

Understanding Young People's Perceptions of College



RESEARCH OVERVIEW

**Do you see
college in
your future?**

**Tell us more.
Take a brief
survey**

(Link goes here)

Need for Research

- 2013 – 2021: 37% decline in Black student enrollment
- 2021: Equity Working Group assessed points of vulnerability in student enrollment and success
- Current research built from student roundtables noting gaps in information related to postsecondary plans

Research Questions

- What are the perceptions of prospective Black students regarding the value and accessibility of higher education?
- What factors influence their decisions to enroll or not enroll in college?
- To what degree do perceptions vary by family income and educational attainment?

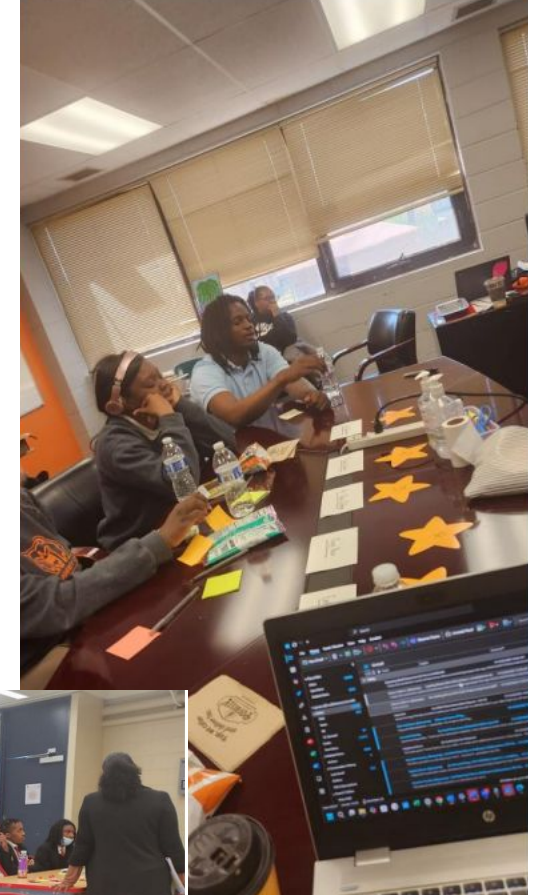


METHODOLOGY

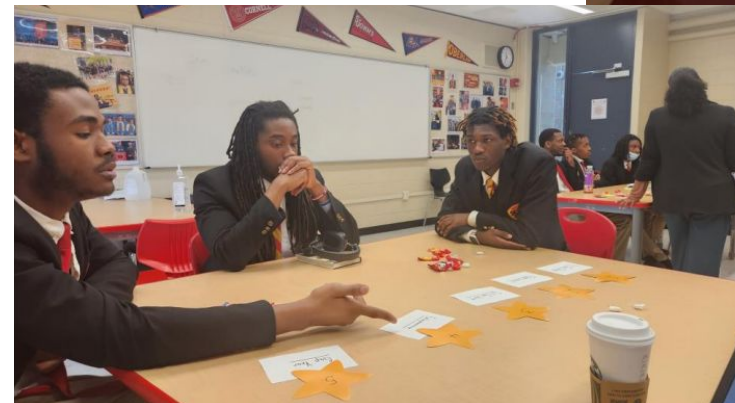
- **205 surveys** collected through paid social media advertisements and outreach to youth organizations
- **52 focus group participants** engaged through youth serving community-based organizations including:
 - Southwest Organizing Project
 - Upward Bound
 - Youth Guidance
 - Gyrls in the H.O.O.D.
 - Build Inc.
- **Outreach targets**
 - City's southside (55%), City's westside (10%), south suburbs (10%)
 - Targeted 16-24 years old



Gyrls in the H.O.O.D.



