

A large crowd of graduates in black gowns and yellow stoles are seen from behind, throwing their black mortarboard caps into the air. The caps are scattered throughout the sky. In the background, a black stage with yellow trim is visible, with an American flag and a German flag on poles. The scene is set outdoors with green trees in the distance.

Hear Us Out

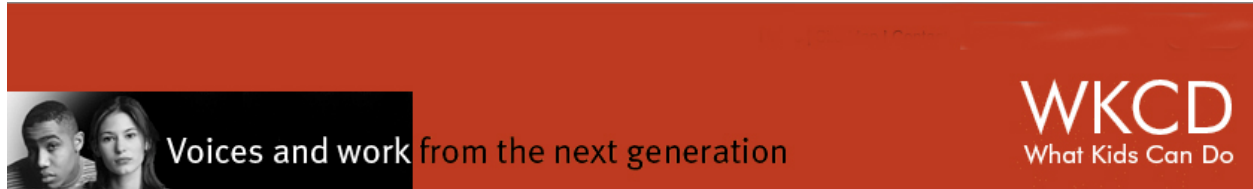
Hamilton County High School Students Talk About
Going to College

A student research project with the Public Education Foundation and the
Center for Youth Voice at What Kids Can Do

FALL 2010

Contents

PREFACE	2
INTRODUCTION by Student Researchers	3
SURVEY RESULTS	
Executive Summary	5
Thinking About College	6
School Climate	7
The Application Process	8
Hurdles	11
Afterschool and Summer Programs	12
Seniors and the College Application Process	14
Family Income and Race/Ethnicity	15
Gender	17
FOCUS GROUP RESULTS	
Introduction	20
What Motivates Us	20
What Weighs Us Down	23
What Would Help	26
Advice to Ninth Graders	29
REFLECTIONS . . . AND AN INVITATION	31
SCHOOL DESCRIPTIONS	33
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	35



PREFACE

For nine years, the national nonprofit WKCD (What Kids Can Do, Inc.) and its Center for Youth Voice 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 dozen high school students in Hamilton County, Tennessee 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, funded by the Indianapolis-based Lumina Foundation for Education. Three thousand miles away, a group of high school students in Seattle embarked on the same inquiry.

The 21st century has brought a push for college unparalleled in our nation's history. And there is no shortage of ambition among our high school students—whatever their family background, race, or ethnicity—to take on college and succeed once there.

As the student voices in this report attest, however, the path to college requires preparation and know-how, which are often in short supply, as well as determination, which can't be replenished enough.

Barbara Cervone, Ed.D., President
Center for Youth Voice in Practice and Policy
What Kids Can Do, Inc (WKCD)



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. We come from four comprehensive high schools in Hamilton County, TN, and all ten of us were members of the Class of 2010.

We got involved with **Hear Us Out** because of a genuine interest in improving the future of our schools and the lives of students. With the college admission and financial aid processes still fresh in our minds, we understand the difficulties many young people, including ourselves, face going to college. We thought it would be interesting to hear directly from our peers how well prepared they feel for college and what role the school has had—and should have—in that process. And it was.

We had a two-pronged approach to collecting information. The first was a written survey—developed by us with principals, school counselors, and college advisors—that measured student opinions about college preparation. We let teachers know the goals of **Hear Us Out**, and then we got their help in administering the surveys through classes. All students in grades 9-12—from the athletes to the studious ones, and from the quiet ones to the class clowns—were invited to complete the surveys, which we then collected and returned to PEF (Public Education Foundation). Later, through Survey Monkey, we were able to analyze the data for our individual schools.

The second method for collecting information was through focus groups led by us. Since we wanted to get a diversity of answers, we included students from as many different backgrounds as possible: black, white, Asian, athletes, band members, males, females, scholars, leaders, and even the quiet ones whom the school doesn't really hear much from because they keep to themselves. One group even had a Ukrainian exchange student. We asked questions we'd developed about their preparation for college and who/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 to hear what students had to say (both on the survey and in the focus groups). Most students want to go to college but don't know where to go for information. We need more school counselors and college advisors, and college preparation should be the goal of all classes and not just the AP and Honors classes. Our peers are in the same boat as us in not knowing enough about college until senior year; there needs to be more focus on college preparation in earlier years.

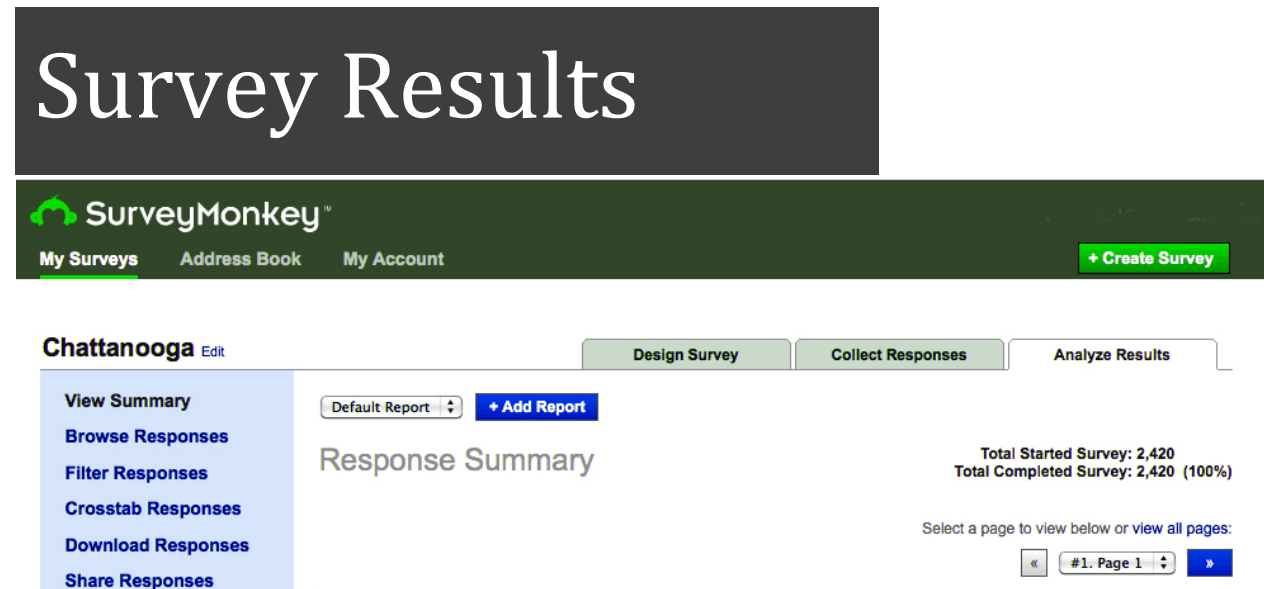
It was an amazing experience to be able to work with students from other schools on a professional level and explore the many differences as well as common ground we all have. We hope the survey and focus group results will help improve what's happening at our schools and the whole educational system. It's a great opportunity to brighten the future of students.

Central High School: *Hilary Payton* and *Caleb Sanchez*

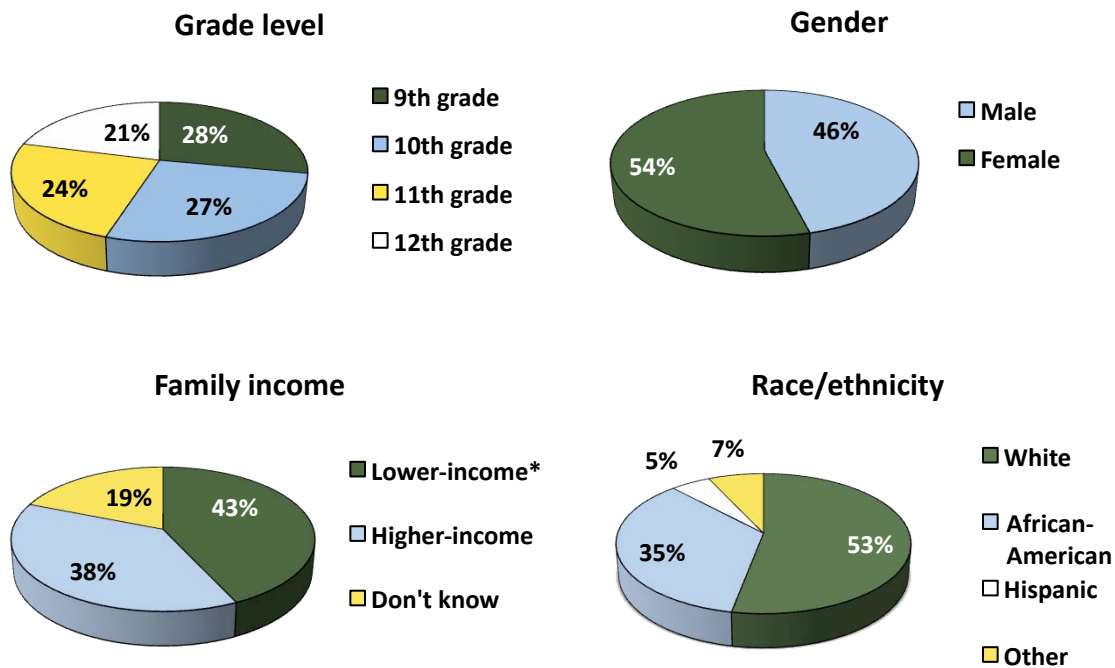
Hixson High School: *Andy Sharp* and *Ti Tran*

Howard High School: *Jerlisa Harris*, *Lekesha Kennemore* and *Ashley Simmons*

Ooltewah High School: *Robin Brown*, *Bria Williams* and *Edward Wood*



Number of Hamilton County Public High School Students Completing Survey = 2,420



* Lower-income = eligible for free or reduced lunch

First in the family to attend college: 26%

US Citizen: 95%

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Families are the biggest source of motivation for Hamilton County public high school 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, 33 percent of the ninth through eleventh graders in our survey said they had never spoken with a school counselor about college; 18 percent had never spoken about it with a teacher. Among seniors, these numbers drop to 14 and 12 percent respectively.
- Eighty-four percent of the students report that the idea of going to college had been planted early, 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-nine percent of the students indicated they planned to attend college right after graduation. More than three-quarters had researched colleges on the web (91 percent of seniors), 63 percent had looked into the SATs and ACTS (88 percent of seniors), and 70 percent had visited a college campus, most often with their family.
- More than half of the students said the cost of college was their biggest hurdle. Grades were a distant second. Sixty percent said they knew “some” or “a lot” about financial aid; 40 percent said they knew “little” or “nothing.” Eighty-seven 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, 32 percent said a teacher, 30 percent a counselor. Twenty-eight percent of the seniors said they had completed their college application “mostly on my own.”
- All in all, students in our survey gave their schools good scores on “school climate.” For example, 34 percent strongly agreed and 42 percent agreed that their teachers “think I am college material.” The figures were the same for the statement, “My school has high expectations for all students.”
- Students had less positive opinions of their classmates. Close to half disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement, “I feel that most students at my school strive to do their best.” White students viewed their peers more negatively than African-American students.
- Sixty-eight percent of the students said they had participated in school-based extracurriculars: 28 percent had participated in a community-based afterschool or summer enrichment program; 16 percent had participated in federally funded programs like Gear Up and Upward Bound. However, students said they wished they knew a lot more about afterschool and summer programs in their community; most of what they knew came from friends and siblings.
- 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 79 percent of higher income students say they expect to attend college right after graduation, compared with 65 percent of lower-income students.
- Female students in our survey reported: stronger college intentions and planning, a stronger network of adults to whom they turn for support, and a stronger belief that their teachers think they are college material and encourage them to take advanced-level courses.

