

# **REVIEW** and **ANALYSIS** of the **Class of 2014** of High School Senior **Opinions Survey**

West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission  
and West Virginia Council for Community and Technical College Education





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# Executive Summary

## Academic Preparedness

- Students reported an average GPA of 3.30 and ACT exam score of 21.22.
- Nearly 8 out of 10 students reported having earned a high school GPA of 3.0 or higher.
- About 9 out of 10 students reported having taken at least Algebra II, a required course for enrollment at a West Virginia public four-year institution.
- Nearly 9 out of 10 students reported being enrolled in either a skilled or professional curriculum pathway in high school.
- These tracks prepare students for entry into two- and four-year institutions of higher education.

## Sources of College Information

- More than 8 out of 10 students reported having spoken to a high school official about college entrance requirements and nearly 9 out of 10 had discussed financial aid requirements.
- Students cited college websites, email, and direct mail as the three most important resources for college information.
- Parents and teachers had the most influence over students' college choices.
- Nearly two thirds of students received help from a parent when deciding whether to apply for college.
- About 3 out of 4 students visited at least one college campus.
- More than half of students surveyed found CFVW to be an important source of college information.
- Students who found CFVW to be an important resource knew the requirements of financial aid and report plans to attend college at higher rates.
- More than 7 out of 10 students in GEAR UP schools received direct assistance from a college representative, while fewer than 5 out of 10 students in GEAR UP comparison schools received similar help.

## Financial Aid Awareness

- Almost two thirds of students received help submitting the FAFSA from a parent.
- Almost two thirds of students surveyed overestimated the one year cost of tuition at public in-state four-year colleges and universities. An additional 14 percent reported not knowing the cost of tuition.
- GEAR UP students were three times more likely to accurately estimate the price of tuition than students in the comparison group.
- The financial aid options students were most informed about were the PROMISE Scholarship, federal loans, and Pell grants.

## Collegiate Plans

- Nearly 9 out of 10 students planned to attend college, with three quarters planning to attend beginning the fall of 2014.
- Of those who planned to attend college in the fall, more than 8 out of 10 had already been accepted to college by the time they completed the survey.
- Of those who were accepted, more than 8 out of 10 reported being accepted to a West Virginia public institution.
- More than 70 percent of students hoped to earn at least a bachelor's degree, with an additional 10 percent hoping to earn an associate's degree.



**College Decisions**

- More than one third of students who do not plan to attend college cited cost as a significant factor in their decisions. More than half of those students plan to enter the workforce immediately after high school.
- 7 out of 10 students cited affordability as one of the reasons they were most likely to attend a specific college.
- More than three fourths of students planning to attend college believed they could afford a public West Virginia college with the help of financial aid and family resources.
- Students perceived they would rely on their parents, personal savings and institutional scholarships as sources to finance a college education.
- More than 8 out of 10 students planned on working to help finance their college education, with 7.5 percent of those working full-time.

## Overview

A 2012 Manpower survey found that nearly half of U.S. employers are having trouble filling vacant positions with skilled, educated workers—a problem attributed in large part to a shortage of applicants with the technical skills necessary for success in a rapidly evolving global economy.<sup>1</sup> Workforce projections point to “middle skill” occupations – those skilled and technical jobs requiring more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree – as those expected to be in highest demand over the next decade.<sup>2</sup> In fact, more than 51 percent of current jobs in the southern United States are classified as middle skill. But while these numbers seem promising for trained workers seeking employment, they point to a potential problem for employers struggling to fill millions of anticipated vacancies from an applicant pool in which only 43 percent of prospective employees possess the necessary skills and training.

WorkForce West Virginia projects that 20 of the state’s 31 most high-demand occupations will require some form of postsecondary education<sup>3</sup>, while a 2012 report by Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce predicts that by 2020, 51% of all West Virginia jobs will require some education or training beyond high school.<sup>4</sup> The responsibility of preparing recent high school graduates and adult learners to meet the state’s workforce demands will lie, in large part, with West Virginia’s colleges and universities. Unfortunately, the college-going rate among West Virginia’s high school graduates is at its lowest point in more than ten years, with less than 55 percent of the state’s 2013-2014 high school graduates enrolling in a two- or four-year institution of higher education in the fall 2014 semester. These data are particularly troubling when examined in the context of post-recession job growth. According to a 2013 report by Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce, post-recession job growth reached an all-time high of 82% for bachelor’s degree holders, compared to a rate of only 41% for those with some college or associate’s degree. While the growth in these categories has generally increased at a steady rate since 1989, the job market for those with a high school diploma or less has experienced a significant decline (-14% growth since 1989), underscoring the value of a college education to potential job-seekers.<sup>5</sup>

In an effort to improve this matriculation rate, the Higher Education Policy Commission (HEPC) embarked on a survey of high school seniors in the spring of 2014. The High School Senior Opinions Survey asked students about their high school experiences, post-graduation plans, and the factors that influenced their college-going decisions. The 2014 survey cycle marked the fourth administration of the survey, enabling researchers to track trends in student responses.

This analysis is intended to provide stakeholders, interested in increasing the college-going rate of West Virginia high school graduates, with information about students’ perspectives, experiences, and plans as they transitioned to life beyond high school. It was also designed to serve as an evaluation tool for WV GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs), a grant program funded by the United States Department of Education. GEAR UP provides educational services at high poverty-poverty middle and high schools in an effort to prepare low-income students to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. The program serves cohorts of students through the completion of high school, with services beginning no later than seventh grade. GEAR UP also provides college scholarships to low-income students.

The sample was designed to be representative of the seniors enrolled in public high schools in 2014. Due to considerable variation in high school size, the sample was drawn to be representative across small, medium, and large schools. A quasi-random sample of high schools was drawn from the 115 high schools across the state. Additionally, all 14 GEAR UP schools were purposefully sampled for this analysis. Further, in an effort to ensure that GEAR UP students were compared

**Class of 2014**  
**High School Senior**  
**Opinions Survey**



to a similar sample of students who did not receive GEAR UP services, GEAR UP comparison schools were identified. Including all GEAR UP and GEAR UP comparison schools, the final sample consisted of 45 schools. A detailed description of the methods used for this report can be found in the methodological appendix.

In addition to statewide data, many of the tables in this report include data for GEAR UP and GEAR UP comparison schools. The statewide data include all schools participating in the survey (i.e., non-GEAR UP, GEAR UP, and GEAR UP comparison), while GEAR UP comparison data are comprised of responses from 11 high schools identified prior to survey administration as having similar demographic and academic characteristics to GEAR UP schools. Data in the GEAR UP column of each table represent the 14 high schools participating in GEAR UP. It should be noted that the comparison group contains fewer than 14 schools, as three of the schools identified for the comparison group were unable to complete the survey due to inclement weather and other unforeseen events that resulted in school closings during the administration period.

This report focuses on five key areas: academic preparation in high school, sources of college information, financial aid awareness, collegiate plans, and college decisions. In order to improve the college-going rate of students, college access providers need to understand what students do and do not know about the college-going process and the factors driving their college-going decisions. The following sections are designed to investigate each of these topics.

We begin by providing some basic demographic information about the surveyed population and compare that information to state figures provided by the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE). Despite being designed to be representative of the state's high school senior class, individual high school response rates caused some sample demographic information to vary from what was reported statewide. Understanding these demographics will help contextualize the analyses found in the later sections of this report.

### *Age, Gender, and Ethnicity*

**Table 1**

#### *Student Demographics*

<b>Age<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Survey Sample</b>	<b>Statewide Data<sup>b</sup></b>
17 or younger	3.8%	77.2%
18	81.6%	19.3%
19 or older	14.6%	3.5%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	52.4%	48.2%
Male	47.6%	51.8%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
African American or Black	5.2%	5.5%
American Indian/ Native American	0.9%	0.1%



Race/Ethnicity Continued

Asian American or Pacific Islander	0.9%	0.8%
Caucasian/White	86.9%	91.8%
Hispanic/Latino	1.0%	1.1%
Multiracial	3.0%	0.7%
Other <sup>c</sup>	2.3%	**

- <sup>a</sup> Significant differences in age statistics between sample and statewide data are likely a result of different data collection dates during the school year.
- <sup>b</sup> Data provided by the West Virginia Department of Education.
- <sup>c</sup> “Other” category not reported in WVDE statewide data.

Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic characteristics of the students who participated in the survey and, for comparison, statewide demographic data supplied by the West Virginia Department of Education. As expected, high school seniors in the sample were primarily 18 years old (81.6%) but there were also a considerable number of seniors age 19 or older (14.6%). Approximately 52.4 percent of those surveyed were female, which was slightly higher than the state figure of 48.2 percent. Males were slightly underrepresented in the survey. Of survey respondents, 47.6 percent were male, about 4 percent lower than the state’s reported 51.8 percent.

The racial/ethnic composition of this sample was only slightly different than what was reported statewide. Caucasian/white (86.9%) students were underrepresented in the sample when compared to the state figure of 91.8 percent. African American/Black students were slightly underrepresented at 5.2 percent, just below the 5.5 percent figure reported statewide. Also slightly underrepresented were Hispanic/Latino (1.0%) students when compared to the state figure of 1.1 percent. All other racial and ethnic groups were slightly overrepresented in the sample.

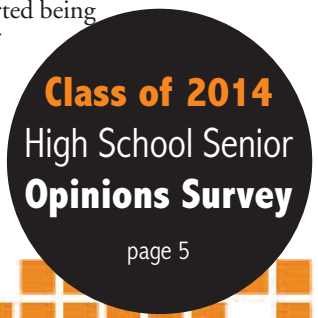
**Table 2**

*Student Financial Information*

<b>Family Income</b>	
\$30,000 or less	32.9%
\$30,001 to \$60K	31.4%
\$60,001 to \$100K	24.0%
\$100,001 or more	11.6%
<b>Free/Reduced Price Lunch Eligibility</b>	
Not eligible	48.9%
Eligible	51.1%

Socio-economic status (SES) has long been considered one of strongest predictors of college matriculation. In this survey, we approximated SES in two ways: self-reported family income, and free and reduced priced lunch status. As shown in Table 2, approximately 64.3 percent of students reported a family income of under \$60,001.<sup>a</sup> This is consistent with information from the U.S. Census Bureau which reports that the median household income of West Virginia residents was \$41,043.<sup>6</sup> Further, 51.1 percent of students reported being eligible for free or reduced lunch which is consistent with WVDE data identifying 54.7 percent of students as low SES.

<sup>a</sup> It should be noted that this was self-reported family income and may not be representative of actual family income.



*Family Educational Attainment***Table 3***Family Education*

<b>First Generation Status</b>	
Not first-generation	65.9%
Potential first-generation student	34.1%
<b>Father's Level of Education</b>	
High school or less	43.2%
Some college	30.9%
BA or above	25.9%
<b>Mother's Level of Education</b>	
High school or less	54.6%
Some college	23.7%
BA or above	21.7%
<b>Siblings with College Experience</b>	
0	62.1%
1	27.1%
2	8.2%
3	1.5%
4	0.5%
5 or more	0.5%

The educational attainment of immediate family members is also a predictor of college matriculation. Often, first-generation students lack the necessary skills and knowledge required to navigate the collegiate landscape. First generation college-goers are defined as those whose mother and father have no education beyond high school. Having a parent that attended college gives non-first-generation students both tangible and intangible resources that increase their likelihood of matriculation. Parents who have attended college are more likely to have the financial resources to pay for their child's college education. Further, they are better positioned to mentor their children about what courses to take in high school, what to look for in a college, and how to apply. Having help with logistical college preparation issues such as understanding college requirements, applying, and simply knowing where to look for additional information provides students with invaluable resources that make the college-going experience that much easier.<sup>7</sup>

As shown in Table 3, about one third of West Virginia high school seniors would be considered a first-generation student if they attended college. Approximately, 43.2 percent of students' fathers and 54.6 percent of students' mothers never attended college. These parents are less likely to be able to help their children navigate the complexities of the college bureaucracy. Therefore, it is particularly important for college access providers to offer special services for potential first-generation college-goers, so that these students also have access to this crucial intangible information.

Siblings who have gone to college can also provide their younger brothers and sisters with necessary information and support in preparing post-high school plans. About 38 percent of the students surveyed had at least one sibling enrolled in a college or university. Though the educational attainment of siblings does not factor into first-generation status, their experiences could be particularly informative for potential first-



generation college-goers. Only 29.9 percent of this population had a sibling with at least some college experience. Of those students who were identified as first-generation college-goers, with neither parent having attended college, 70 percent also reported having no siblings with college experience. College access programs are uniquely positioned to guide these students through the college matriculation process.

### *I. Academic Preparedness*

Academic preparation is an important indicator of college-going and college success.<sup>8</sup> Students with high grade point averages (GPAs) and ACT scores tend to have higher college enrollment and graduation rates than those with lower scores. Further, a rigorous high school curriculum better prepares students for the academic transition from the high school to college curriculum.<sup>9</sup> In order to better understand the academic preparation of West Virginia seniors, students were asked several questions pertaining to their academic experiences, including their: GPA, ACT score, course selection, and curriculum pathway. The following section reports on these metrics.

**Table 4**

*Average GPA and ACT Score*

<b>Average</b>	
GPA	3.30
ACT Score	21.22

**Table 5**

*GPA Distribution*

<b>High School GPA</b>	
1.00-1.99	1.6%
2.00-2.99	20.1%
3.00-3.99	64.6%
4.00+	13.8%

West Virginia high school seniors reported an average GPA of 3.30 and average ACT score of 21.22, as shown in Table 4. The majority of students reported a GPA between 3.00 and 3.99 (64.6%), with an additional 13.8 percent reporting a 4.0 or above, as shown in Table 5. The official average ACT exam score published in the West Virginia 2014 ACT Profile was a 20.6, but this score was reflective of all students who took the exam regardless of grade level. The national ACT composite average of 21.0 was similar to what those in this sample reported. According to the 2015 HEPC Standards and Procedures for Undergraduate Admissions at Four-Year Colleges and Universities these average scores (GPA and ACT), in conjunction with one another, would meet West Virginia’s minimum requirements for admittance to an in-state four-year public institution. The code requires that students have either a minimum 3.0 GPA or a 2.0 GPA with a minimum 18 ACT composite score.<sup>b</sup>

<sup>b</sup> *Institutions with doctoral programs, such as Marshall University and West Virginia University, have a higher ACT composite score requirement, 19.*



**Table 6***High School Class Selection*

<b>Selected High School Curriculum</b>		<b>Statewide</b>
Unsure		12.7%
Skilled pathway		24.6%
Professional pathway		62.7%
<b>Highest Level of Math</b>		
Less than Algebra 1		0.4%
Algebra 1		1.8%
Geometry		7.8%
Algebra 2		36.5%
Trigonometry		24.5%
Pre-Calculus		16.8%
Calculus or above		12.2%
<b>Number of AP Classes Taken</b>		
0		53.8%
1		15.5%
2		10.2%
3		5.6%
4		5.4%
5 or more		9.5%

While grades are correlated with future success, so too are the courses students choose to take. High schools in West Virginia have developed a variety of curriculum pathways designed to prepare students for their post-secondary plans. Currently, there are two primary pathways for high school students: skilled, which prepares students for a two-year college or entry into the workforce; and professional, which prepares students for a four-year college. Table 6 offers a summary of students' high school course selections. While 62.7 percent of West Virginia high school seniors reported taking classes that prepared them for entry into a four-year college, recent college-going rate reports published by the HEPC point to an actual college-going rate that has steadily declined since 2001, to a low of 54.6 percent for 2014 high school graduates statewide. The fall 2014 in-state college-going rate (the percentage of high school graduates enrolling in West Virginia colleges and universities) is even lower at 46.3 percent, meaning that even though students are enrolled in curriculum pathways intended to prepare them for college, many are not matriculating. The HEPC reports also estimate that approximately 24.6 percent of students took a pathway that prepared them to enter a two-year program, while about 9.6 percent of recent high school graduates in 2014 enrolled in an in-state public community or technical college, a decrease of 8.5 percent from 2013. An additional 31.2 percent enrolled in an in-state public four-year institution, a decrease of four percent from 2013.

