

Value of Higher Education Arizona Learners Research Report

Understanding barriers and influences on college attainment



ARIZONA
INNOVATION
ALLIANCE

DECEMBER 2023



BACKGROUND

Arizona's level of educational attainment significantly trails the national average

In 2020, less than half (46.3%) of Arizona's high school graduating class enrolled in a two- or four-year college. In comparison, in 2019 the national immediate college enrollment rate for high school completers was 66 percent. Lack of educational attainment is a primary limiting factor not only on individual prosperity, but also the economy of entire communities and Arizona as a whole.

The Arizona Innovation Alliance (AIA) initiated the **Value of Higher Education (VoHE)** work group to better understand perceptions of higher education among Arizonans. The VoHE group sponsored this research to **understand the experience of low-income students who attend schools with a low college-going rate**. The Arizona Innovation Alliance (AIA), supported by the Arizona Board of Regents, is a partnership between Arizona State University, Northern Arizona University, and the University of Arizona with the mission of increasing educational attainment through enhanced collaboration.

The research project was completed in two phases, **qualitative & quantitative**, to uncover robust insights from Arizona learners and their families.

OBJECTIVES:



Understand

Perceptions of the value of a college degree and variances between specified target groups



Explore

Preferences in modality, communications, and resource needs



Identify

Biggest barriers to applying and attending a two- or four-year institution and key decision-making influences



Gather

Initial input on any demographic differences in attitudes and barriers to inform and enhance strategies

A grayscale photograph of two young women sitting outdoors. The woman on the left is wearing a dark top and has her glasses perched on her head; she is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The woman on the right is wearing a light-colored top and denim overalls, with large headphones around her neck, and is smiling broadly. In the background, there are stone steps. On the right side of the image, there are three vertical bars: a yellow one at the top, a red one in the middle, and a blue one at the bottom.

PHASE I

QUALITATIVE REPORT

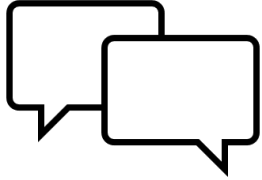
*Conversations with high school students and their
parents about post-high school educational choices*

MAY 2023



Introduction

METHODOLOGY:



21

In-depth Interviews

Conducted between
April 13 – May 1, 2023

About two-thirds of the participants live in rural households and one-third in suburban/urban households

All interviews lasted 1-hour

Conducted via Zoom when possible or via phone when Wi-Fi was unreliable



14 interviews with **students**

7 interviews with **parents**

STUDENT PROFILE:

- Sophomores and juniors
- Mix of post-high school plans and attitudes around college
- Open to attending an in-state school if considering college
- Attend a public school that is not on the list of top 50 in terms of percentage of college-going

HOUSEHOLD PROFILE:

- Mix of ethnicities, including 4 key target groups: Native American, Hispanic, other ethnicities and Parents
- Low-income, based on Arizona BOE guidelines for eligibility for free / reduced school lunch
- Across 4 counties (two low-population density) and 7 different high schools

STUDY APPROACH

The Arizona Innovation Alliance sponsored this study to understand student and parent experiences in order to continuously meet the needs of its communities.

AIA wants to ensure that the voices of students and families are heard, especially in rural areas and those who might be experiencing economic hardship or uncertainty.

Finding students to participate in the study was not an easy task. Recruiting was completely from scratch, and it took 4 weeks of outreach and 2.5 weeks of interviewing to complete the 21 interviews. Most were done on Zoom, but several shifted to the phone when students had Wi-Fi issues in their homes. Some did the interviews at school to ensure they had connectivity to do a zoom call.

The students were gracious and open, and we were honored to spend time with them and hear their perspectives.

RESEARCH PARTNERS:

Jeanne Corrigan, Mosaic Insight Group

A strategist and researcher with 20+ years of experience, Jeanne designs and leads in-depth qualitative studies that translate behavior and attitudes into meaningful insights. She is an expert in creating connections with respondents and then championing those voices to solve problems and identify opportunities.

Sage Baker, Sage Baker Consulting

With 20+ years of research and strategy expertise, Sage honed her creative and strategic skills as a brand planner, working on iconic brands like Southwest and Walmart. She is now an independent consultant, building a business based on her expertise in brand planning, strategic consulting and market research that gets to the heart of the matter.

Study participants represented a spectrum of situations and orientations to the choices after high-school:



	Female student	Female student	Male student	Female student	Male student	Female student
	Not engaged yet	Moving ahead with caution	Making the practical choice	Going it alone	Has everything but the money	Lots of support, still needs specifics
Ethnicity	Caucasian / Hispanic	Hispanic	Native American	African American	Native American / Hispanic	African American
Community	Suburban	Rural	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
Status	Sophomore	Graduating early	Junior	Junior	Sophomore	Sophomore
Summary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undecided and unsure • Doesn't enjoy school, looking for other paths • Has family needs to consider • Needs to decide post-high school plans but it seems too far into the future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family support and encouragement, even if financial aspect is a hurdle • Mental health and well-being are paramount and so is finding a path to pursue further education that doesn't compromise that 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lost a parent, moved several times • Mom works nights, not often available • No older siblings have attended college • Believes trade school is best immediate choice, is wary of investment needed for college 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carrying the weight of adult responsibilities • Has a desire to pursue education and opportunity • Choice to pursue college means "abandoning" family members • Little to no parental support and unsure about engaging other adults given personal circumstances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supported by family, would be the first to attend college in the United States • Identified by teachers as a leader • Knowledgeable about and clear on desired major • Little knowledge of process, cost, resources but determined to go to college 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very engaged, involved in school • Lots of sources of support, info (parents, teachers, coaches) • Parents have degrees • Older brothers started college (but didn't finish) so has the knowledge and experience



Key Insights

DISTILLED IN 10 TRUTHS

10 TRUTHS

about their lives, the way they view their choices and the potential path to college

Their Reality

The post-pandemic world is different, and so are they

Their lives are unpredictable, making long-term planning a challenge

Life after High School

Conversations aren't happening

The students lead the process

The wish to avoid struggle informs choices

College is not always seen as worth the cost

College Consideration

Many have the desire, but lack the details

Students seek information, but the approach falls short

The starting line is later than you think

One person can make a significant impact

Their Reality

TRUTHS

The post-pandemic **world is different,**
and so are they

Their **lives are unpredictable,** making
long-term planning a challenge



The post-pandemic world is different, and so are they

CURRENT STATE:

The pandemic has a long tail.

The pandemic hit low-income households hard, and students continue to deal with the effects. Several families are still recovering from losing loved ones or financial setbacks.

Mental health is a significant issue.