Excel Academy



Urban Prep



PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

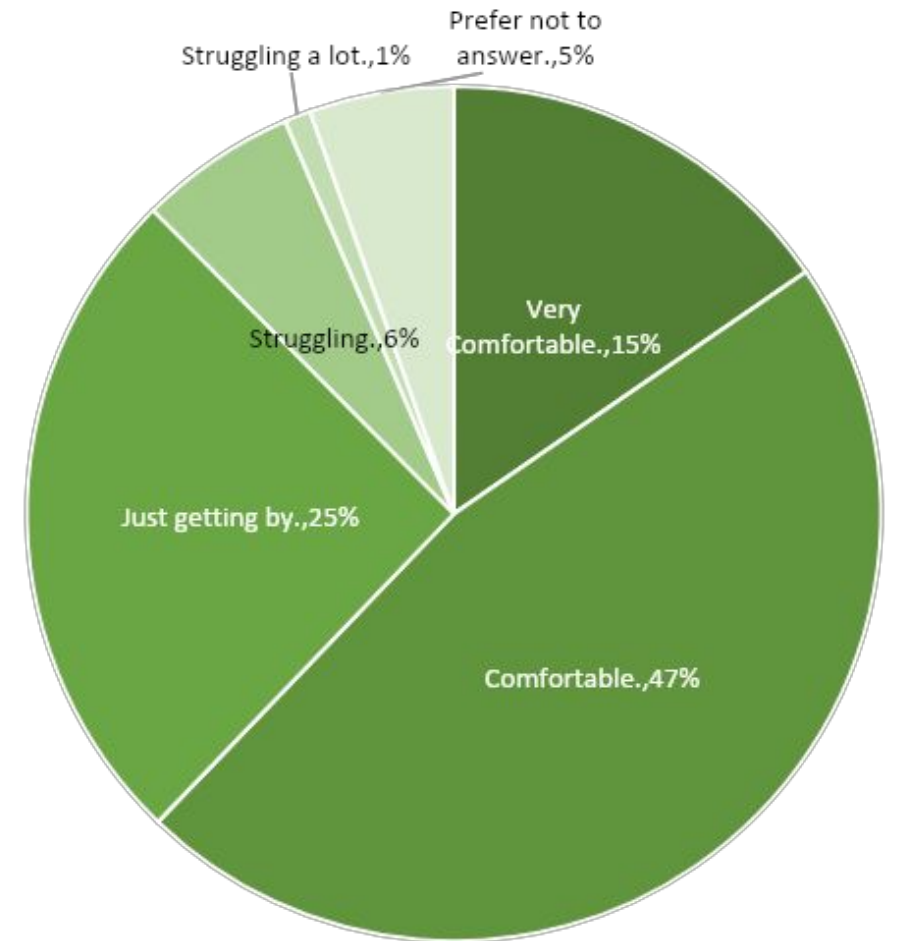
Gender: 33% - male, 66% - female, and 1% - non-binary

Race & Ethnicity: 82% - Black/African American, 7% - Hispanic, 5% - Multi-Racial, 3% - White

Educational Attainment: Participants had not started in college. For families: 24% - first-generation college households, 14% - some college but no degree, 6% - associate degree, and 45% - bachelor's degree or higher.

Family Income: 62% - finances are comfortable or very comfortable. 32% - just getting by or struggling