Students who take higher level math courses and those who take Advanced Placement (AP) courses are more likely to be prepared for college than those who do not take such courses. As shown in Table 6, 90 percent of students took at least Algebra II, a course required for admittance to a public four-year institution. Approximately 46.2 percent took at least one AP class while in high school. AP classes are intended to help prepare students for the pace and rigor of college coursework. Unfortunately, the College Board (2014) reports only 43 percent of all West Virginia AP test takers, not just the senior class, scored at least a 3, the minimum score required for partial college credit. The mean score on AP tests administered statewide

during the 2013-14 school year was 2.43, more than half a point below the minimum score of 3.0 required for partial college credit, and well below the national average of 2.87. The national average for those passing similar exams was 58.7 percent.<sup>10</sup> Given the difference in passage rates between test takers nationally and in-state, it seems that West Virginia AP students may need additional academic support to prepare them for college-level work.

**Table 7**

*Perception of Preparedness*

Degree of Preparedness	Statewide	GEAR UP	GEAR UP Comparison
Very prepared	12.8%	10.9%	17.8%
Prepared	33.3%	30.8%	37.0%
Somewhat prepared	37.0%	36.7%	31.8%
Not prepared at all	16.9%	21.6%	13.5%

Although academic preparedness may suggest students are ready to enter college, their perceptions of preparedness can also inform matriculation decisions. As seen in Table 7, 16.9 percent of high school seniors felt not at all prepared for college, while 46.1 percent felt that their high school education and experiences prepared them. Though it is important that students felt prepared, only 12.8 percent felt very prepared, meaning there is still work left to be done to improve students’ feelings of college readiness. Students in GEAR UP schools felt less prepared than those in GEAR UP comparison schools. While 17.8% of students in the comparison group felt very prepared, only 10.9 percent of GEAR UP students believed that their high schools had sufficiently prepared them for college. Because this survey question was intended to measure students’ perceptions of preparedness, it is possible that GEAR UP students may simply possess a greater awareness of what is required to succeed in college, and consequently have a better appreciation of perceived deficiencies in their academic preparation. Increasing college access efforts and aligning high school curriculum with college entrance requirements may help students feel more prepared.

**Academic Preparedness: Summary**

These metrics represent a snapshot of the academic progress of high school seniors. The majority reported that they met or exceeded four-year in-state college entrance requirements. Students averaged a 3.3 GPA and a 21.22 ACT score, and nine out of ten students took at least Algebra II. These results align with the professional curriculum pathway in which more than six of every ten students in high school enrolled. In total, more than 80 percent of students felt their high school education somewhat prepared them for college. These findings suggest that the majority of West Virginia students were academically prepared to enter college. Why then does the state’s college matriculation rate lag behind national averages? Attending college is not solely based on academic preparedness. Prospective college freshmen need a variety of resources to help them understand the college-going process. The following section begins to explore some of these resources.



## II. Sources of College Information

Respondents were asked several questions about the resources they used when deciding about college. These questions targeted specific areas such as the influence of others, importance of various resources, college visitation, and parental involvement with college preparation.

### *High School Staff*

High school staff is uniquely positioned to provide students with valuable information about college entrance and financial aid requirements. For first-generation students and students with low socio-economic backgrounds, high school staff may take on particular importance in the college-going process. These students are less likely to have family members who can provide them with knowledge about how to navigate the college admissions process.<sup>11</sup> For some students, teachers, school counselors, and administrators are the most valuable resource in their decision to attend college. In fact, 72 percent of respondents noted that high school staff was influential in their decision about college. With such a high

percentage of students feeling that high school staff members were influential in their decisions, it was encouraging to see that 85 percent had spoken to a high school staff member about college entrance requirements and 87.7 percent about financial aid availability, as shown in Table 8. Some students may be reluctant to pursue college because they do not know what is required to be admitted or to receive financial aid. Simple interactions with teachers, counselors, or administrators in which general college information is passed to students can have a meaningful impact on whether they attend college, particularly for first-generation students.<sup>12</sup> The GEAR UP program helps to facilitate such interactions, as evidenced by the data in Table 8, which show that more than 95 percent of students in GEAR UP schools had spoken to a high school staff member about college entrance requirements, compared to only 78.6 percent of students in comparison schools that do not participate in GEAR UP. Similar results were observed with regard to financial aid availability, with more than 96 percent of GEAR UP students reporting that they had spoken to a high school staff member about the availability of financial aid. Less than 84 percent of students in comparison schools had spoken to a high school staff member about the same topic.

***GEAR UP Success***  
*More than 9 out of 10 students in GEAR UP schools have spoken to a high school staff member about college entrance requirements and financial aid availability, compared to 8 out of 10 students in comparison schools.*

**Table 8**

*Spoken to by High School Staff*

Topic of Discussion	Statewide	GEAR UP	GEAR UP Comparison
College entrance requirements	85.0%	95.5%	78.6%
Financial aid availability	87.7%	96.4%	83.7%

### *CFWV*

There are numerous resources that students can utilize when researching college. One resource, the College Foundation of West Virginia (CFWV), was a primary focus this survey. CFWV is a college readiness outreach initiative aimed at helping students learn how to plan, apply, and pay for college. CFWV provides a one-stop

college-planning website, CFWV.com, which features information about all of the state’s colleges and universities, as well as financial aid programs, and career and degree programs. It is a collaborative effort between the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, the West Virginia Community and Technical College System, the West Virginia Department of Education, and the West Virginia Department of Education and the Arts.

With early intervention, CFWV is able to help students with high school, financial aid, college, and career planning. It also offers several programs dedicated to informing students about various college enrollment issues. Programs such as College Goal Sunday allow students and families the opportunity to receive free, confidential, support in completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The website also offers information about all West Virginia state-level financial aid programs as well as information to assist aspiring college-goers in preparing for life after high school.

Because of the state’s investment in the program, this research intended to measure the influence CFWV has had on students’ post-secondary plans. Data were compared with results of previous iterations of the High School Senior Opinion Survey in order to measure the impact CFWV has had over the past two years as well as areas in need of improvement. Approximately 57.9 percent of students in 2014 believed that CFWV was an important or very important resource for gathering information about college. In just four years this figure has increased 28.3 percentage points from the 2010 rate of 29.6 percent. Table 9 is indicative of how students who feel CFWV is important are more informed of financial aid options available to them.

**Table 9**

*Students who are very informed about WV financial aid options by CFWV importance (2014)*

<b>Knowledge of Financial Aid Source</b>	<b>CFWV Important</b>	<b>CFWV Not Important</b>
Federal loans	34.6%	16.1%
Pell grants	33.4%	15.2%
Work study	32.4%	14.7%
PROMISE	56.9%	41.1%
WV HEGP	31.9%	10.7%
WV ESTS	22.8%	7.8%
Underwood-Smith	18.2%	5.7%
HEAPS	18.3%	4.9%
SMART 529 Plan	21.6%	8.1%
Tax credit	17.8%	5.1%
Institutional scholarships	29.6%	15.8%

In both 2010 and 2012, students who believed CFWV was an important or very important resource were significantly more likely to be very informed on every source of financial aid. Conversely, students who believed CFWV was an unimportant or very unimportant resource were significantly more likely to be uninformed on all types of financial aid. These results suggest that CFWV is a helpful and meaningful resource for financial aid information. In effect, students who use the resource are more likely than those who do not to feel well-versed in financial aid options. Further, students who felt CFWV was important were also significantly more likely to receive state-sponsored financial aid.

**Class of 2014**  
**High School Senior**  
**Opinions Survey**  
 page 11



**Table 10***First Considered College by CFWV Importance*

	Before high school	During high school	Never considered attending
CFWV important (2014)	68.6%	28.5%	2.9%
CFWV important (2012)	73.2%	23.4%	3.4%
CFWV important (2010)	67.9%	28.0%	4.1%

As seen in Table 10, students who found CFWV to be an important resource considered college at an earlier age. About 68.6 percent of students who felt CFWV was an important resource began considering college prior to high school. This rate was 4.6 percentage points lower than the rate of those who did not feel the resource was very important, but still slightly higher than the rate in 2010. Further, 95.6 percent of those who thought CFWV was an important resource planned to attend college, a rate 23.9 percentage points higher than that of those who considered CFWV to be very unimportant (71.7%).

