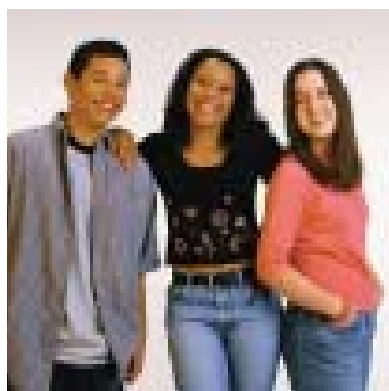
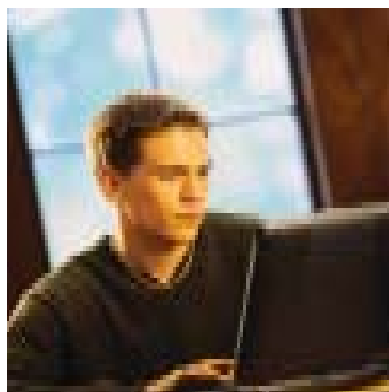
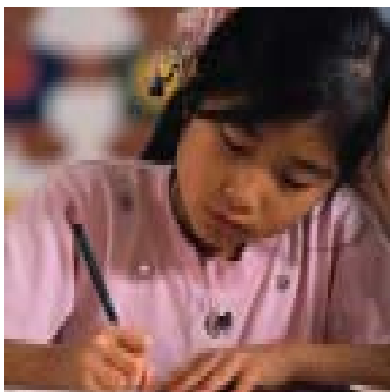


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INTRODUCTION

In spring 2005, the Educational Policy Institute was contracted by an anonymous, non-profit, Missouri-based organization to conduct analysis of data from a series of focus groups of 7th, 9th, and 11th grade students. The purpose of the focus groups, conducted by the Change and Innovation Agency in Jefferson City, was to examine the postsecondary aspirations and the perceived barriers faced by students in achieving their career and postsecondary goals. In short, students were asked what they wanted to be when they grew up and why. Students were then questioned about their plans immediately after high school, including whether they were planning on attending a postsecondary institution, why, and what general impressions they had of college. Probing deeper, the students were subsequently asked to identify who and/or what influenced their postsecondary plans, as well as the potential barriers they saw to achieving their goals. Students also offered suggestions about how to break down the barriers they saw to postsecondary education.

For this study, 11 schools from 3 areas in Missouri were selected to participate. Four schools were located in or near St. Louis, four in Kansas City, and three in the Southeast region of the state. Six of the schools were high school, one was a junior high school, and the remaining four were middle schools.

ANALYSIS

When examining the responses to the survey questions, we initially focused on differences across geographical boundaries, expecting that students from the Southeast school district would, for example, identify different barriers to college than students from an urban area. However, remarkably few differences between the responses of urban and rural students existed. We did, however, find significant differences across grade level, especially with regard to the people students identified as influential in the college decision process and career aspirations. More importantly, we found that students' perceptions of their chances of attending a postsecondary institution after high school changed dramatically between the seventh and eleventh grades. It should be noted that the Educational Policy Institute was limited in the analysis by the level of detail available from the original focus group data and its coding.

What follows is an analysis of the major perceptions of Missouri youth when asked about their future, including career aspirations, the influence of parents and family, counselors, and peers, perceptions about tuition and financing of postsecondary education, and academic preparation. These are the primary areas that either support or detract from future career and academic goals.

CAREER ASPIRATIONS

When asked what they wanted to be when they grew up and why, Missouri students listed over 126 different professions (see Exhibit 1). Overall, the top ten professions named by the students were: professional athlete, lawyer, pediatrician, teacher, nurse, cosmetologist, doctor, entrepreneur, chef and veterinarian.

To look at the bigger picture, we grouped the students' career goals into more general categories, for example, putting all students who wanted to be nurses, pediatricians, OBGYNs, surgeons, and psychologists under the term "Medicine." The top ten categories were: medicine, entertainment, professional sports, law, business, art, cosmetology, writing, the culinary arts, and veterinarian. It is evident that these students have set high goals for themselves. Achieving the dream of playing sports profes-

sionally takes years of hard work and dedication, and only a small percentage of the population actually achieves that goal. Becoming a doctor or lawyer entails years of intensive study and requires that a solid academic foundation be laid in primary and secondary school. Of concern here is whether or not these students are aware of the amount of education or training required to achieve their career goals. Two Yale University researchers recently published the results of research that showed that students who wanted to be lawyers, doctors, and university professors tended to underestimate the amount of education these occupations required, while those that wanted to be writers, engineers, entertainers, and athletes overestimated the amount of education they needed. Additionally, the number of students interested in certain professions, such as law or medicine, far exceeds the actual number of jobs that are projected to be open in those fields (Schneider 1999).