Age: 36% - 18-24, 61% under 18





FACTORS DRIVING PERSPECTIVES ON COLLEGE

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First Gen Status



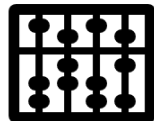
Family Income



Gender



Career Aspiration



Financial Risk Assessment



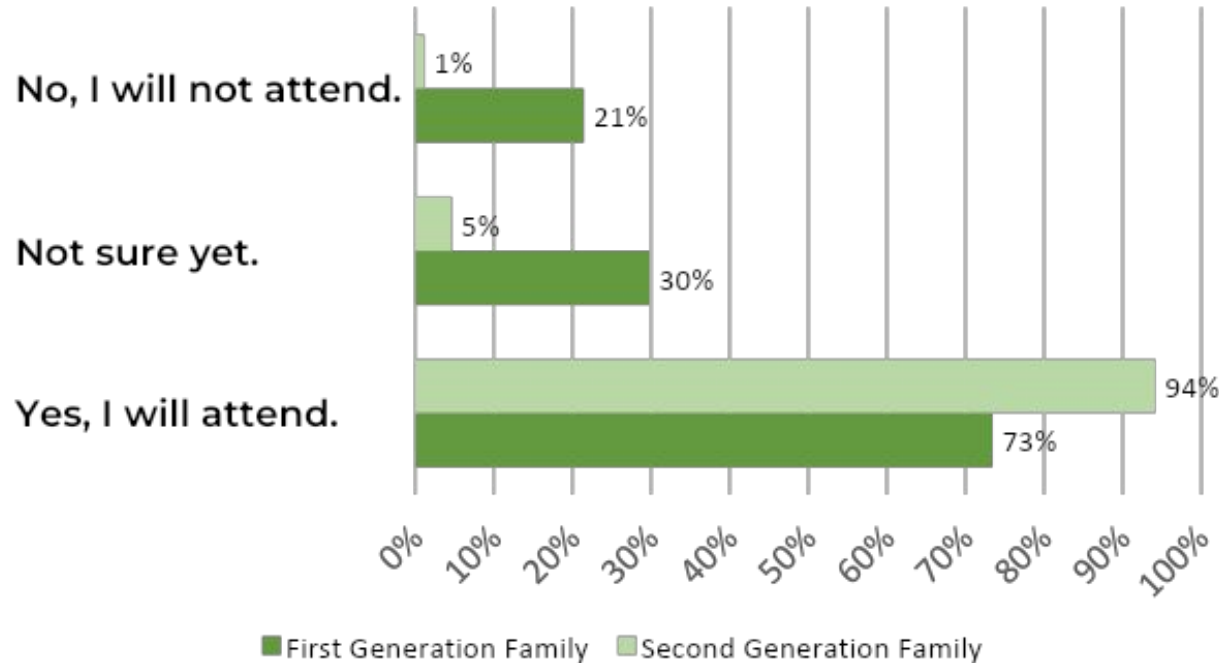
Personal Experiences



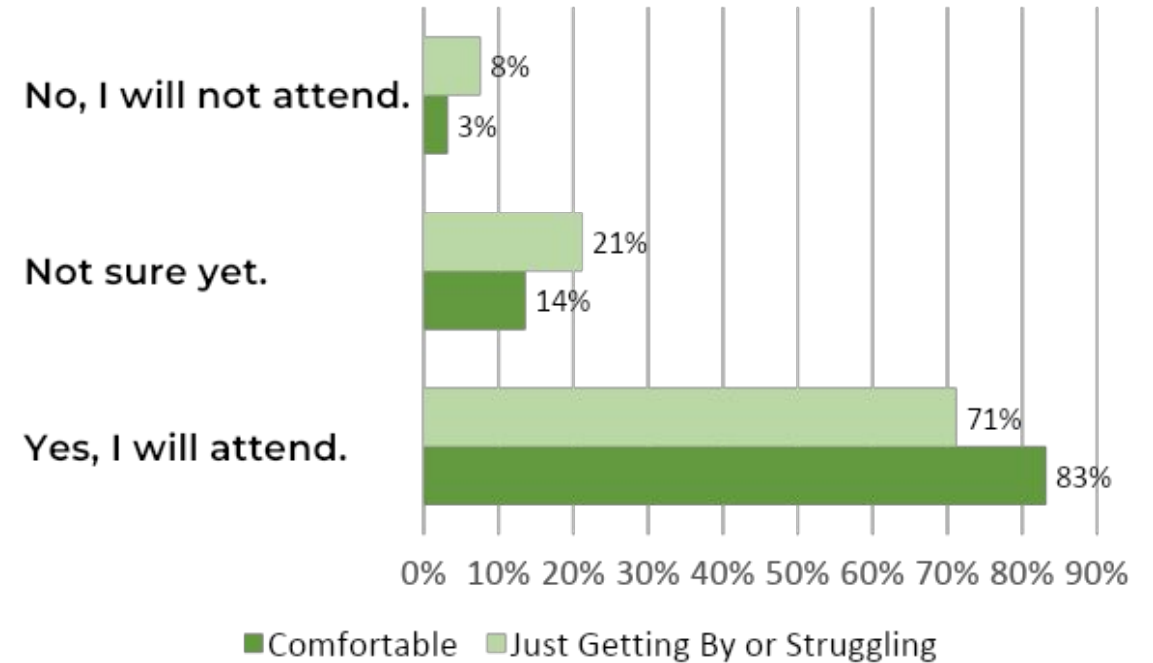