THINKING ABOUT COLLEGE

Thinking about college is clearly the first step to getting there. Almost 70 percent of the 2,397 Hamilton County high school students we surveyed said they plan to attend college right after graduation. In 9th grade the figure was 62.5 percent; by 12th grade, it was 71 percent.

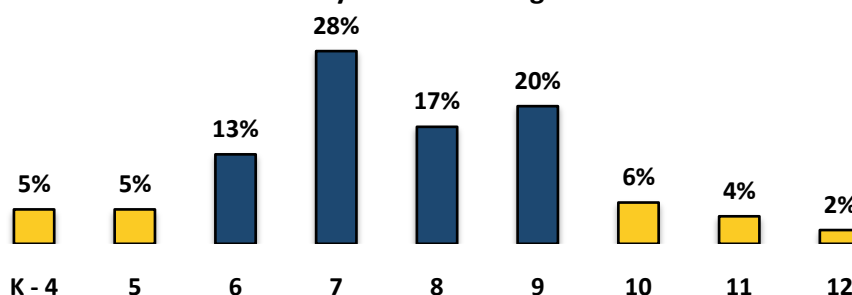
Our gut tells us that students need champions who put and keep college in their sight. The students in our study second that emotion. “Once you know someone is looking at you, expecting the best of you, that’s when you start working and doing your absolute best,” one senior told us.

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-seven percent of the students in our survey said their family influenced them “a lot”; 45 percent said their teachers; 45 percent cited mentor, coaches, or other adults in the community.

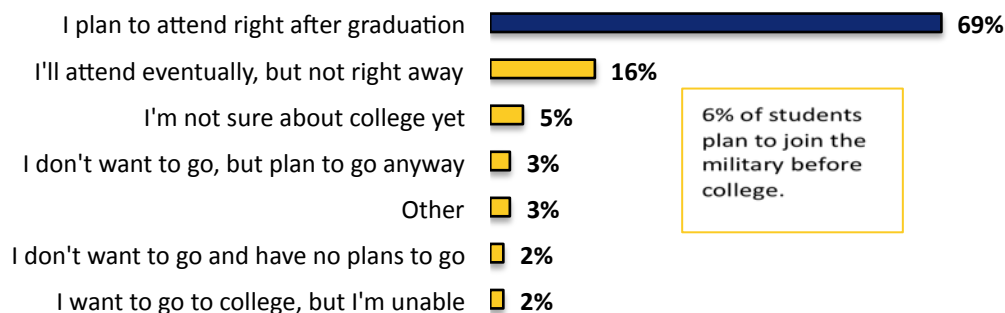
Research shows that nothing beats planning early, and our student respondents agree. “They start us on college too late,” one said. “We should start a lot of things in 9th grade. Honor classes, we should have been taking those in 9th grade.” When asked when someone first spoke seriously to them about attending college, 306 students said 6th grade. The number jumped to 688 in 7th grade.

Among lower income students (as measured by eligibility for free or reduced lunch), 67 percent said they planned to attend college on the heels of graduation, compared to 78 percent of higher income students. The gap was the same for students who would be the first in their family to attend college versus their non-first-generation peers.

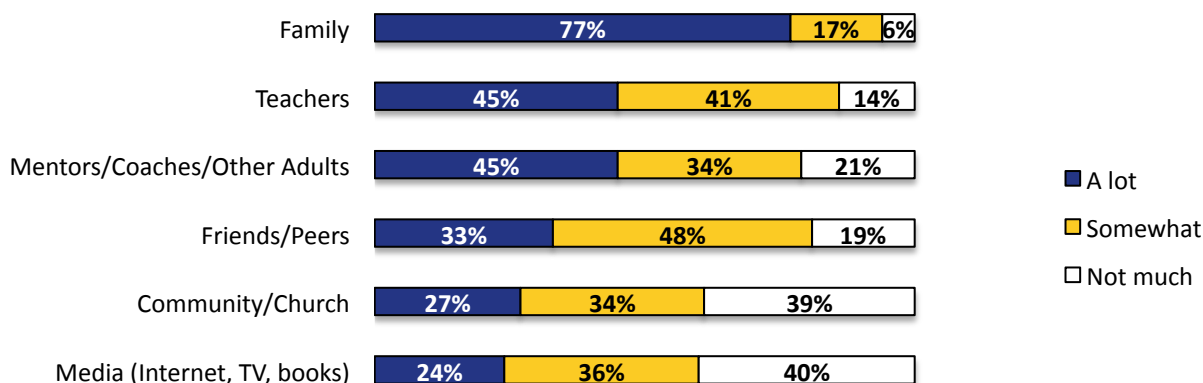
What grade were you in the first time someone spoke to you about college?



Which best describes your plans for college?



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



SCHOOL CLIMATE

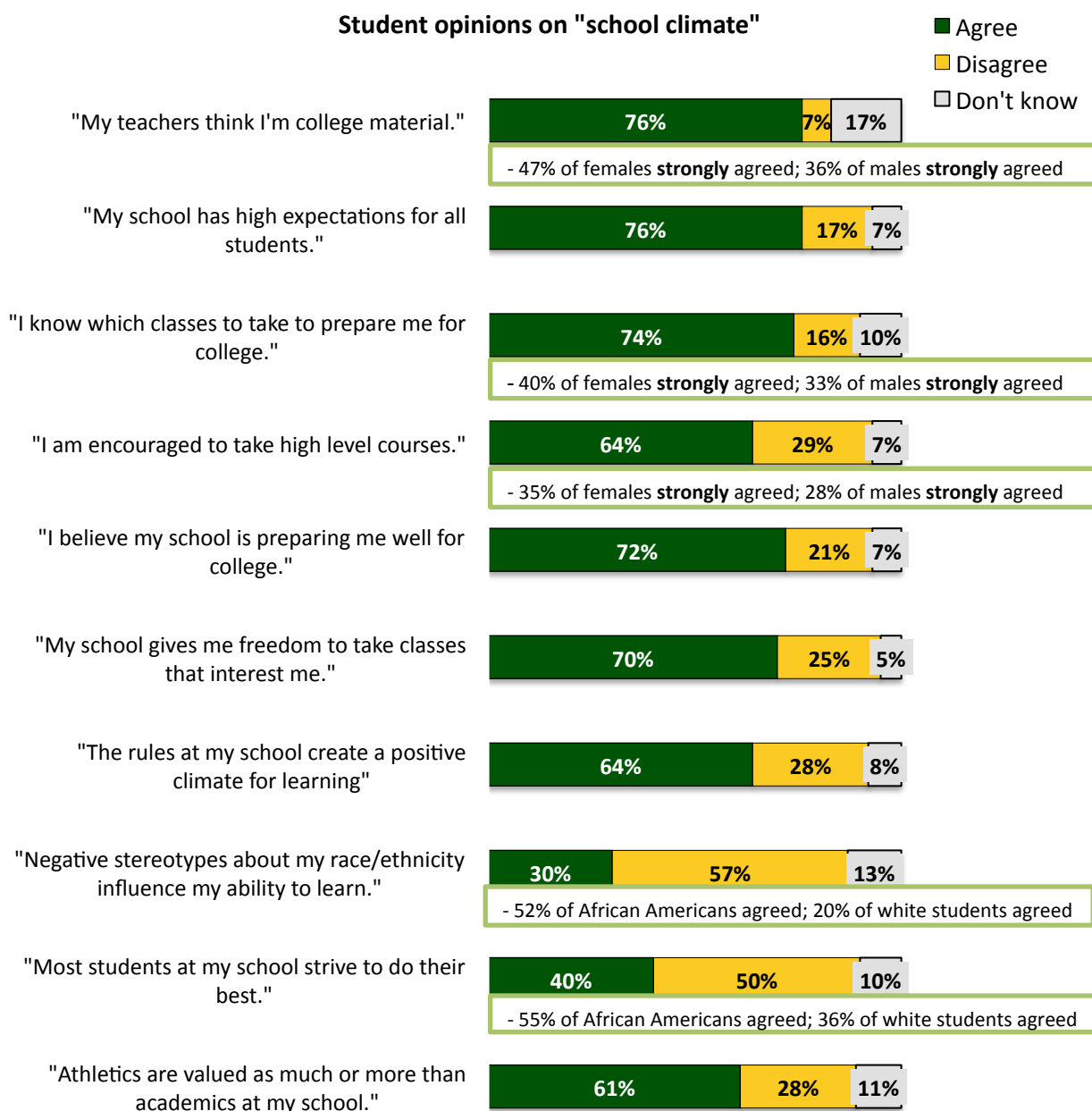
Research shows that a supportive “school climate” feeds student success toward college. The students in our study concur. “How can you believe in yourself when your school doesn’t believe in you?” asked one tenth grader. Students need teachers who believe they are college material, they said, and schools 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. For example, 34 percent strongly agreed and 42 percent agreed that their teachers “think I am college material.” The figures were the same for the statement, “My school has high expectations for all students.” Some pointed to a particular teacher. “Mr. [Name] has definitely been, I can honestly say, the biggest influence on my life,” one focus group participant told us.