Exhibit 1. Career Aspirations of 7th, 9th, and 11th Grade Missouri Students

7 th	9 th	11 th
Professional Athlete	Professional Athlete	Lawyer
Lawyer	Lawyer	Doctor
Teacher	Pediatrician	Model
Pediatrician	Cosmetologist	Teacher
Vet	Teacher	Chef
Entrepreneur	Writer	Computer Engineer
Singer	Nurse	Entrepreneur
Nurse	Actor	Music Producer
Doctor	Doctor	Nurse
Chef	Entrepreneur	Pediatrician
Artist	Forensic Scientist	Writer
Actor	Singer	Professional Athlete
Truck Driver	Beautician	Accountant
Real Estate	Chef	Child Psychologist
Psychiatrist	Clothes Designer	Coach
Pilot	Coach	Computer Technician
Model	Computer Technician	Engineer
Engineer	Judge	Interior Designer
Cosmetologist	Mechanic	Law Enforcement
Architect	OBGYN	OBGYN
Zoologist	Real Estate	Physical Therapist
Wild Life Biologist	Vet	Real Estate Agent
Welder	Air Force Pilot	Surgeon
Web Designer	Airplane Mechanic	Vet
Video Game Designer	Anchorwoman	Actor
Undertaker	Archeologist	Actuary

If we look at the shift in Missouri students' aspirations over time, we see that as they mature, though their preference for specific jobs may change, they still lean heavily towards professional, technical, and managerial jobs. In seventh grade, a large number of students wanted to become professional athletes, followed distantly by the desire to become a lawyer, teacher, or pediatrician. Ninth graders had similar career goals. However, by the eleventh grade, becoming a professional athlete is no longer anywhere near the top of the list. Students named becoming a lawyer, doctor, model, and teacher as the most desirable careers. Perhaps this shows that by the eleventh grade, students have become more realistic about the chances of succeeding as a professional athlete and decided to turn their focus what they perceive as more attainable goals. Indeed, research has shown that high school students may begin to opt out of certain professions as they become more aware of barriers to particular occupations (Helwig 2004).

Regardless of the reasons behind the shift in career goals that occurs as students' age, the majority of every group that participated in the survey chose professions that require at least a college degree. Research has shown that career aspirations relate directly to the decision to go to college. In fact, getting a good job is named by most parents and their children as the primary reason for going to college (Hossler 1999). Evidence from this study appears to support Hossler's theory. When asked why they wanted to attend college, students from every grade stated that part of their desire to attend college was rooted in the fact that a college degree was a re-

quirement of the type of career they planned to follow.

WHY COLLEGE?

To gain a better understanding of why students aspired to specific careers, they were asked to list their reasons for choosing their prospective professions (Exhibit 2). In general, students said they made their professional goals based on an affinity for the skills needed to do the job. For example, those that expressed an interest in medicine said they liked to help people, while students who wanted to be lawyers said they enjoyed arguing. In every group, at least one student cited salary as an important factor in choosing a career. Some mentioned role models, such as their parents, siblings, and other family members, who influenced their choice. Research has shown that academic performance, parental expectations, and peer influences all affect career aspirations, and that many children have higher educational and occupational goals than their parents attained (McNearney 1998). It is also evident from their career choices that they value professions that carry a high level of social clout, and are heavily influenced by the sectors of society that they interact with or are exposed to most often: teachers, doctors, and actors. When talking about their reasons for choosing a particular occupation, some students referenced specific television shows or characters from television shows. This leads us to question the sincerity of their desire to do a particular job, as well as how informed they are about what type of work that job really entails.

Exhibit 2. Reasons for Aspiring to College by 7th, 9th, and 11th Grade Missouri Students

7th	9th	11th
Career	Career	Career
Money	Money	Money
Education	Education	Education
To get away	To be the first	Sense of pride/accomplishment
Play sports	Achievement of goals/success	Better Life
Experience	Be a good role model	Get away
To avoid what I see from people that didn't go	Make something of myself	Independence
TV	Get out of town	New experience
Prove that I can do it	Sports	Play sports
To achieve goals/success	Availability/Cost	To be first

The fact that career aspirations play such an important role in the desire to go to college has led researchers to investigate when these aspirations begin to develop. Research suggests that this process starts in junior high, when students begin to value a particular occupation and begin to see attending college as critical in securing their occupational goals (Cabrera 2000). Many well-paying jobs require a college degree and students are aware of this at a young age. However, the Missouri students provided evidence that just as career goals change over time, so do postsecondary educational aspirations. Each group was asked how many students planned to go to college. Clearly, students had lowered their perceptions of their chances of earning a postsecondary degree as they progressed through school. This change in attitude can be most clearly seen in the change from 7th to 9th grade in the percentage of students that intended to continue their education after high school. In 7th grade, 98 percent of the students planned to go to college. By 9th grade that percentage had dropped to 89 percent and by 11th grade, only 83 percent of the students surveyed said they had plans to go to college.

