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COST, LOCATION, AND ACADEMICS: HOW ILLINOIS HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS DECIDE ON A 4- YEAR COLLEGE

PART OF THE 2022 ILLINOIS COLLEGE-
GOING SURVEY SERIES

REPORT 1

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This report was reviewed by experts to ensure that its contents are rigorous, accurate, and useful to educators and policymakers with varying levels of background knowledge. The reviewers of this report included:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report focuses on the college choice process of 1,251 Illinois high school seniors (Class of 2022) who were intending to attend a four-year college in Fall 2022. The survey was conducted in the summer of 2022. In this report, we use survey responses to answer the following questions:

1. What **general factors** do diverse groups of Illinois high school seniors consider in choosing a four-year college?
2. What is the **single decisive factor** that most animates the four-year college choice for different groups of Illinois high school seniors?
3. How do high school seniors view four-year colleges **inside and outside Illinois**, and why do seniors choose to stay or leave the state for colleges?
4. What are students' **intentions and interactions** with four-year colleges that may influence these decisions?

We found that the answers to these questions differed by student groups, but we also found important similarities across factors considered by high school graduates regardless of student characteristics.

General Factors for Decision-Making. High school seniors in our sample ranked their **perceptions of cost** as the most important factor for their decision-making process for college selection, regardless of race/ethnicity, region, and/or parental education. It was both the most generally considered and the most decisive factor for college selection.

After cost, the following relevant factors emerged for students:

- **Academic reputation** and, to a lesser extent, **social environment** and **economic opportunities** were also strong considerations, even decisive ones.
- **Location**—including both staying close to home or wishing to be farther from home—was also highly considered generally but was less often used to make a final decision.

Staying in or Leaving the State for College. This report examined the specific viewpoints of students who intended to stay or leave the state for college. This is a key issue for the state, given that 47.6% of four-year college-goers leave the state (IBHE, 2023). In general, we found that:

- **Stayers and leavers have vastly different demographic profiles.** *Leavers* are more likely to be White, from the suburbs or downstate, children of parents with a high educational attainment level, and feel very prepared for college. In contrast, *stayers* are more likely to be Black or Latinx (although a greater percentage of Black students leave compared to Latinx students), from

the city of Chicago, children of parents with lower educational attainment levels, and feel less prepared for college.

- **Both stayers and leavers made final decisions based on cost and academic reputation.** However, they weighed these and other factors differently, as described in the forthcoming bullets.
- **Stayers more consider near-term pragmatic factors in selecting a college, while leavers more consider the college experience and long-term benefits.** *Stayers* are focused on near-term *pragmatics*, with cost being a primary consideration, along with family and friends' opinions and the possibility of working during college. *Leavers* emphasize the college experience and college's longer-term (rather than short-term) economic benefits: they are more likely to consider social environment and athletics/extracurriculars, as well as the academic reputation and reputation for job placement of colleges. For *leavers*, social environment and academic reputation are weighed more in the decision.
- **Stayers and leavers have different informational, logistical, and financial contexts for college decision-making.** *Stayers* are more likely to rely on need-based aid (such as federal grants), while *leavers* are more likely to have loans or no financial aid at all. *Stayers* are more likely to get information about colleges from teachers and counselors, while *leavers* are more likely to get information from the internet. Finally, while most students will move from home to attend college, *stayers* are more likely to commute to college and live at home.
- **Stayers and leavers have divergent views of the state's college offerings.** Majorities of *stayers* and *leavers* believe that Illinois colleges have the best overall cost across public and private universities, although *stayers* believed this much more than *leavers*. This is the one point on which *stayers* and *leavers* agree at all. On all other factors, *stayers* think Illinois colleges have better reputations, social environments, and so forth, while *leavers* think out-of-state colleges are better. For *leavers*, the perception of lower cost is clearly not sufficient to compensate for their perceptions about academic reputation and social environment of Illinois institutions—and indeed their perception of cost shows room for improvement.
- **Leavers report that lower costs, accompanied by better quality of colleges, would keep them in-state.** While a slight majority of *leavers* viewed in-state college costs as better, far from all agreed. Indeed, *leavers* reported that lower tuition, better quality of colleges, and more financial aid could have swayed them to stay in Illinois. As a large proportion of *leavers* go no further than neighboring states, investing in lowering costs further and improving perceptions of institutional quality could be important policy levers.

Race/ethnicity. Across racial/ethnic groups, there was a similar consideration of many factors, especially cost. However, there were also key differences. When comparing each of the groups below to a comparison group of all other racial/ethnic groups combined, we found that:

- **Latinx students** were more likely to consider college diversity, more likely to decide based on opportunities to work during college, and less likely to consider or decide based on a college social environment. For those concerned about location, being closer to home was vital. Latinx students were also more likely to commute to campus from home than other students, more likely to have federal Pell grants and work-study for college financing, and more likely to gain information about college from teachers, counselors, and college fairs.
- **Black students** were more likely to consider college diversity and athletics/extracurriculars than other groups. They were less likely to consider family and friends' opinions as an overall factor, but this changed as a decisive factor, as Black students' final decision was indeed more based on where their family wanted them to go than for other groups. Other decisive factors involved admissions processes, support for diverse students, and opportunity to work during college. They decided less based on social environment. Black students concerned with location wished to be further from home and were more likely to live on campus. Black students were more likely to have federal Pell grants and work-study for college financing, as well as more likely to gain information about college from counselors and college fairs.
- **White students** more generally considered athletics/extracurriculars and opinions of family and friends than other populations, and more made their final decision based on social environment and job placement after college. Unlike Black and Latinx students, White students were more likely to gather information about college from family and friends. White students were also more likely to live on campus and have multiple funding sources, private loans, or no aid at all.

Region. Chicago students showed differences from their peers in the Chicago suburbs and downstate counties, as the two latter had similar preferences.

- Specifically, Chicago students more considered college diversity and less considered academic reputation and social environment. The inverse was true for suburban and downstate students.
- Chicago students were also more likely to commute and to be receiving state MAP grants, federal Pell grants, and work-study funding. In contrast, suburban and downstate students were more likely to live on campus.

Parental Education. Black and Latinx students were the most likely to be first generation four-year college students. Black students' parents were likely to have a high school degree, whereas parents of Latinx students were more likely to have less than a high school degree. White parents, on the other hand, were most likely to have at least a bachelor's degree. As parental education increased, the likelihood of leaving the state for college also increased, explaining some of the trends in this report.

Conclusion. While most students consider cost, location, academic reputation, social environment, and economic opportunity when selecting a college, regardless of their identities, the weight assigned to most factors varies across the different populations

within the state of Illinois. In designing a college system that appeals to and works for all, consideration of these different needs is critical.

For the particular issue of college outmigration from Illinois, the results suggest a two-pronged approach that:

(a) supports students who are likely to stay in state—particularly Chicago-based Black and Latinx students—with college preparation, application, and need-based financial aid, and

(b) elevates the perceptions of Illinois (both the state and its colleges) with all students, but particularly those most likely to leave: White suburban and downstate students with highly educated parents.

Cost, Location, and Academics:

How Illinois High School Seniors Decide on a 4-Year College

Part 1 of the *2022 Illinois College-Going Survey Series*

Introduction

In May 2022, we conducted a survey of Illinois high school seniors to ask about their college decision-making. This report—Part 1 of the *2022 Illinois College-Going Survey Series*—focuses on the decision-making of a sample of 1,251 Illinois high school seniors who reported that they would attend a **four-year college** in Fall 2022. Subsequent reports in the series will investigate students with different college intentions. In this report, we use survey responses to answer the following questions:

1. What **general factors** do diverse groups of Illinois high school seniors consider in choosing a four-year college?
2. What is the **single decisive factor** that most animates the four-year college choice for different groups of Illinois high school seniors?
3. How do high school seniors view four-year colleges **inside and outside Illinois**, and why do seniors choose to stay or leave the state for colleges?
4. What are students' **intentions and interactions** with four-year colleges that may influence these decisions?