This generation is particularly aware of and honest about their mental wellness. Several students talk about facing serious challenges and this influences how they think about their future plans.

THE IMPACT:

Disengagement from online school / learning

Many students had negative remote learning experiences during the pandemic. This left them scrambling to catch up when they returned to school and less receptive to online education in college. Many comment they are “not into school” now.

Support and exposure to college information lacking

College programming and support has not returned to pre-pandemic levels in many schools. Events like “community days” with visiting colleges have not been brought back in many rural schools. Conversely, military recruiters, trade schools and employers have remained consistent and visible.

In their own words...

“I really prefer in-person... I struggled with remote learning; it’s so easy to get distracted.”

– FEMALE STUDENT



**PARENT
PERSPECTIVE:**

“I commute almost two hours each way to my job so during the pandemic, I wasn’t around to help with school. I thought about quitting my job because she was falling so far behind.”

Their lives are unpredictable, making long-term planning a challenge

CURRENT STATE:

It's hard to consider future decisions when daily life has so much instability.

Adult responsibilities overwhelming

The death or absence of a parent, personal or family health issues or being asked to take on adult responsibilities is overwhelming. It's hard to look up and out to the future when today's needs take all the attention. Many simply don't have the luxury of thinking too far ahead.

Life for the parents is also challenging. Several of the moms are single parents working long hours to make ends meet. By necessity, they treat their young learners as nearly adults, capable of figuring out (and paying for) the next step.

THE IMPACT:

Many dealing with significant challenges

More than half of the participants are dealing with mental health challenges, taking care of younger siblings and taking a job to contribute to the family income. The economic insecurity experienced by all creates an even greater sense of scarcity and risk.

Limited ability to look ahead

Students don't always have a clear picture of where they are and what questions they should be asking.

The expectation that all students (and parents) have the capacity to be proactive and persistent in gathering information is unrealistic.

In their own words...

"I'm staying with family now because my dad passed away three months ago, and things weren't going our way."

– MALE STUDENT

**“I found out I’m
graduating early
and I’m really glad
because I want to
be done with high
school... but now,
I have to figure
out what’s next.”**

– FEMALE STUDENT





Their Reality

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Still recovering from severe loss as result of pandemic

The pandemic left a tremendous amount of loss in its wake for these students and their families. Already tenuous connections to and engagement in education were stressed and even severed by remote learning or school closures.

This loss - of connection, learning, engagement - means students **need personal connections to adults who can help guide them to and through the road to college.**

Prioritizing mental health

Both students and their parents are **aware of the importance of protecting and maintaining mental health and well-being.** This has become a top priority in their lives.

Difficulty planning what's next

For learners living in less-stable circumstances, **the decision to possibly pursue a college education has significant implications**, some of which might be negative. Additionally, the **unpredictability of their daily lives makes it difficult to do the long-term planning** needed to make college a reality.

Life After High School

TRUTHS

Conversations aren't happening

The students lead the process

The wish to avoid struggle informs choices

College is not always seen as worth the cost



Conversations aren't happening

CURRENT STATE:

Few are talking about what's next.

Many students haven't had any conversations with their parents/guardians about plans after high school. Almost none are speaking in specifics or have a plan.

Most students are not talking to their friends about it either. What students are doing after high school doesn't seem to be a subject that's in the public sphere.

Rural schools do not introduce college advising classes or workshops until senior year; urban learners are exposed to more but it's still up to them to be proactive and connect to resources.

THE IMPACT:

Most don't start thinking seriously about their post-high school plans until senior year.

For the most part, the parents aren't raising the issue and students aren't getting external prompts telling them they should.

Few students are outlining a specific future plan. Rural sophomores and juniors don't hear about or are not invited to college / career events offered by their schools. This is markedly different from an affluent student's experience where this question is a major focus starting early in high school (or sometimes before) and peaks during their junior year.

In their own words...

“My mom has a masters degree from NAU, and I think she could maybe help me with scholarships, but we haven't talked about it yet.”

– FEMALE STUDENT



PARENT PERSPECTIVE:

“The relationship is hard; I work nights so we can’t spend much time together. We haven’t really talked about what he’s doing after high school.”

The students lead the process

CURRENT STATE:

The parent waits for the child to come to them to talk about life after high school.

Parents are walking a fine line; they want the best for their children but do not want to risk alienating them by applying too much pressure. Even when they have a preference, almost all parents say they will support what their child wants to do.

Parents don't seem to take steps to be plugged into what the high school offers or to investigate the process on their own. Only one or two have gone online with their children to gather information.

The most informed students have older siblings who have gone through the process of applying to college.

THE IMPACT:

Parents hesitate to raise the topic.

They fear damaging the relationship or they have little awareness of the process. The result is that children have freedom and autonomy but not much direction.

In their own words...

“As soon as she graduates, I’m not pushing her to go do anything...I want her to have a couple months...time to grow up and make life choices...I just hope she decides to go to school.”

– PARENT

Thus, creating gaps in information and decision-making.

Students are somewhat stalled until senior year, when the high school provides more formal support. The parents don't seem engaged by any communications directed at them, instead relying on their learners to tell them what's available and what's happening at school.



“I’m 70% confident I’ll go to college. The 30% is just the nerves of it. My parents went to college in Mexico so I’m trying to figure out how it all works.”

– MALE STUDENT

The wish to avoid struggle informs choices

CURRENT STATE:

The word “struggle” (and wanting to avoid it) came up in many conversations.

Most believe that college can open doors and reduce struggle in the long run, but immediate concerns often trump future possibilities.

The metrics to evaluate options are centered on the perception of what’s realistic and what path offers the greatest potential for completion and success.

THE IMPACT:

Students balance immediate needs and realities as they look at choices.

Barrier beliefs:

1. Going to a university is **not like trade school or community college** - I can’t work, it will take all my attention
2. College is **really stressful** and I might not be ready for the demands
3. College **takes too long**
4. College **isn’t necessary**; there are many people who do fine without it
5. In college, I will **spend time taking classes I don’t need**
6. I **don’t want to go into debt**. I will go to school someday, but I **want to work for a while first**.
7. I **don’t like high school and I can’t imagine several more years of school**, why would I keep going in school if I know it’s not my thing
8. I **don’t know what I want to do** and I’m not ready to make such a big choice

College is not always seen as worth the cost

CURRENT STATE:

Most students want to do something after high school – not many plan on starting their work life immediately after graduation.

While most believe that more education brings more opportunity, there are tradeoffs to the value:

----- THE IMPACT: TWO CAMPS OF THOUGHT -----

College is important and we're going to make it happen.