The Missouri students' responses indicate that they have the desire to go to college, especially in the seventh grade. The task now is to ensure that they are adequately prepared to reach their goals. Timing is critical. Programs aimed at equipping students with the necessary tools to apply and succeed in college must begin in the seventh or eighth grade and continue through the senior year of high school. As dis-

cussed, students dramatically lower their postsecondary educational aspirations by the eleventh grade. Below we discuss who and what motivated students to attend college, and what barriers stand in the way of them achieving their goals.

The responses received from the focus groups show that students need guidance in choosing an academic and career path.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT COLLEGE REPRESENTS TO STUDENTS

The focus groups also asked students what they thought of college (Exhibit 3). Perhaps due to the entertainment industry, news reports, or information from family and friends, students listed parties and money more often than other reasons for attending college, regardless of grade level. Career and education are also mentioned near the top. Other thoughts of college included "learning," "athletics," "friends," and "greek life." Interesting, students also mentioned such thoughts as "hard work," "freedom," and "responsibilities." Again, there seems that there was little relationship between grade level and response. The list does represent that students have many ideas of what college represents or means to them, some comical ("bad food"), some serious ("scholarships"). But they apparently do have a compass as to what college is, certainly as early as the 7th grade in

this case. This can be loosely seen as a positive indicator and that they have a foundation from which to build towards through the middle and high school, but only if they are able to act upon their aspirations.

Exhibit 3. Thoughts of College by 7th, 9th, and 11th Grade Missouri Students

7 th	9 th	11 th
Parties	Money	Greek Life
Money	Parties	Money
Books	Career	Parties
Jobs	Greek Life	Athletics
Education	Scholarships	Another four years
Greek Life	Dorms	Freedom
Learning	Education	Friends
Scholarships	Freedom	Future
Athletics	Hard Work	Grades
Career	Classes	Grants
Dorms	Independence	Hard Work
Girls	Responsibilities	Jobs
Boys	Work	Studying
Grades	Campus	Which college?
Professors	Diploma	Work
Roommate	Four Years	Activities
Work	Friends	Career
Bad Food	Future	Girls
Friends	Grades	Homework
Future	Jobs	Loans
Graduate	Major	Majors
Homework	New People	New people
Independence	Studying	Professors
School	Tests	Responsibility
Tests	Activities	Scholarships

COLLEGE INFLUENCERS

With regard to influences about college, all groups surveyed in the project listed parents, siblings, and other family as the top influencers. Friends and teachers were also seen as important, as were

church members, boyfriends/girlfriends, counselors, and various people in the community. A number of students also mentioned “myself” as an influencer, suggesting that there exists a locus of control among some students that they, themselves, matter greatly in deciding their future.

Exhibit 4. Major Influencers on the Path to College, by 7th, 9th, and 11th Grade Missouri Students

7 th	9 th	11 th
Parents	Parents	Parents
Siblings	Siblings	Siblings
Grandparents	Friends	Family
Cousin	Teachers	Myself
Family	Grandparents	Grandparents
Teachers	Myself	Teachers
Aunt	Aunt	Friends
Uncle	Cousin	Counselors
College Players	Family	Boyfriend
Friend	Uncle	Church Members
Homeless Guy	Boyfriend/Girlfriend	Coaches
Man at the Store	Counselors	College Athletes
Myself	Johnny Cochran	College Coaches

Family. As stated, family was, by far, the most influential factor pushing Missouri students to go to college. Studies have shown that parental encouragement and involvement in a student’s academic life is one of the most reliable predictors of whether or not a child will attend college (Hossler 1999; Cabrera 2000; Choy 2002). Parents show support for their children’s postsecondary aspirations in a variety of ways, both implicitly and explicitly. Attending school-sponsored activities, helping their children with their homework, discussing college plans regularly, and being involved in their child’s class selections are important at the secondary level. The level of parental support and involvement in their children’s education can vary greatly and is affected by a variety of factors, including socioeconomic status, education level, and how a parent views his role in raising and educating his child (Hoover-Dempsey 1997) 7-9. These factors, often termed “cultural capital,” affect not only the way parents encourage their children, but also their own perception of how competent or qualified they are in providing that encouragement.

Parental education level matters in that “parents who have gone to college are familiar with the experience and are better quipped to explain to their children how the college system is structured, how it works, and how students can prepare for it” (Hossler 1999, p.26). Parents with higher educational levels tend to be more involved in curricular decisions, attend programs on educational opportunity for their children, and know more about college prices (Choy 2002).

In the focus groups, if a student’s parents or siblings had attended college or were currently enrolled, the student viewed their family members as role models to be emulated. Students whose parents and siblings did not have postsecondary education experience viewed earning a college degree as a way to improve their social and financial station in life. Students with younger brothers and sisters said they wanted to go to college in order to be a role model to them. Indeed, research has shown that sibling educational level can affect a student’s propensity to continue their own studies. Students with siblings that attend

college are more likely to go themselves, while those with older siblings that drop out of high school are at higher risk for not continuing their education (Horn 1997; Cabrera 2000).

