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CLOSE AND COST-EFFECTIVE: HOW ILLINOIS HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS DECIDE ON A 2- YEAR COLLEGE

PART OF THE 2022 ILLINOIS COLLEGE-
GOING SURVEY SERIES

REPORT 2

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External Review:

To ensure that its reports are rigorous, accurate, and useful to educators and policymakers with varying levels of background knowledge, IWERC solicits feedback from experts. The reviewers of this report included Elliot Regenstein of Foresight Law + Policy and Nathan Wilson of Illinois Community College Board. This report also followed the methods of Report 1 in this series, which was reviewed by a wide cadre of scholars and practitioners. We deeply thank all these reviewers for their time and expertise.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Spring 2022, IWERC conducted a statewide survey of high school seniors on their college decision-making. A report on the decision-making processes of 4-year college-goers was published previously, illustrating those students' focus on cost, location, and academic reputation in selecting a 4-year institution (Barragan Torres & Bates, 2023). This follow-up report provides findings for the 858 respondents who were planning to attend 2-year college, asking:

1. What **general factors** do Illinois high school seniors consider in choosing a 2-year college?
2. What is the **single decisive factor** that most animates the 2-year college choice for Illinois high school seniors?
3. What are students' **intentions and interactions** with 2-year colleges that may influence these decisions?

For each of these questions, findings for these 2-year college-goers were compared to findings previously published for 4-year college-goers who took the same survey (see Barragan Torres & Bates, 2023). We found that 2-year college-goers have both similar and different decision-making frameworks for college than 4-year college-goers, which is unsurprising given the different goals and structures of 2-year and 4-year colleges.

Key findings of this study were:

1. **Cost and location** (staying close to home) were key considerations for 2-year college-goers. Compared to 4-year college-goers, 2-year college-goers were much less concerned with the academic reputation or social environment of their chosen college.
2. Although both 2-year and 4-year college-goers selected **cost** as the *single most decisive* factor in choosing a college, 2-year college-goers were even more likely to center cost than 4-year college-goers. They were also more likely to decide based on **location**.
3. In contrast to 4-year college-goers, students attending 2-year college were more likely to state that they were commuting to campus (rather than living on campus) and that they decided on a college without *any* contact with the college or with previous contact being actual course-taking at the college.
4. Two-year college-goers also felt less prepared for college and reported less use of financial aid sources than 4-year college-goers.

These findings suggest that 2-year and 4-year college-goers have similarities and differences in their decision-making frameworks. While both groups of students are concerned with cost and location, 2-year college-goers weigh cost and location (i.e., being in the community college district) more heavily. This finding aligns with the purpose and structure of community colleges: these colleges are designed to serve students in their geographic districts, and students receive lower tuition rates by enrolling in their district community college (ICCB, 2024). Many students enroll in their district community colleges in order to save costs before transferring to a 4-year college that will accept their credits (see Aiello, 2024, for more on Illinois transfer agreements).

The 2-year college-goers also reported lower levels of academic preparation than 4-year college-goers. This difference also makes sense, given the role of 2-year colleges in serving local communities, the open admissions policies at Illinois community colleges, and the obligation of community colleges to serve students at different levels of readiness. Indeed, Illinois community colleges are currently developing new models to serve students with varying levels of academic preparation, including providing them with developmental education supports while they are enrolled in credit-bearing courses (see ICCB, 2023b). Our findings reinforce the unique role of 2-year and trade colleges, suggesting that the 2-year student population has different goals and needs than the 4-year student population.

Close and Cost-Effective: How Illinois High School Seniors Decide on a 2-Year College

Part 2 of the *2022 Illinois College-Going Survey Series*

Introduction

In Spring 2023, we released a report on how Illinois high school seniors (Class of 2022) decided on a 4-year college, with a particular emphasis on their choice to stay in or leave Illinois for college. That report—Part 1 of the *2022 Illinois College-Going Survey Series*—was based on a survey of Illinois high school seniors about their college decision-making (Barragan Torres & Bates, 2023). Although the sample for that survey was over half comprised of 4-year college-goers, the survey was also completed by many seniors with other post-high school plans.