The value is driven by both the outcome (higher paying jobs) and the potential for growth. In this mindset, the family is determined that the child will go on in school in some fashion. Money worries can be overcome even if they don't yet know how.

PARENT INFLUENCE: Certain factors support a belief in the value of a college education. Usually there is a parent with some education who has navigated the process or a student who wants to pursue a specific profession that requires a degree.

The costs connected to college education are too high.

Students and parents question value in terms of the **opportunity cost** of both the time and money required to get a college degree. They believe that college is one way but not the only way (or even the best way) for their situation.

PARENT INFLUENCE: Several parents who started college and took on debt but didn't end up getting a degree have this mindset. They are wary of debt and don't want their children to go through what they did. Others think it will take too long – they've seen it take well beyond 4 years to get a degree.



Life After High School

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The desire for the growth and opportunity that college can provide is cancelled out by concerns, lack of details and support.

A significant amount of inertia related to pursuing a college-bound path for both students and their parents is created by the following forces:

- Waiting for students to lead the conversations if / when the conversations happen
- The desire to avoid risk and struggle
- The debate over the cost and value of college

There are many opportunities to help counteract that inertia by:

ENGAGING

Students and their families earlier in the high school years

FACILITATING

Ongoing conversations about pathways to college

PROVIDING

Specific information and resources about how to make college possible

Considering College

TRUTHS

Many have the desire, but lack the details

**Students seek information,
but the approach falls short**

The starting line is later than you think

One person can make a significant impact



Many have the desire, but lack the details

CURRENT STATE:

College most popular choice.

The largest group (between a third and half) would choose to attend a 4-year institution right after high school if they could afford it. Most don't have a clear idea of the benefits of community college, with only a few considering it.

Application and scholarship process is a black hole.

Students have only a limited understanding of the specific steps or process, no matter what path they want to take.

They don't know specifics around cost to attend college.

Many just have the perception that it's "expensive." Some have vague ideas about scholarships and others say they have an adult who they can go to who will help figure it out. While a handful mention specific types of scholarships or FAFSA, they have minimal details.

In their own words...

"I know you can sign up to talk to someone about FAFSA but I'm not sure what that is."

– FEMALE STUDENT


THE IMPACT

Not many have a grasp of the requirements, costs or deadlines.

In their own words...

"I don't think I'd know how to apply or when everything has to be done. I guess I need to figure that out."

– FEMALE STUDENT

A young man with a backpack and earbuds is looking at a laptop in a library. The background is blurred, showing bookshelves and a warm, indoor lighting.

“I went online to U of A to see the costs and I think it was something like \$11,000. We can’t afford that, so I didn’t go any further.”

- MALE STUDENT

Students seek information, but the approach falls short

CURRENT STATE:

Most students have gone online to get more information about colleges or trade schools, most often by going to school websites.

Students start with what's top of mind for them – ***what to expect from the experience and if I will fit in***. They look at the dorms and food options and get an idea of what the social life is like. After that, it's hit or miss if they stay and try to find more immediate and concrete information such as application deadlines and financial resources.

Few have a firm list of schools at this point. While the focus is on in-state schools, some are willing to consider any school that would offer them a scholarship. About one-third of the students want to focus on schools that are close; the balance are open to being away from home.

A handful have attended a webinar or toured a campus in the last year, most often through an urban/suburban high school. This familiarity makes them more comfortable about navigating the process, but they still have trouble speaking to specifics.

THE IMPACT:

Research happens in fits and starts

Students end up with some information that's good to know but not all the information they need to know.

In their own words...

“I tried to look at the ASU website but then I ran out of time at school. Our Wi-Fi at home isn't very good.”

– MALE STUDENT



“I want the information but not all at once. I wish they would start earlier and give it to us in small amounts.”

- MALE STUDENT

“I’ve been looking at scholarships...but that’s about it. I don’t know what the next steps are.”

- FEMALE STUDENT

“My cousin got scholarships to go to Ft. Lewis College, so I’ll probably look at that.”

- MALE STUDENT

The starting line is later than you think

CURRENT STATE:

College counseling often doesn't happen until senior year.

Students say this is too late. Counselors and teachers may prompt them to think about the choice and what they might want to do but they don't seem to get into the nitty-gritty of the "how" until senior year.

Students in rural areas especially are lacking in exposure and planning. They can't attend the workshops or classes until senior year, so they miss out on specific information about the process until then.

THE IMPACT:

Students and parents want earlier engagement and support to understand the process and know what's expected.

This could look like:

1. A clear roadmap of the steps with timelines
2. Clarity around eligibility especially when students graduate early
3. Information that is calibrated to the student's timing and progress (short, focused messaging, action-oriented, steps specific to their year in school)
4. Someone specific to call or go to if they have questions
5. Stories of people in different situations and goals
6. Focused, short-form content, answering questions and creating forward momentum / a feeling of progress (but not all video, since some have unreliable wifi)