COLLEGE PLANS

- 79% plan on attending
- 16% not sure
- 5% will not attend

College Plans by College Attainment



College Plans by Family Income



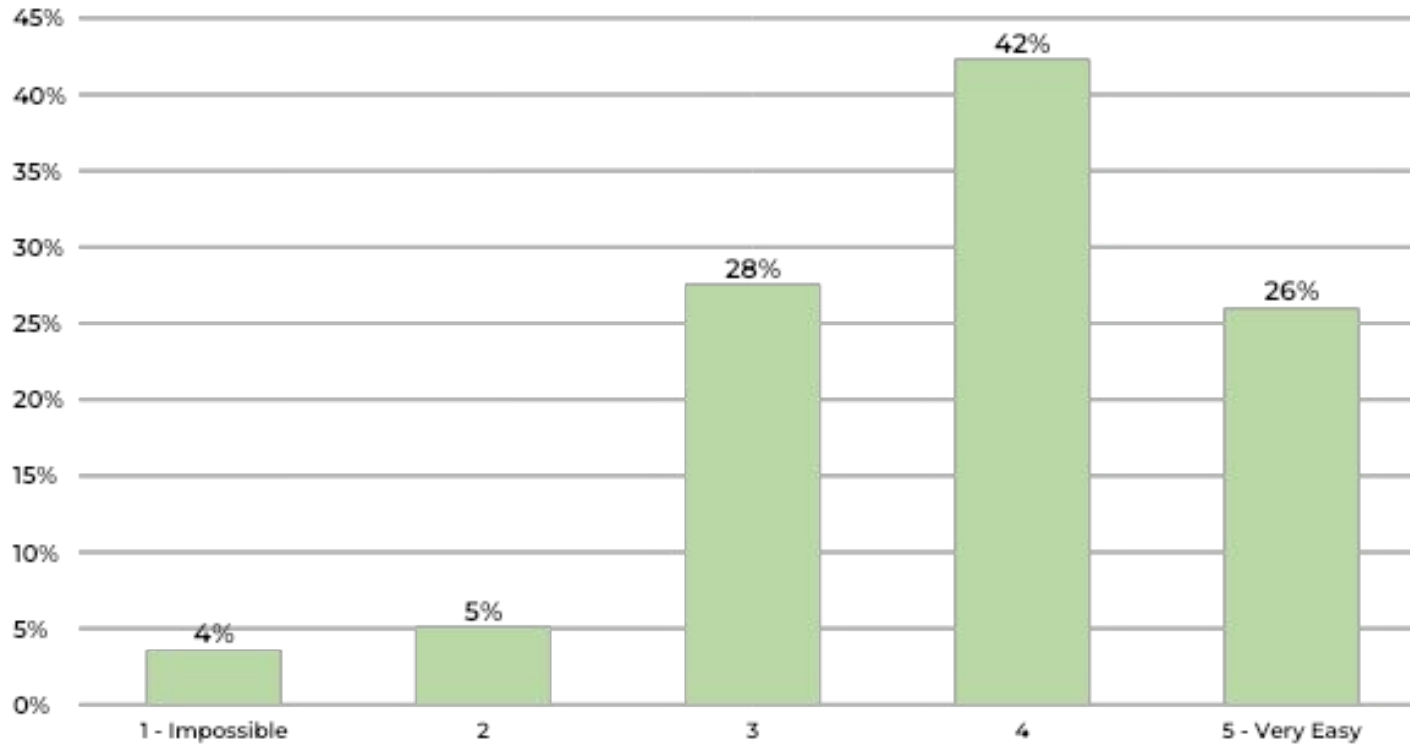
Gender Differences

Of those that are not sure or won't attend college, 62% are male and 31% are female



EASE OF ATTENDING

How easy is attending college?