These results indicate that the state's investment in CFWV is paying off. Students who found CFWV to be an important resource considered college earlier, knew the requirements of financial aid, and reported attending college at higher rates. With continued focus in this area, West Virginia may be able to realize an increase in the state's college-going rate. This increase is necessary to supply the changing workforce with qualified graduates to sustain and build the state's economy.

Although CFWV is an important resource, others are also available. Understanding how high school students receive information about college can help college access programs understand where to concentrate their efforts. With a plethora of resources available in the technological age, students are able to get information from resources as diverse as physical mail or a billboard, to targeted e-mails and collegiate websites. Knowing which resources are the most valuable to students allows stakeholders to prioritize resources in which to invest money in order to have the best chance of reaching potential college-goers.

*Sources of Information*

Respondents indicated that the top three most influential resources in researching options for college were college/university websites (50.5%), e-mail (31.9%), and direct mail (31.5%), as shown in Table 11. For the first time since the survey began, e-mail has surpassed direct mail in importance, perhaps because of our ever-increasing dependence on technology in today's world. Interestingly, CFWV (44.6%) and college fairs (38.3%) were among the top three most influential resources in GEAR UP schools.

The three least important resources were radio (46.6%), magazines and newspapers (37.8%), and signs and billboards (37.5%). While these can all be effective means of marketing, they lack the ability to give substantive information to prospective college goers.

***GEAR UP Success***  
*GEAR UP students were far more likely to have obtained valuable college information from CFWV and college fairs than students in non-GEAR UP schools.*



**Table 11***College Resources**Very Important Resources – Rank Ordered*

Statewide		GEAR UP		GEAR UP Comparison	
College websites	50.5%	College websites	52.6%	College websites	47.2%
E-mail	31.9%	CFWV	44.6%	Direct mail	28.8%
Direct mail	31.5%	College fairs	38.3%	Email	28.2%

*Very Unimportant Resources – Rank Ordered*

Statewide		GEAR UP		GEAR UP Comparison	
Radio	46.6%	Radio	30.5%	Radio	50.6%
Magazine/Newspapers	37.8%	Magazines/Newspapers	24.1%	Television	41.6%
Signs/Billboards	37.5%	Television	23.5%	Signs/Billboards	41.4%

Parents also serve as valuable resources to their children in the college-going process. To assess the degree to which parents provided their children with academic advice, students were asked about the extent to which their parents helped them in several different areas. This gives college administrators and college program staff an understanding of parental involvement and what types of information and resources are required to help children transition from high school to college.

**Table 12***Parents Assisted with College-Related Decisions*

	Statewide	GEAR UP	GEAR UP Comparison
Choose high school classes	37.3%	42.9%	34.6%
Create list of colleges to apply to	44.8%	46.9%	40.8%
Decide to apply for college	61.0%	62.2%	56.0%
Decide how to finance college	57.3%	58.6%	52.2%
Submit the FAFSA	60.8%	60.8%	56.0%

Table 12 illustrates students' perceptions that parents were very influential in helping decide whether or not to apply for college (61%). How parents influenced decisions related to college, though, varied. The majority of students reported their parents helped them decide how to finance a college education (57.3%) and submit the FAFSA (60.8%). Students in GEAR UP schools reported receiving help from parents at significantly higher rates than students in the comparison group. This is an indication that GEAR UP family engagement activities had an impact.

As shown in Table 13, with or without help from their parents, 85.4 percent of those surveyed had already filed their FAFSA at the time the survey was administered. A completed FAFSA is required in order for a student to receive financial aid. The rate was slightly higher in GEAR UP schools, with 87.6% of students reporting that they had completed the FAFSA. This rate was more than five percentage points higher than that among students in GEAR UP comparison schools. It should be noted that these data are student-reported, and that the percentage of students who actually completed a FAFSA by December 2014 was, according to HEPC data, less than 60%. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that some survey respondents might have had the impression that they completed a FAFSA, but instead applied for a personal identification number (PIN) with the US Department of Education, a step



that had to be completed prior to submitting a FAFSA. Another possible explanation for the FAFSA completion discrepancy is that the federal FAFSA report only includes students aged 18 and younger in order to account for the high school student FAFSA completion population. Students who were 19 or older in high school, an age group that included more than 14% of survey respondents, are considered adults and are not included in the federal report.

Interestingly, students reported their parents were least helpful in creating a list of colleges to which students would apply (44.8%). Results from this question on the 2012 survey were distributed fairly evenly across the possible responses indicating that while parents helped students make the decision to apply to college, they were less likely to help students decide which college to attend. This trend appears to be improving, however, as data from the 2014 survey point to an increase in parental involvement in creating a list of potential colleges.

**Table 13***Filed Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)*

	Statewide	GEAR UP	GEAR UP Comparison
Already filed FAFSA	85.4%	87.6%	82.0%

Parents were least likely to aid their children in choosing high school courses. This metric is particularly important because the courses students take in high school influence not only which colleges they can attend but also have a direct impact on their academic preparation. Given the lack of parental involvement in this area, it may be that high school staff and college access providers should incorporate curriculum advisement as a major focus of their work with students.

**Table 14***College Visitation*

Number of College Campus Visits	Statewide	GEAR UP	GEAR UP Comparison
0	27.0%	19.9%	31.7%
1	22.0%	21.2%	20.9%
2	21.2%	21.8%	19.3%
3	13.8%	17.7%	12.2%
4	5.8%	8.5%	5.9%
5 or more	10.1%	10.9%	10.1%

***GEAR UP Success***  
*GEAR UP students visited college campuses and received direct personal assistance from college personnel at much higher rates than students in comparison schools.*

Finally, visiting a college campus and interacting directly with college personnel can help students obtain valuable information about the college-going process, and can also ease their apprehensions about transitioning from high school to college. When middle school and high school students visit a college campus they experience and learn about college life in ways that pamphlets and e-mails cannot explain. Sometimes city size, college location, student life, and available amenities make a difference in students' decisions to enroll. Such visits also give students the opportunity to speak with college admissions counselors about any concerns they may have with the admission requirements, application process, or financial aid. As shown in Table 14, 73 percent of students had visited at least one college campus. More than 80 percent of GEAR UP students reported as least one college campus visit, while only 68 percent of students in comparison schools had visited a campus.

More than half (57.0%) of the students in the survey received direct, in-person assistance from a college representative at some point in the process of preparing for college (see Table 15), while more than two thirds (70.1%) of students in GEAR UP schools had received similar assistance. The percentage of GEAR UP students receiving assistance from college personnel is even more remarkable when it is considered in relation to the comparison group, in which only 48.9 percent of students had received assistance from college personnel.

**Table 15**

*Assistance from College Personnel*

	Statewide	GEAR UP	GEAR UP Comparison
Received direct personal assistance from college personnel	57.0%	70.1%	48.9%

*Sources of College Information: Summary*

Being academically prepared is essential for college enrollment and success but students must also have resources which provide them with information about college enrollment. It is encouraging to note that the vast majority of high school seniors have had high school staff speak to them about financial aid and college entrance requirements. It appears that students could also benefit from focused advising on the relationship between high school coursework and success in college. This advice could increase the college readiness of students and hopefully increase the college matriculation rate. As a state sponsored program, CFWV is having a profound effect as a collegiate resource for many students. Those who found it to be important considered college at an earlier age and were significantly more likely to be well informed about various financial aid sources.

These survey results can also inform university administrators and college readiness organizations about which resources prospective students utilize when researching and deciding on a college to attend. By targeting the most valued resources, college websites, direct mail, and e-mail, these interested stakeholders will be able to distribute important information about college and be confident that their message is being received.

**III. Financial Aid Awareness**

While the previous section was designed to see which resources students used to make decisions about college, this section will examine the degree to which students were informed about how to finance college. Financial awareness was measured by assessing students' understanding of the costs of college and how well informed they were about financial aid opportunities.