The goal of this work was both practical and theoretical. Practically, we sought to inform the State of Illinois and its many institutions of higher education about college decision-making, in service of policy and practice that will better serve Illinois students. We partnered with the Office of the Governor of Illinois, along with several state agencies, for this purpose. We particularly emphasized the issue of Illinois students leaving the state for college, given that almost half of Illinois four-year college-goers leave the state (IBHE, 2023).

Theoretically, we sought to add to a body of literature that has traditionally found that cost, academic reputation, program availability, and location, as well as parental and peer advice, are important factors for college choice (Dixon & Martin, 1991); this

work contributes a robust examination of the differential importance of those factors for diverse student populations within our state. For a complete literature review and explanation of the goals and methodology of this survey, please see the *Technical Guide* (Barragan Torres, 2023) of this **2022 Illinois College-Going Survey Series**. Here, we simply note that this work is relevant because college-choice factors inform the design and implementation of postsecondary access-related policies, especially with an equity perspective (Palmer et al., 2004; Park & Hossler, 2014). These factors have implications for high-school counselors (Espinoza, 2002), as well as students and their families, especially those with less resources (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019).

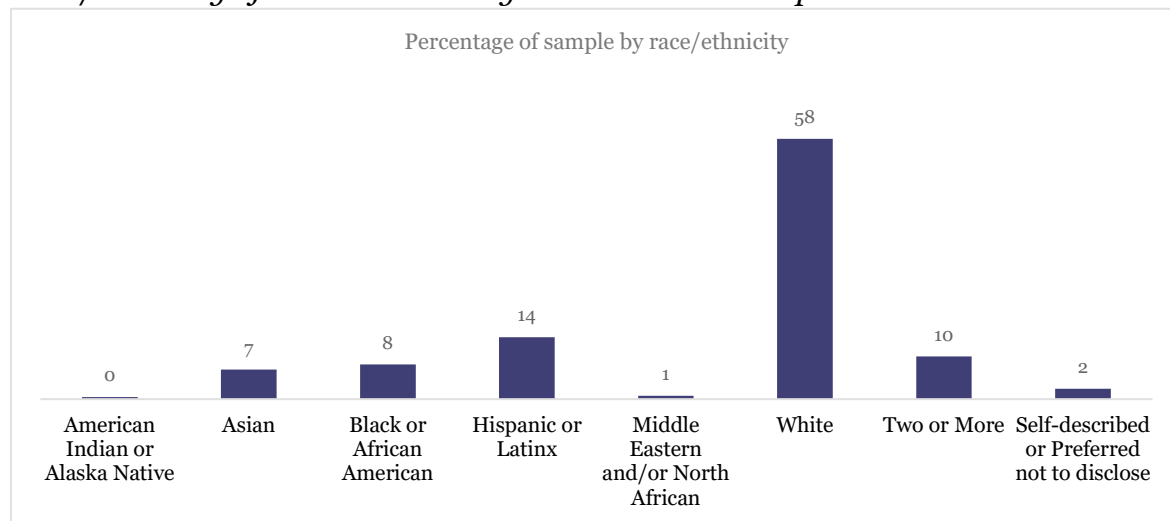
In this report, we first describe the sample of 4-year college goers, and then we dig into each research question. Given the characteristics of our sample, we detail the answers to each of these questions for different student populations by race/ethnicity, region, and whether they decided to *stay* or *leave* Illinois for college. We also summarize the sample in terms of parental education and how it relates to first generation status, given its role with college selection (Niu, 2015). However, we are unable to test for significant differences across parental education due to smaller sample sizes. We conducted tests of means to assess significant differences between groups whenever sample sizes allowed. All differences where probabilities are smaller than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$) are considered statistically significant for the purpose of this report.

SECTION 1: Four-Year College-Going Sample

About 51% of our total survey sample, 1,251 of 2,464 high school seniors, said they were planning to attend a 4-year institution in Fall 2022. Of this group, nearly 70% (N=865) provided sociodemographic information, including race/ethnicity, location within the state, and parental education.^a Figure 1 shows that four-year college-going seniors in our sample were statistically more likely to be White and less likely to be Hispanic or Latinx.^b Extrapolating from the Illinois Board of Higher Education’s report on Fall 2021 4-year college enrollments by Illinois high school graduates (IBHE, 2023), we estimate the population of Illinois high school seniors enrolling in 4-year college in Fall 2022 is 57% White, 18% Latinx, 12% Black, 10% Asian, and 3% 2 or more races. Compared to these numbers, we slightly over-sampled White students (58%) and students of two or more races (10%), and slightly under-sampled Latinx (14%), Black (8%), and Asian (7%) students.^c Due to differences in sample size, we can only make statistical comparisons in this report between Black or African American^d, Latinx, and White students, as well as students who identified as having two or more races/ethnicities.

Figure 1.

Race/Ethnicity of Four-Year College Goers in Our Sample.



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

^b From here onward, we use the term Latinx; however, the option was to select Hispanic or Latinx ethnicity.

^c We suspect that our survey methodology, which allowed students to check all races/ethnicities that apply, enhanced our 2+ races sample relative to IBHE’s data.

^d From here onward, we use the term Black; however, the option was to select Black or African American race.

In terms of region, our four-year sample was comprised of 49% high school seniors in the downstate region (anywhere outside of Chicago and the Chicago suburbs in Cook and the Collar Counties), 12% in Chicago, and 39% in the Collar and Suburban Cook counties—i.e., the Chicago suburbs (the term used from hereon out). We note that Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) data on high school senior enrollments suggest that seniors were located 28% downstate, 17% in Chicago, and 55% in Collar and Suburban Cook counties. While these data are not perfectly analogous, given one is *all* high school seniors and the other is seniors *who were 4-year college-goers*, we suspect our study over-sampled the downstate population and under-sampled students in Chicago and the suburban counties. However, we were satisfied with this sample, as it allowed us to make strong statistical comparisons between these regional groups.