Of those that believe college is hard to attend, **only 17% have plans to attend college**

Of those that believe college is easy to attend **87% have plans to attend college**

Ease of Attending by Income

	Struggling	Comfortable
Easy	51%	73%
Neutral	34%	22%
Hard	15%	5%

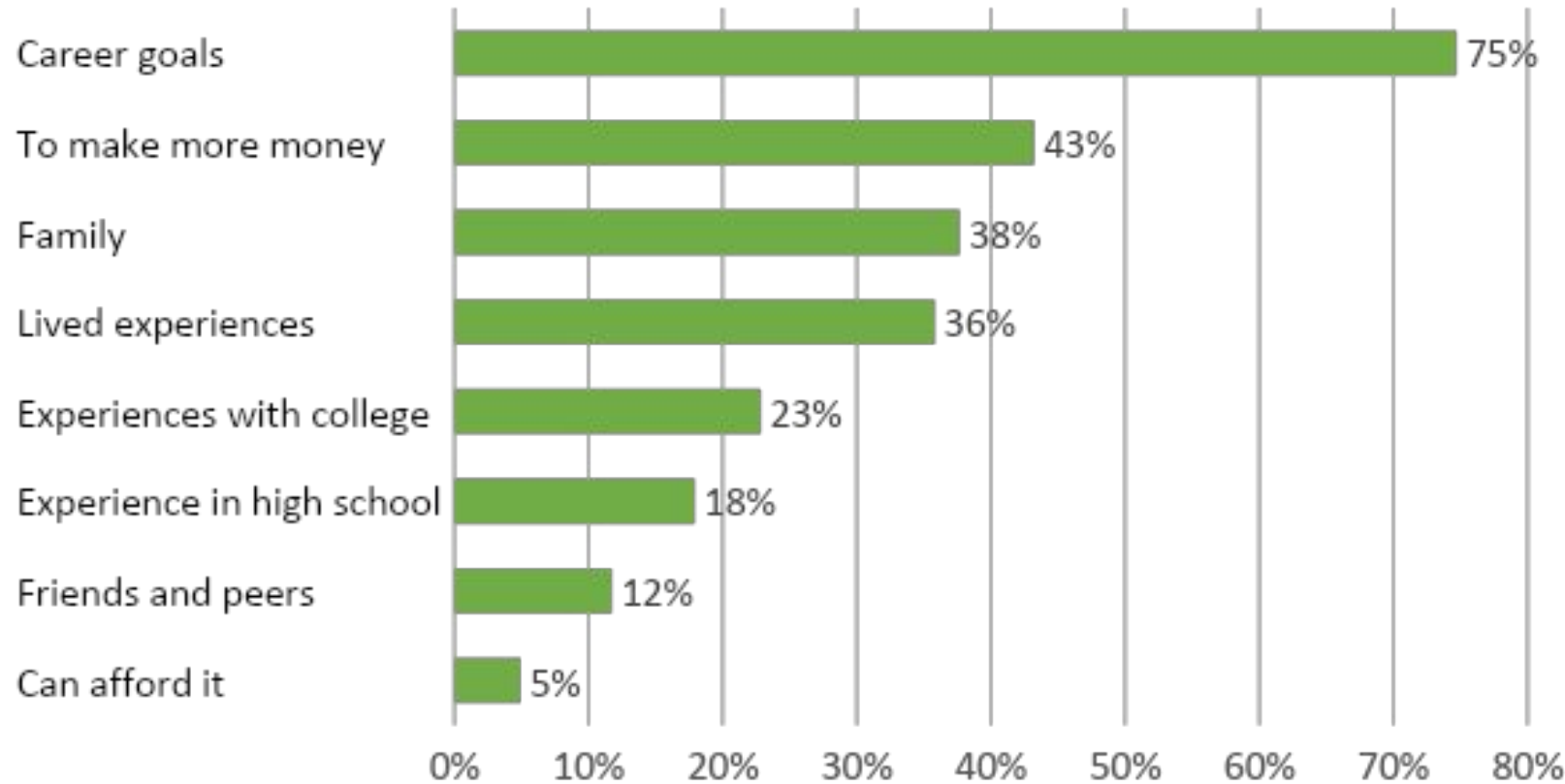
Ease of Attending by Family's Educational Attainment

	First Gen	Second Gen
Easy	53%	81%
Neutral	31%	16%
Hard	16%	3%



WHY DO STUDENTS WANT TO ATTEND COLLEGE?

