

What We Know About College Decision Making

Executive Summary

[*Pathways to Opportunity: The Virginia Plan for Higher Education*](#) sets a vision of making Virginia the best state for education by 2030. To reach this goal, SCHEV has estimated that 70% of the state's working-age population should have a degree or other credential of value. The plan includes strategies to close gaps in access, retention and attainment. The last three years, however, have demonstrated that closing these gaps – while essential – will not be enough to reach the Commonwealth's ambitious goal.

The combined currents of a pandemic, social justice transformations, labor market upheaval and questions about the value of higher education have dampened demand for higher education. Recent data released by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) show that in 2022, approximately 30,000 Virginia high school graduates did not enroll in any institution of higher education within 16 months of graduation. Additionally, the population of Virginia high school students is anticipated to contract starting in 2025-2026. Undergraduate enrollment at Virginia's public and private nonprofit institutions is about 3.7% lower in fall 2022 than it was in fall 2019. If all else is held constant, the data signal lower enrollments which will result in lower educational attainment in Virginia. Without a change of course, the state may not meet its goal to be the best state for education by 2030.

This enrollment brief focuses on one specific aspect of this complex issue - the factors that influence an individual's decision to pursue higher education. Long before senior year, a student's social and academic experiences shape their post-high school plans and decision to pursue higher education. Both quantitative and qualitative factors influence a student's choice to continue their education and if so, where to attend.

The following summarizes the common factors identified through SCHEV's review of existing, available focus group and survey data pertaining to middle school students, high school students and high school graduates who did or did not pursue higher education.

What we know about middle and high school students' plans post-graduation:

- Sixty-six percent of students intend to pursue two-year or four-year college or other continuing education¹.
- The remainder intend to pursue (in order from greatest to least): employment, the military or did not specify plans.
- A gender gap is evident across various data sources with more girls than boys intending to pursue post-secondary education.
- The cost of college is a major concern across both genders.
- COVID-related learning loss/burnout and summer melt² are some (but not all) contributing factors between post-high school plans and actual enrollment.

What we know about high school graduates who did not pursue higher education:

Cost, stress, uncertainty about area of study, opportunity cost and return on investment are the main reasons why 18-to-30-year-olds did not attend college or complete their degree.

What we know about high school graduates who continued on to higher education:

Both facts and feelings influence where individuals decide to pursue higher education. Generally, feelings play a larger role in the decision-making process for women than men. However, across the board, a sense of belonging and the ability to be supported by an institution are key feelings that influence college choice.

Key facts that influence where an individual attends include:

- Major/program of interest offered
- Academic reputation/quality of program
- Proximity to home
- Cost/financial aid

The subsequent sections of this enrollment brief provide further details on decisions related to pursuing higher education.

¹ Source: 2022 VDOE State Fiscal Stabilization Fund Indicator (C11) Report and administrative report of all public, 12th grade student post-secondary plans

² "Summer melt," the surprisingly common scenario in which high-school graduates apply, are accepted, and say they plan to enroll in college—but don't. Source: <https://sdp.cepr.harvard.edu/summer-melt>