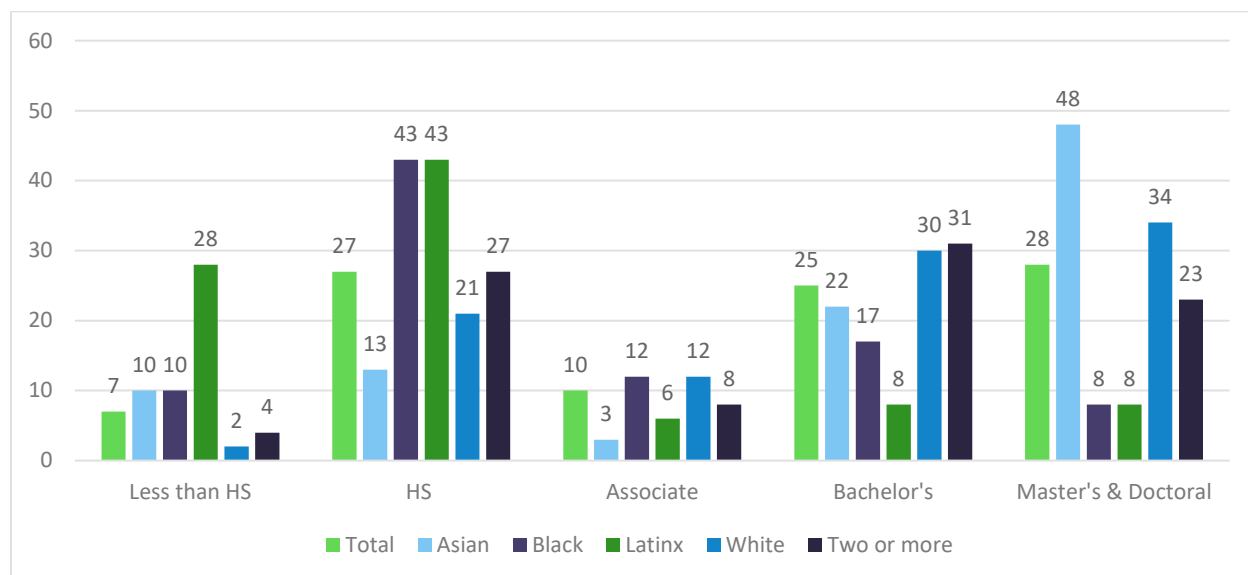
Most students in our sample who were attending a four-year institution declared that they were *staying* in Illinois for college (59%, N=704); however, a large number (41%, N=490) conveyed that they were *leaving* the state to pursue their degree. The most recent data on four-year college selection (Illinois Board of Higher Education [IBHE], 2023) had 47.6% of 4-year enrollees leaving the state in Fall 2021. Assuming Fall 2022 was similar to Fall 2021, we slightly under-sampled *leavers*, most likely due to the under-sampling of suburban counties. Again, this sample works for our purposes, allowing us to make statistical comparisons between groups.

Throughout this report, we dive into the intersectionality of identities between race/ethnicity and region, and how it relates to leaving or staying for college in Illinois. For example, we observed that White students in the suburbs were more likely to leave Illinois for college than their Latinx and Black counterparts in Chicago. Similarly, White students in our sample were least likely to be first generation students and their parents were most likely to have at least a bachelor's degree. Given that parental education is related to the availability of resources (Chevalier et al., 2013), students from families with more resources can afford the higher costs to attend an out-of-state college, which often has a higher tuition and relocation costs (Niu, 2015). In any event, this intersectionality is important to note; as we analyze survey responses across intersecting groups, we are analyzing the same sample from a variety of different perspectives.

Given the role of parental education in student transitions to higher education (Cataldi et al., 2018), we also describe how parental education relates to race/ethnicity, region, and *stayers vs. leavers*. Figure 2 highlights differences across race/ethnicity groups in the highest education level attained by a parent. We noted that parents of Black and Latinx students were more likely to have a highest education level of high school degree or equivalent (43%)—and, in the case of Latinx students, “less than high school” (28%)—whereas White parents and parents of students with two or more races were most likely to have at least a bachelor’s degree (64% and 54%, respectively). The relation between race/ethnicity and parental education was statistically significant.^e

Figure 2.

Percentage of Students by Parental Education Levels Across Race/Ethnicity.



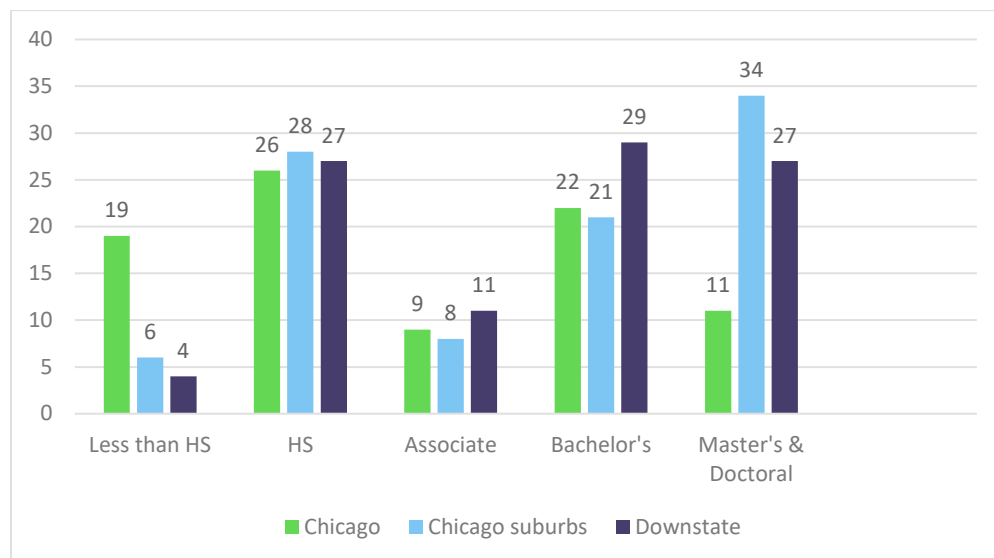
Note: HS included some college but no degree; some students were unsure or preferred not to answer.

Differences in terms of region were statistically significant and showed that, on average, parents of Chicago students who responded to the survey were less educated than parents of students in the Chicago suburbs as well as parents downstate. These differences are depicted in Figure 3. It is important to remember that these figures show the parental education of *4-year college-going students* from our sample and thus do not reflect the general parental education in those regions for *all high school seniors*.

^e We were unable to conduct pairwise comparisons due to smaller sample sizes within each category of parental education.

Figure 3.

Percentage of Students by Parental Education Levels Across Regions.

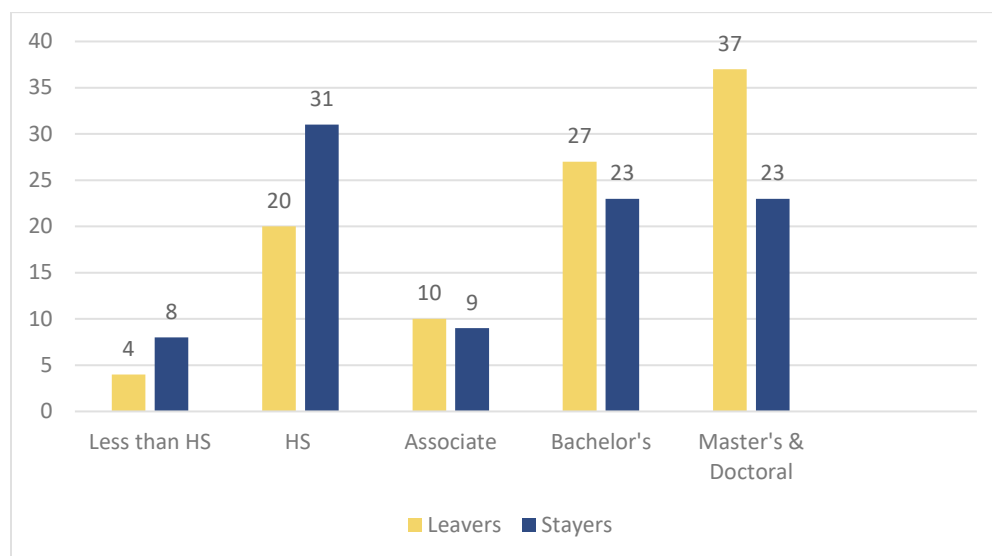


Note: HS included some college but no degree; 9% of students in Chicago were unsure about their parents' educational level.

A parallel trend was observed in the differences between *leavers* and *stayers*, as shown in Figure 4. *Leavers'* parents were more likely to have at least a bachelor's degree than *stayers'* parents, whereas *stayers'* parents were likely to have high school or less than high school as their highest attainment levels. In summary, as parental education increases, so does the proportion of *leavers*. Niu (2015) also showed that in addition to income, parental education was positively correlated with distance traveled for college.

Figure 4.

Percentage of Students by Parental Education Levels Between Leavers and Stayers.



