I realized I can’t get anything, like I couldn’t get scholarships, I couldn’t get into barely any colleges because of my grades, and that’s when basically I was like, ‘Oh, I have to get this.’ Right now I am sitting at a 2.9 and when I graduate, I’ll have a 3.2, if I’m lucky.” – Hamilton County high school senior

“At the beginning of the year, it was really hard for me to stay focused because it was more than I was used to. In middle school, sometimes they just pass you on. It also depends on what class you take, too, because if it’s an elective, it might be easier to pass than some of your core classes.” – Seattle high school freshman

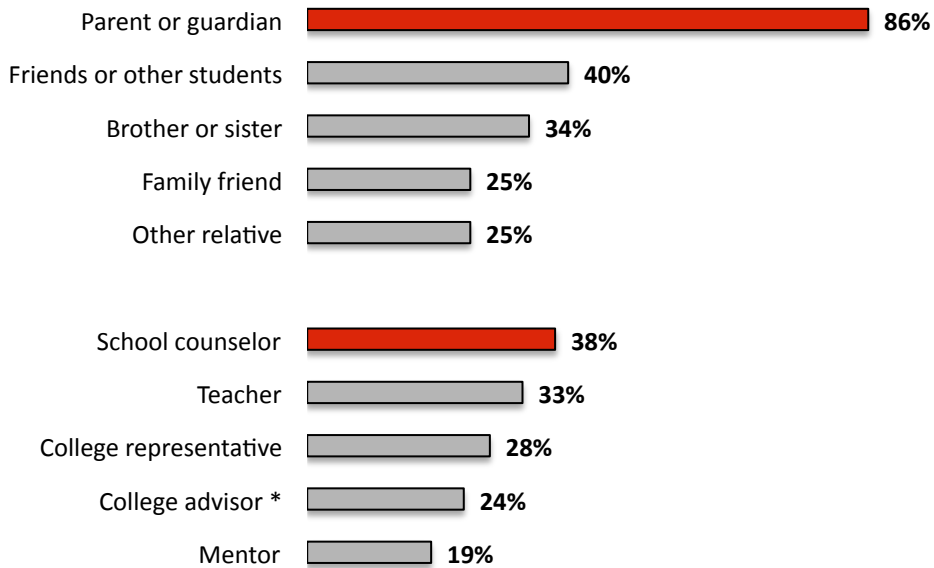
We asked students to list their biggest concerns or hurdles regarding college. **The cost of college and securing financial aid was by far the biggest concern, at every grade level. Grades—along with having the credits, meeting the academic requirements, and troubles in specific subject—was second.**



Other hurdles/concerns:

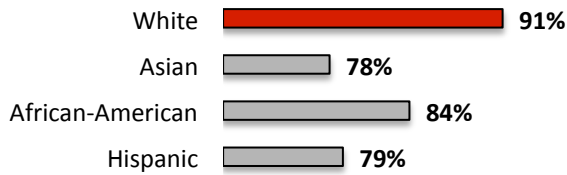
- Knowing what to major in, what I want to do (121)
- Lack of motivation, poor work habits/ethic (106)
- I won’t finish college, I’ll fail (52)

If you were to have a problem moving forward with your college plans, to whom would you turn for help? (mark all that apply)

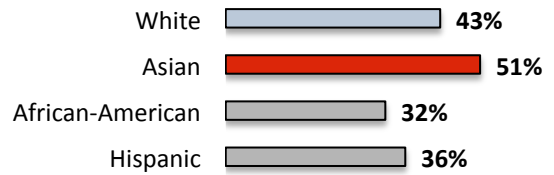


- Typically part-time advisors, hired with “soft” money, to augment regular school counselors

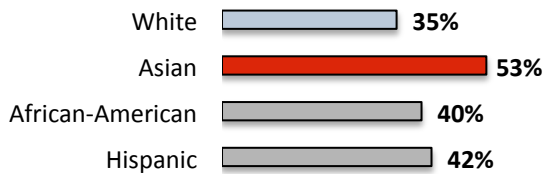
**DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN:
Would turn to parent or guardian**



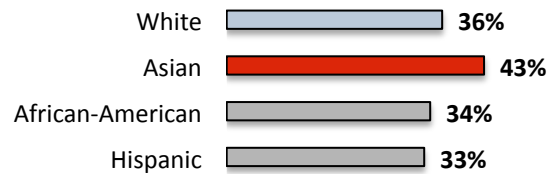
**DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN:
Would turn to friends/other students**



**DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN:
Would turn to school counselor**



**DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN:
Would turn to teacher**



AFTERSCHOOL AND SUMMER PROGRAMS

“I want to be the first in my family to go to college, to get a degree. I’m just waiting for the time to come when I can prove everybody wrong—except my counselors at the Boys and Girls Club, who believed in me from the start.” – Hamilton County high school senior

“I’m in CAN and I’m in TRIO. TRIO, you go around to different colleges and talk to people, learn what it’s about and get a bigger insight on what college you want to go to. In CAN, they help you write your college letters, take your SATs and ACTs. I don’t think I’d be how far I am right now if it hadn’t been for those programs.” – Seattle high school senior