The fact that parents with high levels of education also tend to have higher incomes, and therefore have access to more resources than their low-income, less educated counterparts, may also have a positive effect on the formation and execution of postsecondary educational plans. Well educated, high-income parents tend to discuss educational goals with their children more frequently and at younger ages than low-income, under-educated parents. By discussing academic options, parents consistently show their support and expectations, giving their children the confidence to pursue their college and career goals.

The creation of expectations and goals, and the requisite planning that takes place to achieve such goals, is an important step on the pathway to college. By starting the college discussion as early as the seventh grade, students begin to take the necessary steps that will prepare them to attend college. "Family support and early educational plans are among the strongest predictors of students developing and maintaining college aspirations, sustaining motivation and academic achievements, and actually enrolling in college" (McDonough 1997) 11. Planning to go to college as early as the seventh grade gives students the opportunity to enroll in college preparatory classes, which is yet another strong predictor of whether or not they will attend a postsecondary institution.

Showing financial support is another important way parents send their children the message that they are expected to go to college, a link that is often missing for low-income or first generation students. By saving for college, parents can objectively express their encouragement and create the expectation for their child to pursue a college degree (Cabrera 2000). Without financial support, students often view postsecondary education as unattainable, while those that can count on their parents to fund their

education are more likely to go, even if they are from low-income families (King 1996; McDonough 1997).

Missouri students in both the seventh and ninth grade cohorts mentioned that they knew their tuition was already paid for, therefore they felt an obligation or expectation to go. One student specifically mentioned the fact that his grandfather had started a college fund as the reason he had decided to go to college. Therefore, financial support from their family can significantly influence a student's college aspirations. Putting away money earmarked specifically for tuition creates a tangible guarantee for students that they will have the financial resources available to them when they reach college age.

Outside the family circle, people such as teachers, friends, and neighbors were mentioned only once or twice by the seventh grade students. From their responses it was evident that seventh graders relied heavily on their family for guidance in developing their postsecondary aspirations. They named the least number of influences out of all three groups, of which the first five were family-related. The only non-family player mentioned more than once were teachers.

Similarly, the ninth graders highlighted the importance of their family in deciding to go to college; however, external influences had begun to creep in. Counselors, boyfriends, a man at a store, even people who had not gone to college were mentioned as having an influence in the students' decision process.

By the eleventh grade, it is evident that students had begun to break away from their parents' influence and seek out other sources of advice regarding college. Though parents and siblings were still mentioned most frequently, students were influenced by a broader range of individuals as compared to ninth graders. Additionally, there was a greater variety in the type of people they look to for guidance, including church members, co-workers, homeless people, college coaches, recruiters, and people that had and had not gone to college. It is interesting to note the

increasing significance students put on themselves as being pivotal in the college decision process. In the seventh grade, only one group referred to themselves as playing a major role in deciding to go to college. However, by the ninth grade and eleventh grades, five groups rated themselves as important in the decision making process. We therefore see the development of autonomy and independence over time. Students entering or actively engaged in the search and choice stages of college planning begin to take on more responsibility and rely not only on themselves, but on sources other than their immediate family members for guidance.

Counselors. When the students from Missouri were asked to describe the level of involvement of their school counselors, the response was mixed. Seventh graders replied that their counselors were not at all involved in planning for college. According to the American Student Counselors Association (ASCA), however, counselors' duties at this stage include guidance in academic and career planning, as well as the development of study and organizational skills (ASCA, 2006a). Ninth and eleventh grade students surveyed mentioned counselors as being somewhat important in the college decision process, albeit, not as frequently as they mentioned other sources. At this stage, counselors are expected to be very involved in the college decision process, charged with walking students through the post secondary planning and application process, career awareness, and helping students with the transition from high school to post secondary life (ASCA, 2006b).

To gauge school counselors' effectiveness and visibility to students, the focus groups were also asked how involved their counselors were. The responses were mixed. Seventh graders, overall, did not view their counselors as very involved, but again, this may be due to the limited role that counselors play at that stage in the educational system. By ninth grade, students had more interaction with their counselors, but, overall, they had mixed reviews. Two groups thought their counselors were very involved, but four groups complained that their counselors were either completely uninvolved or that they, the students,

were responsible for seeking out their counselors for advice. The responses from the eleventh grade cohort were similar, with only two groups declaring their counselors to be "very involved" and "helpful". Four of the groups had negative opinions of their counselor's role in the college decision process, saying they either had to initiate counselor involvement or that they did not have sufficient time with their counselors.