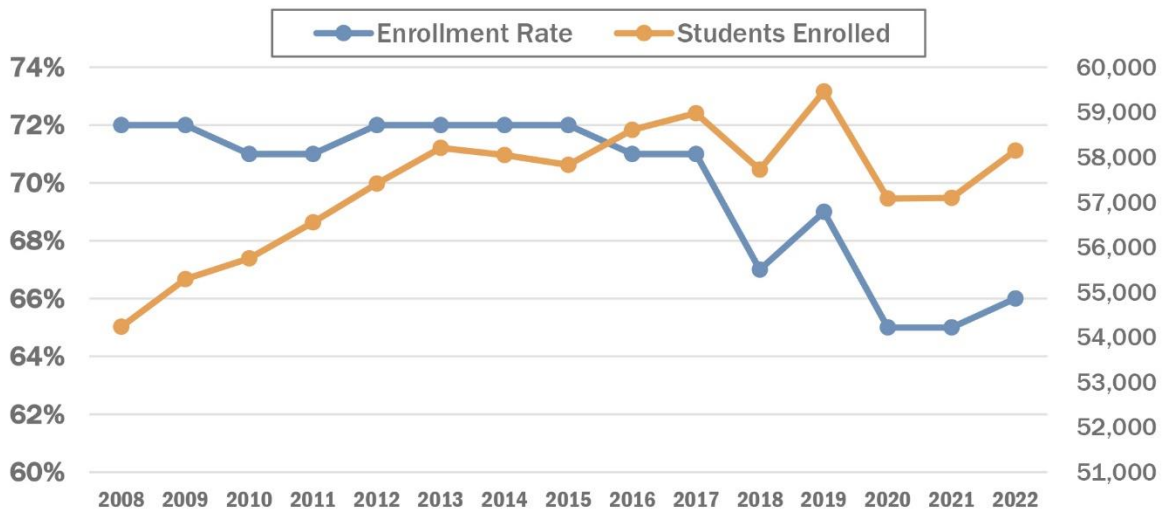
What We Know from Secondary Students

Virginia Department of Education Findings

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) issues an annual fiscal stabilization fund indicator (C11 report)³ that identifies postsecondary enrollment of high school graduates. Coupled with the C11 report, all public high school counselors complete an assessment of seniors each spring about their postsecondary plans. The combined data, which are most recently available for 2021-2022, show that most high school seniors intend to pursue some sort of postsecondary education, with the remaining students intending to enlist in the military or indicating no plans during the spring leading up to graduation.

The same data show that regardless of gender, there is a decrease in those who enroll compared to those who intend to enroll after high school. Personal and financial factors as well as “summer melt” can be attributed to this decline.

College Enrollment Rate of Recent Virginia High School Graduates



Source: VDOE C11 Report

Free Application for Federal Student Aid Findings

³ https://p1pe.doe.virginia.gov/postsec_public/postsec.do?dowhat=LOAD_REPORT_C11

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form submission/completion rates also can serve as an indicator of postsecondary plans. FAFSA completions⁴ in Virginia are up this year (through September 29, 2023) compared to the previous year (academic year 2022). This could be interpreted as a slightly greater interest in college by current high school seniors. Through September 29, 2023, 58.3% of Virginia's high school class of 2023 completed FAFSAs, slightly lower than the 58.9% national average.

GEAR UP Virginia Survey and Focus Group Findings

In fall 2022, SCHEV conducted focus groups with students at four GEAR UP⁵ Virginia high schools to examine college-going plans and the reasons why some students may choose not to attend postsecondary study. SCHEV staff found that while nearly all participants had a career in mind, not all agreed that college was necessary to reach that goal. Boys were less likely than girls to see college as a requirement and mentioned other interests such as joining the military, earning a commercial driver's license or getting a job in a parent or relative's business. The focus groups also revealed that boys and girls had different career interests and that interest in college varied by high school.

The study suggested that gender differences toward college may emerge at an earlier age and that students' high school experiences shape their attitudes toward college. For example, girls were more likely than boys to see college as a necessary step to reach their career goals. Some high schools promoted a college-going culture more effectively than others, and boys suggested that an emphasis on careers may be more effective than a focus on college. The study highlighted the importance of considering gender differences in college aspirations and other aspects of student motivation when developing programs to promote a college-going culture.

Pell Initiative Findings

SCHEV contracted with HCM Strategists to conduct focus groups with young Virginians from low-income communities. A summary of their findings is below.

⁴ <https://formyourfuture.org/fafsa-tracker/>

⁵ <http://www.gearupva.org>

The college decision-making process for low-income students is complex and filled with various obstacles, creating uncertainty. Respondents noted that the path to college involves several steps, including:

- information gathering
- the application process
- finances/cost
- balancing other responsibilities
- academic challenges
- campus culture and belonging
- post-graduation

Throughout each stage, participants felt the weight of each decision and were uncertain about the next step. They felt like outsiders to the process. Financial obstacles were a significant concern for low-income students, including awareness of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), Pell grants and lack of knowledge of how to apply or access them. Finances were an ongoing hurdle.

In addition, researchers found that campus culture is not an immediate concern when respondents initially assess their next step; however, those with some experience at a four-year institution deemed it a major consideration for their likelihood of success. Respondents viewed mentoring as a vital support to overcome uncertainty for each obstacle. Several focus group respondents reported attending a community college as their first step in higher education, describing it as a more accessible and affordable option that allowed them to explore different majors and gain academic skills before transferring to a four-year university. However, respondents noted that community college campuses can lack the social atmosphere and campus culture found at larger universities, which can make it more difficult for students to feel connected and motivated. Overall, low-income students face several barriers to attending or succeeding at a four-year public university, including financial concerns, lack of access to information and resources, academic challenges, family responsibilities and campus culture.

YouScience & Gallup Research

In August 2022, YouScience released a report⁶ including Gallup poll research on student engagement and education relevance. The Gallup research indicated that by high school, most students (66%) are disengaged. This matters because engaged students are twice as likely to

⁶

<https://resources.youscience.com/hubfs/Brochures%20and%20collateral/YouScienceRelevanceGapTLPaper-2022.pdf>

perform well academically and have hope for the future which ultimately leads to thinking about and planning for life, work and/or continuing education after high school.