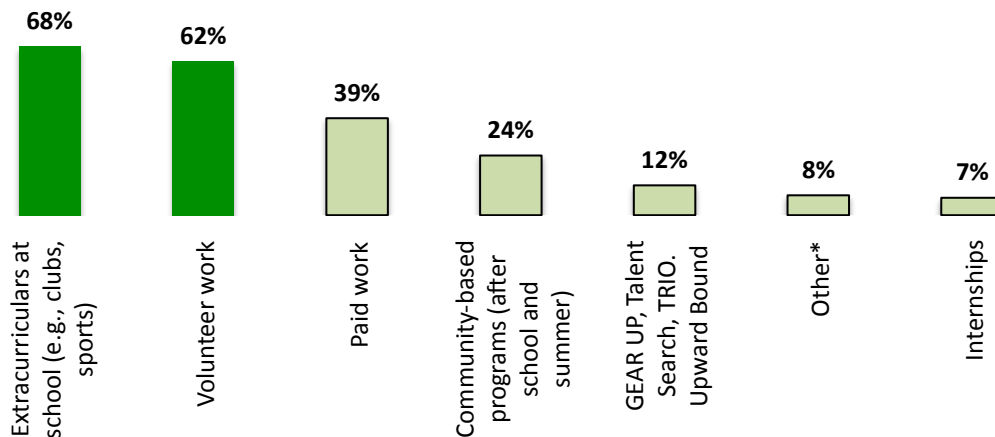
Over 73 separate studies suggest that students who participate in afterschool and summer programs reap multiple benefits (CASEL, 2008). Such programs often give them opportunities to excel outside the classroom, to build physical fitness, to brush up on academics or spread their wings academically, to follow or develop interests and talents, to learn teamwork and competition, to practice leadership, or to contribute to their community.

Just as important, many afterschool and summer programs give students a chance to be known well by a caring adult—to gain a mentor—who can help them on the path to college.

Sixty-eight percent of the students in our survey said they have participated in school-based extracurriculars, 62 percent in volunteer work, 39 percent in paid work, and 24 percent in community-based afterschool and summer programs. More than half of the students added that they knew “little” or “nothing” about afterschool and summer programs and wished they knew more. Most of what they knew came from siblings or friends.

The two most common obstacles students mentioned that prevented their involvement in afterschool and summer programs, whether school or community-based, were the need to work and lack of transportation.

Which of the following afterschool and summer activities have you participated in? (mark all that apply)



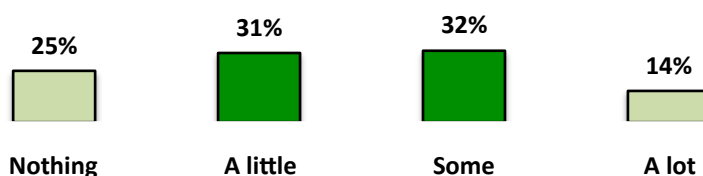
Comments:

Some students used the category “other” to describe a specific afterschool or summer program: e.g., Catholic summer camp (CYO), Boys & Girls Club camp, All-City Band, AAU Basketball, FCCLA, Global Visionaries (teen leadership program), National Honors Society, debate club, drama club. A number cited a non-team sport, like running or skateboarding. Others cited private lessons: e.g., in gymnastics, fencing, piano, Chinese, karate. Some cited community classes in subjects like filmmaking, journalism, dancing.

Some demographic differences:

- Asian students participated most in volunteer work (73%), followed by whites (68%), Hispanic (60%) and African-American students (51%).
- White students participated most in extracurriculars (77%), followed by Asian (67%), African-American (60%), and Hispanic students (57%).
- White students participated most in paid work (44%), followed by African-American (38%), Asian (36%), and Hispanic students (27%).
- Asian and Hispanic students reported the highest level of participation in afterschool, summer, and other activities (32% and 30% respectively), followed by white (17%) and African-American students (13%).
- The rate of participation of lower-income students was substantially less in relation to volunteer work (53% vs. 69% for higher income students), extracurriculars (58% vs. 78%), and paid work (35% and 45%).
- Female participation rates matched male rates in every category except volunteer work, where 69% percent of females vs. 54% of males said they had done volunteer work.

How much do you feel you know about community programs that can give you additional skills for college (e.g., extra academics, leadership)



If there have been barriers or obstacles to your participating in afterschool and summer programs, please describe them:

- **Work/job (cited 433 times)**—“I have been working since sophomore year.”
- **No time (313)**—“Between school and homework there's just no time for much of anything.” “Finding time between being with my mother and father's schedules for when I'm with them.” “I really like personal time and have problems putting so much time aside for after school activity.”
- **Lack of transportation to get to and from programs (250)**—“I don't have bus fare or a ride.” “I live far away from school and my transportation is the metro so therefore it gets too late after school. “I stopped going to the Upward Bound program because transportation was a big issue for my parents.”
- **Family obligations (85)**—“I need to watch my younger siblings at home until my parents get home.” “I would join any program that would help prepare me for college, but there's always a family problem. They don't want me gone late or catching the bus late. I have to be home early to do homework, chores, and be in bed on time.”
- **Expense of programs (54)**—“We are dead broke and camps and activities cost money.”
- **No interest, feel uncomfortable (44)**—“I don't find a lot of school offered activities interesting.” “I am asocial.” “Tryouts are scary.” “Language difficulties.”

SENIORS AND THE COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS

“The paperwork was so daunting, you had to get all the paperwork and transcripts for the school, you had to fill out all the applications and all the scholarships. Like it was so much and so overwhelming and the taxes and everything. And I didn’t know if I was filling them out right. It was just complicated and confusing.”

“It really helped that [college advisor] was able to help us out with the FAFSA and things like that. But a lot of things like the college applications you have to fill out on your own. Maybe it would help if the colleges showed you more step by step how to fill out their applications. Most of them try, but it’s still a little bit scary.”

“One obstacle that I went through is people telling me I couldn’t even get into the college that I wanted to go to [U of Alabama], that I didn’t have a chance, that it’s too much money. I even had an adult tell me I couldn’t get in because my ACT score wasn’t high enough. They said it’s a really big school, you’re going to be up against all these other people. So I wasn’t even going to apply because I had so many people telling me you’re not going to get in. But I applied anyway—and got in.”

