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VIEWPOINTS OF ILLINOIS HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO DO NOT ATTEND COLLEGE

PART OF THE 2022 ILLINOIS COLLEGE-
GOING SURVEY SERIES

REPORT 3

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External Review:

In order 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. We thank Elliot Regenstein (Foresight Law + Policy) for reviewing this report. This report followed the methods of Report 1 in this series, so we also thank the reviewers of that report for their contributions that shaped this piece.

Acknowledgments

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Spring 2022, IWERC conducted a survey of Illinois high school seniors to better understand their college-decision-making processes. Although a vast majority of seniors who answered the survey were attending 4-year or 2-year college, a non-negligible number (n = 355, 14% of the sample) were not attending college at all.

This report, the third part of a four-part series stemming from this survey, digs into the sentiments of these non-college-goers. While this sample is inherently not representative of all non-college-goers in the state, given that it was a population of non-college-goers who voluntarily answered a survey about college decision-making, we believe the data can provide a window into viewpoints of this population.

In this report, we explore two questions:

1. What are Illinois high school seniors who are not immediately attending college **planning to do**?
2. What **supports** might encourage Illinois high school seniors who are not attending college to enroll?

This report has the following key findings:

- A majority of respondents were **working** rather than attend college.
- Some respondents indicated that help with costs (n = 143) or finding college options and applying (n = 83) would encourage them to attend college, but a strong number of respondents (n = 128) said that **nothing would encourage them to attend college**.
- Half of those respondents who said that nothing would encourage them to attend college simply cited not liking or wanting to continue school as the reason. To a lesser extent, these respondents cited a preference for working and not wanting to take on debt as reasons not to attend college.
- Respondents in this non-college-going group felt less academically prepared than students in our four-year and two-year samples, and their parents had lower educational attainment.

These findings suggest that non-college-goers have less readiness for college—both academically and socially—and that any traditional supports to encourage college-going (e.g., help with costs and applications) would need to be coupled with efforts to overcome general aversion to further education amongst this population.

Viewpoints of Illinois High School Seniors Who Do Not Attend College

Part 3 of the *2022 Illinois College-Going Survey Series*

Introduction

In Spring 2022, we conducted a survey of Illinois high school seniors about their college decision-making (Barragan Torres & Bates, 2023). Although that survey was aimed at potential 2-year and 4-year college-goers, with much higher response rates among those populations, a healthy number of respondents were not planning to attend college at all. This report—Part 3 of the *2022 Illinois College-Going Survey Series*—focuses on the viewpoints of those 355 high school seniors (14% of the sample) who reported that they would not be attending a 4-year or 2-year college in Fall 2022.

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

1. What are Illinois high school seniors who are not immediately attending college **planning to do**?
2. What **supports** might encourage Illinois high school seniors who are not attending college to enroll?

Please see the previous reports (Barragan Torres & Bates, 2023, 2024) in the series, as well as the technical guide (Barragan Torres, 2023), for more information on the survey design and the theoretical and pragmatic underpinnings of this study. In the remainder of this report, we share findings about the sample and their viewpoints on each question.

SECTION 1: Sample of Non-College-Going Respondents

Students who were not attending college comprised 14% (355 out of 2,464) of our sample of high school seniors. This sample was less than half the size of our 2-year college-going sample, and less than a third the size of our 4-year college-going sample. As such, we suspect that many high school seniors who were not attending college simply did not bother to answer a survey that was explicitly about college-going. We thus make no claim that this survey is representative of the overall sentiments of the population of Illinois high school seniors who do not attend college; instead, it is likely respondents in this report were those with the strongest consideration of or views about college, despite not attending it. As such, we share our analysis of these viewpoints as a window into the thinking of non-college-going students about college, providing as rich a quantitative and qualitative examination of their views as possible.