This report—Part 2 of the *2022 Illinois College-Going Survey Series*—focuses on the decision-making of a sample of 858 Illinois high school seniors who reported that they would attend a **2-year or a technical college** (hereafter called “2-year college” for simplicity) in Fall 2022. Community colleges in Illinois are distinct from 4-year institutions; they are open to all students at different levels of college readiness, and they are designed to meet the unique needs of their surrounding communities (ICCB, n.d.). Students have diverse goals for enrolling in community colleges, with some intending to transfer to 4-year college and others to earn skills and credentials needed for work or daily life. As such, the decision-making processes of 2-year college-goers may well differ from that of 4-year college-goers.

In this report, we use survey responses to answer the following questions:

1. What **general factors** do Illinois high school seniors consider in choosing a 2-year college?
2. What is the **single decisive factor** that most animates the 2-year college choice for Illinois high school seniors?
3. What are students’ **intentions and interactions** with 2-year colleges that may influence these decisions?

The practical and theoretical aims of this study were described in both Part 1 (Barragan Torres & Bates, 2023) and the technical guide (Barragan Torres, 2023) for this series. In this report, we first describe the sample, then dig into each research question in turn. Along the way, we examine how the answer to each question differs by student population.

SECTION 1: Two-Year College-Going Sample

In Fall 2022, the semester that students in our survey sample would have first enrolled in college, Illinois community colleges enrolled over 230,000 students (ICCB, 2023a). These students came to the colleges with diverse goals. Around 60% of those students enrolled in the associate-level “transfer degree,” which provides students access to coursework preparing them to transfer to 4-year institutions (ICCB, 2023a). Others enrolled in career and technical education courses designed to provide them with work-related skills or credentials, with still others enrolled in courses for adult education and English as a Second Language. In short, community colleges (and other postsecondary 2-year and vocational programs) serve diverse purposes and student goals. As such, student decision-making around such institutions may be markedly different from that of 4-year enrollees.

Two-year college-goers comprised 35% (858 out of 2,464) of our sample of high school seniors. Some 64% (N=550) provided sociodemographic information, including race/ethnicity, location within the state, and parental education.^a Table 1 shows how 2-year college-goers in our Spring 2022 sample compared to figures extrapolated from the Illinois Board of Higher Education’s (IBHE) report on Fall 2021 2-year college enrollments by Illinois high school graduates (IBHE, 2023). Our sample is comparable to the state’s official figures, although we slightly oversampled White students and students of two or more races, while slightly under-sampling Latinx, Black, and Asian students. Given the closeness of our survey sample to the state population, we did not use weighted inferences, as the tradeoff of doing so was higher than preserving our data to explore trends and patterns (see Bollen et al., 2016, for details).^b

Table 1. Race/ethnicity of 2-year college goers in our sample (Fall 2022 college-goers) and in IBHE’s report (Fall 2021 college-goers).

	IBHE 2-Year College-Goers	IWERC 2-Year College-Goers
White	56%	60%
Black	8%	5%
Latino	28%	21%
Asian	5%	3%
Other	0%	3%
2+	3%	7%

^a We categorized students by race/ethnicity and region as described in the Technical Guide (Barragan Torres, 2023).

^b We used IBHE’s numbers for comparison to ensure we were comparing our sample only to the population of high school seniors intending to enroll in 2-year colleges, as our sample was high school seniors only. However, as a whole, the Illinois community college student body in Fall 2022 (the year our sample would have first enrolled) was 47% White, 12% Black, 28% Latino, and 5% Asian (ICCB, 2023a).

Our 2-year sample included geographic representation from across the state of Illinois, with 56% hailing from the downstate region (anywhere outside of Chicago and the Chicago suburbs in Cook and the Collar Counties), 14% from Chicago, and 30% from the Collar and Suburban Cook counties (i.e., the Chicago suburbs, a term used from hereon out). We have no directly comparable state data on Illinois 2-year college-goers on which to evaluate the representativeness of this regional sample; however, compared to the general high school population (ISBE, 2022) and data shared on the Illinois community college population by ICCB staff, we over-sampled the downstate population and under-sampled students in the suburban counties. However, the rich geographic distribution allows us to make rigorous comparisons between these regional groups.

Table 2 shows parental education attainment levels for our 2-year college-going sample, with a comparison to parental education attainment for our 4-year college-going sample (Barragan Torres & Bates, 2023). The parents of 4-year college-going students have higher attainment of advanced degrees than the parents of 2-year college-going students, which is unsurprising given previous research finding a relationship between parental and child educational attainment (see Dubow et al., 2009).

Table 2. Reported parental educational attainment levels of survey respondents attending 2-year college vs. 4-year college.