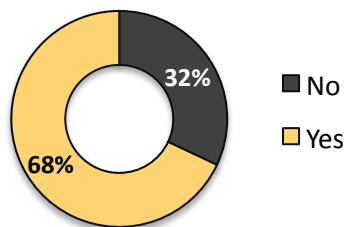
- Hamilton County high school students

For the 967 seniors who completed our survey, we asked where they stood in relation to the college application process: whether they had applied and how many colleges had they applied to (as of April 2010). **Almost two-thirds of the seniors had applied to two to five colleges.**

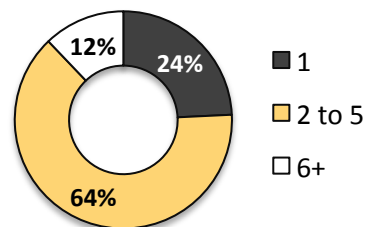
The data for lower- versus higher-income students revealed stark differences: among lower-income students, 54 percent had completed a college application, compared to 75 percent of higher-income students.

We also asked seniors who had helped them with the application process, including filling out federal financial aid (FAFSA) and other scholarship forms. **The majority of seniors said that a parent or guardian had guided them (57 percent). Twenty-seven percent said they had mostly done the application process (except FAFSA) on their own. School counselors and teachers came lower on the list of who helped.**

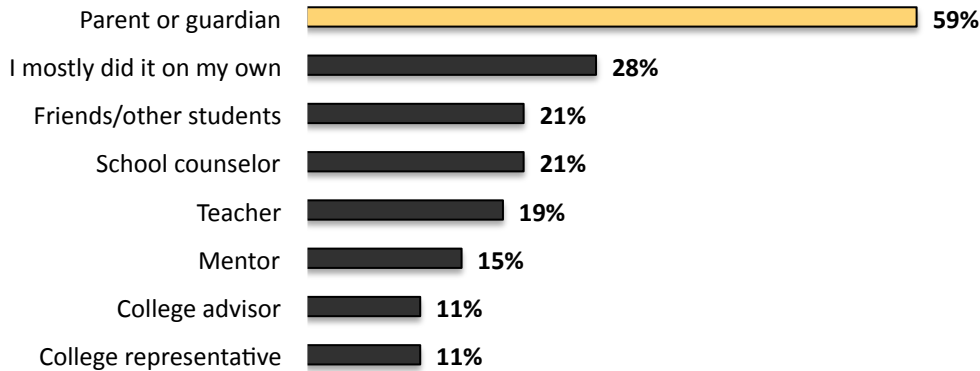
Have you ever completed a college application?



If yes, how many colleges have you applied to?



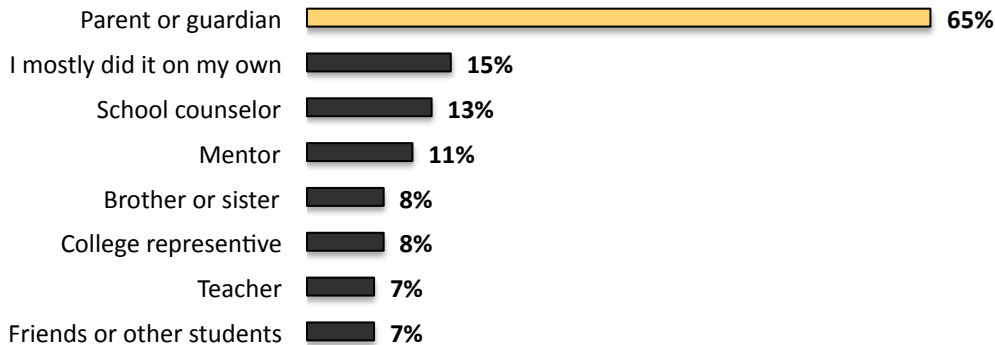
Who helped you with the application process? (mark all that apply)



Comments:

- Among lower-income students, 44% reported a parent or guardian had helped them with the college application process compared to 75% of higher-income students.
- 21% of lower-income students had turned to a mentor for help compared to 11% of higher-income students.

If you applied for financial aid, who helped you complete the FAFSA/ scholarship forms? (mark all that apply)



Comments:

- Among lower-income students, 45% said a parent or guardian had helped them fill out the FAFSA compared to 81% of higher-income students.
- 19% of lower-income students said they'd mostly completed the FAFSA on their own, compared to 12% of higher-income students.
- 17% of lower-income students had gotten help from a mentor compared to 6% of higher-income students.
- 11% had gotten help from a teacher compared to 4% of higher-income students.
- 22% had gotten help from a school counselor compared to 8% of higher-income students.



Focus Group Results

INTRODUCTION

The student comments that follow are from the fifteen focus groups our student researchers conducted with classmates during April 2010—in four schools in Hamilton County and five in Seattle. A total of 175 students participated in these 45 – 60 minute discussions; 50 completed individual interviews as well. Their participation was voluntary. Student researchers worked hard to engage a mix of students with regard to grade level, race/ethnicity, gender, and college plans.

A WKCD videographer taped all fifteen focus groups. Highlights appear in two 13-minute videos—one for Hamilton County, a second for Seattle—that can be viewed online at http://www.whatkidscando.org/featurestories/2010/11_hear_us_out/

We extracted the audio from this videotaping, transcribed it in its entirety, and drew from the 75 plus pages of transcripts in the student comments we present here.

Student researchers structured their focus groups around nine questions. However, the discussion was often spontaneous as students brought up points and experiences that amplified the core questions. For the purposes of this report we use the same general categories as we use in the video:

- What motivates us with regard to going to college? Who has influenced us most and how?
- What weighs us down? What obstacles stand in our path?
- What are our schools doing that helps us toward college? What might our teachers and counselors do differently?
- What roles do mentors and special programs outside school play?
- What special challenges do students face who are the first in their family to attend college?
- What advice do we have for freshmen following in our footsteps?