Reasons for Interest in College



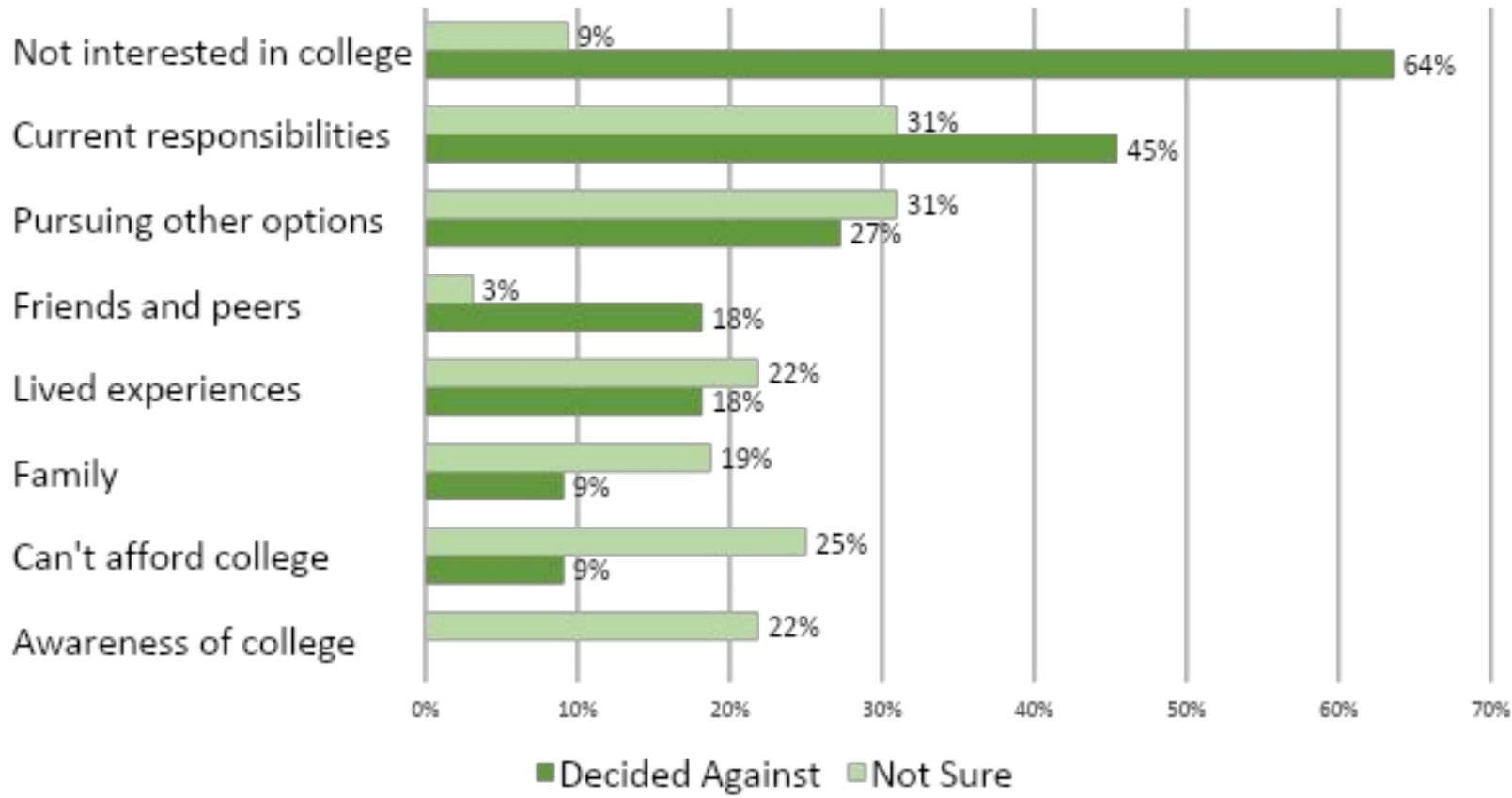
75%
Cited career goals as the top reason they plan to attend college

Respondents could select up to three options



WHY ARE STUDENTS UNSURE OR DECIDED AGAINST COLLEGE?