Financing college is a daunting task for potential college-goers, particularly those who come from low-income backgrounds, as do many students in West Virginia. Indeed, researchers have found that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to apply for college because of financial concerns and misconceptions.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, ensuring that West Virginian students accurately estimate the cost of tuition is essential to increasing the state's college-going rate. In 2014, the average undergraduate tuition for in-state students enrolled at West Virginia's four-year public institutions

**Class of 2014**  
**High School Senior**  
**Opinions Survey**  
 page 15



was \$6,661 and \$3,468 at public two-year institutions.<sup>14</sup> Tuition at West Virginia's public four-year institutions is among the lowest in the country, and well below the national average of \$8,851.<sup>14</sup> With lower than average tuition rates it is surprising that more than half of the students across the state overestimated the cost of in-state public tuition. As shown in Table 16, only 33.4 percent of students surveyed accurately estimated the price of attending a four-year college in West Virginia. However, 65.5 percent of students attending a GEAR UP school answered this question correctly, compared to only 21.8 percent of students attending non-GEAR UP schools. This difference suggests that GEAR UP is highly effective at educating students on the cost of attending an in-state college.

**Table 16***Estimated Tuition*

Estimated cost of tuition	Statewide	GEAR UP	GEAR UP Comparison
Up to \$3,000	2.4%	1.0%	3.4%
\$3,001 to \$7K <sup>a</sup>	33.4%	65.5%	21.8%
\$7,001 to \$10K	18.3%	9.0%	19.7%
\$10,001 to \$15K	13.4%	7.3%	13.9%
\$15,001 to \$20K	11.1%	6.8%	11.1%
\$20,001 to \$25K	4.3%	2.3%	4.7%
More than \$25K	3.4%	2.5%	4.3%
Don't Know	13.8%	5.7%	21.0%

<sup>a</sup> 2014 average cost of tuition at a WV public 4-year institution was \$6,661

The GEAR UP program strives to create a strong college-going culture in its schools. One aspect of this endeavor has been to educate students, families, and local communities about the actual cost of tuition at West Virginia public higher education institutions. GEAR UP researchers noticed that misconceptions about college affordability impeded students' desires to matriculate. As a result, the program has employed a variety of methods to help students understand the true cost of college-going. The results of this analysis indicate that these efforts have been successful and have ramifications for students throughout the state. Despite the majority of students being incorrect about the price of college, students were at least informed about the various options of financial aid available throughout the state. The College Board estimates that nationally, students received an average of \$6,110 in college assistance during the 2013-14 academic year, requiring them to only pay 30 percent of their college education out-of-pocket. Students in West Virginia have a myriad of options when it comes to financial aid. They can receive federal, state, institutional, and program-specific scholarships and aid to ease the financial burden of college.

**Table 17***Financial Aid Awareness*

	Statewide	GEAR UP	GEAR UP Comparison
Federal loans	26.7%	32.9%	22.9%
Pell grants	25.8%	35.4%	21.6%
Work study	24.9%	32.4%	21.2%
PROMISE	50.1%	49.0%	46.3%
WV HEGP	22.8%	35.3%	17.5%

	Statewide	GEAR UP	GEAR UP Comparison
WV ESTS	16.3%	25.2%	13.2%
Underwood-Smith	12.8%	20.1%	9.2%
HEAPS	12.5%	21.7%	7.6%
529 Plan	15.8%	21.8%	12.4%
Tax credit	12.4%	19.5%	8.5%
Institutional scholarships	23.7%	27.9%	18.9%

**GEAR UP Success**  
*GEAR UP students are more knowledgeable about college costs and financial aid options than students in comparison schools.*

Table 17 shows the percentage of students who indicated that they were very informed about various financial aid opportunities. Students were the most informed about the PROMISE scholarship (50.1%), federal loans (26.7%), and Pell grants (25.8%). In general, GEAR UP students were more informed about financial aid opportunities than students in the comparison group. In support of the state-sponsored scholarship, West Virginia prioritizes educating high school students on the requirements necessary to receive the PROMISE. Flyers, pamphlets, and posters are utilized by high school administrators and CFWV to further the effort. This publicity ensures that students understand that they must begin preparing for college scholarships by at least the ninth grade. As a result, students were nearly twice as likely to be well-informed about

PROMISE scholarship requirements than they were about any other type of financial aid. However, more attention needs to be placed on informing students of federal loans, particularly regarding repayment requirements and the steep penalties for default. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the three-year default rate for West Virginia graduates is 18.2 percent, which is higher than the national average of 13.7 percent (2011 cohort).

The three sources of financial aid that students were the least knowledgeable about were the Higher Education Adult Part-Time Student grant (HEAPS), tax credits, and the Underwood-Smith Teacher Scholarship program. These results are expected, as 99.7 percent of recent high school graduates attending in-state colleges enroll full-time. HEAPS is an award for part-time students, and thus the vast majority of recent high school graduates are ineligible for this award.

### *Financial Aid Awareness: Summary*

Understanding the price of tuition is essential in college preparation. Students must have realistic expectations regarding tuition to accurately assess whether or not they are able to attend college and which college to attend. More than half of those surveyed overestimated the cost of tuition; however, students in a GEAR UP high school were three times as likely to estimate the price of tuition correctly as those in non-GEAR UP schools. The successful strategies used by GEAR UP should be incorporated into access programs across the state to ensure students have realistic tuition expectations. Despite not knowing the average tuition, students were well informed about several different types of financial aid, primarily the state-funded PROMISE scholarship. However, there is a lack of advisement about the repercussions of borrowing money across the state that needs to be addressed by access providers, higher education institutions, and high schools alike.

**Class of 2014**  
**High School Senior**  
**Opinions Survey**



#### *IV. Collegiate Plans*

According to a report produced by the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, 51 percent of jobs in West Virginia will require postsecondary education by 2020.<sup>4</sup> For both the benefit of the state and its students, it is imperative that high school seniors recognize that a changing economy demands some kind of postsecondary credential. To this end, students were questioned about their plans after high school and if they intended on attending a two- or four-year institution of higher education. Furthermore, if they planned to attend college they were asked about their application strategies, intended major, and institution selection.

**Table 18**

##### *College Plans*

	Statewide	GEAR UP	GEAR UP Comparison
Plan to attend college	86.5%	86.5%	80.5%
<b>Began Considering College</b>			
Prior to high school	64.3%	62.7%	61.3%
During high school	27.5%	29.8%	26.8%
Never considered	8.3%	7.6%	11.8%

College access efforts are usually coupled with early intervention techniques to ensure that students are fully aware of college entry requirements and to give them ample time to begin preparing academically. As shown in Table 18, nearly two-thirds of those surveyed indicated that they had begun considering college enrollment before high school, with only 8.3 percent never considering college. Another 27.5 percent of students began considering college while they were still enrolled in high school. When compared to 2012, the number of students considering college prior to high school decreased by 2.5 percent while those never considering has decreased by 0.1 percent.

Further, the percent of students planning to attend college increased between 2012 and 2014 by 0.3 percent. In 2014, 86.5 percent of high school seniors were planning to attend college, while 86.2 percent were planning to do the same in 2012. Unfortunately, there is a disconnect between the proportion of students who plan to attend college and those who matriculate. When 86.5 percent of students intend to go to college but less than two thirds matriculate immediately after high school graduation, questions remain regarding what makes those who intend to enroll unable to do so.

**Table 19**

##### *Number of Colleges Applied to*

Number Applied To	Statewide	GEAR UP	GEAR UP Comparison
0	22.3%	14.6%	29.1%
1	25.2%	17.4%	27.2%
2	17.3%	19.5%	16.8%
3	15.9%	18.9%	11.5%
4	7.9%	13.3%	5.9%
5	5.9%	8.2%	4.6%
6 or more	5.5%	8.0%	4.9%



**GEAR UP Success**  
*GEAR UP students submitted a greater number of college applications than students in comparison schools.*

The intention to go to college was also reflected in the number of colleges to which students applied. As shown in Table 19, about 22.3 percent of students had not applied to college, while nearly 78 percent had applied to at least one institution. One quarter of students surveyed had applied to one institution, 17.3 percent to two, and 15.9 percent to three. More than 85 percent of GEAR UP students had applied to at least one college, compared to only 71 percent in the comparison group. Research has shown that a combination of parental college completion, high income, and strong academic ability typically result in students applying to multiple institutions.<sup>15</sup>

**Table 20**

*College Attendance and Selection*

	Statewide	GEAR UP	GEAR UP Comparison
Plan to attend college fall 2014	75.5%	76.0%	69.0%
Already been accepted	66.5%	65.6%	60.1%
<b>Sector of Attending College <sup>a</sup></b>			
2-Year WV public	17.5%	33.5%	11.0%
4-Year WV public	64.3%	55.6%	68.7%
WV independent	8.0%	6.3%	9.4%
Out-of-state public or private	9.8%	4.3%	10.6%
WV for-profit	0.3%	0.2%	0.3%
Online	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%

<sup>a</sup> Among students who were already accepted to college.