WHAT MOTIVATES US

Our family

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.

My mother, she was a teen parent and she had a really difficult time growing up. But she found her way to one of the best private colleges in the country. She showed me that no matter what circumstances you have, you can achieve your goals. You can't just be like, "Oh, my family...my parents are drug addicts, so I'm never going to amount to anything because they didn't go to college." You need to be like, "Okay, I'm going to go to college. I'm going to be the first in my family." You can't just wait for someone to say, "You need to go to college because no one else did." That's on you.

My parents, they never really talked about me going to college, they just expected it. It was just like it was going to happen one way or another, whether I wanted to or not. I mean I do want to go to college. It's part of me and it's just like it's going to happen eventually.

My main influence has to be my father...supporting two kids because he was a single parent, it was tough for him. He sometimes had to work two jobs. But he always wanted me to go to school to get good grades, go to college, so I wouldn't end up like him. And that really inspired me.

My biggest influences would probably be my older brother. My older brother, he was going to college to be a mechanic and he has, he actually got kicked out of college 'cause, believe it or not, he let a girl get to his head. And he didn't pay attention to his work. Right now, he's working two jobs with no plans for his future. I sure don't want to be like him!

Our teachers and counselors

My health science teacher, she's down to earth, I think she gives it to you on a basic level. It's just like she connects with you, outside of school, inside of school, she's there. She's a great influence on what you would like to be when you grow up, cool and relaxed but still professional.

Last semester my algebra teacher, she doesn't inspire you as much to go to college. But she does inspire you in the classroom to do better by helping you during class or some private sessions after school. Anyway possible that you can get your grade up, she helps you.

Well, me personally, I probably wouldn't have applied to the colleges I did without the help from the school. I wanted to go out of state, but without the support of people at our school, like the career center and Mr. [Name], the activities coordinator, I probably wouldn't have pushed myself. I just kinda got nervous and a little too scared to go away, but they helped me and made it seem like a possibility for me. And now I am going out of state, so...

Ourselves

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.

Yeah. Education, it's universal and no matter where you go, with a certain amount of education you'll be respected and people will look at you like... I mean it's just a simple thing, but if you have a degree, people are going to look at you differently.

My parents, they were born in Vietnam. I was born here. The requirements I need for college and everything, I'm knowledgeable in it. They aren't, and what they are expecting of me they don't understand. So my motivation is myself. How do I get there? What help do I need? I have to answer questions like that myself. The motivation, the understanding for college, it's up to me to provide that.

I just feel like at the end of the day, the person that you have to look at in the mirror *is you*, not your mom, not your dad, not your teacher. You have to look in the mirror and go to sleep content.

You have to motivate yourself. You have to tell yourself, "I have to do it, and that's what I'm going to do!" If you make good grades, then people will pay attention to you, they'll be like, "He actually tries or she actually tries and puts effort into studying for a test." Your parents, yea they love you, they're going to be like, "Yea, you can do this, you can do that." But at the end of the day, it's you doing the work. If you tell yourself you can't do it, mostly likely you won't.

Our community and our peers

I think it's good that as far as our religious leaders and people in the community, they're setting 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.

Whenever I see people working, the seniors in the group at least, when I see us working on applications, it makes me feel really motivated to get my stuff done. And be like, “Oh! I gotta do that! I forgot.” Having them going the same path that I’m going, it’s really helpful. It’s also admirable because it’s so good to see people my age, who are my friends who I’ve basically grown up with, see them be passionate to go to college and to go further their life and do what they want to do.

WHAT WEIGHS US DOWN

Money for college

Financial aid. That’s my big obstacle. I’ve been looking for scholarships and stuff, but there’s just so many scholarships that so many people are applying to at the same time. It’s really hard, harder than people think. I worked all year on scholarships and grants. Like I did a huge search for colleges and locations and programs and internship options, and I looked for the colleges that I thought would best fit me. And then 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.

I’m a sophomore, so I haven’t done much planning, but I know one thing my family’s struggling on is the money for college. I know they’re saving up for that, and I have to help by keeping a tight budget and buying just the things I need.

One big obstacle is being able to go to college out of state. You can't afford it and you consider, “Oh well, if I stay at state and I have all the grades and all this scholarship going on, that's a full ride.” But if you go out of state, go to your dream college, you’ll be so much in debt.

Poor grades

I didn’t know about GPA when I started high school.
Me neither. I didn’t know what my GPA was until 10th grade.
I learned about it from my brother. He explained it to me. (Student exchange)

When I was a freshman, I pretty much goofed around a lot and didn't take school as serious. And now my GPA's suffering for that. When I look back, that was my fault only and nobody else's.

Finding our way

My obstacle is deciding what I want to do and what school to go to. So that makes you a little lost in high school, because when you know what you want to do, you decide your classes to get to where you want to go.

My obstacle is my family because they motivate me to go to college and I want to go, but they want me to go one way, and I want do it the way I feel comfortable doing it. Right now I’m arguing with them. I’m going to prove to them that my way will get me to their expectations of me going to college and everything.

My only obstacle would be picking which college I want, because, I mean, there are a lot of schools out there, you know? You know, they send all the stuff, these letters, these packets and stuff. Like you see one college and, “Man, I want to go this college!” Then you get another one and think, “This might be a better school for what you want to do.” It’s hard to pick one school out of all of them.

Getting a counselor's attention

I feel I'm at a disadvantage because I don't have any mentors or tutors that help me because most of those programs are for free and reduced lunch. My family is borderline middle class, so I can't apply for anything to help us as much and that's a huge struggle. I can't go e-mail my mentor because I don't have one. That's why I just go to my counselor, but she's usually busy. I try to be strong about, to keep asking questions until I find someone to answer them.