High school student disengagement, by and large, results from a lack of perceived relevance of education to their life and future. In other words, “what is the point” and “why does this matter?” Specifically, gaps exist in terms of life relevance and skills relevance. The earlier that K-12 students can understand the relevance of education to their lives, the more likely they are to stay engaged in school, succeed academically and make long term life/career plans which may include postsecondary education.

Career Readiness Review

In December 2023, the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD) released its Review of Career Readiness in Virginia⁷ which examines how Virginia prepares secondary students for careers, highlighting specific state, national and international approaches. The review includes Virginia high school student and young adult survey findings. The findings reinforce those aforementioned (“What We Know from Secondary Students”) in this brief. Specifically, that gender, socioeconomic status and regional differences exist among teenagers in terms of postsecondary plans. Similar to findings across OECD (other states and countries reviewed), boys in Virginia are more likely to be uncertain about their career goals and less likely to pursue postsecondary education.

OECD’s review examines K-12 career readiness (career awareness and career development activities) as an important outcome that prepares students for future success (college, careers, civic engagement). Of the 9,000 teenage and 1,000 young adult (19-26 year-old) Virginians surveyed for the OECD review, most expected to complete college but many students’ career goals didn’t align with their educational plans. The review recommends early, often and diverse career awareness and career development activities at the primary and secondary education levels to help students establish clearer postsecondary goals and plans (not just limited to higher education). The review identifies career readiness as a factor influencing postsecondary pursuits generally (postsecondary education vs. workforce entry) and specifically (career goals aligned to education plans and labor market demands).

⁷ OECD (2023), *Career Readiness Review: The Commonwealth of Virginia, United States*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a5ff0e6c-en>.

What We Know from High School Graduates

Several recent surveys offer insight into how high school graduates perceive their preparation for and decisions about post-high school plans.

YouScience & Gallup Research

YouScience, a company that develops online tools to assess students' natural aptitudes and connect those with potential career paths, surveyed 500 recently graduated high school students⁸ nationally. More than half of the respondents indicated that their high school should better prepare them for future careers. Slightly more than half (57%) reported having five or fewer conversations with teachers or counselors about their post-high school opportunities. The same percentage of male high school graduates indicated that they felt prepared to make a career choice or declare a major upon high school graduation, while only 41% of female students felt prepared.

"Where are the students?"

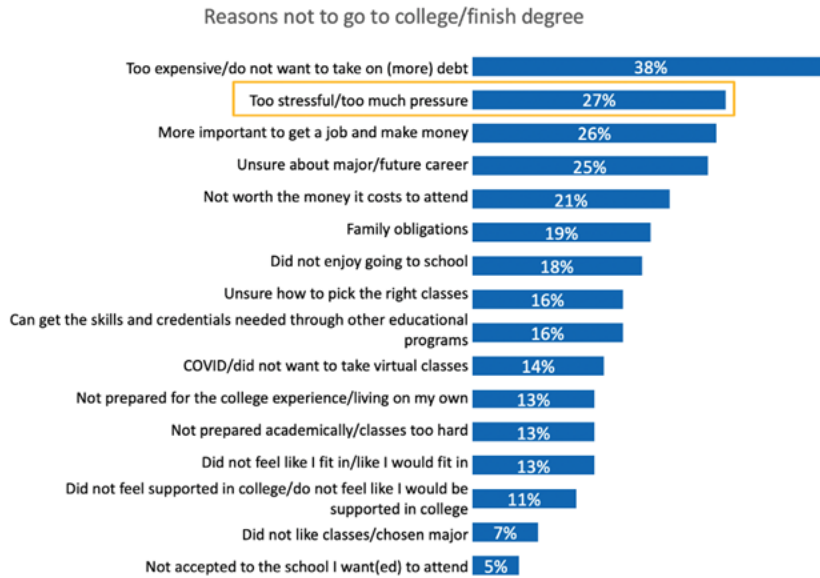
In 2022, HCM-Edge Research conducted a multi-pronged research project⁹ to understand the barriers to college. Their effort included qualitative research with 11 focus groups of high school graduates ages 18 to 30 who did not pursue college or dropped out of a two-year or four-year college program. HCM-Edge Research incorporated quantitative research in the form of a survey of 1,675 high school graduates in seven target states (CA, FL, NY, OH, TN, TX and WA). Statistical analysis of the data and reporting resulted in the following insight: although money is the number one obstacle, stress and uncertainty are key barriers to college and reasons why surveyed 18- to 30-year-olds did not go to college or finish their degree. Other key factors include opportunity cost and return on investment.