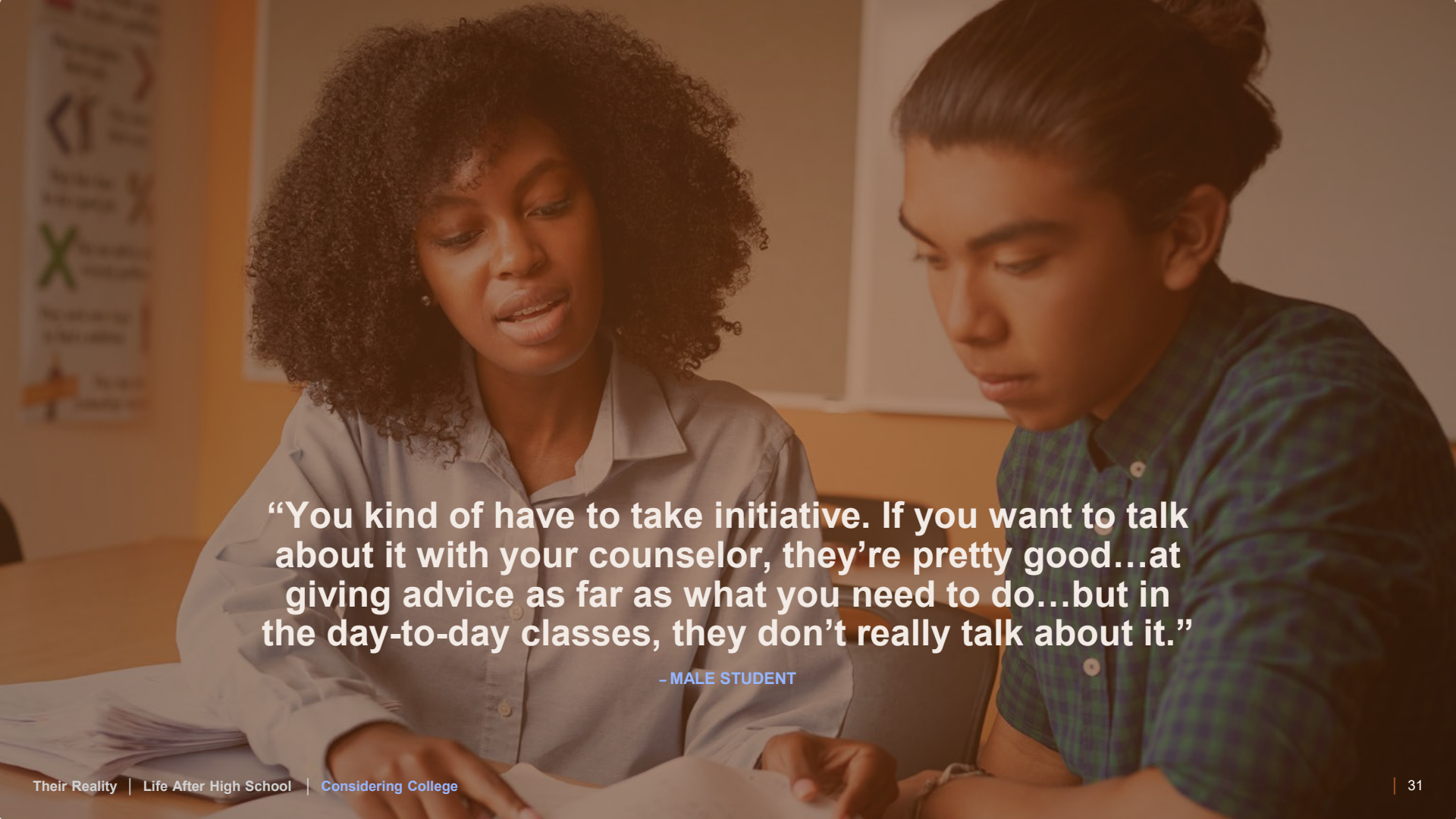
“I want to go but I don’t know how to make it happen.”

– FEMALE STUDENT

“I don’t know where to get any information, it feels like they just hand you a brochure. I need someone to sit down and explain it.”

– FEMALE STUDENT



A young woman with curly hair and a young man are sitting at a desk, looking at papers together. The woman is on the left, wearing a light blue button-down shirt, and the man is on the right, wearing a green and blue plaid shirt. They appear to be in a classroom or office setting. The background is slightly blurred, showing some papers and a wall.

“You kind of have to take initiative. If you want to talk about it with your counselor, they’re pretty good...at giving advice as far as what you need to do...but in the day-to-day classes, they don’t really talk about it.”

- MALE STUDENT

One person can make a significant impact

CURRENT STATE:

Those most confident they can go to college know someone who's been through the process.

This is usually a parent who has attended college or a family member who received scholarships to a 4-year university. Others are sure they can work with a specific school counselor to guide them.

Conversely, those who are most lost don't have anyone in their lives who is engaging with them on this question.

Most students aren't considering community college and this seems like a missed opportunity. The young women who are leaning towards a two-year degree had something (a tour, a teacher, a neighbor) that helped them understand why it might be a good choice in their situation.

THE IMPACT:

Almost all learn better and retain more when someone walks them through information and answers questions.

Every child who has any grasp on the steps/process has an advocate in their corner. This person is a motivator, a cheerleader and a scout, someone who shows the way.

In their own words...

"A teacher at school helped me apply to a summer program at ASU and I was accepted. I'll live on campus for six weeks and maybe then I'll understand about how college works."

-- MALE STUDENT

"The admissions counselor at Pima Community College gave us her card when we took the tour. Now at least I know I have someone I can call."

- FEMALE STUDENT



**“Ms. A is our
college
counselor
and I know I
can always go
to her with
questions.”**

- FEMALE STUDENT

A person with a backpack is standing on a rocky peak, looking out over a vast mountain range under a clear blue sky. The person is wearing a light-colored hoodie and dark pants. The backpack is dark and full. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

Considering College

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Without a clear understanding of the specific milestones and timing in the college application process, students often find themselves underprepared and unequipped to even start.

Students often wait to start thinking about college and how to get there until their senior year. This timing increases the challenges they already face.

Students tend to direct their research toward the **college experience (being there) rather than** gaining practical information about **how to get there**.

Those most hopeful about their ability to apply to and get into college **have at least one knowledgeable, supportive adult helping them each step of the way**. This is often a parent, but can also be a counselor, teacher or another adult in their life. Many of these students (and families) need dedicated and consistent support from a trusted adult who can lead the way.



Situational Challenges

TYPE OF COMMUNITY

It all comes down to access



Isolated, fewer resources overall

- Unreliable Wi-Fi for some
- Have to work harder to go to school, have longer commutes, more exposure to dropping out
- Low exposure to (or aren't considering) community college
- No ability to tour colleges further away; even some who live in Flagstaff haven't been to NAU
- No parents say they have attended a workshop or information session at the high school
- Some parents will just be happy to see their children graduate high school – that's a success

vs



More resources = more opportunity

- Some urban schools offer tours to nearby campuses (some Tucson students have visited the University of Arizona and Pima Community College). Rural students talked about field trips in middle school but nothing since then.
- More urban students mention the opportunity to meet with counselors before senior year
- While some students talk about college and military recruiter visits, they don't often mention trade schools

NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS

The impact and experience of the truths are amplified

In their own words...

“We drive about 45 minutes or so to school. Living on the reservation is not a problem except when it rains. The roads wash out and I can’t make it to school.”

PARENT PERSPECTIVE:

“They need to get off the reservation. There’s nothing for them here.”

- **Disconnected from school during the pandemic**
 - Often without help / oversight, really fell behind
- More likely to be the ones with **less access** (poor Wi-Fi on the reservation, no computer at home)
- Community has a lot of **unemployment / underemployment, long commutes, arduous schedules**
- **School isn’t always valued**, high drop-out rate, see friends who seem to be doing great who left school to work
- More inertia, **easy to get stuck** on the reservations
- Substance issues, **health issues**, lack of access / resources for health care
- Experience **loss, isolation**
- Take care of family, in **multiple-generational households**
- **Not just about how to apply to college but how to graduate from high school**

GENDER DIFFERENCES

Young women are more likely to be influenced by responsibilities at home, and are more flexible and open about their thinking.

