

PhillyGoes2College

Challenges to Higher Education for Philadelphia High School Students

After reaching out to over 2,000 teens, it is clear that students understand the value of a college education. This report seeks to analyze the barriers that students face and identify the ways in which the PhillyGoes2College office can help them obtain their college degree.

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PhillyGoes2College Final Report

Goal

Our goal was to give presentations to students, conduct focus groups, distribute surveys, and discuss their experiences regarding college access with the intention of identifying the barriers that prevent students from pursuing higher education. We expected our discussions to allow students to share information with each other, raise awareness of the PhillyGoes2College office, and provide us with insights about the students' perceptions of the value of a college education. With the surveys, we identified patterns of behavior and thinking about college access among students. These surveys would provide us with data that would show us the number of students planning on going to college and the number that are taking steps in order to get there. The focus groups and surveys were able to give us information from the students themselves about the factors that influenced students' college aspirations.

Background Information

This summer we reached out to more than 2,000 teens, 705 of which completed surveys on their attitudes and perceptions about college. We also held focus groups with over 300 students. The presentations ranged from groups of about 20-300 students. Focus groups had between 4 and 15 students with discussions lasting no less than 45 minutes. Students' grades ranged from middle school to college, with most being high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

We reached out to teens from 28 sites across the city, many of which are located in North Philadelphia. These students are currently involved in the WorkReady program, SLAM, Breakthrough, and the Boys and Girls Club. These teens came from public, charter, and magnet schools.

The focus groups and surveys were able to give us information from the students about the factors that lead to college-bound teens. This allowed us to give recommendations on how the PhillyGoes2College office can help students in Philadelphia obtain a college degree.

Findings

Survey Findings

We found that 90% of the students are planning on enrolling in an institution of higher education after high school. However, when asked what they have done to prepare 77% said that they maintained good grades and only 8.5 had participated in AP or Dual-Enrollment courses.

Those students who were unsure about their post-high school plans or planned to attend trade school were less likely to have maintained good grades, have visited a college campus, and be involved in AP or

Dual-Enrollment classes. They also cited college as being “valuable” rather than “very valuable” as the rest of the college-bound students.

The students were more likely to obtain college information from their high schools, with 71.6% citing high schools as one of their sources of information. 58.4% of students also relied on the internet and 41.8% on a college or career counselor. Only 27.6% of all students reported having met with a career or college counselor.

Only 9.9% of students reported a lack of information as the lowest barrier to college.

82% of students rated a college education as “very valuable” with only 1 student claiming that a college education is not valuable. Most students believed that their families and teachers also shared their views of the value of a college education. Students claimed that their communities and friends were “supportive” of their college goals compared to the “very supportive” rating they gave to family and teachers.

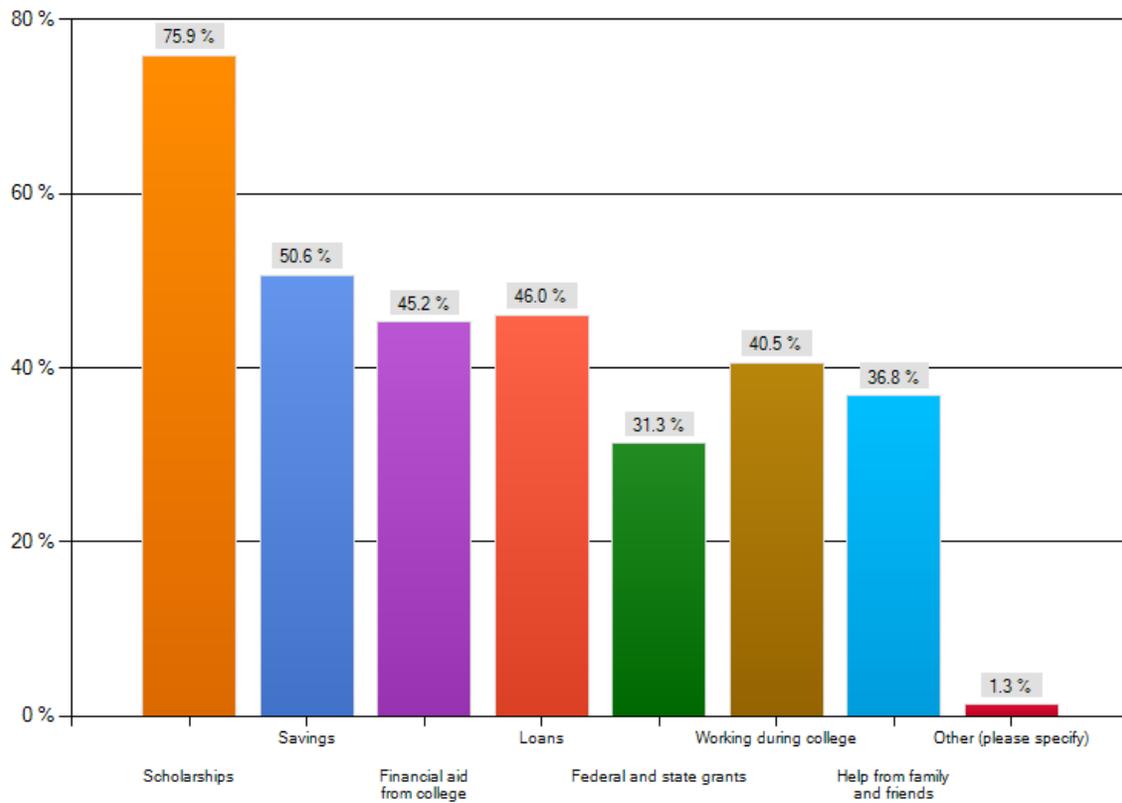
68% of students said that the cost of going to college was the greatest barrier that was keeping them or others from going to college. The second reason was a lack of confidence that they were prepared to succeed in college and the third was a dislike for school.