⁸ https://www.youscience.com/post-graduation-readiness-report/?utm_medium=referral&utm_source=newsrelease&utm_campaign=student_survey_release

⁹ <https://edgeresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/HCM-EDGE-Research.pdf>

Although money is the #1 obstacle, stress and uncertainty are also key barriers to college

- Too much stress is a larger barrier for those who have already experienced college.



Source: HCM-Edge Research “Where are the students?”

What We Know about College Choice

Individuals who decide to continue their education must weigh a variety of facts and feelings when determining where to attend based on pursuit of a short-term credential, two- or four-year degree. Once that path is determined, a myriad of options exist for an individual. This section focuses on the key facts and feelings that influence college choice (for both two- and four-year postsecondary pathways).

Student Voice Survey

Student Voice, a collaboration between Inside Higher Ed and College Pulse, is a news hub spotlighting the student perspective on higher education. Inside Higher Education has a standing partnership with College Pulse to survey undergraduate students currently enrolled in the United States. The Student Voice survey canvases students on many topics including college choice.

The survey¹⁰ sample includes 2,001 undergraduate students from a panel of 700,000 verified students from more than 1,500 different colleges and universities in all 50 states.

The most recent survey, fielded from February to March 2022, identified the top factors that influence where students choose to go to college. Some variations existed by subgroups (i.e., gender and race) where cost/affordability made up a greater percentage, but the rank of factors generally stayed the same.

The top 10 factors include:

1. Major/program of interest offered – 65%
2. Academic reputation – 56%
3. Proximity to home – 53%
4. Quality of academic program – 49%
5. Cost of tuition – 46%
6. Financial aid package/scholarship - 45%
7. Look and feel of campus – 41%
8. Size of student population – 23%
9. Extracurricular activities – 15%
10. Racial diversity on campus - 14%

Longmire and Company Survey

Feelings also play an important role in an individual's choice of where to attend college. Longmire and Company, an enrollment management product company, released a study in 2017 on this topic of facts versus feelings as part of the college selection process; another study is currently underway. The 2017 study yielded over 13,000 responses from students at public institutions (60%) and private institutions (40%) to understand the extent to which feelings play a role in the college selection process and which feelings were the most common that impacted a student's final decision.

The results from the Longmire survey ¹¹ indicate both facts and feelings influence where individuals decide to pursue higher education. Generally, feelings play a larger role in the decision-making

¹⁰ <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2022/03/21/survey-student-college-choices-both-practical-and-strategic>

¹¹ https://www.longmire-co.com/documents/studies/Emotional_Motivators_National_Report.pdf

process for women (43%) than men (29%). However, across the board, a sense of belonging and the ability to be supported by an institution are key feelings that influence college choice.

Across all survey respondents, the most common feelings that impacted college selection included: 1) seeing oneself there; 2) campus climate; 3) sense of community and 4) feeling comfortable. Other factors related to pride and feeling that the institution cared about the student.

SCHEV's 2022 report on issues impacting student well-being persistence and completion, "[What Matters Most](#)," further reinforces that "sense of belonging" plays an important role not only in college decision-making but in a student's persistence and success in higher education.

What Don't We Know? How Do We Fill in the Gaps?

The previously referenced studies, surveys, focus groups and reports help paint a picture of whether and why individuals pursue higher education. Additional efforts are underway to help fill in the gaps. Discussions are ongoing to determine how to obtain additional insight from high school students to identify and understand the reasons behind students' choices, particularly why some opt not to pursue higher education after high school graduation.

The need for additional insight stems from recognition that despite the abundance of data, the enrollment picture is not complete. The question then becomes: How much more data are needed to inform institutional and state-level actions? What type of data are needed and from what groups (K-12, college students, working adults)? Are some gaps more critical to fill than others? For example, why do some Virginia high students decide to pursue college and others don't? Do statistically significant differences by subgroup (race, gender, income, geography) exist, and how might insight from disaggregated data impact actions taken to increase access, persistence and completion? Additionally, should the emphasis be on enrollment, outcomes or both? What will ultimately drive a change in behavior that shows the value or makes the case for pursuing higher education? Will shifting the focus on outcomes bolster the value proposition of and enrollment in higher education? These are all tough questions that warrant further consideration and should inform next steps.

Conclusion

To achieve its vision of "Best State for Education," Virginia must reach a 70% attainment target for certificates, certifications and degrees by 2030. Achieving this target requires closing access and completion gaps as well as reversing declining enrollment trends. Qualitative and quantitative factors influence college decision-making, which in turn impacts enrollment. Exploration and

understanding of these factors are important parts of changing the course of enrollment trends and ultimately reaching Virginia's attainment goal.