Students had less positive opinions of their classmates. Close to half disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement, “I feel that most students at my school strive to do their best.” White students viewed their peers more negatively than African-American students.

On the subject of negative racial or ethnic stereotypes influencing “my ability to learn,” 60 percent of the students said they had no or little impact; 40 percent said they did. African-American students were more than twice as likely to cite race as an obstacle to learning. “Me being African American,” according to one student, “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.’”

Sixty-one percent of the students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “I feel that athletics are valued as much or more than academics at my school.”



THE APPLICATION PROCESS

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 (75 percent), friends or other students (51 percent), or a relative (43 percent).**

For teachers and school counselors, the numbers were 35 percent and 27 percent respectively. Among seniors, 46 percent said they had spoken about college “many times” with a counselor and 51 percent had spoken many times with a teacher.

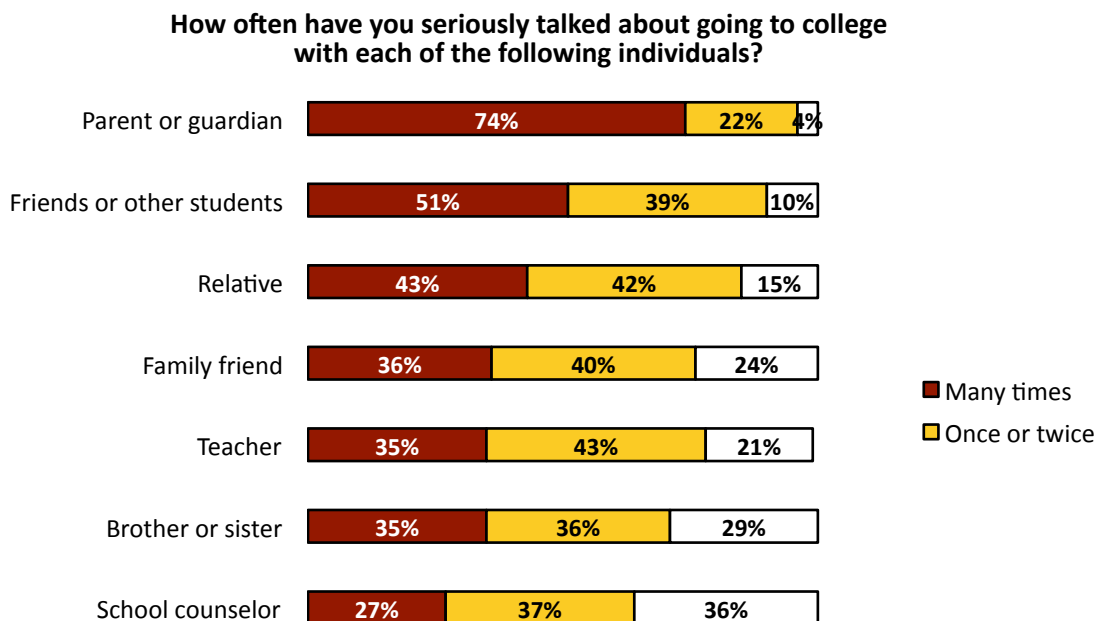
However, 33 percent of the ninth through eleventh graders in our survey said they had never spoken with a school counselor about college; 18 percent had never spoken about it with a teacher. (Among seniors, these numbers drop to 14 and 12 percent respectively.) In our focus groups, students spoke bluntly about the difficulties of getting a counselor’s attention. “Every time I walk in there,” one 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. **More than two-thirds of the students surveyed said they had researched colleges on the web and made a list of colleges that interested them.** We broke the data down for seniors, as well, figuring their numbers would go up (and they did).

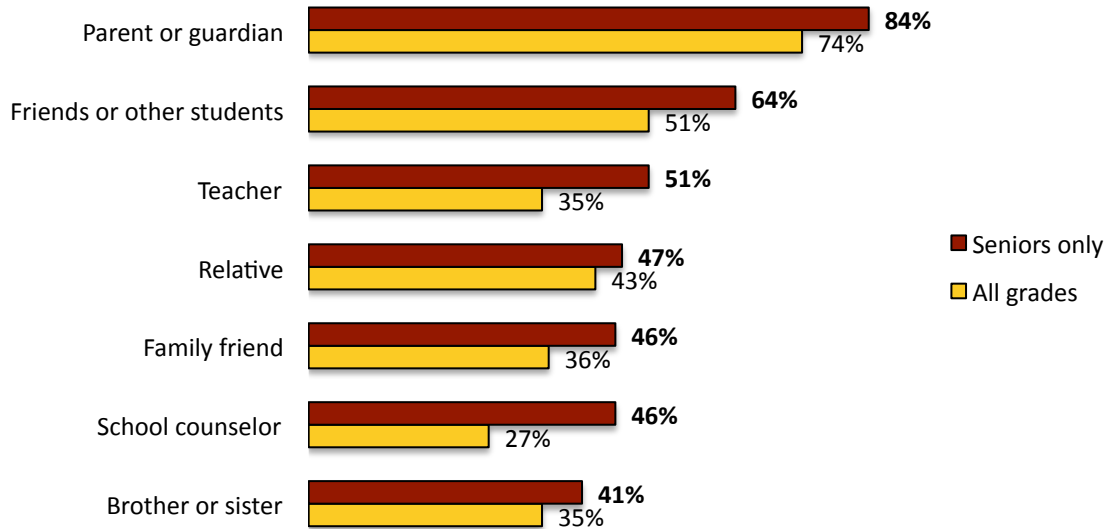
We asked students how much they knew about the costs of college and applying for financial aid. **Sixty percent of the students said they knew “some” or “a lot” about college costs; 40 percent said “nothing” or “little.”** One focus group participant told us: “My father is kinda planning to pay for me to go to college. I never really understood what he was giving up for me.”

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 percent of the students reported having visited at least one college campus (rising to 78 percent among seniors), most often with a family member (66 percent of ninth graders, 55 percent of twelfth graders).**

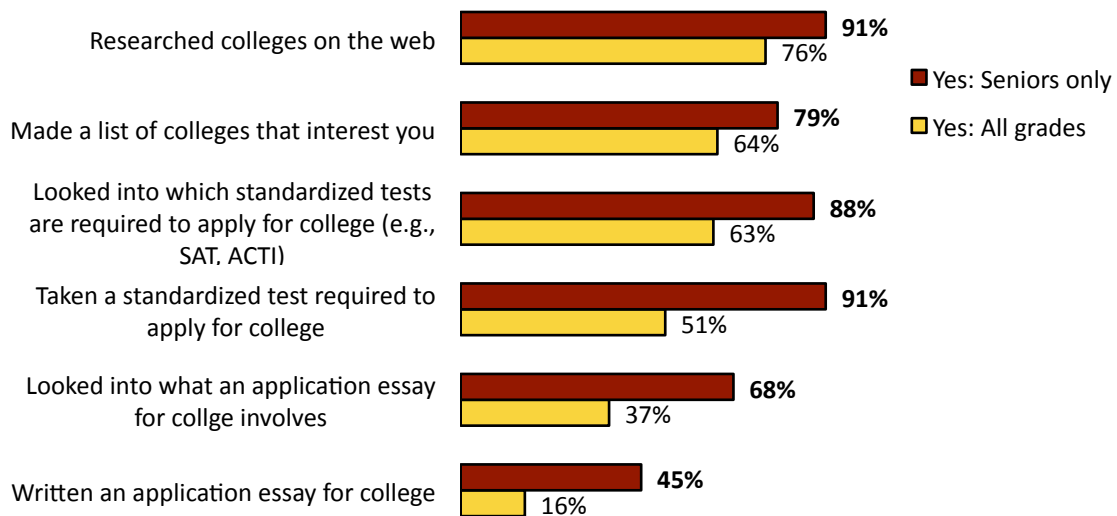
If they were having a problem with the college application process, 87 percent said they would turn to a parent or guardian, 32 percent said a teacher, and 30 percent said a school counselor.



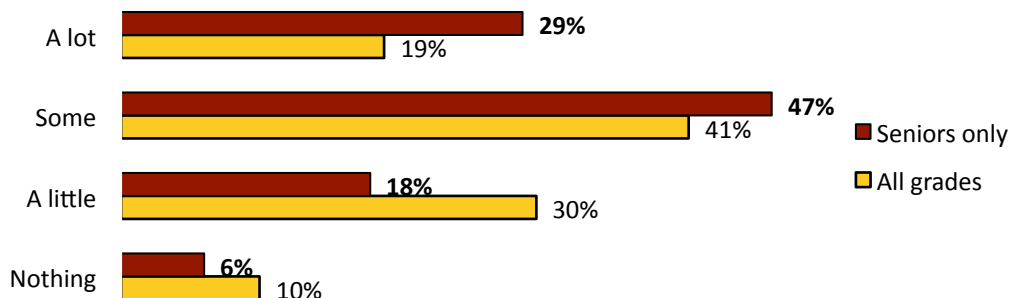
I have talked many times to each of the following about college.



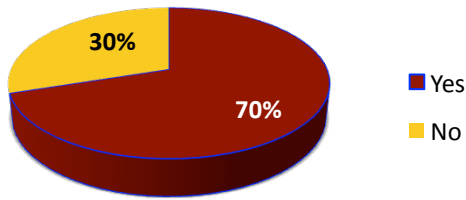
Have you ever...?



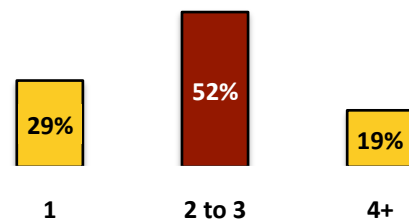
How much do you feel you know about the costs of college and getting financial aid?



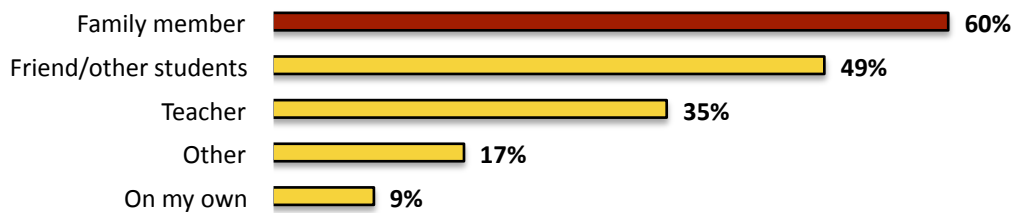
Have you ever visited a college campus?