	2-Year Sample	4-Year Sample
Less than high school	10%	7%
High school/GED	31%	19%
Some college, no degree	8%	8%
Associate degree	15%	10%
Bachelor's degree	18%	25%
Master's degree	9%	21%
Doctoral/professional degree	2%	7%
Unsure/prefer not to answer	9%	4%

NOTE: Samples sum >100% due to rounding.

We note two final characteristics of our sample. First, the 2-year college-going sample was 55% female, 40% male, and 2% non-binary (with 3% declining to say or self-describing). This sample mirrors the Illinois community college population for Fall 2022, which was about 57% female (ICCB, 2023a). Second, while Report 1 on 4-year college-goers distinguished students by their intentions to attend college in-state or out-of-state, no such distinction is necessary for this sample. An overwhelming 94% of the 2-year college-going sample planned to attend college in-state; i.e., within the state of Illinois.

SECTION 2: The General Factors 2-Year College-Goers Considered

This section answers our first research question: *What **general factors** do Illinois high school seniors consider in choosing a 2-year college?* Our analysis draws on a survey question that asked respondents to select *all* the factors they considered in choosing a college. As explained in Barragan Torres (2023), the possible choices were cost of attendance, academic reputation, economic opportunities during and after college, college location, college social environment, college diversity, athletics and extra-curriculars, recruitment strategies from institutions, perceptions of likelihood of admission, family and friends' opinions, and other (with an option to write-in a unique factor).

Table 3 shows the percentage of respondents who selected each factor as a consideration (out of 692 respondents who answered this question).

Table 3. Percentage of respondents who considered each factor in selecting a 2-year college.

Factor	Percentage of Respondents
Cost	78%
Location	74%
Likelihood of Being Admitted	45%
Family & Friends' Opinions	39%
Economic Opportunities During & After College	34%
Academic Reputation	33%
Social Environment	29%
Athletics/Extracurriculars	21%
Diversity	17%
Recruitment Process	17%

As with 4-year college-goers (see Barragan Torres & Bates, 2023), cost and location were key considerations for 2-year college-goers. To get at the specific motivating factors within each of these considerations, we asked respondents who selected each consideration to check all the more specific factors that motivated them. Within those who selected cost as a key consideration, 91% of seniors said they considered the overall cost of attending college (tuition and room and board), 46% considered specific financial aid opportunities offered by their selected institution, and 24% considered the campus work opportunities available in their selected institution. Within those who selected location, 83% wanted to remain close to home and 38% were interested in the working opportunities during college close to them. This emphasis on cost and location aligns with the idea of 2-year students wishing to attend the

community college in their geographic “district” boundary, or the district within which their home is located. Students who attend their in-district community college receive lower tuition costs (ICCB, 2024).

In contrast, 2-year college-goers were much less concerned with academic reputation and social environment than 4-year college-goers. However, within those respondents who were concerned with academic reputation (33%), most were concerned about the quality of their program and institution (61% and 52%, respectively), as well as the availability of their program or major of interest (68%). The comparative lack of selection of academic reputation does make sense, given the unique role of 2-year institutions. Students are generally attending the 2-year college in their geographic boundary area for the purpose of earning a work-related credential and/or earning a transfer degree at a more modest cost before transferring to a (likely pricier) 4-year institution. As such, students who intend to transfer may be more concerned about the academic reputation of their potential 4-year institution than that of the 2-year institution. The Illinois Articulation Initiative also supports Illinois 2-year community college students in transferring credits to all Illinois public 4-year institutions (and many private 4-year institutions), with specific credits for general education and many majors being designed to transfer directly as the “first two years” of the 4-year degree (see Aiello, 2024). As such, students may be less concerned about academic reputation at the 2-year stage of their enrollment, knowing that their credits will transfer to 4-year institutions regardless of the specific Illinois community college selected.

We found a number of significant differences in considered factors by student characteristics. For example, diversity was considered much more by students of color than White students (and, relatedly, by students from Chicago and the suburbs than by students from downstate, as students from the latter are more likely to be White). Students identifying as non-binary were also more likely to consider diversity. Students from Chicago and the suburbs were more likely to consider college social environment, perhaps reflecting a greater variety of close community colleges to choose from than in downstate areas. Students from Chicago and the suburbs were also more likely to consider economic opportunities than downstate students. And female and non-binary students were more likely to consider family and friends’ opinions, especially related to family direct recommendations about a specific institution.