Factors Shaping Interest in College



Reasons Unsure

Current Responsibilities: 31%
Pursuing Other Options: 31%
Can't Afford: 25%

Reasons Not Attending

Not Interested: 64%
Current Responsibilities: 45%
Pursuing Other Options: 27%

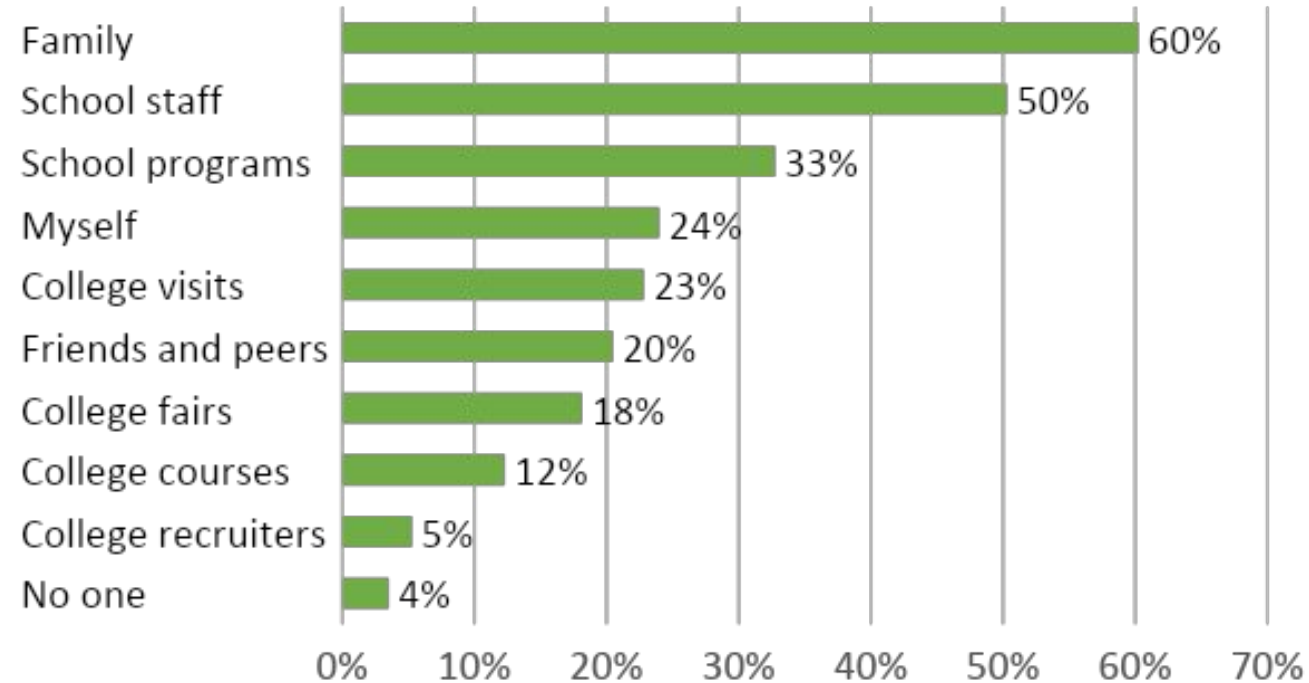
Respondents could select up to three options



WHO OR WHAT INFORMS YOUNG ADULTS ABOUT COLLEGE?

11%

Of first-generation college student respondents say no one talks to them about college compared to 4% of the total survey population



Select up to three options

First Generation Student Responses

47%	School staff
36%	In school or after-school programs
34%	Family



COLLEGE: YES OR NO?

- More opportunity
- More of a voice
- FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out)
- Generational wealth
- Recognition
- Desire to improve
- Family pressure
- Post-college life outlook
- Further education
- Pursue interests
- Meet new people/new relationships
- Job opportunity
- Experience new environment
- Scholarship/financial support
- Counselor support
- Young professional organizations (Greek, etc.)
- Parties
- Freedom/schedule
- Make more money
- Escape toxic home life
- Break generational curses

- Not sure on major
- Cost/loans
- Homesick
- Safety
- Time - before making money
- Homework/Study
- Time - dedication to school life
- Mental - stress of schooling
- Old buildings/new environment
- Rules to attend and stay enrolled
- Generational curses
- Fear of trying new things
- Fear of failure
- Self-doubt
- Bad grades
- Not accepted
- Transportation
- Family/friend obligations
- Family/friend discouragement