If yes, how many colleges did you visit?



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

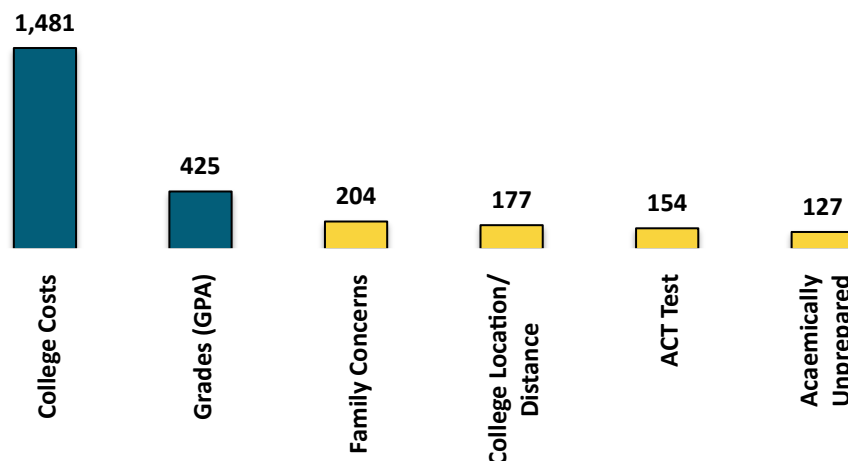


Comments: The “other” category included grandparents, aunts and uncles, social workers, boyfriends/girlfriends, neighbors, coaches, church members, and military recruiters.

HURDLES

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, with grades a distant second.**

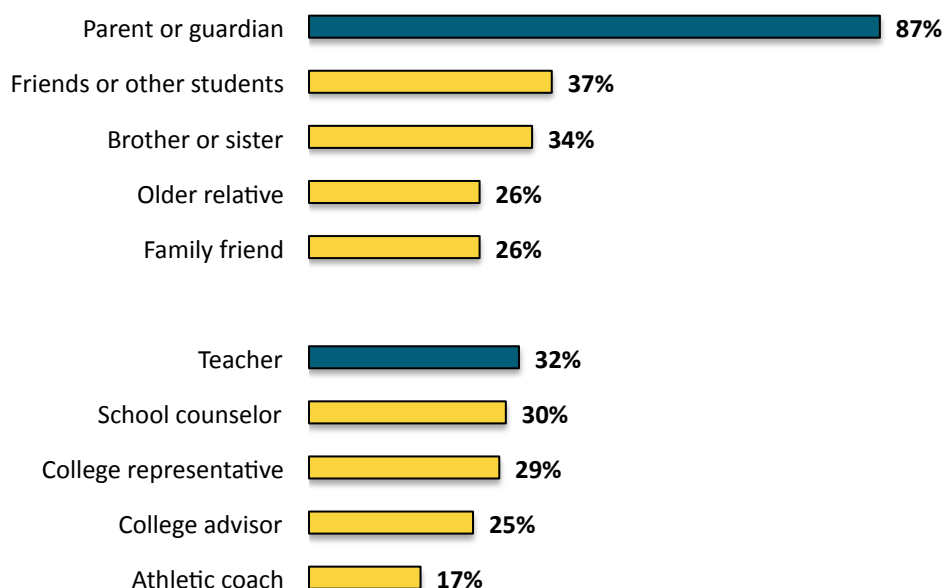
Top college hurdles named by students (Number of students citing concern)



Other hurdles/concerns:

- **Not sure what I want to do (17)**
- **Partying, bad influences (16)**
- **I won't finish college (16)**
- **Lack of motivation (14)**
- **Time management (8)**
- **Expectation that I join the military (6)**

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



AFTERSCHOOL AND SUMMER PROGRAMS

Research strongly suggests that students who participate in afterschool and summer programs reap multiple benefits. 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.

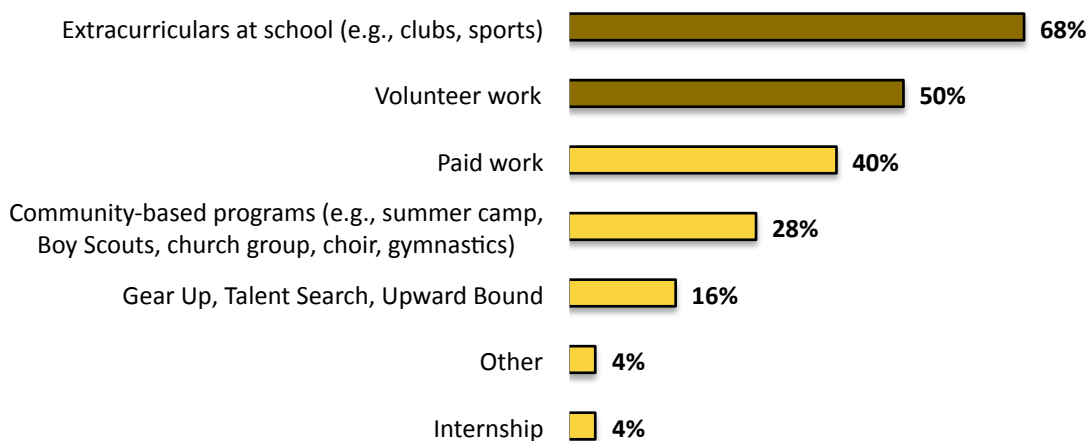
Just as important, many afterschool and summer programs give students a chance to be known well by a caring adult—to gain a mentor—who can help them on the path to college.

Sixty-eight percent of the students in our survey said they have participated in school-based “extracurriculars.” Twenty-eight percent said they have participated in a community-based afterschool or summer enrichment program. Sixteen percent said they have participated in one or more of the federally funded programs Gear Up, Talent Search, and Upward Bound.

Students told us they wished they knew more about these opportunities. When asked how much they knew about afterschool and summer programs in their community, 56 percent of students said they knew little or nothing and only 14 percent said they knew a lot. Most of what they knew came from friends and siblings: “My sister went there and she told me I should too.”

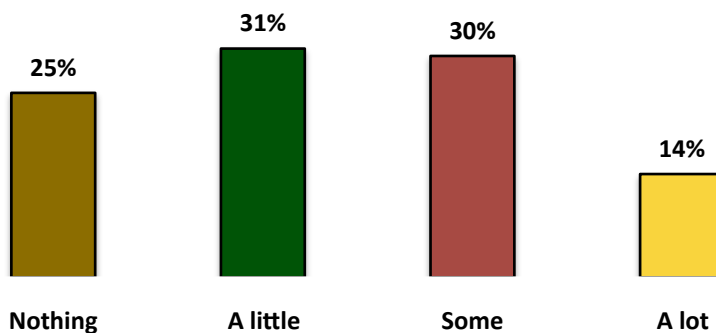
The two most common obstacles students mentioned that prevented their involvement in afterschool and summer programs were their need to work and their lack of transportation. Forty percent of the students surveyed said they have a paid job after school and/or in the summer and 50 percent said they had volunteer work: “I’d like to but I don’t have the time.”

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



Comments: Students who marked “other” described a huge range of activities: e.g., music lessons, helping neighbors, horse shows, Charm School, Model UN, National Security Forum, visiting people in the hospital, bass fly fishing, trips, Junior Miss, Chattanooga Adolescent Awareness Team.

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:

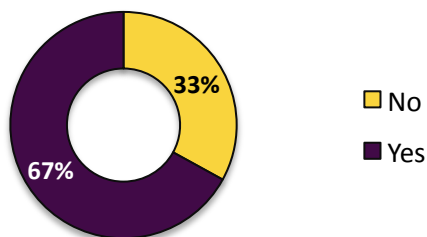
- Work/job (cited 210 times)
- Lack of transportation to get to and from programs (125 times)
- No time (109)
- Expense of programs (30)
- Family obligations (e.g., caring for siblings, visiting father) (29)
- Not interested (6)

SENIORS AND THE COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS

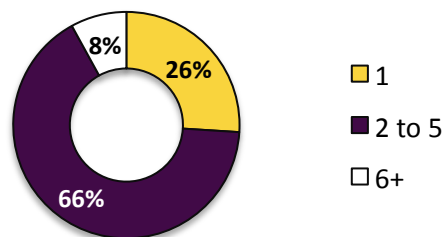
For the 558 seniors who completed our survey, we asked where they stood in relation to the college application process: whether they had applied and how many colleges had they applied to (as of April 2010). **More than two-thirds of the seniors had applied to two to five colleges.**

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 (over 60 percent). Twenty-eight 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.**

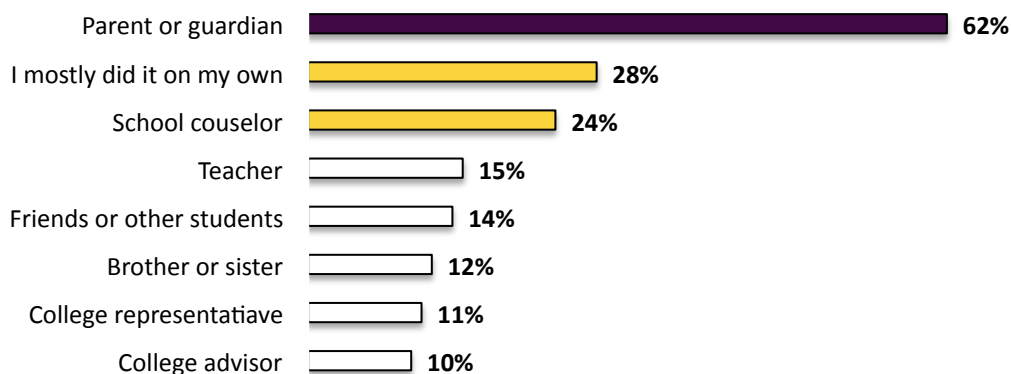
Have you ever completed a college application?