Note: HS included some college but no degree.

Before leaving this section, we reiterate that our four-year college-going sample is likely not representative of all four-year college goers in Illinois. As such, we express caution about whether our overall survey responses are accurate of the sentiments of the Illinois four-year college-going population as a whole; this is an important limitation of any survey. We discuss the issue of sample population more deeply in the *Technical Guide* (Barragan Torres, 2023).

However, we feel our findings are sound for several reasons. First, our main goal was not to provide top-level estimates about statewide sentiments; instead, our goal was to compare student sentiments across key populations (e.g., race/ethnicity, region, and stayers vs. leavers). Our sample provided us with the statistical power to make such comparisons, and we do not make such comparisons where we lack the power to do so.

Second, we conducted a robustness check to see how some of our top-level estimates were affected by the specific race/ethnicity and regional composition of our respondent sample. We weighted the sample by the 2021 race/ethnicity figures extrapolated from IBHE (2023) and by the regional figures for high school seniors from ISBE. These weighted results did not substantively differ from our unweighted results. Given this, we present our unweighted findings throughout. Indeed, we feel that

weighted findings would have some methodological drawbacks given the lack of solid regional data for 4-year college-goers on which to weight, the use of an item-level analysis that included respondents who did not give demographic information and thus cannot be weighted, and the goal of our study (which was comparing opinions by subgroups, rather than providing top-level statewide estimates).

Third, all our major findings about differences between racial/ethnic groups and stayers vs. leavers echo previous research and state data (e.g., IBHE, 2023). While our exact percentages may differ from extant data (e.g., our sample's percentages of stayers and leavers are lower than IBHE's most recent data), our trends are the same. Thus, we encourage the reader to focus on the trends and comparisons we report here, rather than the precise estimates.

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

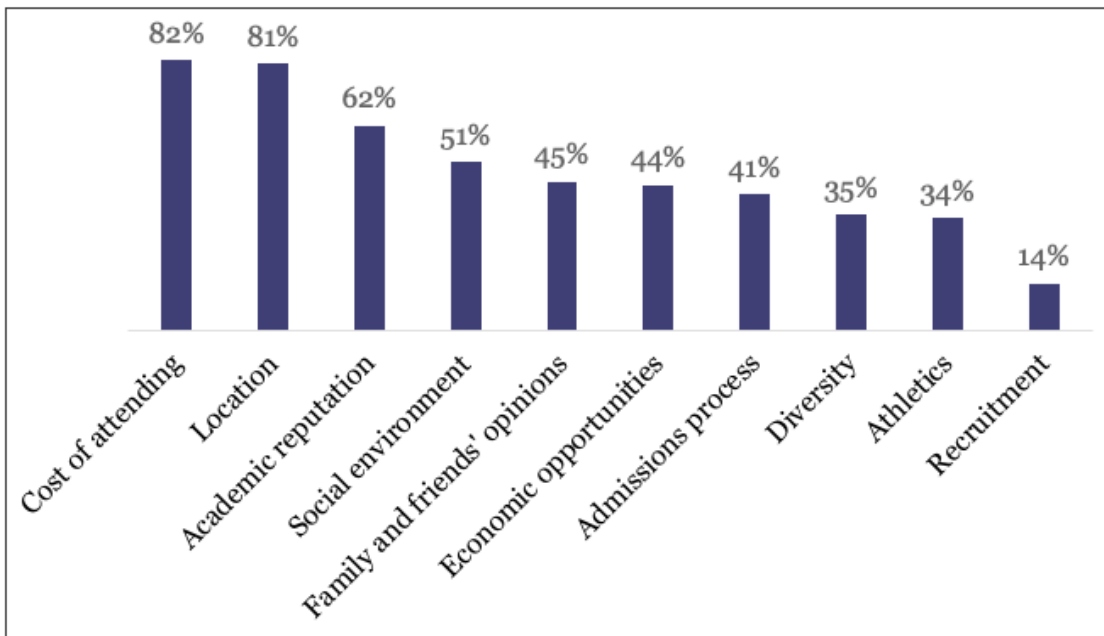
This section answers our first research question: *What **general factors** do diverse groups of Illinois high school seniors consider in choosing a four-year college?* Here, seniors selected the factors they considered while researching where they would attend college (LaFave et al., 2018). Based on extant research (see Barragan Torres, 2023), along with input from state agency staff, the possible factors were cost of attendance, academic reputation, economic opportunities during and after college, college location, college social environment, college diversity, athletics and extra-curriculars, recruitment strategies from institutions, perceptions of likelihood of admission, and family and friends' opinions. Respondents could select all that apply. We also provided the opportunity to share additional factors that students considered for deciding where to pursue higher education.

Figure 5 shows the percentage of respondents who considered each factor. Most respondents considered cost of attendance (82%), college location (81%), academic reputation (62%), and social environment (51%). Fewer considered recruitment process (14%) and athletics or extracurriculars (34%). The first thing to note is that most of these factors, especially those selected by more than 60% of students, were selected by most student populations as well. For example, cost and location were selected by most students regardless of their student characteristics or the region where they lived.

However, we did observe a few statistically significant differences in selected general factors by race/ethnicity, region and between *leavers* and *stayers*. The only two factors where we did not find any statistically significant differences were college location and admission processes. While we recognize the likely role of parental education in the decision-making process, we do not analyze each factor across this variable for two reasons. First, given the overlap in sample across race/ethnicity, region and between *leavers* and *stayers* with parental education, this cross section of data would provide little additional information—i.e., parents of White students in suburban Chicago and downstate are, on average, more educated than parents of Latinx and Black students in Chicago. And second, the limited sample size within some groups of parental education meant there were fewer than 10 observations across general decision factors.

Figure 5.

Percentage of Respondents Who Considered Each Factor.



Note: N=1,073 HS seniors

In terms of race/ethnicity, we found that athletics and extracurriculars, diversity of the institution, social environment, and family and friends' opinions showed statistically significant differences. Table 1 displays these differences. Specifically, White students (41%) were more likely to consider athletics and extracurriculars than any other race group, followed by Black students with 29%. Diversity of an institution was most important for students of color, especially Black students (58%), and least important for White students (25%). While majorities of most race/ethnic groups considered a college's social environment, Latinx students were the exception, with only 38% considering this factor. Finally, there was a statistical difference between White (48%) and Black (35%) respondents on family and friends' opinions.

Table 1.

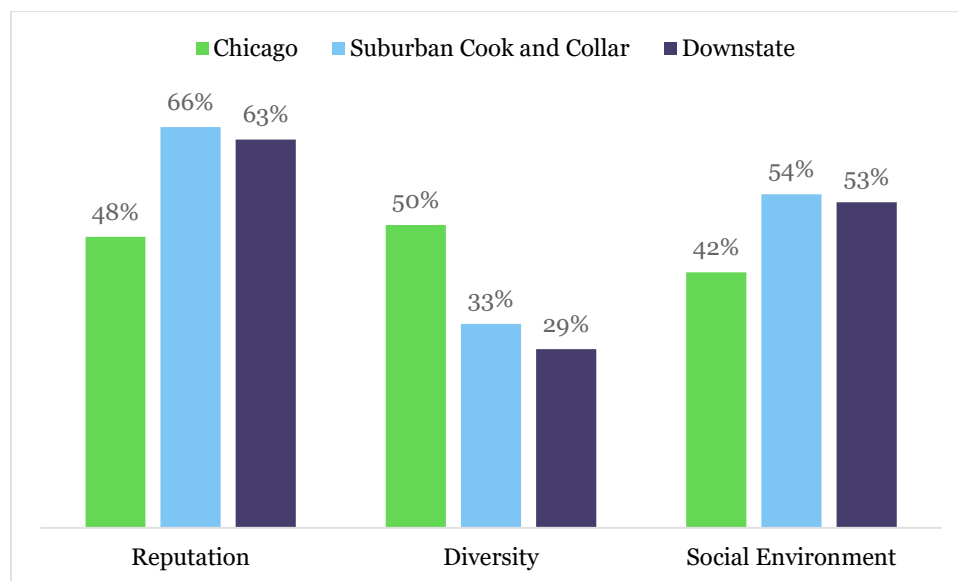
Differences in Considered General Factors by Race/Ethnicity (%).