The young women we talked to are:

- Considering a **wider variety of paths** (the majority of young men are focused on going to 4-year colleges)
 - Girls talk about helping professions/careers that can begin with a degree at a community college or trade school; boys mention careers in math, science, engineering that require a 4-year degree
- More likely to say they have a small **circle of friends, instead staying close to their families**, especially those in rural schools
- **More likely to say they've talked to a sister / friend about the future** (but it's still not very frequent)
- Given **more caretaking responsibilities** and are **more concerned about the impact going to college might have on their families**
- **Sharing more about their mental health struggles**

* Small sample size, directional



COMMUNICATION

When it comes to marketing and communications about college, university **websites are the critical first step** in navigating the possible path to college.

WHAT'S WORKING / MOST VALUED:

Websites

are a first destination for information; they do a good job of showing student life, programs / degrees offered

Campus Tours

are effective and impactful, especially if the students leave with a contact to follow-up with

High School Resources

Most are interested in their high school's programming but don't have access to it

Personal Reference

Knowing the experience of a sibling / family member who has navigated this process successfully



COMMUNICATION

When it comes to marketing and communications about college, university **websites are the critical first step** in navigating the possible path to college.

What's Not Breaking Through:

- There is no direct path from website home pages to a short summary of the process for application and scholarships
- While some say they receive emails from universities, no student or parent could recall any specific messages
- The mailers they remember give an impression of the college experience but not how to get there
- Paper materials/handouts lose value without context, help
- Parents are often unable to be involved in their child's school, so they feel out of the loop

Thinking about communications

HOW MIGHT YOU...

Audit marketing and communications through the lens of preparing students to apply (how it works, what's needed, timing)

Use social media channels and or social content to support discovery and educate high school students on the application process and resources

Create communications that speak directly to high-school juniors and seniors. Create a highly visible one-click access to a pathway to college, with a summary of the application process, key milestones, timing, etc.

Ensure that physical marketing pieces/collateral (mailers, flyers, brochures) also educate in addition to building anticipation / excitement



From Insight to Action

Their Reality

INSIGHT: The post-pandemic world is different, and so are they

What it means

Loss of:

- Learning, engagement
- Connection
- Family members

How might you . . .

- Reintroduce students to online learning
- Take the technology gap into account for Native American households.
- Provide significant emotional and academic support to rural and low-income students
- Have a greater presence and connection in the high schools, particularly in rural areas

INSIGHT: Their lives are unpredictable, making long-term planning a challenge

What it means

- There's a big difference between sophomore and junior year
- Students don't know how or where to start – it's all theoretical and they are left to draw their own conclusions
- Eligibility is an open question; we only heard about happy surprises but it's likely other students find out late they **aren't** graduating

How might you . . .

- Tailor messages / information by year in school
- Emphasize milestones, first steps in the messaging
- Understand the impact eligibility has on post-high school plans
- Give them a lens to evaluate different majors/careers, make it more real to them

Life After High School

INSIGHTS: Conversations aren't happening; The students lead the process

What it means

- Few opportunities to explore and dream
- Parents don't want to show what they don't know so they wait for their children to bring it up
- Students aren't always ready to lead
- Assume that financial concerns will be the biggest barrier without knowledge of costs /scholarships

How might you . . .

- Help make it fun and easy to talk about the possibilities
- Give parents and students ideas/openings to bring up the topic
- Provide specific road maps and questions for students to follow as they explore options
- Engage families earlier so they can know if a 4-year college is an option

INSIGHT: Avoidance of struggle informs choices

What it means

- Parents want their children to pursue different opportunities and a better quality of life, but some feel like college is a big risk and may set them back
- A four-year degree takes the most time / treasure, while not always having a clear idea of the outcome
- Parents want whatever path that will mean less struggle for their children
- Even with big hopes, the thought of trying and failing is worse than not trying

How might you . . .

- Offset some misperceptions around a 4-year degree
- Showcase stories of how different students made college happen with little debt
- Build on small successes and reward / encourage engagement in the process/visits to the website

FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

Life After High School

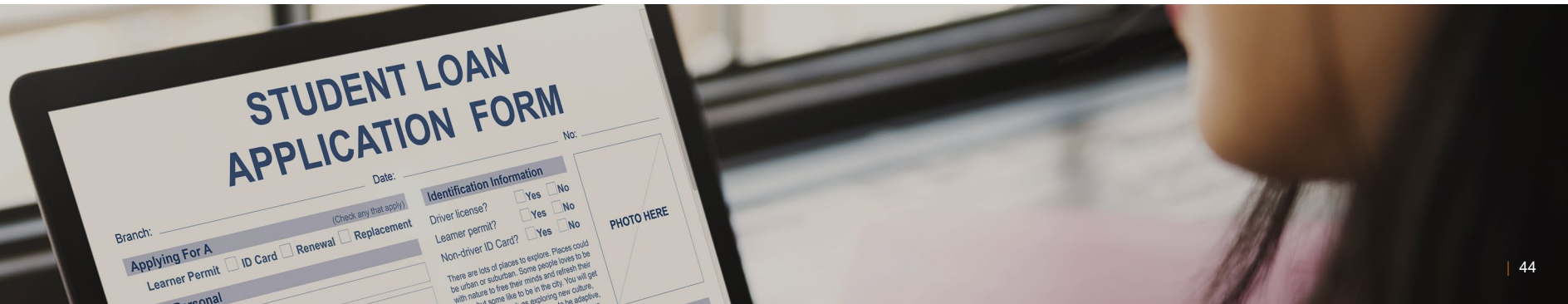
INSIGHT: College not always seen as worth the cost

What it means

- College is important but the relative value of a degree is questioned as is taking on debt
- There is concern around the time commitment, how long it will take to start earning an income
- Trade school can be a good option, especially for students who are “done” with school

How might you . . .

- Make sure those who have a great chance at receiving a full ride at a state university know that
- Highlight how a community college can be a pathway and positive transition point
- Speak directly about when a 4-year degree might not be the best solution



Considering College

INSIGHTS: Many have the desire, but lack the details; Students seek information, but the approach falls short

What it means

- Majors / programs and campus culture and amenities are getting through
- Less awareness of specific requirements, application process and financial aid
- Don't really start digging in until senior year when it can feel overwhelming

How might you . . .

- Provide a roadmap that lines up the steps
- Use to-the-point, simple language
- Provide clear directives, include baked-in checklists and timelines
- Create focused, different content for different situations and spell out the relevance
- Adopt a step-by-step structure that give students a sense of progress
- Demonstrate an empathetic tone, real and comforting

INSIGHT: The starting line is later than you think

What it means

- Many students don't engage formally at school until senior year
- Few parents are aware of what's offered by their high school
- No parents have attended a workshop/school event for this child

How might you . . .