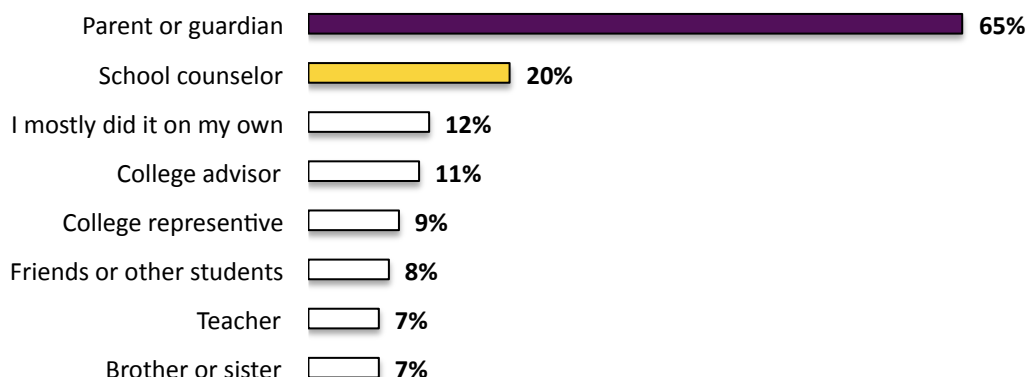
If yes, how many colleges have you applied to?



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



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



FAMILY INCOME

Study after study shows how poverty blocks the path to college for some students and challenges most. Decades of research trace a strong correlation between family income and school achievement: the higher a student's family income, the more likely he or she is to experience academic success, and vice versa.

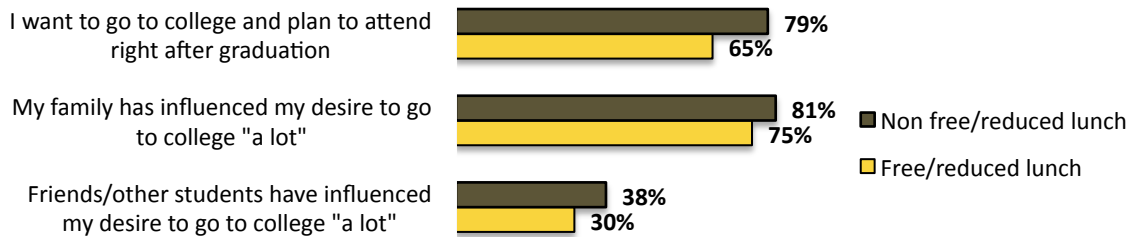
Our results tell a similar story (with family income measured by whether a student is eligible for free or reduced lunch). **It starts at the planning stage, when 79 percent of higher income students say they expect to attend college right after graduation, compared with 65 percent of lower-income students.** "For me it's plain simple," one student wrote. "My family needs me to work. They can't live on my mom's disability check."

With schools hard pressed to give the college supports their students need and the majority of the students in our survey reporting that their family is their mainstay on college, low-income students also fall behind. **Only 49 percent of lower-income seniors said they asked their families to assist with the application process, compared to 73 percent of higher-income seniors.** "Lord, my parents want to help, but they didn't go to college themselves. It can be painful for everybody," said one senior.

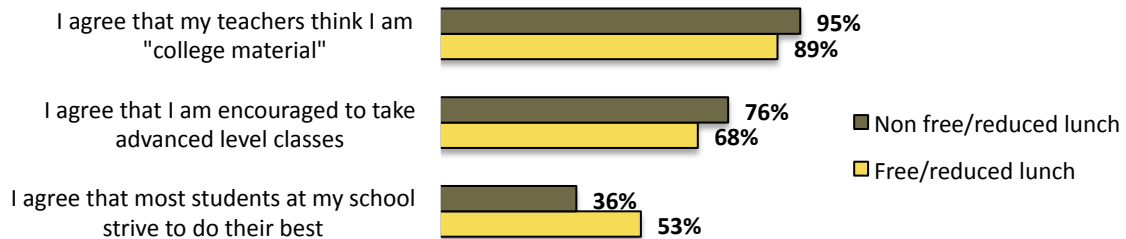
Fewer lower-income students said they felt that their teachers regard them as "college material" or encourage them to take advanced level classes. "Some of the things these teachers say be making us think that we ain't gonna make it," one focus group participant told us. **Fewer report participating in extracurricular activities or in paid or volunteer work** (although low family income does allow them to participate in federal enrichment programs like Upward Bound).

In all, 913 of the students surveyed said they were eligible for free or reduced lunch, 818 said they were not, and 401 did not know.

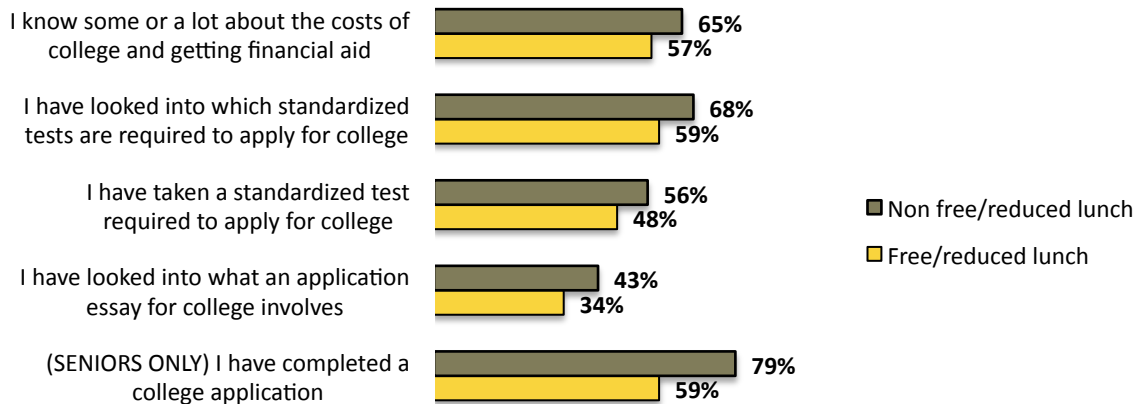
Thinking about college



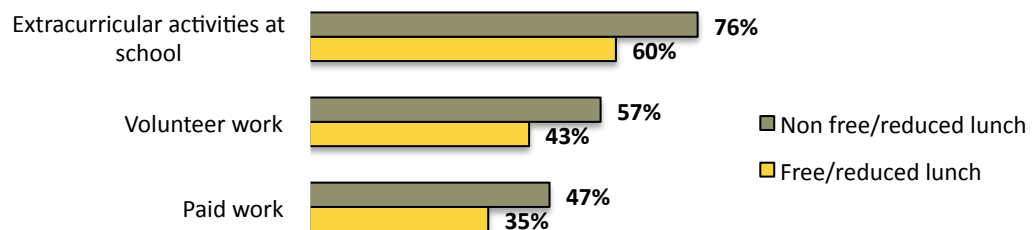
School climate



Application process



Participation in afterschool and summer activities



GENDER

More women are going to college today than they did a decade ago. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of females enrolling in college after high school increased by 20 percent from 1967 to 2000, while the number of men has decreased by 4 percent.

Our research suggests why. **Female students in our survey reported: stronger college intentions and planning, a stronger network of adults to whom they turn for support, and a stronger belief that their teachers think they are college material and encourage them to take advanced-level courses.**

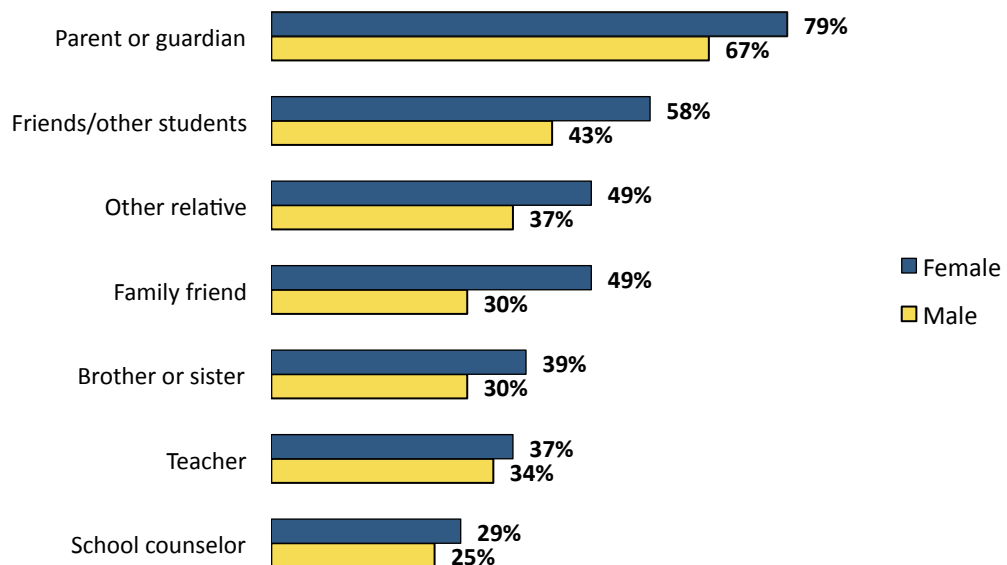
“Look around and what do you see,” one male student asked. “It’s the females who are getting the better grades and studying harder, it’s the females who go get the attention they need, who raise their hand first.”

Females made up 1,164 of the students completing our survey; 1,002 were male.