Significant Factor	Black	Latinx	White	Two or More	Statistically significant relations
Athletics	29	18	41	22	Black and Latinx; Black and White; Latinx and White; White and Two or More
Diversity	58	45	25	47	Black and Latinx; Black and White; Latinx and White; White and Two or More
Social environment	51	38	55	58	Black and Latinx; Latinx and White; Latinx and Two or More
Family and friends' opinions	35	43	48	42	Black and White

In terms of region, we found differences for academic reputation, diversity, and social environment. Specifically, we observed that students in Chicago were more likely to choose diversity as a factor for their decision-making (50% vs. 33% in the Chicago suburbs and 29% Downstate) than students in other regions. And, in contrast, students outside of Chicago were slightly more likely to select the reputation of an institution as a considered factor (66% in the Chicago suburbs and 63% Downstate vs. 48% Chicago). Figure 6 illustrates all these significant differences.

Figure 6.

Significant Differences for General Factors by Region.



Interestingly, most factors were significantly different for *stayers* and *leavers*. Statistically significant factors included cost of attendance, academic reputation, athletics and extracurriculars, social environment, economic opportunities, and family and friends' opinions. Differences are summarized in Table 2. While both *leavers* and *stayers* considered the cost of attendance for college selection, *stayers* were statistically more likely to select this factor (85% vs. 77%). *Stayers* were also statistically more likely to consider their family and friends' opinions. *Leavers*, on the other hand, were more likely to consider academic reputation, social environment, economic opportunities during and after college, and the availability of athletics and extracurriculars.

Table 2.

Percentages of Significant Differences for General Factors for Leavers and Stayers.

	Leavers (N=430)	Stayers (N=610)
Cost of attendance	77%	85%
Academic reputation	71%	57%
Athletics and extracurriculars	42%	29%
Social environment	59%	47%
Economic opportunities	48%	42%
Family and friends' opinions	39%	49%

Note: Highest percentage in bold font.

As previously noted, we allowed students to share *other* factors that they considered (not on our list). About 5% (N=65) shared *other* concerns. Amongst their responses, we found that most declared a specific major as a consideration (40%)—about 50% were *stayers* and 30% were *leavers*. Another consideration was having obtained or been offered a scholarship to pursue their studies (11%), with most of these students staying in Illinois. Academic reputation, COVID regulations (both the presence or lack thereof), religion, and specific support were reported by about 5% of seniors who considered *other* factors, and most were leaving the state.

After choosing a general consideration, students were asked follow-up questions about the specific factors they considered within that general factor. In Section 6, we discuss the distribution of specific factors for each general consideration in detail. Here,

we give a brief description of the specific factors noted for the top four general factors: cost of attendance, location, academic reputation, and social environment.

Specifically, most students who selected cost considered the overall prices of colleges and being offered financial aid packages, with fewer selecting being able to work on campus. In terms of location, most students specifically considered staying close to home or the experiences they could have during college. Most Latinx students were concerned with attending a college that was closer to home, whereas Black students considered attending a college that was far from home. The most evident differences between *stayers* and *leavers* concerned distance from home, both closer and farther.

Within academic reputation, most high school seniors considered availability and quality of program/major for their decision-making, as well as the overall quality or ranking of the institution. Finally, most students who selected social environment as a factor referred to campus amenities and resources as the main environmental factor they considered, closely followed by social life at the college. However, Black and White students were more likely to consider having a “big name” sports team as a factor. And *leavers* were more likely to have considered campus amenities and resources, as well as if a college had a “big name” sports team, than *stayers*. Section 6 describes in detail all the specific factors reported by four-year college-goers, with breakdowns by race/ethnicity, region, and *stayers vs. leavers*.

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

This section answers our second research question: *What is the **single decisive factor** that most animates the four-year college choice for different groups of Illinois high school seniors?* Given that students considered multiple factors for their college selection, we were interested in which was the *single* decisive factor that animated the decision to attend a specific college. About 76% (N=949) of four-year college attending students provided information about their decisive factor; respondents had to have already selected a final college to answer. These factors overlap, to some extent, with the general factors that students could have selected.

Table 3 shows that the biggest percentage of students (32%) made their final decision based on cost of attendance. A college's academic reputation or ranking was the second decisive factor (17%). The third factor in terms of prevalence was the perceived opportunities for employment after college (12%), closely followed by the social environment or climate of a specific college campus (10%). The location of a college followed (8%), which is notable as location rivaled cost for the most *considered* factor, but clearly was less impactful as a *decisive* factor. All other factors were 5% or below.

Table 3.

Percentages of Respondents Who Selected Each Factor as the Single Most Decisive Consideration for College Selection.

Decisive Factor	Percentage of Respondents
Overall, it has the most reasonable cost of attendance.	32
It has the best academic reputation (or ranking).	17
It gives me the best opportunity for employment after college .	12
It has the best social environment or campus climate for me.	10
It's in the best location .	8
It gives me the best work opportunities during college .	5
It had the smoothest admissions process.	3
It has the best opportunity for me to play sports .	3
It had the most appealing recruitment process.	3
It's where my family wants me to go.	3
It has the best opportunity for me to participate in extracurriculars .	2
It has the most support for students of my demographic background .	1
It's where my friends want me to go.	0

As shown in Table 4, we found statistically significant differences between racial/ethnic groups and *leavers* and *stayers*. For example, within race/ethnicity, Latinx students decided most on cost (49%) compared to 30% for Black and White students. White students more frequently decided based on the social environment or campus climate of a college (14%) than Latinx students (3%) and Black students (5%) did. In contrast, 10% of Black students decided based on family input, as opposed to 2% of all other race/ethnicity groups; Black students also decided more based on a smooth admission process and support for students of their demographic background. Students of color were twice as likely (8%) to decide based on opportunities to work *during* college as White students (4%); in contrast, White students (13%) were more likely to decide based on opportunity for employment *after* college than Black (6%) and Latinx students (9%).

Differences between *leavers* and *stayers* were more striking for some factors. For example, 22% of *leavers* selected their college based on academic reputation or ranking as opposed to 13% of *stayers*. Similarly, 16% of *leavers* considered the college's social environment and campus climate compared to only 6% of *stayers*. In contrast, 37% of *stayers* selected their college based on the overall cost of attendance as opposed to 24% of *leavers*. Another important difference is that *stayers* were almost twice as likely to consider work opportunities during college (7%) as the most decisive factor compared to *leavers* (3%). There were no statistically significant differences for decisive factors by region.