Almost 77% of respondents not going to college (N = 273) provided some sociodemographic information, including race/ethnicity, location within the state, and parental education.^a In Table 1, we show how the racial/ethnic identities of our Fall 2022 non-college-going respondents compared to percentages extrapolated from a report on Fall 2021 Illinois high school graduates by the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE, 2023). Our sample is not representative of the general population of non-college-goers. Compared to IBHE's figures, our sample includes more representation from White students and students who identified as two or more races, while it includes less representation from Black and Latino students. Because we believe our sample is inherently only representative of a select subset of non-college-goers, and because our interest is in providing viewpoints rather than estimates of overall activity amongst the Illinois non-college-going population, we do not weight the sample, but instead report results directly from our raw data.

Table 1. Race/ethnicity of non-college-goers in our sample (Fall 2022) compared with IBHE's report (Fall 2021).

	IBHE Non-College-Goers	IWERC Non-College-Goers
White	43%	49%
Black	19%	12%
Latino	32%	19%
Asian	3%	2%
Other	0%	6%
2+	3%	10%

Our respondents came from across the state of Illinois, with 58% coming from the downstate region (anywhere outside of Chicago and the Chicago suburbs in Cook and the Collar Counties), 9% from Chicago, and 33% from the Collar and Suburban Cook counties (i.e., the Chicago suburbs, the term used from hereon out). As we do not know the exact distribution of non-college-going high school graduates across the state, we cannot be certain how representative this sample is to the general population. However, compared to ISBE (2022) data on where high school seniors enroll, it seems likely that we greatly oversampled downstate students and greatly under-sampled Chicago and suburban students.

In Table 2, we show the parental education attainment levels for this sample of non-college-going students, as well as for our samples of students who were planning to attend two-year and four-year college (Barragan Torres & Bates, 2023, 2024). Comparatively, the

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

respondents to our survey who were not attending college reported much more uncertainty about their parents' educational attainment, with those who were certain reporting slightly lower levels of overall attainment than in the other samples.

Table 2. The reported parental educational attainment levels of survey respondents not attending college, attending 2-year college, and attending 4-year college.

	Sample Not Attending College	2-Year Sample	4-Year Sample
Less than High School	11%	10%	7%
High School/GED	31%	31%	19%
Some college, no degree	7%	8%	8%
Associate degree	10%	15%	10%
Bachelor's degree	13%	18%	25%
Master's degree	6%	9%	21%
Doctoral/professional degree	3%	2%	7%
Unsure/prefer not to answer	20%	9%	4%

NOTE: Samples sum to >100% due to rounding.

In terms of gender, the sample was 43% female, 49% male, and 3% non-binary (with 5% self-describing or preferring not to respond).

SECTION 2: The Plans of High School Seniors Not Attending College

This section answers our first research question: *What are Illinois high school seniors who are not immediately attending college **planning to do**?* In Table 3, we show the percentage of students (out of 329 respondents) selecting each option for a question asking directly about their plans. Respondents were allowed to select as many options as applied; respondents who answered that they were doing something not listed in the options were given the opportunity to share what they were doing.

Table 3. Percentage of respondents who indicated each post-high school plan.

Post-High School Plan	Percentage of Respondents
I am working.	58%
I am taking a gap year, with the intention to continue my education later.	22%
I am joining the military.	20%

I am unsure what I am doing.	18%
I am enrolling in an educational program in Winter/Spring 2023.	5%
I am doing something not listed [in the options].	16%

A majority of respondents planned to work, with 20% joining the military. Notably, a healthy percentage of respondents indicated an intention to go to school in the near-term, either in the second semester of the year (5%) or after a gap year (22%). Interestingly, students in the Chicago suburbs were significantly more likely to take a gap year than students located elsewhere. Respondents also evinced uncertainty (18%). We found no other statistically significant differences between groups.

Although 16% of respondents indicated that they were doing something not in the options, an examination of the 28 write-in responses revealed that students were in unique training programs/apprenticeships (n = 20) or engaging in other idiosyncratic activities (e.g., working for family, religious mission, recording music).

SECTION 3: Support for Students Not Attending College

This section explores our second research question: *What supports might encourage Illinois high school seniors who are not attending college to enroll?* While not attending college is, of course, a perfectly valid choice, it is important to understand if Illinois high school seniors have the support they require to make a college choice (should they wish to attend). Thus, we asked survey respondents who were not attending college to share the resources that might encourage them to further their education. Respondents (n = 329) could select all that applied; they also had the option to write in resources that were not listed. Table 4 summarizes these responses.

