

NEXT GENERATION'S PERSPECTIVE ON HIGHER EDUCATION



In Illinois, college enrollment among Black students declined by 37% since 2011. Previous efforts, such as CSU's Equity Working Group and student roundtables, identified gaps in postsecondary planning.

Chicago State University explored how prospective African American students perceive the value and accessibility of higher education—and what factors influence their decisions to enroll or not enroll in college. This study engaged more than 200 predominantly Black prospective college students 16 – 24-year-olds who in Chicago through surveys and focus groups.

College Plans

High Interest in College - 79% of survey respondents expressed interest in attending college

Plans by Respondent Demographics

Family Education Attainment: 73% of prospective first-generation college students plan on attending vs. 94% for students from non-first gen. families

Finances: 71% of students from families who are struggling financially plan on attending vs. 83% of students who are comfortable financially

Gender: 75% of males plan on attending vs. 75% for females

Factors Shaping Interest

Key Issues Shaping Young Adults' Plans Disaggregated by Students' College Plans

	Plan On Attending	Unsure About College Plans	Do Not Plan on Attending
Factor 1	Career Goals: 75%	Still Considering Career Goals: 44%	Not Interested in College: 64%
Factor 2	Goal to Make More Money: 43%	Current Responsibilities: 31% Pursuing Other Options: 31%	Current Responsibilities: 45%
Factor 3	Family: 36%	Can't Afford: 25%	Pursuing Other Options: 27%

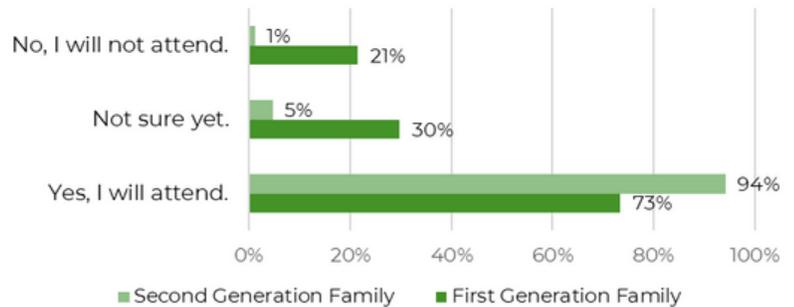
Respondents could choose three options

Plans Outside of College

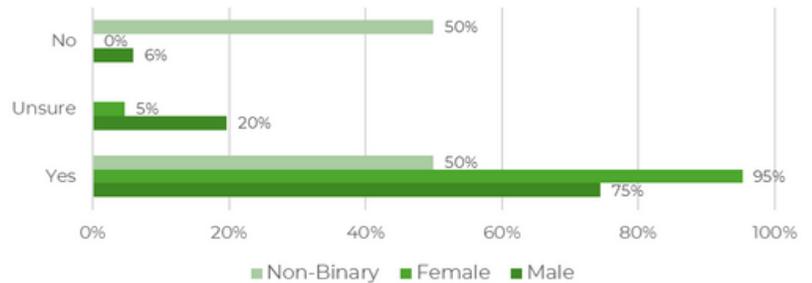
The most common alternative plans for young adults who did not plan on attending college included:

1. Working (current job or seeking other employment)
2. Trade schools
3. Entrepreneurship
4. Military

College Plans by Family College Attainment



College Plans by Gender



First-Generation Student Experience with Learning About College

When asked how they learned about college, prospective first-generation college students answered:

- 11%** - No one spoke with prospective first-generation college students about college
- 47%** - School staff
- 36%** - School-related programs
- 34%** - Family

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Diving Deeper on Students' Concerns

Financial Barriers

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
- Fears of not completing degree

Financial need

- Gaps in financial aid guidance: unaware of grants and scholarships, need greater financial aid literacy
- Financial barriers can force students to prioritize immediate income over degrees.
- Tuition costs and transportation expenses as primary obstacles.
- Financial limitations often made college acceptance feel meaningless.

Family & Cultural Expectations

Need to support family

- Pulled between education and family needs (caring for a dependent parent or joining a family business)
- Physical distance from loved ones was a factor against attending college

Family support and discouragement

- Some families discouraged college, questioning students' ability to succeed or the value of the degree
- Some families encouraged education as an obligation to uplift households or "breaking generational curses"

Distrust of Institution & Self

Is college designed for me?

- Students questioned their belonging in spaces where they felt invisible or isolated.
- Academic jargon, peer dynamics, and code-switching furthered isolation

Need for mentorship and validation

- Many participants emphasized the importance of mentorship, never having received encouragement about their potential or hearing "you can succeed".
- Students (or parents) expressed uncertainty in navigating "the real world" alone and away from familiar support systems.

Assessment of Alternative Paths

1. Students demonstrated practical assessments of trade and workforce options.
2. Appeal of career & technical education
 - Trade schools' hands-on learning and sophomore-year job placements
 - Lower "stress and uncertainty" than college



Young Adults' Recommendations

Adulting Skills

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

Career Advising

1. Connect majors with tangible job pathways
2. Clear information about costs and outcomes across potential pathways

Support Systems

1. Mentorship that reassures students "you can succeed"
2. Ongoing community support systems after orientation
3. Enhance education in entrepreneurship and adult skills (e.g., credit, side hustles).