Table 4.*Percentages for Decisive Factors by Race/Ethnicity and Leavers versus Stayers.*

	Black	Latinx	White	Two or More races	Leavers	Stayers
Overall, it has the most reasonable cost of attendance.	30	49	30	24	24	37
It has the best academic reputation (or ranking).	14	11	16	13	22	13
It gives me the best opportunity for employment after college.	6	9	13	15	13	11
It has the best social environment or campus climate for me.	5	3	14	9	16	6
It's in the best location.	6	7	8	10	7	9
It gives me the best work opportunities during college.	8	8	4	8	3	7
It had the most appealing recruitment process.	2	3	3	6	4	3
It had the smoothest admissions process.	8	3	3	5	4	3
It has the best opportunity for me to play sports.	5	3	4	4	5	2
It's where my family wants me to go.	10	2	2	3	1	5
It has the best opportunity for me to participate in extracurriculars.	0	2	2	0	1	2
It has the most support for students of my demographic background.	6	1	0	4	1	1
It's where my friends want me to go.	0	1	0	0	0	1

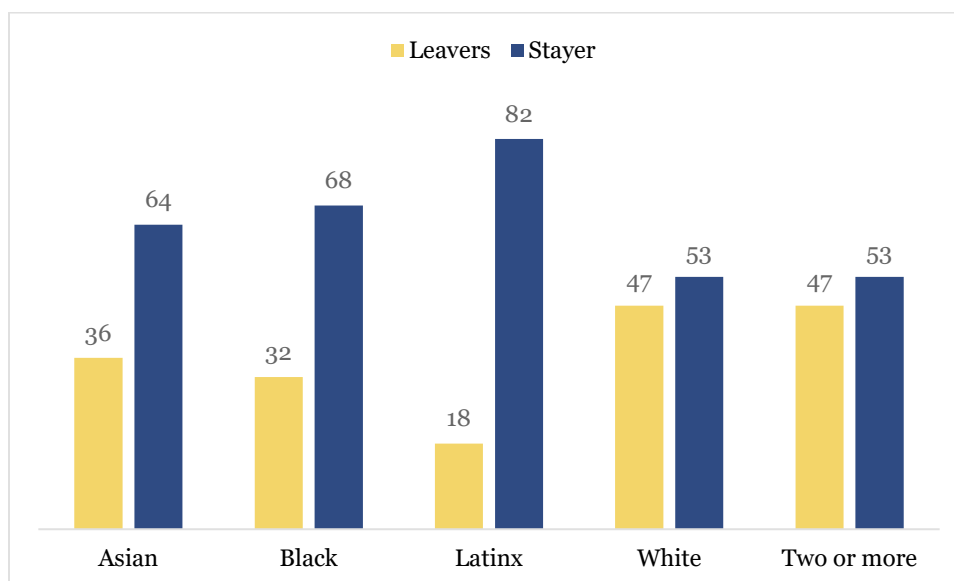
SECTION 4: Choosing a Four-Year College Inside or Outside Illinois

This section answers our third research question: *How do high school seniors view four-year colleges **inside and outside Illinois**, and why do seniors choose to stay or leave the state for college?* In Section 1 of this report, we detailed how *leavers* and *stayers* differ in their characteristics, and in turn, on key decision-making factors in Sections 2 and 3. Here, we address the question of leaving or staying in the state more directly, looking at how respondents rated Illinois colleges on various factors and how *leavers*, specifically, might have been motivated to stay.

Characterizing Leavers and Stayers. Nearly half of the sample (41%) decided to leave Illinois to pursue their four-year degree and 59% decided to stay. Figure 7 describes differences by race/ethnicity for *leavers* and *stayers*. Students who identified as White (47%) or as two or more races (47%) were most likely to be *leavers*. A considerable proportion of Asian (36%) and Black students (32%) also left the state for college. Latinx students overwhelmingly stayed in-state for college (82%). The relation between race/ethnicity and where to pursue college was statistically significant.

Figure 7.

Percentage of Leavers and Stayers by Race/Ethnicity.

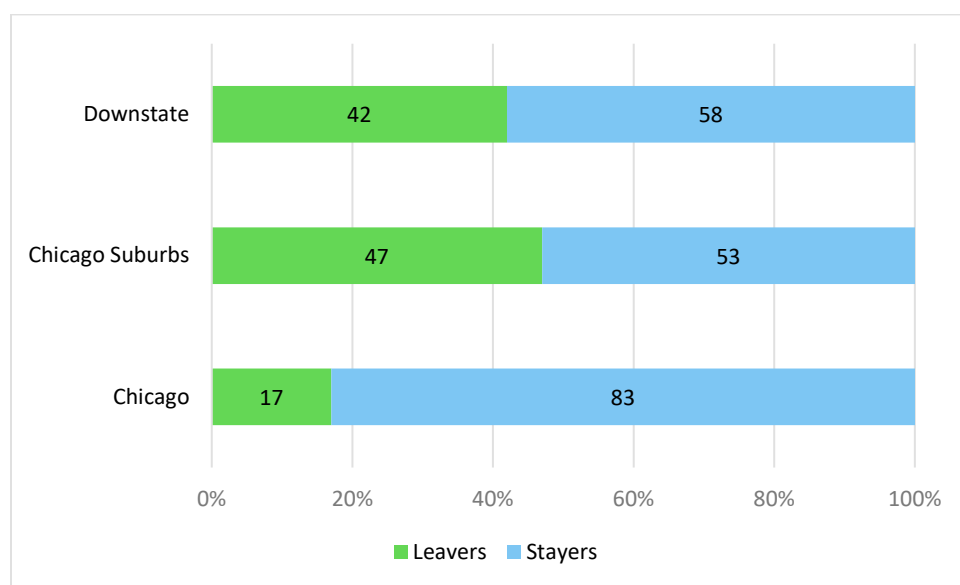


Note: All other numbers for race/ethnicity are too small to report.

In terms of region, *leavers* were physically located in the Chicago suburbs and downstate (47% and 42%, respectively), whereas most students in Chicago stayed in Illinois for college (83%). Figure 8 shows this distribution.

Figure 8.

Percentage of Leavers and Stayers by Region.



As noted previously, this is the same sample of students examined in two different ways; as such, it makes sense that students in Chicago, who were mostly Latinx, stayed in-state, whereas White students from suburban Chicago counties as well as downstate mostly decided to leave Illinois for college. We note that IBHE (2023) has the most precise data on the characteristics of *stayers* and *leavers*, and that our sample *trends* mirror IBHE's trends overall, with the *percentages* of leavers in our sample being lower overall and for all subgroups than IBHE's.

Factors for leaving/staying. Table 5 shows how respondents rated Illinois and out-of-state institutions on various factors. It provides the percentages overall and for *leavers* and *stayers*. **We note that *stayers* and *leavers* both agreed**—albeit with a large gap between them—**that Illinois colleges had the better cost of attendance**. On all other factors, *stayers* rated Illinois colleges more favorably than out-of-state institutions, while *leavers* rated out-of-state institutions more favorably than those in Illinois. Differences between *leavers* and *stayers* for all factors were

statistically significant, indicating that *leavers* and *stayers* had different perspectives regarding college. In addition, most of these differences were large in magnitude.

Table 5.

Percentages Agreeing that Colleges in Illinois or Elsewhere are Better on Each Factor.