The counselors, they do their best. Many of them stay after school to help you with questions that you have. But some of us have so many questions. My family, they immigrated here, they had a really rough childhood, a lot of them didn't graduate high school. So I don't have people to turn to outside of school for help.

Every time I walk in there, all of them are swamped. They're just covered. And every time I go up to the college advisor, there's a line to get in there and talk to her. I think if not get more college advisors, make their hours here longer or put them full-time.

Ours, we can never even talk to them. I was talking to my friend, I was like, "They never in there!" Honestly, when I came up, in elementary school, that's what I thought a school counselor was for. So you can talk to them and express your feelings, but, like, I just want to know what keeps them so busy because it just don't seem like any work is done to me.

And they need to expose us more. By expose I mean putting our name down to schools. Give it to schools, good schools, not just the two-year community college. Not just colleges we have never heard of. Some of us have big dreams and we want to, you know, achieve them.

Procrastination and time management

I would have to say the number one obstacle for everyone is procrastination, because it's one of those "Oh, let's go hang out with friends. Homework....umm, I'll do homework later."

Managing time is the biggest factor. If you don't manage your time right and leave everything until the last moment, you may find yourself settling for less, putting things off until you never do them at all. You'll say to yourself, "I'll just go to college next year or I'll finish high school later. "

When you're a junior and a senior, time management's really important. You have to keep on schedule. I have so much stuff going on, I'm in so many programs that help me go to college, programs I found myself or friends referred me to, like Upward Bound. But then sometimes I have to stay up until one or two in the morning to do my homework.

Race, ethnicity, and income

The pressure builds up a lot and it's sometimes doesn't really motivate you as much as like. People are saying, "You have to go to college because you're a minority or Asian or you're a female." But what if I don't want to go to college? What if I don't want to pursue this career or that career?

Me being African American, it sets certain teacher's minds to think that, "Oh I'm just another black kid that's not going to, you know, do my best." If I'm in an honors class, they don't think I have the mindset or mentality to keep moving forward and do my best.

Well, for me being bilingual, I feel like sometimes my grammar, my English isn't so clear. I know that affects my work, my writing or my presentations, my grade, me going to college or not. I don't feel like I have to live up to expectations, they're not high for students like me. I have to beat them.

Even those special programs for poorer class students don't completely fill the hole. Us Latino and minority students, we often have parents who are like the least involved, which sounds bad. But it's true because they're working a lot, usually two jobs. It's hard for them to get involved with their child's school in general, let alone college or what we're going to do for futures. We tell them these things, but it doesn't mean they know.

As for scholarships and financial aid, I guess the stereotype is white and rich. Yes I'm white, but no I'm not rich. I need scholarship money just as much as anyone else. I understand there are a lot of African American people who have been discriminated against. And so they need that push, I'm all for it. But on the flip side, I almost feel, "Wait just a second, I need help too."

GETTING WHAT WE NEED AT SCHOOL

An early start

I think the freshmen need to be told how important their GPA is their freshman year, because if you mess up freshman year, it can really mess up your GPA for all of high school.

They start us on college too late. We should start a lot of things in 9th grade. Scholarships. Honor classes, we should have been taking those in 9th grade. You can't just throw a child in the 12th grade in an AP class and expect for them to pass that exam.

They have an ACT prep class but you can't take it till your junior year. If we were to start with freshman, helping them go ahead and get ready for the ACT, by their sophomore and junior years they can be getting a feel for how it is, how long it is and stuff. The more times you take it, the easier it gets because you know what to expect. In my ACT prep class, a bunch of seniors were in there and they were taking their ACT for the first time. It shouldn't be like that.

I have a lot of goals set for myself so I was looking at colleges my freshman year, on my own. But at school, I didn't really hear about "you know you should get this done and that done for colleges" until probably the end of sophomore year.

Just today I had the experience of going to help teach in a 9th grade class and I said, "When y'all get in 12th grade, when y'all get in AP classes, y'all ain't gonna be able to play." And they didn't even know what AP was. They thought AP was Austin Park.

Academic challenge

Last year in English class we wrote a lot of poetry and stuff. I consider myself a writer and I'm talented at it, I'm not gonna brag, but I am. The teacher asked us to write a poem, and I was like, "Alright. This is going to be easy. It's my niche." So I wrote my poem and gave it to him. Everyone, their poems got an A. Then I got my grade and I got a B+, and I was like, "This is not okay." So I went up to my teacher and I was like, "Everyone else in the class got an A and I got a B. Can you please explain to me why I got a B? He told me that he knew what I was capable of and was grading me on my own scale. The fact that he looked at me as an individual, that his grade scales were based on what you could do yourself, that really made an impact on my whole learning. A lot of kids would be like, "Aww, that teacher just don't like me." But it's like, "No. There's things you need to work on."

In middle school everything seems so easy looking back, but in high school it's the beginning of the hardcore learning. I'm in IB now. It's scary, but IB is a really...I mean, it teaches you time management

and hardworking, critical thinking, all these things that you're going to need in college. And regardless of the credit, taking the class is a really good experience, I think, for all of the academic struggles that we're going to have been put up against in college. I think that taking classes like IB in high school is really important to challenge yourself and to keep yourself sharp for college.

I'm the type of person who goes to class and do what I got to do regardless. I do the worksheets, read the chapter, put down the answers. But it gets to the point at times where I'm no longer trying to learn, I'm just doing the work to get my grade and go. Sometimes I have to refocus myself and, you know, try and take something away other than just go through it. And some teachers, they don't make it any easier. They're just like, "Here's your work. As long as you get it turned in, I'll give you a completion grade." You think, "I'll just got to my friend and ask her if she'll let me copy her paper."