Table 20 details students' plans immediately following high school. Approximately 75.5 percent of respondents indicated they would attend college in the fall of 2014, and 66.5 percent had already been accepted. The percentage of students planning to attend college in the fall 2014 semester was higher among GEAR UP students (76.0%) than students in the comparison group (69%). The reported 66.5 percent of students already accepted into a college or university is slightly inflated from the state's 56 percent college-going rate, suggesting that students might be including plans to attend less than 2-year postsecondary schooling which is not included in the state's college-going rate calculation. What is troubling about these statistics is the significant number of students who plan on attending college in the fall but do not matriculate. If access providers were able to identify the specific impediments these students face regarding matriculation, efforts may be made to target this group.

Students were also asked what college they would attend in the fall. This question was asked only to students who reported they intended to attend college. Approximately 81.8 percent of these students planned to attend a public institution in West Virginia with 64.3 percent of respondents attending a four-year institution and 17.5 percent attending a two-year institution. An additional 7.3 percent of students planned to attend an in-state independent four-year non-profit institution resulting in nearly nine out of ten college-goers remaining in the state for their postsecondary education.

**Class of 2014**  
**High School Senior**  
**Opinions Survey**



This trend was representative of enrollment patterns in West Virginia's public higher education institutions, with 23.6 percent of traditional aged students enrolled in community and technical colleges, while 76.4 percent were enrolled in four-year institutions in the fall of 2014.

Having such a high proportion of high school seniors attend college in-state has important economic implications for West Virginia. According to the West Virginia Economic Outlook 2012, 48.1 percent of all graduates from West Virginia higher education institutions were employed within the state in 2010, a trend that has been on the rise since 2003. When only looking at West Virginia born students, that number jumps to 58 percent.<sup>16</sup> Given the propensity for students to both continue their education in-state and also work in-state, it seems that increasing the college-going rate of this population would substantially aid the job skills gap the state's workforce is currently experiencing.

**Table 21***Highest Degree Wished to Obtain*

<b>Degree Goal</b>	<b>Statewide</b>	<b>GEAR UP</b>	<b>GEAR UP Comparison</b>
No degree	1.9%	1.4%	2.3%
High school/GED	9.7%	9.2%	14.5%
Vocational training	6.8%	10.7%	7.4%
Vocational or associate's degree	9.9%	13.4%	9.2%
Bachelor's degree	27.7%	29.8%	28.3%
Master's degree	27.9%	23.4%	22.9%
Doctoral	16.0%	12.0%	15.5%

In addition to whether or not they intended to enroll, respondents were asked about the highest degree they wished to obtain. Table 21 shows that 81.6 percent of West Virginia seniors hoped to receive at least a vocational or associate's degree. About 9.9 percent hoped to earn a vocational or associate's degree, 27.7 percent a bachelor's degree, 27.9 percent a master's degree, and 16.0 percent a doctoral degree. An additional 6.8 percent sought to achieve some vocational postsecondary training.

**Table 22***College Attendance*

<b>Intended Status</b>	<b>Statewide</b>	<b>GEAR UP</b>	<b>GEAR UP Comparison</b>
Full-time	87.7%	83.1%	86.4%
Part-time	12.3%	16.9%	13.6%
<b>Intended major</b>			
Allied Health or Nursing	23.4%	28.1%	21.9%
Arts	5.3%	4.4%	5.4%
Business	9.0%	6.6%	8.5%
Career and Technical Education	5.5%	8.2%	7.1%
Communications	1.8%	1.5%	0.9%
Computer Science/Technology*	3.8%	3.5%	4.9%
Education	8.6%	10.2%	8.5%

*College Attendance Major Continued*

<b>Intended major</b>	<b>Statewide</b>	<b>GEAR UP</b>	<b>GEAR UP Comparison</b>
Engineering/Math*	7.2%	5.0%	9.4%
Humanities	2.3%	2.1%	1.6%
Natural/Physical Science*	12.9%	10.6%	11.8%
Social Science	8.8%	7.5%	8.3%
Undecided	11.4%	12.3%	11.6%

\* Indicates a STEM major.

About 87.7 percent of students who report they are college-goers planned on attending full-time. In West Virginia, full-time students are those that take at least 12 credit hours a semester and part-time students are those who are enrolled for anything less than 12 hours. While a 12-credit-hour course load is considered full-time, research suggests that students who complete a minimum of 15 hours per semester tend to be more successful academically, are more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree within four years or an associate’s degree within two years, and have higher completion rates than students who take fewer hours.<sup>17</sup> Traditional-aged students who attend college part-time also tend to have lower retention rates and are less likely to graduate within five years than similar students who attend full-time.<sup>18</sup> Recognizing the benefits of on-time degree completion, West Virginia has adopted a marketing campaign called “15 to Finish.” This nationwide campaign, which originated at the University of Hawaii, promotes on-time degree completion by educating students on the benefits of completing 15 hours per semester or 30 hours per year.

As shown in Table 22, the most popular intended majors of the class of 2014 were allied health and nursing (23.4%), natural/physical sciences (12.9%), and business (9%). Approximately 11.4 percent of students were still undecided. Another 23.9 percent of students intended to major in a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) field, 2.1 percent less than when the survey was given to students in 2012. With this in mind, higher education institutions, high schools, and college access providers may want to develop support structures for students who are interested in pursuing STEM fields to help them enroll in and eventually graduate with these necessary credentials.

*Collegiate Plans: Summary*

Students in this survey had overwhelmingly chosen to attend college. Nearly nine out of ten students reported that they plan to attend college at some point in their life, while two-thirds had already been accepted. Moreover, 81.8 percent of those accepted to college were accepted to an in-state public institution, and 87.7 percent of students planned on attending college full-time. While degree goals have remained relatively stable over time, the percent of those who planned to attend and those who had been accepted both increased since 2012. These are encouraging signs as numerous reports suggest that the number of West Virginia jobs requiring a college degree is expected to continue to rise.



### V. *College Decisions*

The previous section concentrated on the number of students attending college. In this section, we explore why students made the decision to attend or not attend college. Understanding the reasons students choose not to attend college is just as informative as knowing why they did. Respondents were asked several questions about this decision, along with questions pertaining to finances in order to better understand the relationship between tuition, financial aid, and attending college.

Students who did not plan on attending college at any point in the future were asked about factors that played into their decision as shown in Table 23. Over half (52.1%) of those not attending cited plans to look for employment after high school, followed by 41.9 percent needing a break from school, and 40.2 percent having a well-paying job already lined up. These results indicate that financial awareness plays a key role for students who do not attend college. In this survey, 85.7 percent of students who were eligible for free and reduced lunch did not plan on attending college, compared to 88.5 percent of those who were not eligible. It may be that students from low-income families have to place immediate financial needs over their desire to attend college. As a result, these students are less likely to plan on enrolling in college after graduation.

**Table 23**

*Very Important Factors in Decision to Attend or Not Attend College, Rank Ordered*

*Reasons to Not Attend*<sup>a</sup>

Statewide	GEAR UP	GEAR UP Comparison
Looking for job after HS	Looking for job after HS	Looking for job after HS
Need a break from school	Need a break from school	Need a break from school
Well-paying job lined up	Well-paying job lined up	Well-paying job lined up
Costs too much	Costs too much	Costs too much
Not related to future occupation	Not related to future occupation	Not related to future occupation

*Reasons to Attend*<sup>b</sup>

Statewide	GEAR UP	GEAR UP Comparison
Offer interested major	Affordability	Offers interested major
Affordability	Offer interested major	Affordability
School offered scholarship	School offered scholarship	School offered scholarship
PROMISE accepted	PROMISE accepted	PROMISE accepted
School representatives made good impression	Located near home	School representatives made good impression

<sup>a</sup> Among those students with no plans to attend college in the future.

<sup>b</sup> Among those students with plans to attend college in the fall 2014 semester.