Counselors, by job description, play a significant role in the college decision process. Their knowledge of college characteristics, application and admission processes, and ability to evaluate a student's compatibility with specific institutions can be an invaluable resource for students faced with the daunting task of finding a school appropriate for them. Counselors can especially have an impact on increasing the probability that traditionally at-risk students will attend a postsecondary institution because they are responsible for choosing academic tracks for each student that will ultimately either prepare them for college or select them out (Gandara 2002). As discussed below, academic preparedness, along with parental support, is one of the most important predictors of whether or not a student will continue on to postsecondary studies. Placement in a rigorous academic program in high school not only prepares a student for the high level of performance required in a postsecondary program, but also has an effect on the type of institution they will attend, the way in which they go about the college search process, and what types of financial aid they receive (Adelman 1999; Adelman 2006).

Aside from planning out a rigorous academic track, regular interaction with a counselor has also been shown to have a positive effect on a low-income high-school senior's propensity to attend college (Cabrera 2000; Gandara 2002). Guiding at-risk students through each step of the college search, planning, and application process has been shown to increase the likelihood that they will go to college (Horn 1997).

Also, research has shown that “first-generation college bound students begin to think about going to college much later than do students whose parents have gone to college, and those thoughts tend to be triggered by school personnel, specifically teachers and counselors” (McDonough 1997) 6. Given the importance of academic preparation in the college decision process and the significant role counselors play in the planning and execution stages, their position in the pipeline to postsecondary college cannot be ignored.

Counselors do not often play a significant role in the college planning process until students reach tenth or eleventh grade, when they begin to seriously search for a college (Hossler 1999). Up until this point, students rely on their parents for much of their information regarding postsecondary education. Parents are instrumental in the creation of expectations and aspirations, but become less important as students reach the eleventh grade and the college search process begins in earnest. At this point, counselors and teachers take over and help guide the student in choosing a school.

Overall, counselors are an important part of the college decision making process. As evidenced by these Missouri students, students think about their options after high school as early as the seventh grade. This is a critical point for students, a time when their decisions about which courses to take as ninth graders and high school freshmen can affect their chances of attending a postsecondary institution. Counselors can play an important role here by providing general information about careers and college options and costs to parents and students, gradually increasing the complexity of the information they provide as the students mature. It is imperative that students are placed in academic tracks that adequately prepare them to attend a postsecondary institution. As students enter the 10th and 11th grades, counselors take on a more significant role, since they have professional knowledge of what it takes to get into a postsecondary school. If parental encouragement is lacking, a counselor may be able to fill the void. At

any rate, counselors are an undeniably key element in the college search and decision process.

Peers. Seventh graders initially did not appear to place much emphasis on the role of their peers and friends in developing their college aspirations when asked to name influential people in the college decision process. Instead, they stated that they relied almost solely on family members for guidance. However, closer examination of their responses to other question reveal that the seventh graders, do, in fact, rely on their friends for support, as evidenced by one group’s suggestion that they form accountability groups to motivate each other throughout the different stages of the college decision process.

By the ninth and eleventh grades, students had begun to look beyond their family and close friends to other peer resources, including boyfriends and girlfriends, co-workers, and peers that either had or had not gone to college.

The role of peers in the college decision process can either be a positive or negative influence. Research has shown that students who have friends who plan to go to college are more likely to go themselves (Horn 1997; Hossler 1999; Choy 2002). Some studies have also shown that the more frequently students come into contact with other students with college plans, the more likely they are to consider college (Hossler 1999).

High school climate can also have an effect on college aspirations. Students that attend a high school geared towards college preparation are surrounded by peers all focused on the same goal: doing well academically and going to college. This environment, fostered by parents, teachers, and counselors, promotes the expectation that postsecondary studies are a given (McDonough 1997).

In contrast to the positive influence peers can have on college aspirations, when focus groups were asked to name the barriers to postsecondary education, they often cited “friends” as a problem. Seventh graders talked about people from their neighborhood

and gangs, while ninth graders referenced the negative influences from boyfriends and girlfriends, abusive relationships, and hanging out with the “wrong crowd.” For the eleventh grade focus groups, friends were ranked fourth on the list of barriers, a clear sign that influences from outside the family have increased in importance. One student stated that although he intended to go to college, he felt that he needed to “dumb himself down” around his friends, not wanting to alienate himself and be left out of group activities.

Research had shown that peers can have a negative effect on a student’s desire to go to college, particularly for low-income youth. Their feelings about their neighborhoods and loyalty to friends can create a desire to stay close to home, effectively limiting their options for a postsecondary education (McDonough 1997). Some Missouri students noted that they had friends who had decided not to go to college, or had dropped out because they did not like being away from home and felt like they were missing something.

Drug and alcohol use, gang membership, and general laziness have also been linked with peer influence and reduce a student’s chances of going to college (Gandara 2002). In every grade the focus groups listed pregnancy and drugs as two of the top five reasons high school students do not go to college.

The significance of peer influence on a student’s decision to go to college cannot be overlooked. Students need constant encouragement and approval, particularly from their friends. Though ultimately they will decide which college to attend based on a variety of factors, peers can be especially helpful in simply getting through the process. This was especially evident in the recommendations that Missouri students made for staying motivated throughout their secondary schooling. Students from all grade levels advocated the formation of accountability groups to build confidence, disseminate information, maintain focus, and work on school work together. Peer influence, therefore, can be an important tool in getting students to college.