Opportunities

We've got a successful young women's group. We have a group that works at the Y where we have our coed discussion every Thursday in periods 4 through 6. And that helps us get a broader perspective of the male and the female perspective on different high school issues. We've got this career center where we've got people who are really passionate about getting us to college. We have a really great athletics program, which gives good athletes the publicity, I guess you call it, to get to college on a full ride.

Yeah, I feel like this school not only, you know, educates us well, but there are so many programs that help us grow socially too. There's clubs that you can get involved in, student government, sports. And it's so diverse and everybody interacts. It's not just what you do in the classroom that prepares you for college. It's also the environment that you're learning in and having all these people from different cultures. I've grown over the years since my freshman year and being here is what made me the person that I am today.

Guidance

Well, me personally, I probably wouldn't have applied to the colleges I did without the help from the school. I wanted to go out of state, but without the support of people at our school, like the career center and Mr. [Name], the activities coordinator, I probably wouldn't have pushed myself. I just kinda got nervous and a little too scared to go away, but they helped me and made it seem like a possibility for me. And now I am going out of state, so...

For a lot of years in my life I really wanted to go to the University of Washington, and then become a doctor, that big dream! But after talking with the counselors and the teachers, and figuring out what I like and don't like, I found that SU was a better school for me. And now I'm very excited and my teachers are too. The essays, the tests, the studying, that's all part of preparing for college, but finding the right college, um, that's just as important.

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.

Prodding and reaching out

The teacher who stands out for me is my math teacher because he uses humor and, if you screw up, he'll probably end up yelling at you in front of the class. He'll make you feel really bad in front of the whole class and he'll ridicule you. He'll make you clean something. He'll make some sort of joke at you and send you into the hall and slam the door. Then he'll come out and be like, "I only did that because I want you to understand that school is a privilege and you've gotta do better."

I think that if a teacher truly cares about a student, they should call them out. By ignoring a student who is disrespectful, you're telling them that you don't care. So I think as a teacher, regardless of what the environment is, your goal every morning when you come to this building is to educate and touch a student's life. If a student is disrespectful, call them out...then try to get to know them. Teach them respect by showing them respect. When the teacher shows they care, students will care, too.

I think that if teachers, or any kind of counselor, saw a student giving up, they should take the initiative to get involved in that student's life and help them anyway they can with motivation and encouragement, studying...anything just to help them pull through and make it to college.

Besides the ACT, I think teachers should just come up to you and ask what you're doing for college. They should look around and reach out. And the older peers, the seniors, they should seek out the younger ones and encourage them to stay on top of stuff, make sure everything goes okay for them. You can't expect the 9th graders to know what they don't know. Older folks gotta reach out to them.

It's good when you get encouragement. Some teachers, whenever you bring up the subject of college, "If I go to college..." they just say, "it's not an issue of whether or not you should go. You should go no matter what. Do your best, do go. It's not a choice. It's the next step."

MENTORS AND SPECIAL PROGRAMS

Mentors close by

I feel like I have a lot of mentors, all close by. Like both of my parents are really for, "Do whatever you want to do. We'll help you as much as we can." And then, of course, when I'm at school my counselor helps a lot. For me, she's close by too. She's always got something, like, "Check this out" or "This scholarship" or "That college," and I'll look at it and say yes or no. Or I'll look at a scholarship and I'll be like, "I don't know if I can do this," and she'll be like, "Yes, you can." "Oh, okay." She won't let you say no.

My mentor would be my older brother, because every time I tell him something, he always motivates me and tells me I can do better or good job. Just a little pat on the back every now and then is good for me. He hasn't always made the right decisions himself, but he shows me how somebody who's doing bad can pick themselves up. He actually now is leading a youth group about violence prevention and he's going back to school. So that's my mentor.

I would have to say my grandpa. He was an English teacher, so he's always talking about different colleges or things I can go to. He's always just thinking of something else, and everyone expects me to go to college. But he has ideas and different things that he wants me to do.

... in the community

My mentor is my karate teacher. He's an energetic person and it's good to just absorb what he's talking about. He has interesting stories. You don't always get what he's talking about, but it's always tied in.

I have many mentors: my boxing coach, my basketball coach. I don't know, people who just want me to do good in life, just support me and tell me to do what I want, to never give up.

. . . at school

I go for Ms. N. and Ms. D [both career center counselors]. Ms. N. is good when it comes to yelling or pressuring you and telling you you gotta do this and that, and if not, you're not going to make it. And she doesn't give up on you, either. And then Ms. D. because she...well, in my case she's helped me find out some schools when I was telling her the different things that I was interested in. She would help me get info and go online for me and tell me, "Look, this school offers this, and this one that." So I'm gonna say both of them.

Mine would have to be my old math teacher from 7th grade because he's always pushing been pushing me to...not necessarily pushing me, but supporting me in everything I wanted to do, and when I didn't turn work in, he wouldn't look at me as a bad student. He'd talk to me and see if I had problems at home or something like that.

What makes a good mentor

The best thing a mentor can do is show students different paths and different 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." Help us and give us the information instead of our having to find it all on our own.

A good mentor is someone who can put themselves in our shoes and see what we go through. It's great if they listen to us, but they have to experience what we experience too.

I think one of the qualities of a good mentor is someone who really knows you and knows where you want to go in life. Someone you can trust and talk to and who really wants to help you out. It could be an older person. It could be an older brother or sister. Anyone you can trust to talk to you and that has your interests at heart.

Special programs

I'm in the Girls First program. My freshman year we had meetings every week. This year, they asked me to do the mentoring program and I got assigned to a mentor that is close to my career interests. She's just always positive and enthusiastic, she's someone I can trust and talk to about anything and I don't have to be scared to talk to her.