SECTION 3: The Single Most Decisive Factor for 2-Year College Selection

This section answers our second research question: *What is the **single decisive factor** that most animates the 2-year college choice for Illinois high school seniors?* This question was answered only by respondents who had selected a final college choice, which included 549 respondents for our sample (or 64% of the total 2-year respondents). Table 4 displays our findings for this question.

Table 4. Percentage of respondents who selected each factor as the single most decisive consideration for college selection.

Decisive Factor	Percentage of Respondents
Overall, it has the most reasonable cost of attendance.	48%
It's in the best location .	14%
It gives me the best opportunity for employment after college .	10%
It gives me the best work opportunities during college .	6%
It had the smoothest admissions process.	5%
It has the best opportunity for me to play sports .	4%
It's where my family wants me to go.	4%
It has the best social environment or campus climate for me.	3%
It has the best academic reputation (or ranking).	3%
It had the most appealing recruitment process.	2%
It's where my friends want me to go.	1%
It has the most support for students of my demographic background .	1%
It has the best opportunity for me to participate in extracurriculars .	1%

This table clearly indicates that cost is central for 2-year college-goers; all other factors are dwarfed in comparison. Interestingly, while 4-year college-goers also ranked cost the most decisive factor (32% selected it; see Barragan Torres & Bates, 2023), 2-year college-goers were even *more* swayed by cost (48% selected it). Contrastingly, 2-year college-goers cited location as a more decisive factor than 4-year college-goers, likely due to 2-year colleges generally being commuter colleges and chosen based on proximity to home (i.e., in the student's community college district). Finally, mirroring the results in the previous section, 2-year college-goers were less likely to make a decision based on academic reputation or social environment than 4-year college-goers. While we did not find significant differences across racial/ethnic groups or gender, students downstate were more likely to consider opportunities to work after college and extracurricular participation, whereas students in the suburbs considered academic reputation and their family location more.

SECTION 4: Intentions for and Interactions with 2-Year Colleges

This section answers our last research question about college decision-making: *What are students' intentions and interactions with 2-year colleges that may influence these decisions?* Note that, throughout this section, we give data for the total respondents who answered each question, which varied based on the question and was generally lower than the full sample of 858 respondents.

Modality of Attendance. Of the 643 respondents who shared the mode of attendance they planned to use for 2-year college, most (82%) were planning to commute to the college campus, with 13% living on campus and 5% attending online. This provided a stark contrast with 4-year college-goers, who were overwhelmingly living on campus to attend college (80%; see Barragan Torres & Bates, 2023). We did not find significant patterns across students' characteristics, except by region, where students downstate were more likely to move to attend college altogether than their counterparts—nonetheless, this percentage remained relatively small (19%). This modality of attendance makes perfect sense for 2-year college-goers, as 2-year colleges are designed to serve their surrounding community, and enrollees can commute from within the community college boundary to the main or satellite campuses. Indeed, only in 2022 did the Illinois General Assembly pass legislation establishing that community colleges could offer affordable housing to community college students (ILGA, 2022).

First Contact. We asked high school seniors to describe their first interaction with their chosen 2-year college (n = 549 respondents). More than half (51%) had first contact through family and friends. Other notable selections were high school counselor (12%), teacher (8%), and previous course-taking at the community college during high school (7%). These findings were largely in line with those for 4-year college-goers.

Depth of Contact. We also asked respondents to characterize their overall interactions with a 2-year college before making a final decision (n= 549 respondents). The most common choices are found in Table 5; respondents were permitted to select all that applied, except if they selected that they did not visit or talk to faculty/students at all before deciding.

Table 5. Percentage of respondents who had each type of interaction before choosing college.

Choice	Percentage of Respondents
I made my decision without visiting or talking to current faculty/students.	36%
I went for one campus visit.	32%
I talked to faculty or current students virtually.	20%
I previously took courses there (such as through dual enrollment).	19%
I went for multiple campus visits	17%
I stayed overnight or for several days on campus.	0%

Compared to 4-year college-goers (Barragan Torres & Bates, 2023), 2-year college-goers were twice as likely to make their decision without any in-depth contact with the college. As a consequence, they were also less likely to report virtual or physical visits to the college of any kind. However, 2-year college-goers were much more likely than 4-year college-goers to have previously taken coursework at the college (19% vs. 2% took such coursework at their chosen college, respectively). While 2-year college-goers may report less contact with the college as part of a formal recruitment process, community colleges are, by nature, embedded in the students' communities. As such, students likely have previous exposure to the institution and, perhaps, a comfort level with selecting it without a formal recruitment process.