Students who planned to attend college in the fall cited the availability of their intended major (73.1%) as the most important factor that influenced their selection of a specific college, followed by affordability (69.7%), and institutional scholarships (42.8%). While intended major was important, these results indicate that tuition and financial aid also play a large role in the decision to attend, as three of the top five reasons students chose a particular college were related to student finances. In fact, research has found that affordability and financial aid availability were the primary reasons that qualified high school students failed to matriculate.<sup>19</sup>

**Table 24***Financial Aid*<sup>a</sup>

<b>Ability to Afford a Public Four-Year College in WV with Aid</b>	<b>Statewide</b>	<b>GEAR UP</b>	<b>GEAR UP Comparison</b>
Definitely	38.3%	39.2%	36.7%
Probably	38.1%	36.4%	39.0%
Probably not	6.3%	6.1%	4.6%
Definitely not	2.1%	2.5%	2.5%
Not sure	15.2%	15.8%	17.1%

*Source of Financial Aid*

<b>Source of Financial Aid</b>	<b>Statewide</b>	<b>GEAR UP</b>	<b>GEAR UP Comparison</b>
Federal loan	47.7%	49.1%	48.2%
Institutional scholarship	68.2%	67.8%	64.4%
Military program	10.8%	13.6%	11.6%
Other loan	46.2%	50.0%	47.0%
Parents or other relative	77.3%	74.7%	74.2%
Pell grant	48.5%	63.6%	47.5%
Personal savings	62.8%	61.6%	62.7%
Private source scholarship	38.7%	37.4%	38.2%
PROMISE scholarship	43.4%	41.0%	42.9%
State need-based aid	41.5%	55.7%	37.1%
Work-study	41.5%	45.5%	38.0%

<sup>a</sup> Among those students with plans to attend college in the fall 2014 semester.

Encouragingly, more than three quarters of those who planned to attend college in the fall believed that they could afford tuition at a public West Virginia higher education institution with the help of various financial aid resources, as shown in Table 24. Since affordability and financial aid are some of the most important reasons cited for attending college, attending a low-cost in-state public institution is often the most likely scenario for many students. Out-of-state and private institutions have higher tuitions and an increased total cost of attendance compared to in-state and thus would be less attractive to budget-minded college-goers. This finding, coupled with the increased likelihood that in-state college-goers will subsequently work in-state, makes it critical for in-state public institutions to keep tuition costs low.

Finally, students were asked about what sources they planned to utilize to finance college. Parents (77.3%), institutional scholarships (68.2%), and personal savings (62.8%) were most frequently cited as sources to pay for their college education. According to the College Board, a majority of students pay for college using federal loans, Pell grants, and institutional grants.<sup>20</sup> The students' responses in this survey indicate there may be a disconnect between how they believe they will finance college and what will actually happen once they enter college. As shown earlier, students are unlikely to know the price of tuition at a public four-year West Virginia institution of higher education, and thus more work needs to be done to educate potential college-goers on realistic tuition estimates and financial aid resources available to help them afford college.



**Table 25**  
*College Job Patterns<sup>a</sup>*

<b>Work to Finance Education?</b>	<b>Statewide</b>	<b>GEAR UP</b>	<b>GEAR UP Comparison</b>
Yes	84.8%	86.8%	83.6%
No	15.2%	13.2%	16.4%
<b>Planned work hours per week</b>			
1-9 hours per week	15.7%	17.5%	14.5%
10-19 hours per week	31.0%	28.2%	29.3%
20-29 hours per week	33.7%	30.3%	33.8%
30-39 hours per week	12.2%	15.7%	12.2%
40 or more hours per week	7.5%	8.4%	10.2%

<sup>a</sup> Among those students with plans to attend college in the fall 2014 semester.

Even though students have multiple options for financial aid, sometimes aid does not completely cover the costs of attending college. Students may not qualify for certain types of financial aid but still wish to work their way through college. For others, financial aid may help with a few expenses, but students need to work in order to meet the financial needs not covered by financial aid. As shown in Table 25, approximately 85 percent of students planned on working while in college in order to help finance their post-secondary education. Fewer than half (46.7%) of those planning on working said they would work part time, under 20 hours, while the rest (53.4%) would work more hours. At many institutions, students who work for the university, such as in work-study or assistantships, are only allowed to work a maximum of 20 hours a week in order to maintain a balance between working and studying. Some research suggests that many students benefit from working during college by developing time-management skills, independence, and other skills important to success in post-college careers. However, excessive work (more than 20 hours per week) has been shown to result in students being less involved with school, having less time to interact with faculty, and earning lower grade point averages than students who work fewer hours.<sup>21</sup>

### *College Decision: Summary*

One of the main concerns students had when choosing whether or not to go to college was affordability. This concern was also echoed in their choices about which college to attend. Nearly two-thirds of those surveyed indicated financial costs were the most important reason for choosing a specific college. Fortunately, nearly three fourths believe that with the help of financial aid they would be able to afford a post-secondary education in West Virginia. However, differences between how students traditionally pay for college and how they intended to pay while in high school paint two different pictures. Students are unable to accurately estimate tuition at an in-state institution and also believe their parents and personal savings will be able to cover tuition when in reality they are more likely to rely on federal loans, institutional scholarships, and Pell grants. Special attention should be given to educating high school seniors on the real cost of attendance and the most common financial aid resources used in financing a college education.



## *VI. Discussion*

The results of the survey reflect many of the positive initiatives underway in West Virginia to increase the college-going rate of high school students. The majority of students reported being enrolled in a high school curriculum pathway designed to prepare them to enter a two- or four-year higher education institution. High school staff actively spoke with students about college entrance requirements and financial aid, and students were well informed about the PROMISE scholarship. Encouragingly, nearly 9 out of 10 students aspired to attend college at some point in the future. However, there is a disconnect between student aspirations and reality. Less than 55 percent of the 2014 high school graduates enrolled in a higher education institution (not including less than 2-year institutions). This research may help to shed light on some of the intermediary factors at play between student aspirations and enrollment patterns. We discuss some of these points here.

One mismatch discovered through this research was that, on average, students reported being academically prepared for college, but a sizable portion of the 2014 graduating class required remediation upon college enrollment. Remediation may occur through completion of non-credit-bearing developmental courses in English and mathematics, but might also include tutoring, learning laboratories, and other forms of individualized instruction. Students reported an average GPA of 3.30 and ACT score of 21.22, which is similar to statewide averages. Based on this information alone, it would seem that students were academically prepared for college-level work. However, of the 2014 graduating class, 25.6 percent entering a four-year in-state public institution and 65.4 percent entering a two-year in-state public institution required remediation. ACT's academic readiness benchmarks may shed light on some of this mismatch. Academic readiness benchmark scores are defined as the minimum scores needed to predict success in corresponding credit-bearing college courses. In the class of 2014, only 19 percent of West Virginia students who took the ACT scored at or above ACT benchmarks on all four subject tests (English, math, science, and reading). The math benchmark is particularly troubling, as only 31 percent of students met or exceeded the academic readiness score associated with being prepared for college-level mathematics. With such a low percentage of students meeting these benchmarks, special attention should be paid to better aligning high school curriculum with college readiness benchmarks.

One effective strategy to better align expectations is to bring high school educators and college faculty together. Articulation agreements ensure that high school staff and college faculty are all familiar with what is required of students at the college level. If high school staff understands what is expected from students, they can begin to craft a curriculum that gives students the best chance of succeeding in college. Recently, K-12 and higher education faculty created college transition courses that are designed to provide this type of alignment. Students who are deemed not college-ready based on junior year test scores take a transition math class in their senior year that is designed to target their specific deficiencies and get them college-ready. In so doing, students are made aware of the academic standards expected in higher education institutions and are given the opportunity to meet these expectations. The transition math and English courses have been implemented in all public high schools in West Virginia.

A second mismatch discovered in this research was identified as a discrepancy between the actual price of tuition in West Virginia and what students perceived it to be. West Virginia currently ranks 42nd in the country for average tuition and fees at four-year public institutions.<sup>22</sup> The price of tuition in West Virginia is nearly 55 percent lower than the most expensive state, New Hampshire, and nearly one-third lower than the national average. So, why then, are students overestimating the cost of tuition when tuition rates at West Virginia public higher education institutions are among the lowest in the country? As a state, we need to place more emphasis on the true price of tuition.