- Support high schools in outreach to low-income and rural families
- Help create a bridge or ways to start the dialogue earlier with both students and parents

FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

Considering College

INSIGHT: One person can make a significant impact

What it means

- Learners need a scout (someone who knows the way) and a guide (someone who can walk them through the steps)
- Personal connection has a big impact, and the students who don't have one have a harder time navigating this decision

How might you . . .

- Give students a way to feel connected to different schools, a specific person or a hotline to call where they can speak to someone
- Consider Pima Community College's approach and what is working / not working for students from these backgrounds



HOW MIGHT YOU:

Make it Personal

Establish / re-establish a physical and personal presence in these communities that provides practical support and resources for students and their families so that they know their options and HOW to make it possible.



Engage Sooner

Reimagine and develop programs, materials and resources that help students and families **get to the starting line of applying** for college and take them through application process.

Make it Concrete

How might you more effectively and directly facilitate connecting families with financial resources and / or providing the support to apply for those resources.





PHASE II

QUANTITATIVE REPORT

AIA Learners Research Among High School Students

OCTOBER 2023



Introduction

STUDY APPROACH

The Arizona Innovation Alliance sponsored this study to understand student and parent experiences in order to continuously meet the needs of its communities.

Subsequent to the quantitative research a 12-minute **online survey** was conducted between August 28 - September 15, 2023 among high school age students in Arizona to gain a deeper understanding of their interest and barriers in attending college.

Sample Overview:

- 487 students
- Age 13-19 who completed 8th grade or higher
- Sourced from ASU and NAU prospective student lists*
- Segmented into three groups:
 - Rural** (living in Apache, Coconino, Gila, Graham, Greenlee, La Paz, Mohave or Navajo County)
 - Low-income** (identified by their participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP))
 - Other** (neither living in rural counties or participating in the NSLP program)

**It is important to highlight that the sample source for this survey was compiled from several internal sources and chosen as the best available for testing. As such, the data may include inherent bias and in particular non-response bias among high school students who may have lower levels of engagement in the college planning process.*

RESEARCH PARTNER:



Brian Schultz
Owner, Impact Consumer Research
www.impactcr.com



Key Findings



Interest in public universities is high

59%

say an **in-state 4-year institution** is the choice for most of those planning to attend college.

LOW-INCOME AND RURAL

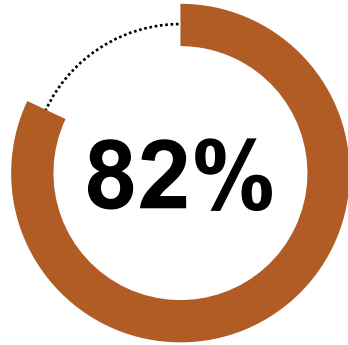
county residents are also **more likely** than others **to consider a 2-year community college or vocational / trade school.**

About three-quarters (77%) of those interested in attending college plan to apply to ASU, NAU, and/or UA, regardless of being low-income participants, residing in rural counties, or otherwise.

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of those interested in going to college claim to have made an on-campus visit to at least one of the three AZ public universities.

Low-income participants are the least likely to have made a visit – 66% vs. 79% rural vs. 80% other.

Low-income students may need extra support



A large majority claim they are likely to attend college after high school, but this is significantly lower than for other students (at 94%)



Why?

Half feel the tuition seems too high for them, plus the cost of books, housing, etc.; **they cannot afford it** and lack financial aid options

They are **less likely to have a parent who attended college**. Support from their parents for their post-high school plans is solid, but lower than for other students.

They are **less likely to have taken AP classes or college entry exams**. They have concerns about academic preparedness and not getting accepted into college

Hispanic students face additional challenges

Less likely to attend college

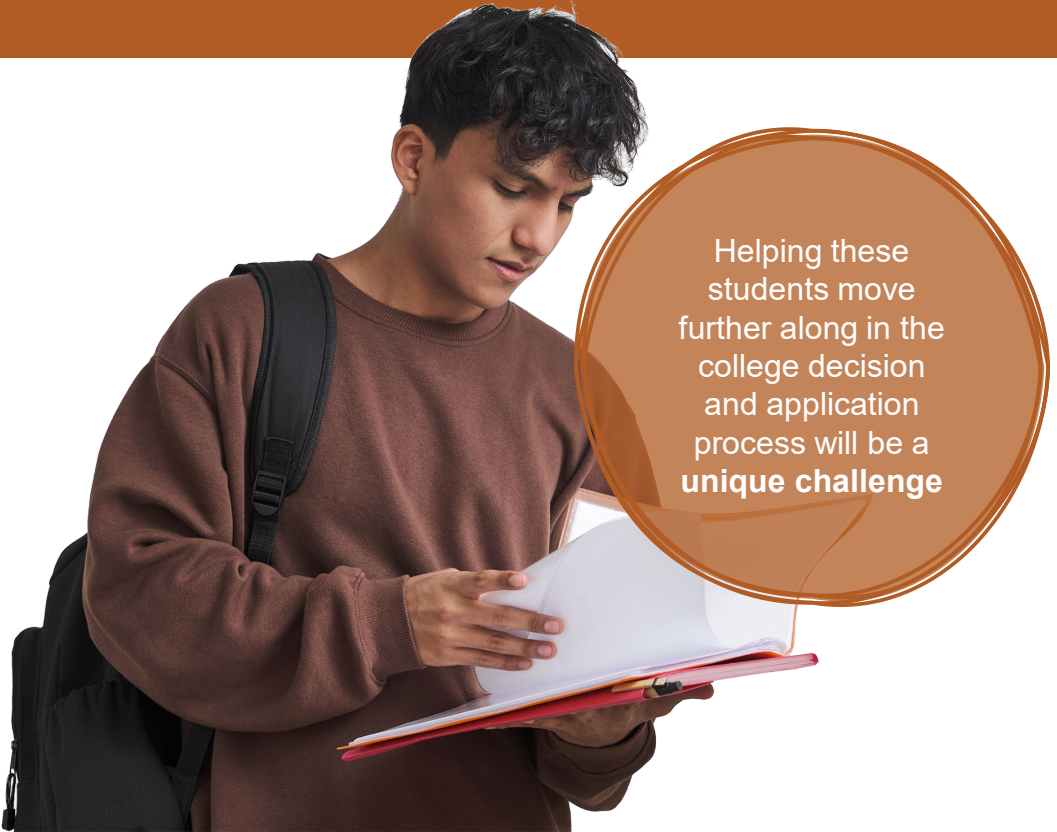
Hispanic Males, in particular

Dual languages

Over a quarter speak Spanish primarily when they are at home

Additional obstacles

- They have **lower GPAs**
- Come from **lower income Households**
- Have other family / work obligations
- **Parents less likely to have gone to college**, but still play a strong role in the decision



Helping these students move further along in the college decision and application process will be a **unique challenge**



Comparison to Qualitative Findings

Navigating financial aid is a top priority

QUANT FINDINGS:

Affordability

Is the largest barrier to both applying and attending college. About half **want financial aid support and counseling** to help them estimate the cost of attending college.