Well for me, I'm involved in this program called Rainier Scholars. It's a minority program that helps people who want to go to college go to college. They give you tools and information and different resources, they also give you academic counselors.

I belong to a program called One World Now, which does global leadership and languages and study abroad, and it's my second year with that program. I've just made such good relationships with the staff there. They also helped me to apply to college and do all of the financial papers.

I'm a participant in the U Dub "Dream Project" that comes here on Thursdays. It's a really great resource in that they assign you a U Dub student who's actually done the whole college process and gotten into college. They're in college, so they know what it's all about. They come here and help and guide students through every step. I am lucky to be able to participate in something like that.

FIRST IN THE FAMILY

A motivator

For me, being first generation and going to college is definitely a motivator because, you know, you look at your parents and sometimes I feel really sorry for them because they work so hard for the salary that they have. So I definitely want to do well in school and go to college, because I know that will open more doors. When I was growing up, I didn't see my parents much. I want to be there for my family.

Growing up for me was hard, too, because my parents were off working all the time and I didn't even live with them until I was about 5 or 6. I lived with my grandparents. So I would see my parents on the weekends, and then Mondays through Fridays I would stay with my grandparents and I wouldn't get to see them at all. That was pretty sad. I want my life to be happier.

I want to prove to my parents that they didn't make a mistake having me. My mom had me at a really young age, so she didn't get the chance to go to college, and I just want to prove to her that she didn't make a mistake and all her hard work just didn't go to waste raising me.

For me, I'll be the first in my family. My dad didn't finish high school, and I feel like I need to be the one to show him that it's possible. And my grandmother didn't get to see my dad finish high school, so I want to show my grandmother, too, that we can do it. And show my little brother that if I could do it, he could it, like set an example for him.

A week ago my mom told me she only finished middle school, and I thought she had finished everything, but apparently not. So it's like, "Whoa!" So I don't know how to explain the feeling of that. It's just...I don't know. It makes you think, really think.

A challenge

My dad did go to college, but in Palestine, so it wasn't the equivalent as it's here. And then all my family, none of them, they only got GEDs. So I would be the first one to go to college. And that's hard because there's not a lot of people I can turn to for experience. They say, "Alright. You're the first person in the family to go to college." Which puts a lot of weight on shoulders, because I'm like, "Darn! This is hard."

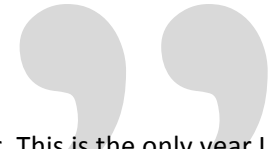
I think it's definitely been a challenge for me just because, like, I can't go home and ask my mom what she thinks. My older sister didn't go to college either, so they're kind of going down the path with me of, "We don't really know what to expect." Like what's too much money to pay? And when do you say no, it's not realistic anymore, and things like that.

I think she's absolutely right. There's positives and negatives to it. The good things are that there's so many people that once they realize you're a first generation trying to get to college, there's opportunities for you. There's scholarships made just for you and there's...well, there's a lot of help. And, you know, you're gonna be making a name for yourself and your family. Then there's the challenge, you're trying so hard to get into it a good college and, if you don't, you let everybody down.

I'm not good at math, but I'm good at writing. It's my dream to write and whenever I tell my family that, they're like, "Nah, man! You have to get a job with mathematics or engineering." And I'm like, "I'm not good at that stuff, I want to write." And they're like, "No. You have to do this." It's like they want to impose their dreams on mine, because they messed up.

My mom used to do that to me. I told her what everyone has told me: "What good is a job if you're not happy and every day you wake up not wanting to get work? What good if it pays you a lot but you have no time to spend with your family and friends?" So now she's encouraging me to pursue whatever I want. Still I feel so much pressure because all of my cousins dropped out of high school and it's all on me. Sometimes the pressure gets too much and I just want to stop. But I want to make her proud of me.

ADVICE FOR NINTH GRADERS



Stay in class. Go to every class. My freshman year, I kicked it like I was a senior. This is the only year I haven't been in any trouble. Yeah, I maintained pretty good grades, but I could have did better. When I got a B, I could've got an A. When I got a C, I could've got a B. As a freshman...think about who it is you want to be so that you won't get sidetracked by things that are nonsense.

Throughout high school I really challenged myself with taking the hardest classes and doing sports. When I wanted to go to a college, I wanted to have what it takes to go there. So just build up, make you the best that you can. And be like, "If that's what college I want to go to, I'm going to make sure I go there." You pretty much need to work hard all through high school. It doubly pays off.

Network with a lot of people. And when counselors come in, make sure you talk to them. Introduce yourself to them so they know who you are, so that when it is time for you to apply for colleges, they'll be like, "Oh, I remember her. She came and introduced herself to me freshman year."

When you come to school everyday, you come to learn new stuff. You might think your teachers give you too much work, but they're just preparing you for the real world. It only gets harder when you get into college. When you're here in high school, this is the easiest. It gets no easier than this.

You can't wait on the principal or the teachers or the counselors, the powers that be. You have to take initiative and just learn it yourself, if you don't know something. Just do your own research, learn on your own about what an AP class is, what you need for college. Don't count on someone else to tell you.

If I was to give a 9th grader advice, I'd say, "Go get a mentor." Even though you think that you can keep yourself up on your own, it's too hard. You get tired, you need to go talk to someone, best someone who cares about you. Or buck yourself up and go talk straight up with a teacher.

You have to learn how to deal with different situations. I have this to do. I have that to do. Which one should I do first? Which one's more important? Or how much time should I spend on this, so that I can finish that? And don't let other people's expectations get in your way.

Since the public schools require all of us to have 60 hours of community service to graduate, while you're getting those hours, you should try volunteering and doing things you like, so you kind of get a glimpse ahead of what's ahead if you want to go for a certain career.