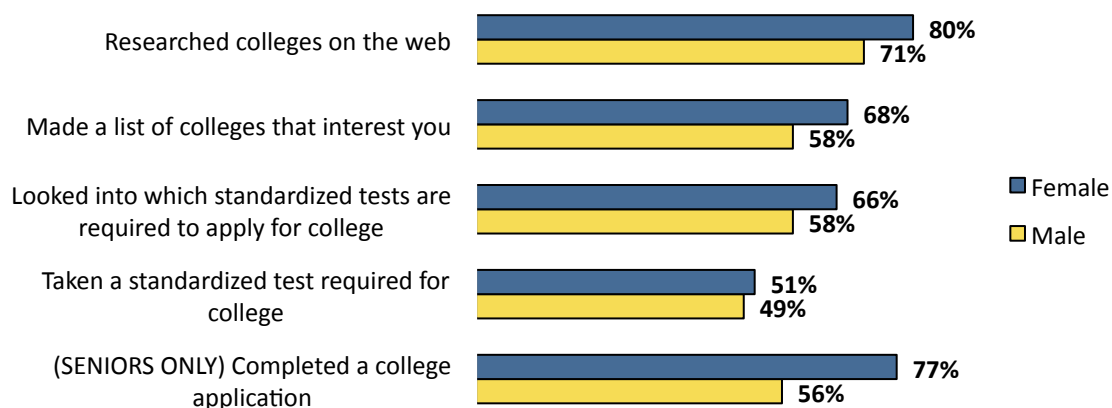
Plans for college



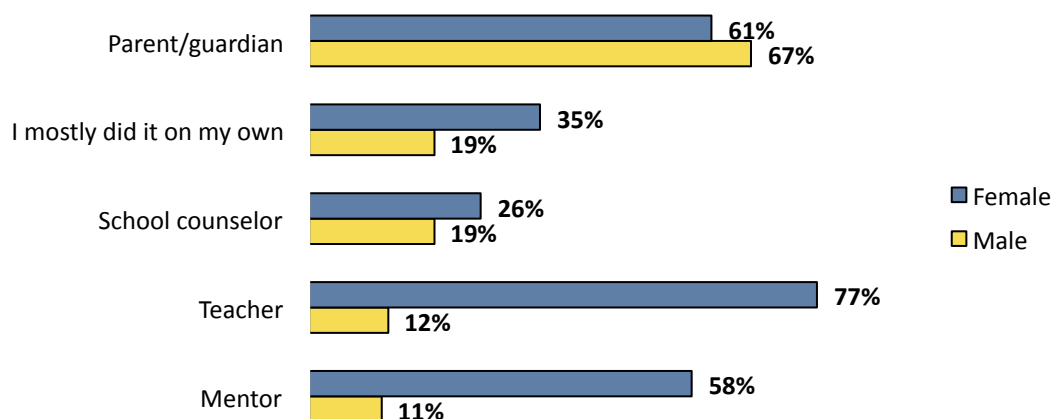
I have talked many times to each of the following about going to college



Application process



Seniors only (as of April 2010) Who helped you with the application process?





Focus group results

INTRODUCTION

The student comments that follow are from the ten focus groups our student researchers conducted with classmates during the week of April 12-17, 2010. In two schools, Ooltewah and Howard High Schools, the student researchers organized three separate focus groups. At Central and Hixson, the student researchers led two focus groups at each school. A total of 105 students participated in these 30 – 90 minutes discussions. 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 ten focus groups. Highlights appear in a 12-minute video that can be viewed online (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppOnaHRLCaY>).

We extracted the audio from this videotaping, transcribed it in its entirety, and drew from the 75 plus pages of transcripts in what 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 would help us negotiate these obstacles? What's on us and what might our school do differently?
- What advice do we have for freshmen following in our footsteps?

WHAT MOTIVATES US

Family

As in our survey, students pointed most often to their parents as the biggest influence on their desire to go to college. For some, like one Ooltewah HS junior, it was a given: “Most of my family went to college, so that's what I've been told all my life.” For others, seeing how hard their parents' lives had been without a college education made them hope for more: to earn more money, open new doors, and make their family proud.

- 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.
- I would say my dad. He's got a nursing degree, which is what I'm following in and it's like having a mentor showing me the way, so it's just following in his footsteps, hoping I can be as good as him.

- That'd be my mother because growing up I didn't have no father, so she played both roles, and she encouraged me that if I want to be successful and make something out of my life, I can't be running around in the streets. To go to college and really do something with your life, so that had to be my biggest influence.
- My parents have always pushed me from middle school, all the way up to high school. Every year that I was in school, they have 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." So it's like number one, my parents pushing me.
- My dad's always tells me stay on the right track, stay on the right track. In the classroom, like he never really tells me you have to have straight A's or whatever, but he says, "He'd really like it," and I don't ever really want to disappoint him or nothing. So I just say, "I'm going to do this for my dad."

Several students singled out a grandparent who pushed them, "You need to get your grades up. What you do you want to do when you get older?" or an aunt who kept saying, "You can do anything if you set your mind to it." Sometimes, students pointed to an older sibling who had set a path they wanted to follow or a sibling whose mistakes they wanted to avoid.

- My sister definitely influenced me to get a better education because my family looks up to her and she attends the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. So she's always pushing me to go and do exactly what she's doing, which is what I want to do.
- 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!

Teachers and counselors

Students talked about a favorite teacher or a college advisor who stoked their college ambitions.

- Well, 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.
- Mr. [Name] has definitely been, I can honestly say, probably the biggest influence on my life. One of the really great things about Central is that we have teachers that genuinely care and want to help you. And [Name] has definitely been an influence for me. He's always there for me if I need advice on something, advice about the future or just any general problem. He's just always been there.
- I gotta cite Ms. [Name] because she took us on most of our class trips. She's the go to person when it comes to college. She always pushed us to do the ACTs, to get ready for this, prepare for that. So I have to say Ms. [Name] has been the main person who really pushed me to go to college.

Coaches and JROTC instructors

Students who were involved in school athletics or Junior ROTC spoke about the special role the adults in charge can play.

- I don't know how to explain it, but when it's your coach, it's a certain connection that you just have with them. We're doing something that we love to do and they're helping us with it.
- I'd have to say my coaches. My parents want me to go to college bad. But if you're a high school athlete, then you're pretty good at what you do. Your coaches push you hard to get you to college, especially when they have a lot of ties at a lot of places. They push you.
- My RO (JROTC) instructor, has influenced me a lot to decide which college I want to go to and what I want to do with my life, and what career choice to pick.

Other adults

Several students pointed to a minister or a church member who had gone to college and encouraged them: "My pastor, you look up to him." Otherwise, not a single student in our focus groups spoke of strong ties with an adult in their community who might serve as a mentor and motivator. However, they longed for them. "We need a mentor program, a big brother program, somebody that's going to help you push," said one Central sophomore.

What would they look for in a mentor? Two students at Howard High School shared their thoughts:

- I'd look for somebody who has an open mind, who's able to put themselves in your shoes to know what you're going through. They don't judge you off of what you've been through. And since they've already experienced things, they're there to tell us about it and they're patient with us.
- I think it's someone who doesn't lower their standards for you. Someone who has standards and expects you to meet those standards and doesn't think, "He might not be able to meet those standards."

Additional thoughts

Motivation wears many faces, students added, and sometimes it comes down to not disappointing others, defying negative stereotypes, or doing what makes *you* happy.

- Sometimes the motivation comes from not wanting to let other people down. The thing I don't want to do is to disappoint people.
- By the way they treat you, the way they talk to you, what they talk about, you get the feeling they hold you to a great responsibility where you feel like, "I don't want to let them down." It's beyond you, you're actually doing this for somebody else, too.
- Me, I use stereotypes as my influence. Like if somebody tells me that my race or something cannot do something, that's gonna motivate me to prove them wrong.
- 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.

WHAT WEIGHS US DOWN

Although the students in our focus groups were optimistic about their college plans—not one said they didn’t think they would make it—they had a long list of obstacles. They talked about poor grades, procrastination, and coursework that didn’t engage them. Predictably, they talked about the cost of college, but also about the way race and ethnicity colors college going. They mentioned not enough counselors, family worries, and lack of encouragement. One student said he faced “no obstacles, none, whatsoever.” The student sitting next to him said, “Man, are you lucky!”

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)
- I basically failed all my classes freshman year, I made like C's and F'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'm sitting at a 2.9 and when I graduate, I'll have a 3.2, if I'm lucky.
- Yea, it was pretty much the same for me, with the GPA and tests. 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.

Procrastination and not working harder

- 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.”
- For me, I should have taken harder classes earlier on, like when I was a freshman. But I just took mediocre, regular ones and now I'm doing the harder classes, which are actually giving me more work and that's a challenge for me. So I feel like, you know, it's up to kids to challenge themselves.
- Well, I think the main thing with me is procrastination. Like I'm a junior and I probably should be looking into college now, like my family has been pressuring me. But I keep procrastinating, like I'll do it next weekend. Sometimes it's because I don't know how to look for a college and a lot of times I just don't feel like looking.
- 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. “

The cost of college

- My father is kinda planning to pay for me to go to college. I never really understood what he was giving up for me.
- With all the competition out there for scholarships, it's really hard to get them. You have to try harder, get your grades up, do extracurricular activities, volunteer.

- 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.

Un-engaging classes

- 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."
- As to teachers, some help, others don't. There are certain teachers that give a lot of work, like you get in college, but then you have to go and do it, learn it all by yourself. If you have questions, it's all up to you. Then there are teachers who will actually talk to you, sit down with you, teach you. They're willing to work with you, you can show up after school and ask for help and they'll help you.
- You can't expect a student to progress, to move on to the next lesson, if they don't understand the assignment they are on. Teachers have to stay focused on the present, they gotta know their students and make sure they understand before the next assignment.

Not enough counselors

Some students pointed to a counselor—or more often a college advisor—that had made all the difference. "I think they've done a great job, considering that they are overwhelmed by so many students," said one Ooltewah senior. "And it's kind of hard for them to get to everybody but they do all they can to help us and show us the best way." However, the bottom line for most students in our focus groups was that too few counselors added up to too little 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.
- I understand that there are only two counselors for 600 students and that's not enough. Every time I go in there, you feel like it has to be to the point, get done, then go back to class. It needs to be more student-oriented.
- Oh my lord.
They try to help.
Not all of them.
They work so hard! They work double 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. (Student exchange)

Family worries

- My mother passed away a couple of years ago. And when I think about it, leaving my family would be the hardest part of going to college because if I go away to college in a different state and something happens to another one of the family members, I wouldn't be there. So leaving my family would probably be hard for me.

Race and stereotypes

- 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.
- Our school always has been what they call a "black school," and so a lot of times when I go out in public, they tell me, "Oh, you go to Howard? Oh, I heard that school is just awful." They say that just to throw you off and make you just mad or something because they feel that here, like we're dumb or something. We ain't dumb! We know our work! If we compete with them, we probably know some stuff that they don't know. (Student exchange)
- For me, stereotypes are big. Depending on how you look at it, how you take yourself, how you carry yourself has a lot of obstacles. You carry yourself one way but you might have an intelligence that people don't look at you having. And when they see, they're like, "Why I didn't know that."
- Stereotypes about your community, your surrounding. That can also break a lot of people. They drop out, just say forget it.
- Race can be an advantage. It's helped me a lot, especially with scholarships. Maybe a school wants more diversity, so maybe they'll choose you because they don't have big diversity at their school.
- 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."
- I don't think it's a race thing. I think it's like a region or area problem. People who are not from here look down on Hamilton County, or Tennessee, probably Tennessee period. It's like, "Well, we've been told that you're not as equipped as they are, you're not prepared like them."
- With stereotypes, you box in others and often get boxed in yourself and soon everyone's walking around boxed. We all become ignorant when we say, "Well, I'm white, I'll do this," or "He's black, so he'll do this."