BARRIERS TO COLLEGE

Exhibit 5 illustrates some of the barriers that were identified by students to enrolling and succeeding at the postsecondary level. “Money” and “grades” were top ranked, was was “babies,” a disturbing response when one thinks about it. Others, such as “self-confidence” and “afraid of change” are areas that are a cause for concern, but also areas that can be improved with proper intervention. Some students were even more blunt about barriers to college: “I don’t want to.”

Exhibit 5. Perceptions of Barriers to College by 7th, 9th, and 11th Grade Missouri Students

7th	9th	11th
Money	Too much work/Don't like school	Money
Babies	Money	Babies
Drugs	Babies	Grades
Grades	Drugs	Friends
Self-confidence	Grades	Laziness
Family issues	Peer Pressure	Test Scores
Depression	Self-confidence	Afraid of change and leaving home
Friends	Family issues/responsibilities	Already have plans
Laziness	Don't want to leave home	Don't want to
Too hard	In trouble with the law	Don't want to spend another four years in school (tech school)

The remainder of this section focuses on two large barriers to college: tuition/financing and academic preparation.

Tuition/Money. The price of a college education was listed by every focus group that participated in this survey as the number one barrier to their postsecondary goals. Regardless of grade level, college costs were consistently ranked above other issues such as grades, family and personal issues, and lack of confidence.

Tuition costs, books, and living on-campus all place a financial burden on students and parents. When asked what could be done about the barrier of money, students had varied responses. Seventh grade students mentioned financial aid such as scholarships, grants, loans, and even free tuition as ways to lessen financial strain. They also talked about getting part-time jobs and beginning a savings account to set aside money for college. One group suggested forming an accountability group to “discuss goals, careers, peer pressure, problems, decision making, and accomplishments”. Such a group is an example of the positive influence that peers can play in the college decision process. Although it was mentioned as a solution to the barrier of college costs, an accountability group could not only push students to prepare financially for college, but could also provide motivation and support throughout the research and selection process.

Ninth graders talked about many of the same solutions that the seventh graders did: financial aid, getting a part-time or summer job, and opening a savings account. However, the ninth graders were more aware of specific complications. One focus group mentioned that financial aid was not always sufficient to cover the entire cost of college. Other groups thought more scholarships should be available and that they should be easier to get. This brings up a debate over merit-based versus need-based scholarships currently taking place in the field of financial aid.

Over the past four decades, national trends related to the financing of postsecondary education have made it more difficult for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to go to college. Increases in tuition have outpaced both the general inflation rate and growth in family income (Heller 2002b) 62. Additionally, “federal and state financial aid to students has not kept pace with increases in tuition” (Education 2002) 6.

Historically, financial aid has been the great equalizer in making postsecondary education accessible to students of all income levels. In recent years, however, state spending has increased at a higher rate for merit-based scholarships than for need-based scholarships. In the ten year period between 1991 and 2001, the proportion of state grants awarded based in merit rose from 11 percent to 24 percent (Heller 2002a) 17. This shift in support from need-based to merit-based scholarships negatively affects access to postsecondary education for poor and minority students, while disproportionately benefiting high-income, white students. These data are disturbing in light of the fact that research has shown that “financial aid is particularly effective at increasing the probability that a student from a lower-income family will enroll in college, and much less effective for students from higher-income families” (Heller 2002d) 29.

Like the seventh and ninth grade students, the eleventh grade focus groups named the price tag of a college education as the primary barrier to attending a postsecondary institution. They talked about getting part-time jobs, saving or investing their money, and depending on their parents to cover college costs. The groups also mentioned various forms of financial aid as being potential solutions, but pointed out that “people don’t want to go through the paperwork” or simply were not aware of or did not understand the options available to them. The groups suggested that schools sponsor classes or programs geared towards helping students create a career and college profile and research financial aid sources. Eleventh graders said parents and students need help completing financial aid forms and that hearing

“personal testimony of people who have gone through [the application process]” would be beneficial. One focus group thought schools should offer classes on how to manage money in general and create a financial plan for college.

Eleventh graders were conscious of the importance of timing with regards to the effectiveness of a program or class a school might offer. A few groups mentioned the need for schools to begin discussing postsecondary educational options as early as the sixth grade so that students have ample time to implement a plan to achieve their goals. Trips to college campuses, college fairs, and college preparation classes held freshman year were other ways listed by the eleventh grade focus groups that schools could spark serious interest in postsecondary education.