Table 4. Percentage of respondents indicating that each resource might encourage them to pursue further education.

Resource	Percentage of Respondents
Help with the costs	43%
Nothing	39%
Help with finding options and applying	25%
More support from those around me	19%

More educational options	18%
Other	8%

The findings suggest that traditional supports, including financial aid, help with navigating the college admissions process, and family and school guidance, could encourage some of this population to attend college. However, many students stated flatly that they would not attend college. In the remainder of this section, we explore details about each of the potential supports, as well as what influences the respondents who are firm in their rejection of college.

Help with the costs. Of the 143 respondents who indicated that help with costs could encourage them to attend college, 139 answered a follow-up question about what those specific supports would be. Respondents pointed to financial aid (73%; $n = 102$); more money saved from working (60%; $n = 83$); cheaper or more reliable transportation (36%; $n = 50$); and other (5%; $n = 7$). Overall, female students were significantly more likely to select additional help with costs of attending than their male counterparts (56% vs. 39%, respectively).

Help with finding options and applying. Of the 83 respondents who felt that help with finding options and applying could help them pursue their education, 80 shared follow-up information. Respondents felt that more information about options (68%; $n = 54$), more help completing applications (55%; $n = 44$), more information about applying (54%; $n = 43$), and more information about the benefits of continuing their education (43%; $n = 34$) could help. Only 3 respondents chose “other.” As with costs, female students were significantly more likely to select needing this help than their male counterparts (37% vs. 17%, respectively).

Support from those around them. Of the 63 who indicated support from those around them would help, 62 provided follow-up information on the most valued specific supports. Those needed supports included family (70%; $n = 44$), parents (62%; $n = 39$), friends/community (56%; $n = 35$), and teachers/guidance counselors (43%; $n = 27$). Interestingly, the desired supports were far more personal than school-based. Black and Latinx students, as well as female students, were more likely to select the general option of more support from those around them.

More educational options. Of the 60 respondents who thought more educational options would encourage them to pursue more education, 59 provided follow-up information on their desired options. These included options that will help them get a specific job (56%; $n = 33$), options that will get them to a better job quickly (54%; $n = 32$), and options closer to home

(39%; $n = 23$). Only 7 selected options further from home. Students not from Chicago proper were more likely to select this factor than students living in Chicago during high school.

Nothing would encourage them to pursue more education. Of the 128 who responded that nothing would encourage them to pursue further education, 121 provided further reasoning. Table 5 summarizes those responses. These reasons were significantly different for downstate and male students.

Table 5. Reasons respondents gave for firmly rejecting pursuit of further education.

Reason	Percentage Selecting Reason
I don't like or want to continue school.	50%
I would rather take the work opportunities I have now.	40%
I don't want to take on student debt.	32%
Other	12%
I don't think I meet the requirements for more education.	9%
I have medical or family reasons not to attend.	6%

College preparation. Finally, a separate section of the survey asked respondents to share how prepared they felt for college academically. As academic preparation can influence the college decision, we share that information here. For the 273 respondents who answered this question, the majority felt “a little prepared” (32%), followed by “prepared” (28%), “not at all prepared” (17%), and “very prepared” (11%). Perhaps not surprisingly, 4-year and 2-year college-goers in our survey felt much more prepared (see Barragan Torres & Bates, 2023, 2024). We found significant differences across racial/ethnic groups, where White students reported feeling a little or not at all prepared more frequently than students from other racial/ethnic groups.

Conclusion

The sentiments of non-college-goers in our survey suggest that they are a distinct population from 2-year and 4-year college-goers. They report lower academic readiness and parental educational attainment, indicating that they are less academically and socially prepared for college. These background experiences likely influence their decision not to attend college. Some non-college-goers might attend college if these experiences were changed in some way—for instance, if they were given more support on researching and applying to college, as well as help with financial aid. However, a substantial portion of this population would not attend college at

all, with aversion to further education playing a key role in that. Efforts to encourage this population to attend college would likely have to start by addressing sentiments about education more broadly.

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