Communication

Direct communications from the school tend to be more influential than media / advertising. Unique creatives from the AZ public universities can help break through the clutter of information they may be receiving, and more directly address their concerns.

Ease of getting information

A **one-stop site** with links to the various resources they need to apply has relatively strong appeal. This may present the opportunity to boost and enhance communications with them and their key influencers.



QUAL FINDING

In their own words...

“Students have the desire but lack the details... they tend to direct their research toward the college experience (being there) rather than gaining practical information about how to get there.”

Parents play important role in decision-making

QUANT FINDINGS:

Circle of Influence

Parents and guardians have the **strongest influence** on the decision to attend college.

A large majority of these students have **talked to family and friends** about attending college.

Many have **parents who attended college**. They can share their personal experiences with their children.

These parents and students appear to be **having the conversations about school**.

We do not know the extent of these discussions or how involved the parents are in the process.



QUAL FINDING
In their own words...

“Conversations aren't happening... Parents don't want to show what they don't know, so they wait for their children to bring it up.”

Motivated students find ways to succeed

QUANT FINDINGS:

Engagement and Action

The base size of those **living in rural counties** is very low, but these students show a **high level of engagement in the college planning process.**

Most have talked to family / friends, and many have researched colleges online, received information from different schools, and spoken to their guidance counselors. Nearly half claim to have already accepted an offer from a college / university.

Conversely, less than half have taken advanced classes, made an on-campus visit, completed financial aid forms, or taken college entry exams.



QUAL FINDING

In their own words...

“Students in rural areas especially are lacking in exposure and planning. They miss out on events and workshops, and often don't have someone to guide them through the process.”

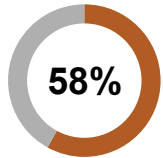




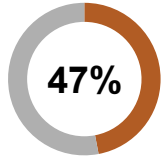
Removing Barriers

What are the barriers?

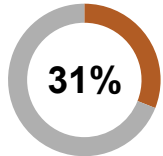
APPLYING



Student loan debt



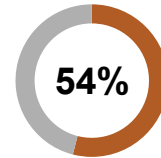
Tuition seems too high



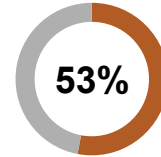
Fear they will not be successful

Low-income participants also mention **concerns with being prepared academically and not being able to afford the application fees.**

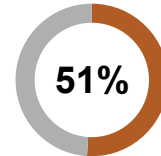
ATTENDING



**cannot afford /
cost of attending is too high**



lack of financial support
(scholarships, loan options, financial aid)



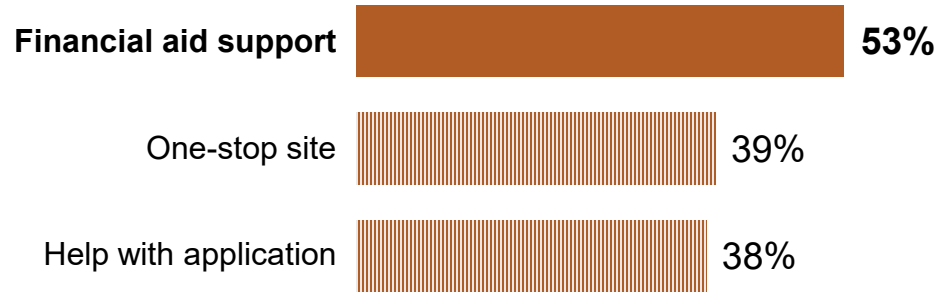
costs are too high
(for books, housing, etc.)

Those living in **rural** counties **most likely to mention work as a top barrier.** They need to help pay bills and don't have time for school.

Removing barriers to applying

Over half of those *interested in attending college* select **offering financial aid support / counseling to help estimate the cost** of attending college as most helpful.

REMOVING APPLICATION BARRIERS:



Other areas of interest are:

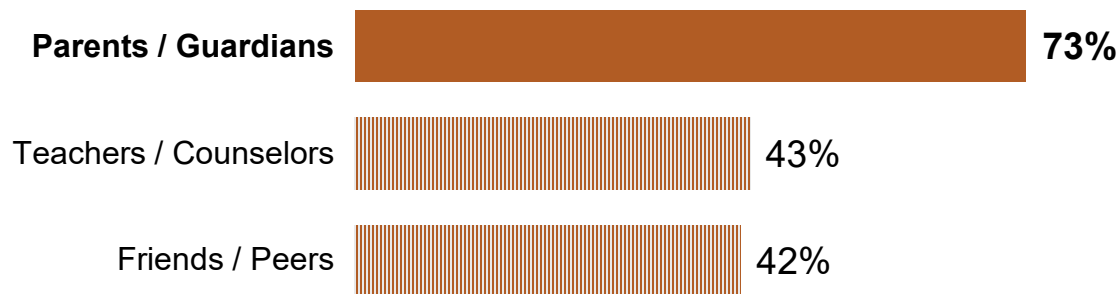
- **A one-stop site with links** to all application, FAFSA, financial aid sites and resources, but less so for those living in rural counties
- **Step-by-step help** while filling out applications
- **Financial support** for standardized test fees and / or college applications (especially relevant for low-income participants)
- **Personalized help** filling out FAFSA application



Removing barriers to attending

Parents and guardians have the greatest influence on whether these students decide to pursue a college education. This may be driven by the fact that many have a parent who attended college.

GREATEST INFLUENCE ON DECISION TO ATTEND:



ADDITIONAL INFLUENCERS:

Teachers and counselors play a strong role in the decision, especially for low-income participants

Friend and peers have a stronger impact on the decision as well

Community organizations and media / advertisements trail well behind for being influencers



Life After High School

Strong majority see a future attending college

Among those most likely to attend college...