It is evident from their responses that by eleventh grade, students have started dealing with the reality of needing to pay for college. They named specific aspects of financial aid that create problems for students, such as confusion over filling out the FAFSA form and other applications necessary to obtain financial aid. In contrast, the seventh graders in this survey simply listed the different types of aid that were available to them, as did the ninth graders, evidence that though they are generally aware that financial assistance is available, they do not understand specifics. Nor is detailed information necessarily pertinent during the early stages of the college decision process. However, it is important to ensure that all students, especially those at-risk for not attending college, are informed that aid will be available for them once they begin applying to a postsecondary institution. Ensuring that parents and students have accurate information about the “real” costs of a college education at the appropriate time is key to combating the financial barrier of attending a postsecondary institution. In the seventh grade, parents are more concerned than their child about how they will pay for college, but are not yet ready to hear about the complexities of every financial aid option available to them. Instead, general information geared towards how to begin saving for college, as well as a summary of the grant and loan options

that will be available to their children in the future, is most pertinent. “Clear, accessible information about affordability, received repeatedly and with increasing complexity throughout the middle and high school years, benefits both students and their families” (Gandara 2002).

Another solution to financing a college education frequently offered by students was getting a job, either over the summer or part-time during the school year. Research has shown, however, that students who work more than 15 hours per week while taking classes are less likely to persist towards earning a degree (Choy 2002). College students working more than 15 hours a week have less time to devote to their schoolwork and may begin to view their classes as a part-time job in competition with their ability to perform at their wage-earning job.

An interesting issue that came up in both the ninth and eleventh grade focus groups was the reluctance of some students and their families to take out loans to pay for college. For low-income students, the financial burden of going to college encompasses more than just tuition and the cost of buying books. They must also consider the costs of forgone income, and that they will not be able to help their families financially when they are in college (Gandara 2002). Although they may have access to loans and grants to pay for tuition, they must consider how their absence from the family’s wage earner pool will affect their parents and siblings. Some low-income students worry that they will not be able to repay the loans they take out once they have a job. Studies have shown, however, to a certain degree, that borrowing increased students’ likelihood of persisting (Choy 2002), perhaps because they were not overwhelmed by having to work a high number of hours at job. In general, college graduates do not typically have problems repaying their school loans, however in the era of rising college costs, students are borrowing more and, consequently, may have higher payments and debt loads than generations in the past. This presents a serious issue to be addressed by those in the financial aid field.

Academic Preparation. Grades became more important to Missouri students as they grew older. Seventh graders ranked grades fourth behind college costs and social issues such as drug use and pregnancy. The ninth grade focus groups ranked academic performance third, as did eleventh graders. When asked what could be done to improve their academic preparedness for college, the students had varied responses.

The seventh grade focus groups expressed a need for more designated study time. A few groups mentioned the importance of organization, and suggested that students set up a schedule with study time blocked out. They also placed an emphasis on consistent encouragement and support, supplied by the school, teachers, family, or accountability groups, to keep them on track academically. One group suggested using “individualized teaching for individualized learning styles,” while others thought simply having more one-on-one time with their teachers or a tutor would help them improve their grades. Only one group mentioned the fear that their ACT/SAT scores were not high enough.

Like the seventh graders, students from the ninth grade focus groups thought studying more, tutoring, gearing lessons to different learning styles would help bolster academic performance. They placed much more emphasis than the seventh graders on preparing for the SAT and ACT tests. However, at least two groups mentioned Gear Up as being important in filling gaps that existed in their schooling.

The eleventh grade focus groups had suggestions similar to those of their younger counterparts: lessons that accommodate varied learning styles, designated study times at school and at home, and tutoring sessions. The eleventh graders placed emphasis on the need for positive role models to guide them through their final years in high school. They named teachers, parents, and peers as potential mentors. Interestingly, at the same time they expressed a need for role models, the students seemed to accept more personal responsibility for

their academic performance, stating the importance of “lots of discipline at home.”

Academic preparation is often cited by researchers as the second best predictor, if not equal to in importance, after parental encouragement, of whether or not a student will attend college (McDonough 1997; Hossler 1999). Academic intensity and the quality of high school curriculum directly affects a student’s chances of attending and succeeding in college (Adelman 1999). Without the necessary academic tools to navigate the college search process, choose an institution, and then perform at the college level, students have little chance of persisting towards a degree. Along these same lines, academically-gifted students often receive more encouragement from parents and school staff, hear more often about their options after high school, and generally are more sophisticated in their research of colleges. Students that do well in school and have been conditioned to expect that they will attend college tend to be savvier in their college search. They apply to a higher number of schools, send more applications to private schools, and are more proactive in their college search. They write letters of inquiry to schools, go on college site visits independently from high school planned trips and make an effort to ensure that the culture of the colleges they apply to is compatible with their own requirements (McDonough 1997, p. 135).

Academic preparedness has also been shown to mitigate the negative effects of coming from a low-income SES background (Cabrera 2000). Students enrolled in a college preparatory track by the 9th grade are much more likely to attend college than students who take remedial or lower-level classes. Therefore, the importance of taking college preparatory classes cannot be underestimated when looking at programs aimed at helping students achieve their postsecondary educational goals. Forming accountability groups came up once again as a solution to a barrier to college, reiterating the idea that peers are an important factor in keeping students on track to continue their schooling.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is much research on why students go to college, and perhaps more importantly, why some students don't go to college. This study importantly puts a face on Missouri students via their perceptions about college and the pathways to and through the postsecondary level.