Factor	General (N=929)		Leavers (N=365)		Stayers (N=534)	
	Illinois	Out-of-state	Illinois	Out-of-state	Illinois	Out-of-state
Cost of attendance*	77	23	55	44	92	8
Academic reputation*	42	58	13	87	61	39
Economic opportunities during and after college*	45	55	12	88	67	33
College location*	52	48	18	82	74	26
College social environment*	47	53	10	90	72	28
College diversity*	52	48	28	72	68	32
Athletics/extracurriculars*	42	58	16	84	59	41
Recruitment process*	54	46	24	76	75	25
Likelihood of being admitted*	75	25	49	51	92	8
Family and friends' opinions*	66	34	32	68	90	10

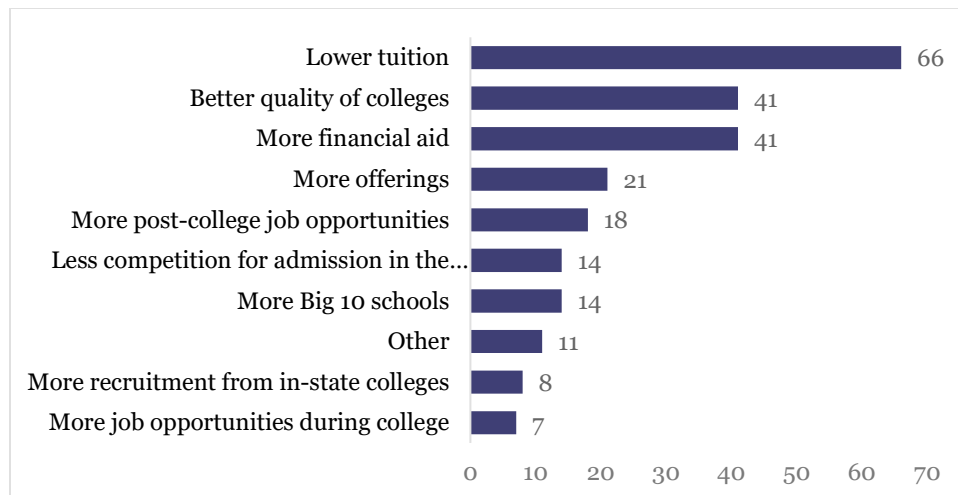
Note: * indicates a statistical difference between *stayers* and *leavers*.

For *leavers*, we also queried which aspect of an Illinois college would have persuaded them to stay, allowing them to select up to three factors. As shown in Figure 9, most *leavers* (66%) said that lower tuition would persuade them to stay in Illinois. The second largest proportion (41%) mentioned that more financial aid opportunities could have persuaded them to stay in Illinois, as well as better quality of colleges (41%). Nearly 21% of *leavers* said that the major they were interested in pursuing was not available in the state. Other options were all under 20%.^f

^f These data do not allow us to determine whether students would have stayed had they been accepted into a *specific* school in Illinois.

Figure 9.

Percentage of Leavers Who Selected Each Factor as Potentially Encouraging Them to Stay in Illinois for College.



Some *leavers* (11%; N=39) wrote in *other* factors that would have persuaded them to stay in Illinois for college. Nearly half of them (41%, N=16) said that nothing would have persuaded them to stay. Many of their responses included differences in politics with the state's leadership and discontent with the economic climate and perceived high cost of living. In fact, six students said that it was either "*Less expensive to attend out of state than in state choices,*" that "[t]he two best schools are insanely expensive and impossible to get into" or that "[s]tudents with high EFC [Expected Family Contribution] get little help in Illinois." Finally, a few described location as a factor, with either no colleges close to their home ("*... I just wasn't drawn to any of the colleges in Southern Illinois, and I didn't want to go further north*") or colleges too close to home ("*Farther location from where I live (all the schools I had interest in were too close to home, independence was very important to me when deciding)*"). Only a few students were interested in having more opportunities to play sports such as rowing and swimming. In terms of academics, one student argued that "[m]ak[ing] it easier to switch majors at U of I" would have been a factor that could have helped them stay for college.

SECTION 5: Intentions for and Interactions with Four-Year Colleges

This section answers our last research question about college decision-making: *What are students' intentions and interactions with four-year colleges that may influence these decisions?* In this section, we describe other factors related to college-going intentions, recruitment, and desired post-college outcomes that may have influenced the college choice, particularly the choice to leave or stay in Illinois for college.

College Choices. Before describing those factors, we first describe the colleges our sample reported choosing. The top 10 Illinois colleges chosen by our sample (i.e., selected by *stayers*) are shown in Table 6. Almost 90% of *stayers* provided information about the college they were attending in the state. The top 10 universities comprised 64% of selected colleges—of these, public schools corresponded to the top 4 (a total of 40%: ISU, UIUC, SIUE, SIUC).

Table 6.

Top 10 Illinois Colleges Selected by Respondents (Stayers).

	Selected College	N	%
1	Illinois State University	80	13
2	University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign	71	11
3	Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville	54	9
4	Southern Illinois University-Carbondale	40	6
5	University of Illinois Chicago	38	6
6	Northern Illinois University	32	5
7	Eastern Illinois University	29	5
8	Loyola University Chicago	20	3
9	Bradley University	18	3
10	DePaul University	18	3

Before selecting these universities, *stayers* reported considering the same top 5 institutions in Illinois (ISU, UIC, UIUC, SIUE, SIUC). The out-of-state colleges *stayers* considered most were University of Wisconsin (all campuses) (N=36, 7%), Purdue University (N=29; 6%), University of Missouri (N=18, 4%), and the University of Iowa

(N=14, 3%)—these schools accounted for almost one quarter of the considered out-of-state colleges.

In contrast, over 50% of *leavers* selected universities in 5 states: Iowa (22%), Missouri (16%), Wisconsin (11%), Indiana (10%) and Kentucky (6%). The rest of the selected states had less than 5% of students attending college. The top 10 out-of-state institutions selected by respondents are listed in Table 7. It is important to point out that, except for Saint Louis University, all are public institutions.

Table 7.

Top 10 Selected Colleges for Leavers.

Selected College	N	%
Southeast Missouri State University	19	4.31
Purdue University	15	3.4
Iowa State University	13	2.95
Saint Louis University	12	2.72
University of Missouri	12	2.72
University of Alabama	11	2.49
University of Iowa	11	2.49
Marquette University	10	2.27
University of Kentucky	10	2.27
University of Wisconsin-Platteville	9	2.04

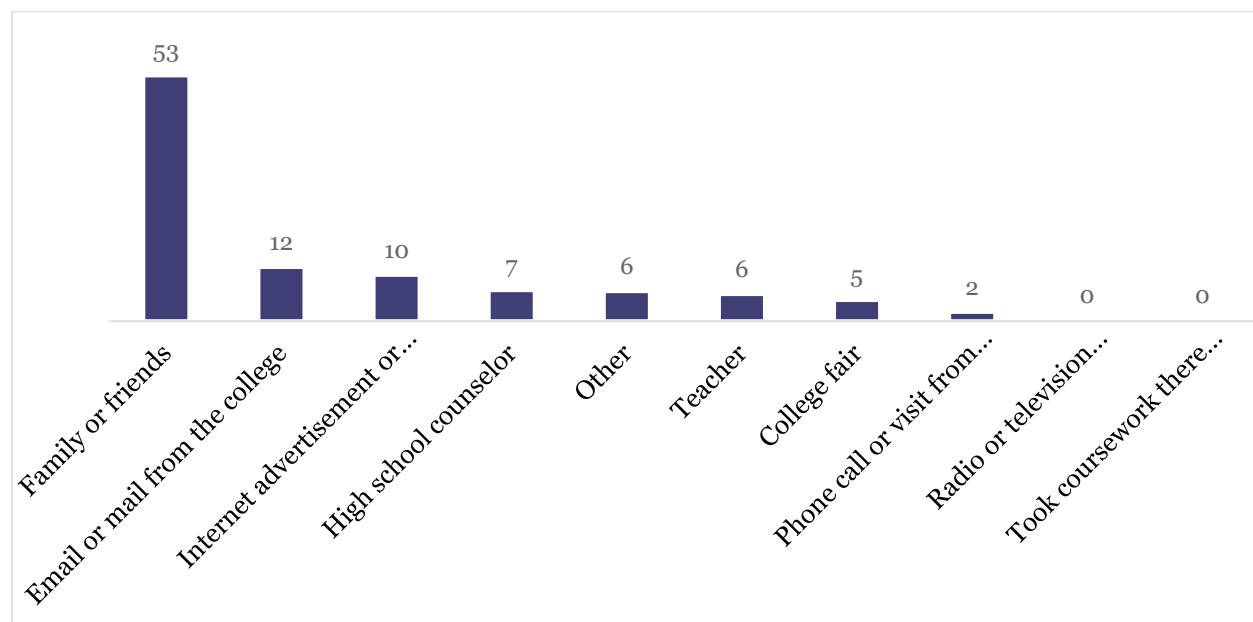
Before making their selection, most *leavers* considered the same group of selected colleges outside of Illinois as *stayers*, such as the University of Wisconsin (various locations; 6%), Iowa State University (4%), and Purdue University (2%). Some *leavers* also considered Illinois colleges, such as the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (20%), Illinois State University (8%), Northwestern University (6%), Loyola University (5%), the University of Illinois at Chicago (5%) and Southern Illinois University, both at Carbondale (5%) and Edwardsville (5%). Another often-considered Illinois institution was Bradley University (5%).