COLLEGE: YES OR NO? cont'd

Financial

- **Gaps in financial aid guidance: limited grant awareness, failing to teach financial literacy**
- **Scholarship challenges**
 - Scholarship complexities could derail opportunities despite eligibility
 - Scholarship systems as exclusionary with rigid requirements
- **Return on investment**
 - Trade school's faster workforce entry and lower debt against college's delayed earnings,
 - Who benefits from the "everyone must go to college narrative"? Not my family or community
 - Weighing college's potential payoff against the grind of "hard work"
 - Fears of not completing degrees
- **Financial need**
 - Faced apparent financial barriers—insufficient aid —that force them to prioritize immediate income over degrees.
 - Tuition costs and transportation expenses as primary obstacles.
 - Financial limitations often made college acceptance feel meaningless, creating a sense of defeated aspiration before their post-high school journeys could begin.
 - Available resources amount to "pocket change" compared to actual costs



COLLEGE: YES OR NO? cont'd

Distrust of Institution & Self

- **Designed for me**

- Students grappled with self-doubt and questioned their belonging in higher education spaces
- Academic settings where Black students described feeling invisible as the lone person of color in classes
- Language barriers added to alienation, as academic jargon and professor dialects left some participants feeling detached needing to constantly code-switching
- Exclusionary peer dynamics in courses reinforced their marginalization.
- One participant questioned—"Do these programs actually help people like us?"—reflected years of encountering empty promises from past youth initiatives. These experiences cast doubt on whether education systems are designed to support marginalized youth
- Concerns about racial profiling and isolation on campus

- **Wish for Validation & Mentorship**

- Many participants emphasizing the importance of mentorship. Several individuals reported never having received encouragement about their potential or hearing "you can succeed".
- Students expressed uncertainty (or parents expressing concern) in navigating "the real world" alone and away from familiar support systems.
- Acute loneliness during the freshman transition, often resorting to "blending in" as a survival strategy rather than authentic engagement. Everyday challenges took an outsized emotional toll
- Mental health struggles



COLLEGE: YES OR NO? cont'd

Family and Cultural Expectations

- **Need to support family**
 - One participant felt pulled between caring for a dependent parent and pursuing education
 - Another was pushed against expectations to join a family business instead of chasing entrepreneurial dreams—
 - Tension around physical distance from loved ones as a factor against attending college.
- **Family support and discouragement**
 - Family discouragement v. obligation to uplift households (motivation)
 - While "breaking generational curses" and gaining "more of a voice" motivated college aspirations, others feared replicating family's struggles with debt ("generational curses" reappeared as an anti-college rationale)



COLLEGE: YES OR NO? cont'd

Alternative Pathway Viability

- **Alternatives' viability**
 - Students demonstrated practical assessments of trade programs and workforce options. These alternatives gained appeal not from lack of ambition, but from their perceived accessibility and clearer routes to financial stability compared to traditional college systems
 - Several expressed skepticisms about traditional pathways, with one describing trade schools as "another dead end" based on experiences
 - Even pro-college participants expressed envy toward the practical advantages of trade pathways
- **Benefits of alternatives to college**
 - Trade schools' hands-on learning and sophomore-year job placements
 - Lower "stress and uncertainty" than college



YOUNG ADULT RECOMMENDATIONS

Adulting Skills

- "Teach us how to make money, manage time, and navigate the real world."
- Debt Literacy: "Schools make it easy to fall into debt, but hard to understand its long-term impact."

Career Advising

- Clearly connect majors with tangible job pathways
- "Shift from "college-or-bust" to valuable skilled trades, entrepreneurship, and adult-life readiness" (e.g., credit, contracts, side hustles).
- Clear, practical information about costs and outcomes across all potential pathways

Support Systems

- Mentorship that reassures students "you can succeed"
- Ongoing community support systems after orientation

"I didn't think about alternatives to college until it was too late."

"Why didn't anyone teach me to build credit or avoid debt?"

4-year college

- factors
- Debt
 - Mom didn't want me to go
 - Scholarships very accessible
 - Mom didn't complete FAFSA
 - Couldn't afford it
 - Too much freedom
 - Never been on my own

THANK YOU!



CHICAGO STATE UNIVERSITY

CORDELL REED STUDENT UNION

Group Activity



Working Question

"If this student's experience were the standard you designed your systems around — not the exception — what would change?"