**Class of 2014**  
**High School Senior**  
**Opinions Survey**



Understanding that West Virginia institutions are affordable options is critical in a state that consistently ranks 49th in average salary.<sup>23</sup> Affordability was cited by both those who do and do not plan to attend college as playing into their decisions about enrollment. Students at GEAR UP high schools were significantly more likely to know the tuition of public in-state four-year institutions. GEAR UP schools maintain a college-going culture throughout all participating high schools and a main goal of the program is to educate students and their families about planning, applying, and paying for education and training beyond high school. The program's intense focus in this area should be replicated throughout the state. If students realize that higher education is affordable, especially in conjunction with financial aid, they may be more likely to attend college.

A third mismatch centers on FAFSA completion rates. More than 80 percent of students surveyed indicated that they completed the FAFSA, but Higher Education Policy Commission data on actual FAFSA completion rates tell a different story. In truth, fewer than 60 percent of students completed the federal financial aid application in 2014. This raises an important question – Why are more than 40 percent of students not completing a FAFSA? A 2011 study conducted by the publisher of the website FinAid.org points to five common reasons that students gave for not completing a FAFSA: 1) they thought they were ineligible for aid; 2) they felt they did not have a financial need; 3) they were concerned that completing the FAFSA would cause them to incur debt; 4) they did not have sufficient information on the application process; and 5) they assumed that the application process would be too much work.<sup>24</sup>

Once students complete a FAFSA, they receive a wealth of information from institutions on the financial aid options available to them, and many discover that they are eligible for assistance they had not yet considered. It is therefore reasonable to surmise that educating students on the benefits of FAFSA completion and offering programs that provide FAFSA assistance to students and their families would result in higher completion rates, which could in turn lead to higher college-going rates as more students are made aware that college is an affordable option. GEAR UP data from this report demonstrate the value of such programs, as GEAR UP students were much more likely to have reported completing a FAFSA than students in the comparison group.

The final mismatch focuses on financial aid resources. Specifically, why do students overwhelmingly report that they will rely on their parents' income and savings to pay for college, rather than one of the many financial aid programs that are available to them? Approximately 51 percent of students qualified for free and reduced price lunch, which indicates that their families were not in a position to subsidize their college education. Nonetheless, they planned on using savings and family resources to pay for college tuition. This is particularly surprising given that students also tended to grossly overestimate tuition. The misunderstanding of payment options may have been a result of high school students simply not knowing how many financial aid resources were actually available to them.

According to the College Board's report, 2014 Trends in Student Aid, undergraduate students in the United States received 54 percent of the money needed to pay for college in the form of grants, 37 percent as loans, and 9 percent as tax credits, tax deductions, and Federal Work Study.<sup>20</sup> Navigating the multitude of financial aid options available to prospective college bound students can be daunting. This is particularly true for first-generation students as they are less likely to have been exposed to information about college in their homes, let alone information about financial aid. It is important that all students are provided free, clear, and up-to-date information about available funding resources. CFVW offers such a service to students in West Virginia. Not only does CFVW provide students with an overview of state-sponsored funding opportunities, but it also provides a financial aid tutorial to help students build their own plans for the future.

College access providers, parents, and high school staff alike should actively engage students with this resource so that students become knowledgeable and ultimately responsible for their financial aid planning. Armed with this information, students may be more likely to matriculate and less likely to contribute to an ever increasing student loan default rate.

If West Virginia wants to remain competitive in the 21st century economy, educating our students must become a top priority. As previously mentioned, West Virginia will be facing a “middle skills” job deficit by 2018.<sup>2</sup> Estimates call for an additional 20,000 certificate or degree holders beyond what the state is already projected to produce. Understanding high school students’ postsecondary enrollment patterns is essential to meeting these projections. While this research has shown that students throughout the state are succeeding in several areas, it has also identified several troubling mismatches between what students report and what we know to be true. These mismatches likely contribute to the disconnect between the state’s low matriculation rate and the high college aspirations of high school seniors. If stakeholders create programs to target these areas it may help to close the gap between aspiration and reality, increase the state’s college-going rate, and ultimately help the state meet its workforce needs.



### *Methodological Appendix*

The target population for the survey was all West Virginia students who were high school seniors in spring 2014. Respondents were selected through quasi-random, stratified sampling. High schools were the primary sample unit, with the sampling frame constructed from a list of all high schools (N=115 in 2014) maintained by the West Virginia Department of Education. High schools were stratified by the size of the senior class as well as the three U.S. Congressional districts in West Virginia in order to make the sample as representative as possible. High schools were assigned to Congressional districts based on the address of their main administrative office. To stratify by senior class size, each high school was assigned to a quartile. The lowest quartile had 87 or fewer students in the senior class, followed by 88 to 143, 144 to 206, and 207 or more. Data on senior class size were obtained from the West Virginia Department of Education.

The survey was also designed as an evaluation tool for the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) project. GEAR UP is coordinated by HEPC and provides educational services to help students plan, apply, and pay for college. All GEAR UP schools (n=14) were purposefully sampled for this analysis. Further, in an effort to ensure that GEAR UP students were compared to a similar sample of students who did not receive GEAR UP services, GEAR UP comparison schools (n=14) were identified. Comparison schools for GEAR UP were selected prior to survey administration using propensity score matching. These comparison schools were similar to the GEAR UP schools on both demographic and academic metrics. As such, they served as a control group to measure the program's success.

In total, 64 schools—including all GEAR UP and comparison schools were selected to receive the survey. The survey was administered via high school guidance counselors who were asked to distribute hard copies of the instrument during the homeroom period. To illicit a high response rate, four follow-up contacts were made with guidance counselors and principals. All told, 45 of the 64 (about 70.3%) high schools responded. The sample represents responses from 3,581 students, or about 17.5 percent of the target population (n=20,493). The response rate was significantly lower than in previous years, due in large part to a series of winter storms and subsequent weather-related school closures and delays. The state also experienced a major chemical leak that contaminated the drinking water supply of a large percentage of the state's population, resulting in additional school closures. Consequently, several schools, including some GEAR UP comparison schools, chose to opt out of the study. Data were weighted to ensure that responses were representative of the entire high school senior class of 2014.

### *Schools Participating in the Survey*

#### *GEAR UP Schools*

Clay County High School  
Lincoln County High School  
Mingo Central Comprehensive High School  
Mount View High School  
River View High School  
Roane County High School  
Scott High School  
Sherman High School  
Summers County High School  
Tug Valley High School  
Webster County High School  
Westside High School  
Wirt County High School  
Wyoming County East High School

#### *GEAR UP Comparison Schools*

Braxton County High School  
Clay-Battelle High School  
Huntington High School  
James Monroe High School  
Midland Trail High School  
Montcalm High School  
Oak Glen High School  
Paden City High School  
Philip Barbour High School Complex  
Richwood High School  
Sissonville High School

*Other Schools*

Brooke High School  
Capital High School  
East Hardy High School  
Greenbrier West High School  
Herbert Hoover High School  
Hundred High School  
Independence High School  
Man High School  
Morgantown High School  
Musselman High School

Nicholas County High School  
Paw Paw High School  
Poca High School  
Ravenswood High School  
Ripley High School  
Saint Marys High School  
South Charleston High School  
Wahama High School  
Wheeling Park High School  
Williamstown High School





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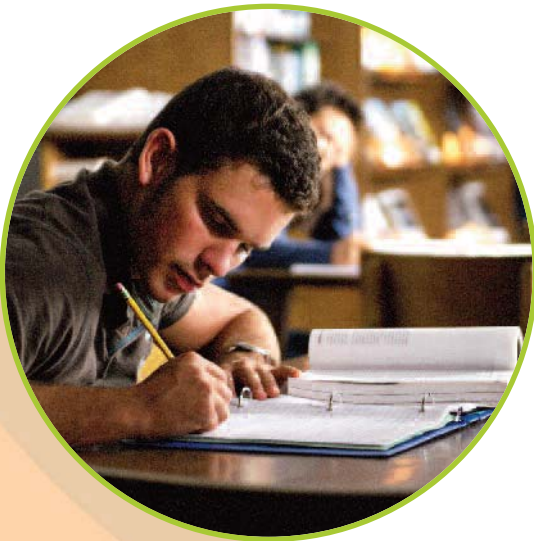


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