The challenge of preparing students for college, both academically and socially, and getting them to take the necessary steps to get into college is enormous. We understand that little things matter immensely to students, but that it often takes many "little" things to make college a reality for students, especially those from lower-income backgrounds.

There are steps that can be taken, however, to help Missouri students better prepare, apply, enroll, and succeed at the postsecondary level. Based on the findings of this study, our knowledge of the research literature, and understanding of programs and strategies in use around the US, we provide, as summary to this report, a series of recommendations for consideration. We realize that there are many possible recommendations to add here; we have chosen the following because we think they are actionable and within the realm of possibilities within Missouri at this time. Some are broad while others are focused. But they provide a launch pad for discussion, and hopefully, action by Missouri organizations and the government to widen access to and through postsecondary education.

RECOMMENDATION 1. Ensure that all Missouri middle and high school students have the information needed to make prudent decisions about their future. Information about postsecondary choices is either an enabler or a barrier for students. With the right information, students and families can make good decisions about the future. Without, they are more likely to make choices that make postsecondary education less of an option as they proceed through middle and high school. Students and families need accurate information on careers, academic

requirements for postsecondary programs, and the cost of a postsecondary education. The latter is the most difficult because the cost, or price, changes from year-to-year. It is entirely possible that the cost of an education will grow 25 percent or more by the time a middle school student graduates from high school. And factoring financial aid into the equation is more challenging due to the nature of need-based aid and current income levels.

State organizations can help Missouri students by providing seamless information about what it takes to go to college in the state and beyond. An orchestrated state-wide marketing and information campaign, much like Colorado and other states have done would be an important step. And this information needs to be provided early and consistently throughout secondary education.

RECOMMENDATION 2. Improve the amount and quality of career counseling made available to Missouri middle and high school students. Counseling in secondary school is an important tool to move students on to the college pathway. Unfortunately, many schools have inadequate counseling-to-student ratios, while others are forced to use counselors as mostly truant officers rather than education enablers. Counseling need to be supported and strengthened in Missouri, with a reduced counselor-student ratio and an opportunity to support the career development and educational needs of students across the state.

State organizations should work together to support counselors and counseling services. Part of this support may include development of a college bound counseling package, or the development of an online career resource center (e.g., Kuder). This would be most helpful if it was a coordinated effort across the state.

RECOMMENDATION 3. Develop a "Career and College Club." Develop a state-wide club, perhaps called the "Career and College" Club, which is targeted at first-generation students with no postsecondary legacy. The club could begin in the eighth grade and

continue until students reached college. In essence, this would be a network of school-based clubs or chapters that aggregate at the district and regional level.

Missouri organizations could bond to develop the statewide infrastructure, chapter rules, and operational structure. In addition, a statewide director could be hired to coordinate all activities and develop materials. At the school level, chapters would require a school-based faculty or staff member to sponsor the club, but otherwise they would be self-directed, with students setting its own goals to identify and overcome the barriers that face these students. The club could facilitate events such as a college visits, speakers, and tutoring/mentoring sessions. A special emphasis would be placed on financial literacy, financial aid, academic requirements, and academic resources.

RECOMMENDATION 4. Develop a “college coach” program. A college coach program could work in tandem with the Career and College Club, whereas the coach is a graduate of a target high school or attendee of a nearby college. This individual could be supported financially in part by a Missouri-based organizations. This, in essence, would be a “work study” program for the coach, but a peer or mentor for the middle and high school students.

RECOMMENDATION 5. Create a Regional Educational Opportunity Partnership (REAP). To coordinate state activities, a network should be created to provide consistency and continuity throughout the state. We suggest developing a series of regional partnerships, or coalitions, to include stakeholder organizations (e.g., school districts, colleges, and community organizations) which would be accountable for setting up goals for access and success and removing barriers to achieving them. The Partnership would leverage resources in the community to support program objectives, as developed by the Partnership.

RECOMMENDATION 6. Conduct research on “what works” in Missouri. Many schools, districts, and organizations are doing a variety of things to encourage

and support college-going behaviors among Missouri youth. However, little is known about the success of these endeavors. It is strongly suggested that some process of identification and evaluation of these efforts is conducted to determine what is going on in the state to support college opportunity, and what efforts are successful. With this information, resources can be reallocated and priorities made on how best to assist first-generation and other students on the pathway to college.

RECOMMENDATION 7. Evaluate all activities for impact toward educational goals. For any new initiatives, we strongly recommend an earnest evaluation effort to determine the impact and efficacy of these programs/strategies. This information is critical to determine the prudent use of resources, and also to implement a “continuous improvement” mindset about programming.

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