Students were least likely to cite federal and state grants as a way to pay for college, with only 30% checking this category. Instead, students expected to cover their college expenses with scholarships, savings, and loans. In general, students reported an intention to use more scholarships than loans. While 62.4% of students thought that most people use college financial aid, only 48.6% of students planned to use college financial aid.

People who were not planning on going to college reported less family (60.0% vs. 82.0%) and teacher/school support (53.3% vs. 68.2%) for their college goals than those planning on going to college, although they reported more community support (42.9% vs. 44.1%) and friend support (53.3% vs. 46.0%) for their college goals than those planning on going to college.

Amongst people planning to attend college, 44.5% felt they would be very successful and 41.4% thought they would be successful. The number only slightly differed amongst all students: 41.7% said they would be either successful or very successful.

How do you plan to pay for college? Please select all that apply.



Focus Group Findings

Students' main motivations for attending college were income, social life, new experiences, education, and increased opportunities.

Students believed that success in college was a factor of having the right mindset, or being focused. In general students did not seem to believe that some are not "smart enough" for college, although they did acknowledge that some people are too lazy or too academically unprepared to survive in rigorous college settings.

Most students reported that they would go to college despite the number of their peers that were going. Only in one focus group did students discuss how peer influence can deter some students. Results for this question may not be reliable: how many students would publicly admit to being pressured, influenced, or being a "follower"? The negative stigma of doing what everyone does have affected the honesty of their answers. When students did acknowledge peer pressure, they noted that romantic relationships and attachments and teen pregnancy held some students back from college.

Students expressed a concern about feeling unchallenged, unmotivated, and invisible in the classroom. They spoke about teachers who were there “waiting for their paychecks” and who were not interested in the academic growth of their students. They also felt as though teachers were insensitive to family situations that affected students in the classroom. Students were frustrated with teachers who gave up quickly when a student did not understand a subject. All of these factors negatively influenced the students’ preparedness for college level work or ability to be self-driven.

❖ **Factors that students identified as being necessary in order to help teens go to college**

Teachers- Students expressed the need to have motivating teachers who were able to make a connection with them. They spoke about wanting to be treated as individuals in a classroom rather than as a group and wanting to learn at their own pace and guarantees that they will not be left behind. Finally the students were persistent in stating that they want to be challenged academically and want their teachers to have high expectations.

Classrooms- In school, students felt that small classrooms and safe schools were pivotal to creating a college access environment. One of the most important aspects of a successful classroom environment was having interactive lesson plans that made a connection to the real “world.” Without this, students said, they would quickly become bored and lose focus.

Paying for College- Money was one of students’ biggest concerns, including paying for college, running out of money while in college, and post graduation debt. Students were often frustrated with the high costs of a higher education. It was clear that there is a need for information about financial aid, filling out the FAFSA, and applying for scholarships before students enter their senior year in high school. This familiarity with the system will allow them to avoid scholarship scams, to advocate for themselves when their financial aid package is not enough and to find free solutions that will help them navigate the FAFSA.

Other factors- Students also spoke about the importance of having mentors who would be able to provide one on one attention and motivation when teachers are not able to provide this sort help. Students felt as though they were not adequately provided with access to information about college early on in their high school careers. They claimed that this information needs to be available early on in order for them to be prepared and aware when the time comes to apply to college. Among family involvement and safe neighborhoods as factors to college success students also mentioned the incredible need to have an inner drive. One girl from El Centro claimed “*no one can force you to be successful*” when asked how to help a student be college-bound. However, the various discussions and data showed that there is not a lack of desire to go to college but rather a lack of information and resources to help students.