Take every opportunity that is given to you. There's so many things that can help you grow as a person and people that are there to teach you something. You'll learn a lot more about yourself and what you actually want to do and where you want to go if you push yourself. It's easy to fall into what you're used to or with the crowd surrounding you rather than pushing yourself to see how far you can go.

I agree with what everyone else said: staying on top of your work, time management, the whole shebang. But it doesn't matter if you don't do something you love. Go for what you love, then, you are never technically working.

My advice is just go explore, but explore in a positive way. Don't do anything that's negative, or it will have an effect on you in the future. That's what I'd say.

SCHOOL INFORMATION

Demographics

The nine high schools in our study—four in Hamilton County and five in Seattle—are all urban comprehensive high schools. They range in size from 423 to 1309 students, grades nine through twelve, with an average enrollment of 831 students.

In Hamilton County, the demographic make-up of three of the four high schools extended from 61 to 71 percent white and 18 to 35 percent African American—comparable to the county-wide breakdown. At one of the four high schools, however, 93 percent of the students were African-American. The percentage of Hispanic students ranged from two to seven percent; for Asian students the range was one to four percent.

The Seattle high schools in our study were substantially more racially and ethnically diverse. Overall, 40 percent of the students were white, 21 percent were Asian, 16 percent were “other” (e.g., Native American, African, Middle Eastern), 13 percent were African-American, and 10 percent were Hispanic. The white population at individual schools ranged from 6 to 65 percent, the African-American from 8 to 54 percent. The Asian population from school to school was steadier, from 13 to 31 percent, as was the Hispanic—from 11 to 22 percent.

The percentage of students completing our survey who were eligible for free/reduced lunch was identical in both Hamilton County and Seattle—with 43 percent meeting the federal poverty guidelines and 38 percent exceeding them. (In both cities, 19 percent of the students said they didn’t know whether they qualified for free/reduced lunch.) Individual school percentages ranged from a low of 24 percent qualifying as low income to a high of 92 percent.

Resources

Counselor-student ratio: The ratio of students per counselor ranged from roughly 250 to 410 per counselor, with an average of 375. For the 2008-2009 school year, the American School Counselors Association reported a national average of 457 students per counselor (and recommends 250-to-1.) In some of the schools in our study, special, time-limited grant programs had provided an additional part-time counselor.

Percentage of time spent on college counseling: The percentage of time devoted to college counseling by regular counseling staff (by the counselors’ self-reports) ranged from 10 to 20 percent. (In the highest SES school in Seattle, counselors reportedly spent as much as 50 percent of their time on college advising.)

Computers per student: On average, the schools in our survey reported 90 computers per student (with 150 computers per student at the lowest SES high school). Reportedly, only a third are available for general use. Schools have library computers available for before and after school, and most have computer labs that are dedicated to classroom and district activities, such as assessments, testing, etc. Individual classrooms usually have a couple computers but, again, these are intended for classroom and district activities rather than general use.

AP classes: The number of AP classes offered at each school ranged from 3—once again, at the lowest SES school in Hamilton County—to 14, at the highest SES school in Seattle. Schools did not keep count of the number of students taking AP courses, making this information unavailable. Two of the Seattle high schools have an International Baccalaureate (IB) program in which roughly half to two thirds of the students in the school participate.

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What Kids Can Do, Inc. (WKCD) is a national not-for-profit organization founded in 2001 for the purpose of making public the voices and views of adolescents. On its website, WKCD documents young people’s lives, learning, and work, and their partnerships with adults both in and outside school. WKCD also collaborates with students around the county on books, curricula, and research to expand current views of what constitutes challenging learning and achievement. College access and success, especially among first-generation college students, are enduring interests. In 2009, WKCD launched a new arm, the Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice.

www.whatkidscando.org

www.centerforyouthvoice.org

www.firstinthefamily.org

Lumina Foundation for Education, a private, independent foundation, strives to expand access and success in education beyond high school, particularly among adults, low-income students and students of color. The Foundation believes postsecondary education remains one of the most beneficial investments that individuals can make in themselves and that society can make in its people. In 2007, Lumina Foundation launched the KnowHow2GO campaign, in partnership with the American Council on Education and the Ad Council. This multiyear, multimedia, multistate initiative encourages 8th through 10th graders to prepare for college using four simple steps. In 2009, the foundation announced a single, overarching “big goal”: to increase the percentage of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025.

www.luminafoundation.org

Alliance for Education, a local education fund, works with Seattle Public Schools (SPS) to support public education through a two-prong approach of Educational Investments and Community Engagement. The Alliance serves as a catalyst for change, a convener of community members, organizations, and civic leadership, and a conduit for directing private resources—both dollars and expertise—toward critical needs for students. At the core of the Alliance’s work is the idea, one backed by ample research, that raising a high bar for all students benefits all students. The Alliance convenes the Seattle College Access Network (SCAN) a network of SPS staff, post-secondary education representatives, community-based college access service providers, policy advocates, and others who are collaborating to increase the number of Seattle Public Schools’ students who apply, enroll in, and are successful in post-secondary education.

www.alliance4ed.org

Public Education Foundation (PEF) was formed in 1988 to strengthen public schools in Chattanooga and Hamilton County. Since then, PEF has developed a national reputation for its break-the-mold programs in school reform and leadership development. Recently, PEF has developed an extensive array of programs to boost college access and success and in 2009 merged with Chattanooga’s local College Access Center. Working in close partnership with Hamilton County Department of Education, PEF’s ongoing mission is to challenge, support and improve Hamilton County public schools so that *all* students succeed in learning and in life.

www.pefchattanooga.org



“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.”

– Edward Wood, Senior, Ooltewah High School, Chattanooga, Tennessee

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