Not enough encouragement

- I believe if a teacher or any adult senses that a student is being discouraged or thinking, "Why should I go to college? Am I not good enough for college?" they should take some time to sit down with that student and help them believe that they should go to college and it would actually help improve their life.
- Some of the things that some of these teachers say be making us think that we ain't gonna make it. Such as, "Why you doing this? You ain't gonna make it out nowhere." Man, naw, you don't say that! You don't say that to no student cuz you don't know what the student gonna go do and who the student is.
- 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 my ACT score wasn't high enough. 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.

Other

- I've had a lot of obstacles as far as stress. I'm always taking honors and planning on taking a lot of AP classes next year and sometimes the work gets really stressful.
- An obstacle for me was getting my full US citizenship here in America.
- 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.
- My freshman year, I was lost. I was lost last year. I'm still lost. I don't know exactly what's going on.

WHAT WOULD HELP

Students in our focus groups had a lot to say about what would help them better prepare for college—and what they would do differently if they had it to do over again. Repeatedly, they came back to the importance of starting early. And while accepting their own personal responsibility in relation to staying on track and working hard, they wished their teachers and counselors would prod them, reach out, and encourage them more. They spoke of high academic standards as well as teaching that accommodated diverse learning styles. They wished for more mentoring, especially by “near peers” (e.g., seniors).

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.
- Ninth and twelfth grade are the most important years because those two years you got to finish off strong. You gotta start strong and got to finish strong.
- 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.

Prodding

- They could have drilled the issue of GPA more with us. They told us how important it was, but as a freshman and sophomore, it's so far away, to me it didn't matter. I think it would also help to hear this from seniors who didn't pay attention to their GPA earlier on and now they are really worried.
- As much as I hated it, taking the plan tests, they're miserable but I wish I had taken them more seriously. When I got back my scores and saw what I got, I was like, "Oh my goodness, is *that* what I'm going to make on my ACT? Why didn't I try?" I know I should have taken it more serious, but it would also have helped if they had told me how much it mattered, instead of just saying, "You're taking this test." I wish they would have made it really important and showed us what we needed to improve.
- Be strict on us in the eighth grade, because eighth grade, it's like a run-through for what's to come, you getting good grades. Last year, some of the grades I have, I didn't do nothing in those classes.
- It would be nice if counselors keep track of your transcript and your progress. It'd be nice if like, a deadline's coming up, they'd come, meet with you and say the deadline's coming up and make you aware that you gotta start filling out stuff and meet deadlines.

Teachers and counselors who reach out

- 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.
- Mr. [Name] is a really good counselor to me. Anytime I see him in a hall or in a classroom, he'll always say hi and see how things are going, just asking what I plan to do in the future and stuff.
- 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."
- Coach [Name], because if you have a problem and you need someone to talk to, he's always willing to talk to you. And Miss [Name] that works in the 9th grade academy. If you need to know where you at or where you stand at, she'll pull you to the side or she'll come pull you out your classroom to let you know your GPA and what you need to do to get to college or stay out of trouble in school.

High standards

- You know, a teacher told me, "An A here would not be an A somewhere else." They told me that and that just made me think, "I'm not being prepared for college at this school."
- Teachers, it seem like their expectations are not the way they should be. Like, they'll tell us a grade is due by a certain time, but they be lenient on it and let you do it. They don't enforce you on making the deadline. And then, it just seems like sometimes they just give grades.
- They should offer more AP classes and honors classes, especially in the ninth or tenth grade.
- They told me taking an AP class was pointless and it didn't make a difference when I went to college. I tried to explain to them that I'm not going on an athletic scholarship. I'm going on an academic scholarship."

- My freshman and sophomore years were pretty easy, it seemed like you just showed up and got an A. But this year, I've been taking AP classes, so it's a lot harder than it was last year. I think they should make classes more rigorous when you first come into high school, instead of putting it all on you starting your junior year.
- My AP English teacher. It's like a bittersweet kinda feeling with her. She pushes you so hard. I'm the type of person who gets really good grades on writing. But her class, the first time I turned in an essay, I was so confident. I was like, "I'm going to ace this, this is a piece of cake." I got it back, made a 75. I was like "Why?" But she really wrote on my paper, which showed me she took her time, read over my work, called me on it, and tried to make me a better writer. I came after school asking for help, and she sat there with me for a few hours explaining why I got the grade that I got. And it was like, "Wow, she stayed so long just for one paper, just to make me become a better writer." It started bitter but it ended sweet. She really helped me.

Teaching that connects to students' learning styles and interests

- Teenagers like hands-on stuff. Like I took aquatic biology last semester and Mr. [Name] took us out to a creek and showed us different things and got us like really interested. A lot of people ended up doing the project, where if you just hand us worksheets, the only thing that goes through our head is "Great, we have another one." Nobody wants to do them.
- I'm like really into ROTC. The thing that draws me to it is I'm not sitting in a classroom everyday. One day I might be sitting in a classroom, learning about something. But the next day, I'll be teaching other students the position of attention. And then another day I'll be doing physical training. I think teachers don't explore their options when it comes to how they can teach you. Granted it might be math, but math doesn't have to be sitting at a desk 24/7 looking at an overhead projector.
- We need to be able to take specific classes that pertain to what we intend on doing after high school. I'm in an environmental science pathway, so I'm taking environmental science and geology, classes that I like.
- Certain students are on different learning paths from the others. It does no good when the teacher gives just one explanation for the whole class. Some may have caught it way before, some may catch it then, and some may never catch it.
- We have a lot of classes here, but some kids may feel like things are missing, like maybe a home ec. class, maybe some time in the weight room for those who don't have time to get in after school and work out. Or some of the teachers, maybe they have interests that they don't teach about, something they can show the rest of the students. (Howard)

Mentoring, especially by "near peers"

- I have friends who have bad grades and stuff, or their GPA is a little lower and so they just give up. They're like, "I'll just go to work, I don't have to go to college." And they don't have a teacher or school counselor encouraging them. I think that maybe they need a mentor who could show them that even though they have bad grades, they could still make it to college. Like you don't have to go to a university. You can go to a junior college or a technical college. They need someone to show them it's not too late if they've given up, to help them out if they're overwhelmed.
- It's about getting snapped with reality. With freshman, you not going to see the big picture until you get a little older. But if that picture is snapped for you by older students, you hearing all this and then looking at us now and seeing us graduating and all, it gives you a picture of reality. By the time you're a senior, you would not be making the mistakes we're talking about now.
- Our school counselors helped us some, but what helped more was having upper classmen talk to us, 11th and 12th graders. It helped me out a lot.

- Yea, 'cause when a teacher tells you, it's just another teacher talking. But when a fellow student who's going through it like that talks, you pay attention.
- Recently I went to a youth legislature trip, and there were schools from all over Tennessee. I noticed that a lot of them, they talked together, they were like a family. It made me feel like I wanted that here at Central. I wanted to be able to walk down the hallways and talk to someone like, 'Hey did you ever finish your essay?' or 'How did you do on it?' I just wish we had more a student-to-student interaction. If I had had someone to talk to my freshman year, I know I would have had a lot less stress and a lot more motivation.
- Or you can get somebody who didn't go to college and, you know, talk about how their life is, how probably it would have been better if they did go to college. Putting it that way may have a better impact than just hearing teachers say, "Go to college." 'Cause they went to college they wouldn't know what it meant not to go to college.
- A lot of kids don't know what options are out there, like I'm not smart enough for college or I don't have enough money for college or college isn't for me. I think if we talk more one on one, just help kids explore their options better, it would help.

ADVICE FOR NINTH GRADERS

We didn't plan it this way, but each focus group ended spontaneously with juniors and seniors giving advice to the ninth graders in the group—an unexpected benefit of including students from all four grades. They had a lot to say.

- Freshman year you hear about it. Sophomore year you hear about it. Junior year, you start hearing about it more towards the end. But senior year, it hits, because, I mean everything at once, you have your deadlines. You have your applications. Not to mention you have your senior stuff like you know, Riverboat and prom and yearbook and your graduation stuff together. **I think the best thing is as a freshman, talk to the teacher that inspires you and just ask her what are some small things that you can do now.**
- **Just keep your grades up.** Freshman year, I thought it was goof-off time. I finished middle school, I can goof-off in high school. And my grade point average after freshman year was a 1.5. I still haven't gotten up above a 2.5.
- **Another thing that will probably help you with college, they didn't tell me until like last year, is AP classes.** The people teaching it, granted all the teachers are smart, but it seems like they have a different view on things. And they actually cause you to think outside the box. And they don't pressure you to do your work. They're more like, "This is your work and it's on you to do it."
- **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 motivate yourself because you're not going to go through life having people motivate you all the time.** You have to look in the mirror and 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.
- I think there's a balance. Like we definitely need to have people that are willing to reach out and help us, but also I think that if there's no desire in the students to progress and gain more knowledge, then the adults can't do everything for us. **You have to have a vision, kinda have to have an idea what you want to be doing in the next few years and just go from that and let that be a motivation to put forth your best effort.**
- I think a solution for overcoming the obstacles is just to stay motivated, try to set goals for yourself and try to accomplish the goals, because there are a lot of kids that say I want to go to college, I want to do this, I want to do that. But when you ask them what they want to do at college, they're like, "I don't know." **You have to make goals. You have to get out and do things. Not everything's going to come and knock at your door. You have to go breaking down those doors sometimes.**



REFLECTIONS . . . AND AN INVITATION

At the end of a journey, travelers often realize that there are things they wish they had known before they started—and they want to give this hard-earned advice to anyone about to take the same journey.

The seniors in our study had a similar impulse. Regardless of which high school they came from—or whether they were male or female, black or white, rich or poor—our seniors had gained a common set of lessons about going to college that they wanted to pass on to younger students.