College preparation. We asked survey respondents to share how prepared they felt for college academically. For the 550 two-year college-goers who answered this question, the majority felt "prepared" (43%), followed by "a little prepared" (31%), "very prepared" (16%), and "not at all prepared" (7%). Comparatively, 4-year college-goers in our survey felt much more prepared (see Barragan Torres & Bates, 2023). Interestingly, we found statistical differences across racial/ethnic groups, where students of color were more likely to feel *more* prepared than White students.

Paying for college. We asked survey respondents to share how they would pay for college (n = 549), selecting all that apply. With the caveat that 236 of those respondents indicated some uncertainty about their exact sources of financial aid, Table 6 below summarizes the percentage of respondents utilizing each source of aid.

Table 6. Sources of financial aid respondents are using to pay for 2-year college.

Financial Aid Source	Percentage of Respondents
Scholarship(s) or other aid from the college	45%
Scholarship(s) or gifts from other sources	26%
Federal Pell Grant	13%
Federal Loan	8%
Private Loan	4%
Other Federal or State Grant	4%
Monetary Award Program (MAP)	3%
Federal Work-Study	2%
AIM HIGH Grant	<1%
Illinois Veteran Grant Program	<1%
Illinois National Guard Grant Program	<1%

In general, while the most common sources of financial aid were the same between 4-year and 2-year college-goers, the percentages of 2-year college-goers using each type of aid were much smaller (see Barragan Torres & Bates, 2023). One explanation for this may be that 2-year college-goers are quite likely to be working while attending college and are much more likely to be attending college part-time than 4-year college-goers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022, 2023), which can affect eligibility for financial aid (see, for instance, U. S. Department of Education, 2024).

Transfer. Finally, we asked 2-year survey respondents to share their plans for transfer to a 4-year institution. Students may attend 2-year institutions for many reasons, including a desire to transfer to a 4-year after earning appropriate credits and/or desire to earn a work-related credential. Out of the 569 respondents to this question, 65% planned to transfer, which is in line with the percentage of Illinois community college enrollees in the associate-level transfer degree program (60%; see ICCB, 2023a). Only 14% said they would not transfer, while the rest of the respondents were unsure. Plans for transfer were not significantly different across student demographic groups.

When we analyzed decision factors across students with different transfer plans, we found that students with different transfer plans weighed cost, location, diversity, academic reputation, and athletics or extracurriculars significantly differently, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Considered factors in the 2-year college choice by transfer plans.

Significant factor	Overall percentage of respondents	No plans to Transfer	Plans to Transfer	Unsure
Cost	78%	73%	82%	72%
Location	74%	66%	79%	75%
Likelihood of Being Admitted	45%	35%	51%	40%
Academic Reputation	33%	20%	40%	18%
Athletics/Extracurriculars	21%	16%	28%	18%
Diversity	17%	8%	21%	16%

Moreover, this group of students also had significantly different decisive factors. Specifically, students planning to transfer were more likely to choose “a smooth admission process” and “opportunities after college” than students without any transfer plans. This makes sense, given the different goals for community college students, not all of which involve intention to seek a 4-year degree.

CONCLUSION

In general, these findings show that Illinois 2-year college-goers have both similar and different decision-making priorities than 4-year college-goers. While both groups of students are concerned with cost and location, 2-year college-goers weigh cost and location (i.e., being in the community college district) more heavily. This finding aligns with the purpose and structure of community colleges: these colleges are designed to serve students in their geographic districts, and students receive lower tuition rates by enrolling in their district community college (ICCB, 2024). Many students enroll in their district community colleges in order to save costs before transferring to a 4-year college that will accept their credits (see Aiello, 2024, for more on Illinois transfer agreements).

The 2-year college-goers also reported lower levels of academic preparation than 4-year college-goers. This difference also makes sense, given the role of 2-year colleges in serving local communities, the open admissions policies at Illinois community colleges, and the obligation of community colleges to serve students at different levels of readiness. Indeed, Illinois community colleges are currently developing new models to serve students with varying levels of academic preparation, including providing them with developmental education supports while they are

enrolled in credit-bearing courses (see ICCB, 2023b). Our findings reinforce the unique role of 2-year colleges, suggesting that the 2-year student population has different goals and needs than the 4-year student population.

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