Despite the increasing importance of higher education, students who are academically qualified for college still face numerous barriers to college enrollment. These barriers range from insufficient financial aid to mixed messages about academic preparation, poor understanding of admission and financial aid application processes, and limited community encouragement. Improving access to college for these students requires policies informed by the way counselors and college-qualified students view these barriers. To contribute to a better understanding of these perspectives, IHEP carried out two national surveys, one of college-qualified high school graduates and another of high school counselors. Results from the two surveys pointed to the need for policy intervention or further research in the following five categories: college cost and the availability of aid, the steps to enroll in college, opportunity cost, economic mobility, and transparency about the amount and types of financial aid available.

College Cost and the Availability of Aid
Overwhelmingly, counselors and college-qualified students who did not enroll in college—non-college-goers—pointed to college cost and the availability of financial aid as primary obstacles to college enrollment.

- When asked about a range of factors, over 70 percent of counselors responded that not having enough aid or tuition being too high was “almost always” or “frequently” important in non-college-goers’ decision to not enroll.

- Over 80 percent of non-college-goers said that the availability of grant aid was “extremely” or “very” important, and 63 percent said that the price of college was “extremely” or “very” important.

Steps to Enroll in College
The survey of students pointed to another significant issue for almost all non-college-goers: not taking the steps necessary to enroll in college.

- Only 15 percent of non-college-goers applied to any college, 12 percent applied for financial aid, and a mere 10 percent took the SAT and 7 percent the ACT. These very low percentages suggest that the decision not to enroll in college may have been made long before high school graduation.

- Two-thirds of non-college-goers received advice on the coursework they needed to take to be ready for college, over half reported a GPA of 3.0 or higher, and nearly 60 percent took Pre-calculus, Calculus, or Trigonometry.

- However, only 15 percent of 15 percent of non-college-goers applied to any college, 12 percent applied for financial aid, and a mere 10 percent took the SAT and 7 percent the ACT.

- These very low percentages suggest that despite being academically qualified, these students may have decided long before high school graduation not to enroll in college.

Opportunity Cost
Enrolling in college involves a number of substantial direct and indirect costs, including tuition, fees, books, transportation, and living expenses. In addition to these costs, students face an opportunity cost—when students are going to class or studying, they forgo the wages they could have earned or the time that could have gone to help with family obligations.

- Results from the student survey suggest that opportunity cost is a particular barrier to college enrollment for certain groups of non-college-goers. Black and low-income non-college-goers were particularly likely to state that the need to work was important in their decision not to enroll in college.
**Policy Options**

The results from the student and counselor surveys of college-qualified students—the first such surveys ever undertaken by our account—suggest that the college-going decision is a complex undertaking, even for students who complete high school and are ready for college. While not painting a definitive picture of why college-qualified students did not enroll in college, these survey data do point to several policy options that policymakers and educators may want to consider:

- Given the extreme concern students expressed about financial aid and the finding that very few students took any of the steps to enroll in college, federal, state, and local governments may want to consider introducing aid programs that provide early commitments or guarantees to high school students who graduate ready for college.

- The high opportunity cost that many non-college-goers face, particularly low-income and Black students, suggests that postsecondary institutions, state governments, and the federal government may want to consider implementing a range of policies related to work and aid that would help non-college-goers enroll in and succeed in college.

- Many non-college-goers, particularly those with lower grade point averages, expressed uncertainty both about their readiness to attend college and about the sufficiency of financial aid. Establishing clear expectations about academic requirements at an early stage and providing tools to plan for college will help reduce uncertainty and promote college going.

---

**Economic Mobility**

Overall, respondents to the student survey believed that college is a vehicle for economic mobility.

- Non-college-goers were asked whether they agreed with the following statement: “A college education is necessary for me to have the things that I want, like a car and a comfortable home.” Over two-thirds strongly agreed or agreed with this statement.

- However, there was one group of students—high academic achievers—who were more skeptical of this statement than the non-college-going population as a whole. Fewer than half of high academic achievers strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. Forty-eight percent of high academic achievers strongly agreed or agreed with the statement on economic mobility, compared to 67 percent of all students.

---

**Transparency About the Amount and Types of Financial Aid Available**

Transparency about financial aid arose as a key issue in the two surveys, particularly in relation to the amount and types of financial aid available.

- Two pieces of data point to a problem of transparency: (1) very few non-college-goers (12 percent) applied for financial aid, but (2) only one-fifth of counselors thought that completing the financial aid application was almost always or frequently important in non-college-goers’ not enrolling in college.

- While the complexity of the financial aid application process itself may be problematic, these data together suggest that the central issue is not merely the complexity of the application. Rather, something else—perhaps a perception that aid will be insufficient—may be inhibiting students from filling out a financial aid application.