College plans:

- Feel it's highly important to get a college degree
- Plan to apply to one of the three in-state Arizona public universities
- Traditional on-campus program

Concerns / Barriers:

- Fear they won't be successful
- Not sure what major / program to pursue
- Lack of scholarships and the cost of books, housing, etc. are too high

DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES:

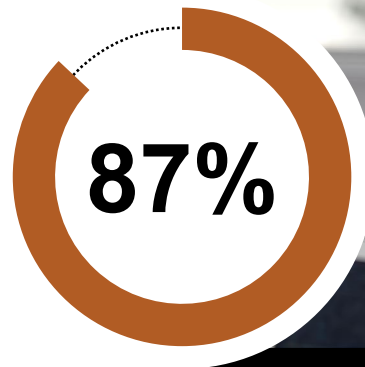
Female

Higher GPA
(3.6 or higher)

**Non-Hispanic;
White or Asian**

Higher HH income
(skews on \$100K+)

Suburban



Parent profile:

- More likely to have attended college / are highly educated
- Supportive of child's post-high school plans
- Expect child to go to college

The rest see themselves doing something else...

Among those most likely to attend college...

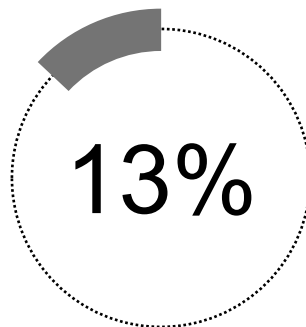
College plans:

- Feel it is less important to get a college degree
- Would apply to 2-year community college or vocational / trade school
- Many unsure of program type
- Plan to apply to one of the three Arizona public universities

Concerns / Barriers:

- Do not want student debt and tuition seems too high
- Work obligations and being too big of a commitment

DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES:



What they're considering instead:

- Find a **job / go to work** (42%)
- Taking a “**gap year**” before starting college (19%)
- Attending a **vocational / technical** school (10%)
- Join the **military** (10%)

But most are interested in attending college / university in the future!

Parent profile:

- Less likely to have attended college / lower education
- Not as supportive of child's post-high school plans
- Fewer expect child to go to college

Male

Lower GPA
(3.0 or under)

Hispanic

More likely to participate in support programs
(NSLP, SFSP, school transportation, and vocational / tech classes)

Urban

Low-income / Rural students differ in demos, and have different college plans and barriers

They have unique concerns:

- 1 **No interest / desire** in attending college at this time – it is not for me
- 2 **Work obligations** and college being too big of a commitment
- 3 **Lack of transportation**

Among those most likely to attend college...

College plans:

- Doing something other than attending college after high school; or attending a 2-year community college or vocational / trade school
- 100% online program (or hybrid due to work obligations or distance from home)

Concerns / Barriers:

- Concerns about being accepted / admitted / being academically prepared
- Cannot afford application fee

DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES:

Lower GPA
(2.5 or under or have not yet received grades yet)

Hispanic
(Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano)

Lower HH income
(under \$50K)

Use of SFSP and school transportation

Parent profile:

- Less likely to have attended college / lower education
- Not as supportive of child's post-high school plans
- Fewer expect child to go to college



Final Conclusions

COLLEGE IS IMPORTANT

Majority of Arizona high school students (86%) **feel that getting a college degree is highly important**

Most (82%) agree their **parents expect them to go to college**, but less so for those in rural counties.

A large majority of these students (88%) view themselves as **likely to attend college** after graduating high school

- **Most plan to attend away from home, while staying in-state.** This skews lower for low-income participants who are more likely to live at home while attending college
- Low-income participants are most likely to find a job after graduating high school, though the number is generally low at 8%
- Over eight in ten feel their **parents are highly supportive** of their plans for after high school. This is highest among rural residents, while skewing lower for low-income participants



THEY NEED INTERVENTIONS TO KEEP MOVING FORWARD

Nearly all have taken steps to start planning for college

- Over three-quarters have **talked with family and friends** about attending college or researched colleges online
- Most have also **received information / brochures from different colleges** and spoken to their guidance counselors
- Rural residents are the least likely to have taken honors, AP, or dual credit classes
- Low-income participants are the least likely to have accepted an offer from a college/university or taken college entry exams – 19% vs. 47% rural and 25% other

Even so, many are still in the earlier stages of the planning process

They are yet to make an on-campus visit, request information from a school, complete financial aid forms, or take college entry exams.



Appendix

RESEARCH PARTNERS

Qualitative Research

Jeanne Corrigan, Mosaic Insight Group

✉ jeanne@mosaicig.com

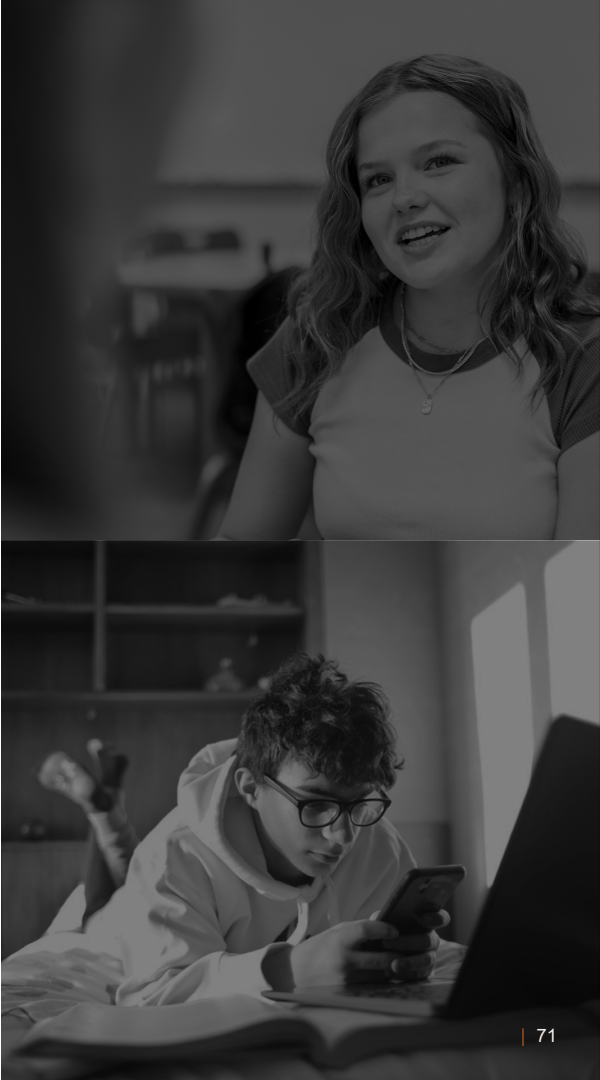
Sage Baker, Sage Baker Consulting

✉ sage@sagebakerconsulting.com

Quantitative Research

Brian Schultz, Impact Consumer Research

✉ brian.schultz@impactcr.com





ARIZONA
INNOVATION
ALLIANCE

Thank you!

72

DECEMBER 2023