In truth, their advice beckons us all, adults and students alike. It bears repeating.

Start early! Over and over again, seniors in our study wanted to tell their younger classmates that 9th grade courses matter: “I thought it was goof-off time, and my grade point average was 1.5. I still haven’t recovered.” They urged younger students to find out what they needed to do to go to college. *They also urged teachers and counselors at their school to do all they could to help students prepare for college, beginning as freshmen.*

Find a mentor! “Even though you think that you can keep up on your own, it’s too hard. You need to go talk to someone, someone who cares about you.” Our seniors spoke of the power of mentors (whether they had one or not) on the college journey: someone who can give advice, show the way, and offer encouragement. A few students pointed to a teacher, coach, minister, JROTC instructor who had helped them; many said the most effective mentor would be a college student who shared their background. *All wished their schools and community could provide college mentors for every student who needed one.*

Talk with your family! There’s no doubt that parents are the most important partners on the path to college—regardless of whether parents had gone to college themselves. Seniors reported repeatedly that they talked to their parents about college more than any other adult and that it was their parents who gave them the most help. However, they also pointed to an underside: their parents were often ill equipped to give them the accurate, concrete advice they needed. *They wished their schools could do a better job of communicating with their parents, especially with respect to the college application process.*

Learn about financial aid! More than half of all seniors in our survey said that the cost of college was their biggest hurdle. They urged their younger peers to find out early about financial aid and scholarships. However only a quarter of the seniors said they had received help completing their FAFSA form from school counselors and teachers; most relied on their families or on their own devices. *They longed for more hands-on assistance from folks knowledgeable about applying for financial aid.*

Believe in yourself! Many seniors had doubts about going to college and quite a few had wondered if they were “college material.” Yet all of these students had, in fact, gotten into college. They wanted freshmen to know that they can do it, too. For low income and minority students, this message was especially urgent. *They want to be challenged to meet high standards not low expectations.*

What comes next? Too many reports make an initial splash, then sit on the shelf. We have larger hopes for this report.

We hope this report serves as a catalyst for conversation. We hope that citizens across our community will read and discuss what our students have said. We hope schools—faculty and students—will take up this report. We hope that community organizations, community leaders, business leaders, higher education faculties, parents, PTA's, neighborhood associations, and groups of concerned citizens will “hear out” these youth voices.

And we pose the following questions:

- **How can we help all schools develop a culture—a mood—that helps every student see that college is an option?**
- **How can we help parents in their critical role as the most important players in their child's college dreams?**
- **How can we provide students with the in-school supports they need?** We are aware of budget restraints; yet students said, over and over again, that their counselors were overwhelmed. *“Every time I walk in there, all of them are swamped. They are just covered up. Every time I go up to the college advisor, there's a line to get in there and talk to her.”*
- **What more can our community—our community organizations, our churches, our elected leaders, our businesses—do to sustain the college dreams of students?**
- **How can we provide students with the mentors they need—especially the “near peer” mentors that seem to be highly effective?**
- **How can we narrow the gap of opportunity and make sure that all students, regardless of family history or wealth or race, have an equal opportunity to go to college?**

“It's on us,” many of our students said. “It's on us whether we go to college or not. It's our job.” While we agree that individual effort is critical, this report reveals many ways that a lot of people can help. If we all step forward—students, parents, teachers, principals, business leaders, concerned citizens, elected officials—the college dreams of many more of our children will become reality. In fact, it's on *us*.

Please join the conversation—and the action.

Dan Challener, President
Public Education Foundation

SCHOOL DESCRIPTIONS

(Provided by school counselors)

CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

Total enrollment: 1051 (284 - 9th; 307 - 10th; 247 - 11th; 213 - 12th) (2010)

Demographics: 61% White, 35% African American, 3% Hispanic, 1% Asian/Pacific Islander (2009); 48% reduced/free lunch (2009)

No. of counselors: 3 plus one special half-time college advisor

Percentage of time devoted to college counseling by regular counseling staff: 3%

Percentage of students participating in honors/AP classes: 15%

Total no. of AP classes offered: 6 (English, Biology, Chemistry, History, Statistics)

Special programs in relation to college preparation: "Senior Prep Day," college fairs, college representatives come to school to speak during "Directive Study Time," college tours, classroom presentations from college counselor and former students, "Making College Count" presentations. For parents: "College Over Coffee," financial aid night

Biggest barriers for students in relation to college access: "Not enough information from their parents, who do not know. School counselors who do not have time for college prep because of their caseloads. Teachers who have not been trained in college access. A college advisor who only can be at our school 20 hours a week and has her hands full working with the seniors."

Additional supports that would benefit students most: "Full-time college advisor."

HIKSON HIGH SCHOOL

Total enrollment: 743 (249 - 9th; 187 - 10th; 159 - 11th; 157 - 12th) (2010)

Demographics: 63% White, 29% African American, 5% Hispanic, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander (2009); 33% reduced/free lunch (2009)

No. of counselors: 2 plus one special half-time college advisor

Percentage of time devoted to college counseling by regular counseling staff: 5%

Average class size: 25 Computers per student: 50

Percentage of students participating in honors/AP classes: 33%

Total no. of AP classes offered: 13 (in all subjects)

Special programs in relation to college preparation: College Night, Financial Aid Night, "FAFSA Fill Out"; FAFSA peer counselor, newsletters, Senior College Day, college tour field trips, visits by college representatives, advisory activities geared toward college, "Application Blitz" to Chattanooga State, ACT prep class

Biggest barriers for students in relation to college access: "Money and parental influence."

Additional supports that would benefit students most: "Having a homeroom advisor that is with students for the entire HS career."

College application and acceptance rates:

- Application: Two-year college - 13%; Four-year college - 87%
- Acceptance: Two-year college - 49%; Four-year college - 51%

HOWARD HIGH SCHOOL (HOWARD SCHOOL OF ACADEMICS & TECHNOLOGY)

Total enrollment: 718 (167 – 9th; 166 – 10th; 213 – 11th; 172 – 12th) (2010)

Demographics: 93% African American, 5% White, 2% Hispanic (2009); 92% reduced/free lunch (2009)

No. of counselors: 4 plus one special half-time college advisor

Percentage of time devoted to college counseling by regular counseling staff: 5%

Average class size: 18 Computers per student: 150

Percentage of students participating in honors/AP classes: 2%

Total no. of AP classes offered: 3 (English, Math, History)

Special programs in relation to college preparation: Parents' nights, college fairs, FAFSA workshop, grade level retreats, college tours, college recruiters.

Biggest barriers for students in relation to college access: "The largest barrier is fear of the unknown when it comes to college access. Many of the students lack exposure to the college world. They are not prepared for the rigor and expectations for college. The parents do not envision the possibility of affording college for their children."

Additional supports that would benefit students most: "More mentors, ACT preparations, early exposure to the idea of college and expectations starting in the ninth grade. The students need more rigor in the classrooms. The parents need to have regular sessions to expose them to the possibilities of college for their children."

College application and acceptance rates:

- Application: Two-year college – 15%; Four-year college – 85%
- Acceptance: Two-year college – 57%; Four-year college – 43%

OLTEWAH HIGH SCHOOL

Total enrollment: 1309 (326 – 9th; 355 – 10th; 374 – 11th; 254 – 12th) (2010)

Demographics: 71% White, 18% African American, 7% Hispanic, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander (2009); 33% reduced/free lunch (2009)

No. of counselors: 4 plus one special half-time college advisor

Percentage of time devoted to college counseling by regular counseling staff: 20%

Average class size: 30 Computers per student: 60

Percentage of students participating in honors/AP classes: 10%

Total no. of AP classes offered: 7

Special programs in relation to college preparation: "Peer advisor from Chattanooga State and college access advisor conduct survey to determine which students need assistance with the completion of FAFSA. We then seek out students and make appointments to assist them with FAFSA forms. Once a week during lunch school counselor and college access advisor sit in lunchroom and assist students with college questions and applications. College and Career Fair. PTSA Open House presentation on preparing for college. THEC program provided college mentors for our seniors interested in college. "

Biggest barriers for students in relation to college access: "Grades and test scores. The ability to pay for college and feeling intimidated to the point of being paralyzed by the college search and application process. The availability to help from counselors and college access advisor. We have a large number of students, immense responsibility, and few counselors. Our college access advisor is only part time."

Additional supports that would benefit students most: "Increased number of counselors. A full-time college advisor."

College application and acceptance rates:

- Application: Two-year college – 31%; Four-year college – 69%
- Acceptance: Two-year college – 95%; Four-year college – 85%

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Student Researchers

Hilary Payton and Caleb Sanchez, Central High School

Andy Sharp and Ti Tran, Hixson High School

Jerlisa Harris, Lekesha Kennemore, and Ashley Simmons, Howard High School

Robin Brown, Bria Williams, and Edward Wood, Ooltewah High School

Project Coordination

*Susan Street, **Hear Us Out** Coordinator, Public Education Foundation, Chattanooga, TN*

Gregory Tate, Graduate Student, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Brett G. Stoudt, PhD., Advisor, Public Science Project, CUNY Graduate Center, New York, NY

Special Thanks

Public Education Foundation, Chattanooga, TN

Lumina Foundation for Education, Indianapolis, IN

Center for Youth Voice @ WKCD, Providence, RI

Principals and staff at:

Central High School

Hixson High School

Howard School of Academics & Technology

Ooltewah High School

Credits

Barbara Cervone, Ed.D, President, WKCD: report layout and design

Focus group transcription: *Andrew Kirschner and Azure Osborne-Lee*

Survey data entry: *Jordan Andrews and Lydea Irwin (college students, Rhode Island); Rikki Kissick, Janice Neal and Amy Roger (Public Education Foundation staff); Susan Crouch*

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 Practice and Policy.

What Kids Can Do, Inc.

P.O. Box 603252

Providence, RI 02906

www.whatkidscando.org

www.firstinthefamily.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.

Public Education Foundation

100 East Tenth Street, Suite 500

Chattanooga, TN 37402

www.pefchattanooga.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.

Lumina Foundation for Education

30 South Meridian Street, Suite 700

Indianapolis, IN 46204

www.luminafoundation.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*

HEAR US OUT is made possible by a generous grant from **Lumina Foundation for Education**, as part of its national **KnowHow2GO** campaign.