Recommendations & Strategies

Students are getting most of their information from their high schools, so PhillyGoes2College needs to make a strong and concentrated effort to reach students in school. The Office should consider establishing a partnership with the in-school Student Success Centers and incorporate detailed, useful information in to their interactions with students. Students need both general information (“there is lots of financial aid”) as well as specific tips (“you can call your financial aid office and negotiate your package or ask your admissions office for a fee waiver”). Assuming that the Student Success Centers provide quality assistance to students, a partnership would allow students to have a back up resource in the event that their guidance counselor is irresponsible or unavailable. A partnership is also an opportunity to collaborate on publicity.

The Office can consider “increasing public will for going to college” in its goals. Students need to have more support from their families and communities, so the public must be aware of college’s benefits (income, independence, meeting new people) and affordability (abundance of financial aid). This goal is imperative in a recession-age where people constantly doubt whether or not college is a sound financial investment.

Again, students need information about financial aid. Students need to understand how the FAFSA helps them receive aid and they need to know about FAFSA completion workshops (as well as low-cost tax services).

In the surveys, 37.4% of students noted a lack of confidence or belief in college success as a barrier. In focus groups, students often noted feeling unprepared by their schools for college, and many seemed unsure with a specific game plan about how to become more prepared. Students know that they aren’t learning what they need but may not know how to get what they need. It is not entirely realistic to expect students to put up with schooling all day and then go out and pursue extra classes and help. How would students know where to start and what to cover? Even if students do have the required classes, if the classes are not effective, they are still not prepared. Students need to know what is expected of them academically in college, and they need to have strategies to obtain quality classes or academic assistance. Suggestions for this issue include: (1) the School District of Philadelphia must step up its efforts to prepare students for college. (2) Students need to have access to tutoring or other academic support while in high school, including college prep programs or programs that focus on academic enrichment. The Office should research these resources. (3) Students need to know about and take AP and other advanced courses and dual-enrollment. (4) Students need to hear more about in-college support: writing centers, tutors, etc.

Many of the students surveyed and interviewed did not report having any structured after-school activity. The Office should look into what students are doing after school and how to partner with after school programs in order to disseminate college information, encourage college tours, and publicize the Office, Student Success, and College Access Centers.

The Office should have a copy of the office organization of local colleges and universities so that students can call in and be directed with their questions to the appropriate office of their school.

The Office needs more information for specific demographics, including people with disabilities, single mothers, and ex-offenders.

What to Include in PG2C Presentations

Talk about the 1 million dollar difference between a high school and a college degree. Most students see college as a way to increase their earnings and they had very positive reactions when told that adding 4 years to their education would add a million dollars to their lifetime earnings. Also talk about college about being an opportunity to have fun, meet new people, have new experiences, and assert their independence. College is not like high school and once students know that they can take the classes they like and are able to make their own schedules in college they are more likely to see it as an experience rather than chore.

Discuss the need to make a plan when speaking with teens who want to attend college. Although most students want to go to further their education, they have not taken the steps in order to get there. Tell them about how the PhillyGoes2College office is a resource that they can use before senior year in order to be better prepared for the college application process. By stressing the importance of starting NOW students will be more likely to be inspired and to become advocate for themselves.

Stress the opportunity for students to earn financial aid. Students become bogged down by the idea of paying thousands of dollars for college, and do not realize that they can have a substantial portion or most of their college education covered in financial aid. Students need to know the types of financial aid: grants, scholarships, and loans. Students also need to hear about the FAFSA and the role of federal aid but also make them aware that most college students do take out loans it is just a matter of knowing which loans are best and making use of every other resource before resorting to loans.

What can PhillyGoes2College offer students?

PhillyGoes2College is a rare resource that can be of tremendous help to students. It is able to reach a large variety of students and guide them through the steps that they need to take in order to be college-bound. The main way is to do outreach and to find ways to come to the students. Whether coming to college fairs, giving presentations, or holding online chats it can greatly increase the availability of college access information in the city. It can do so in the following ways:

- ❖ Hold free information sessions in November about college access and financial aid
- ❖ Host chat rooms in which students can share tips and information during the college process or be connected with current students to ask questions. This can be done by embedding a chat in to the PG2C website or hosting it on a free chat website.
- ❖ Give out college and Philly Goes 2 College information during lunches in high schools
- ❖ Hold workshops during detention that will give students information about college
- ❖ Hold a twice year discussion about “outside” factors that affect college-going patterns such as family situations, class, neighborhood safety, and media influence
- ❖ Continue talking with students about what their needs are
- ❖ Establish a monthly e-newsletter

- ❖ Revise the PhillyGoes2College website. The Office should consider removing the “for students, parents, and mentors” categories and replace them with subject-based categories such as financial aid, applying to college, etc.
- ❖ Look in to setting a text-message service that students can use to have questions answered or that can send reminders out to students about important dates and tips.
- ❖ Set up a blog where one or two students can write about their experiences applying to college and offer testimonials about their experience with the PhillyGoes2College office.