First Contact. Next, we explored how high school seniors first heard about their selected college. About 76% (N=949) of four-year college-goers responded to this

question. A majority (52%; N=499) heard about their selected college first from friends and family, while 12% (N=110) received an email or mail directly from the college. Less than 10% (N=94) did an internet search or saw an internet advertisement from the college. Others obtained information from a high school counselor (7%; N=63) or teacher (6%; N=55). All forms of first contact are summarized in Figure 10.

Figure 10.

Percentage of Four-Year College Goers Who Experienced Each Type of First Contact With Their Chosen College.



We did observe differences in first contact by race/ethnicity and between *leavers* and *stayers*. Table 8 shows these patterns.

Table 8.

Significant Differences by Percentages in First Contact Method by Race/Ethnicity and Between Stayers and Leavers.

	Black	Latinx	White	Two or more	Leavers	Stayers
College fair	6	8	3	3	4	5
Email or mail from college	16	12	12	11	12	11
Family or friends	40	37	62	34	50	54
High school counselor	11	10	4	11	4	9

Internet advertisement or search	17	12	7	19	17	5
Other	3	7	6	14	7	6
Phone call or visit from college rep	3	4	2	0	2	2
Radio or television advertisement	0	0	0	0	0	1
Teacher	3	10	4	8	3	8
Took coursework during high school	0	0	0	0	0	0

In terms of race/ethnicity, we note that Black (6%) and Latinx (8%) students were twice as likely to receive information at a college fair than their White (3%) counterparts, as well as students who identify as two or more races (3%). In contrast, White students (62%) were significantly more likely to first gather information about their selected college from family or friends, compared to 40% or fewer of students from the other racial/ethnic groups; and White students were less likely to have first obtained information from their high school counselor (4%) as opposed to students of color (more than 10%). Similarly, Black (17%) students and students with two or more races (19%) were more likely to gather their information from the internet, followed by Latinx students (12%), as opposed to 7% of White students. Another relevant difference is the role of teachers in providing information for Latinx students (10%) and students from two or more races (8%), as they were more than twice as likely to get information from teachers as White and Black students. No other difference was statistically significant.

There were a few outstanding differences between *leavers* and *stayers* regarding where they first obtained information about their selected college. *Leavers* were three times as likely to obtain their information from the internet (17%) as *stayers* (5%). In contrast, *stayers* were more likely to get their information from their teachers (8%) or their high school counselor (9%) as opposed to *leavers* (3% and 4%, respectively).

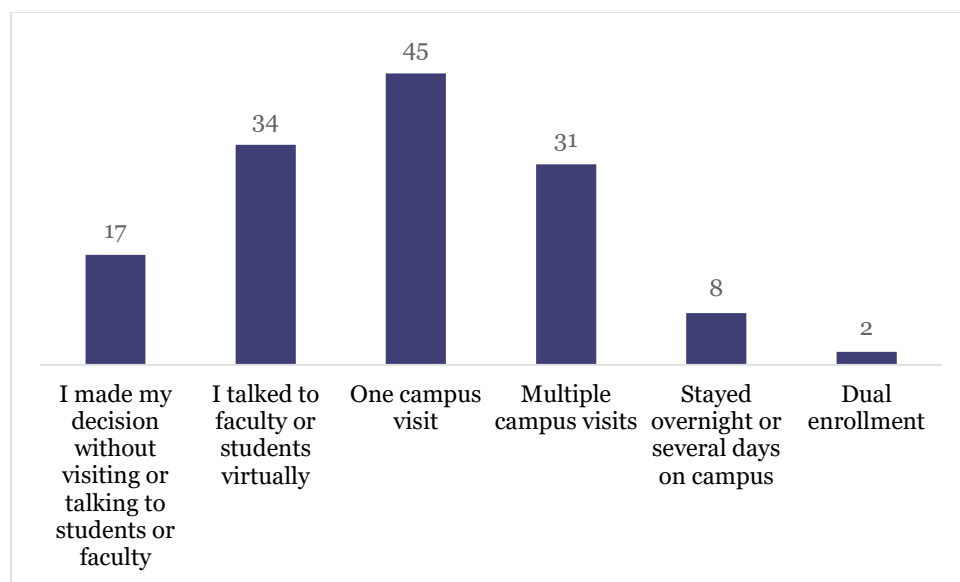
Depth of Contact. Before their college selection, students conducted deeper research.⁸ Specifically, about 76% visited the campus either once (45%) or multiple

⁸ This calculation includes those who reported not doing any additional research and students who did not respond to this item.

times (31%). About 34% talked to students or faculty virtually (as opposed to during a campus visit), and 8% stayed overnight or several days at their selected college. Only 2% (N=19) did a dual enrollment course at their selected college. These percentages are described in Figure 11.

Figure 11.

Percentages of Four-Year College Goers Who Had Each Type of Contact with Their Chosen College.



Statistical differences among race/ethnicity groups, across regions, and between *stayers* and *leavers* are shown in Table 9. In terms of race/ethnicity, we found that Black and Latinx students were more likely to make their enrollment decision without talking to any students or faculty at their selected colleges. In contrast, White students were more likely to do this, as well as visit campus at least one time. Chicago students were more likely to make their decisions without any further information than students in the other regions. And students in the Chicago suburbs were most likely to have one visit to campuses or stay overnight, but students downstate were more likely to visit more than once.

There were also a few stark differences between *leavers* and *stayers*. Specifically, *stayers* were twice as likely (22%) as *leavers* (11%) to make their decision on which college to attend without visiting or talking to students or faculty. And *leavers* were also twice as likely (13%) to stay overnight or for several days on a college campus before

making their decision as *stayers* (5%). This makes sense as *stayers* were more likely to select college based on geographic proximity to their home.

Table 9.

Percentages of Significant Differences in Depth of Contact by Race/Ethnicity, by Region, and Between Stayers and Leavers.

	Black	Latinx	White	Two or more	Chicago	Sub-urbs	Down-state	Leaver	Stayer
I made my decision without visiting or talking to students or faculty*+^	32	31	12	20	29	15	17	11	22
I talked to faculty or students virtually**^	30	27	37	27	33	36	34	39	30
One campus visit+^	38	39	46	47	41	51	41	49	42
Multiple campus visits**+	16	17	37	27	12	27	37	33	29
Stayed overnight or several days on campus**^	11	3	9	9	4	10	8	13	5
Dual enrollment	2	0	3	0	1	2	3	2	2

Note: * denotes significance for race/ethnicity; + denotes significance for region; and ^ denotes significance between leavers and stayers. All tests were corrected for error inflation.

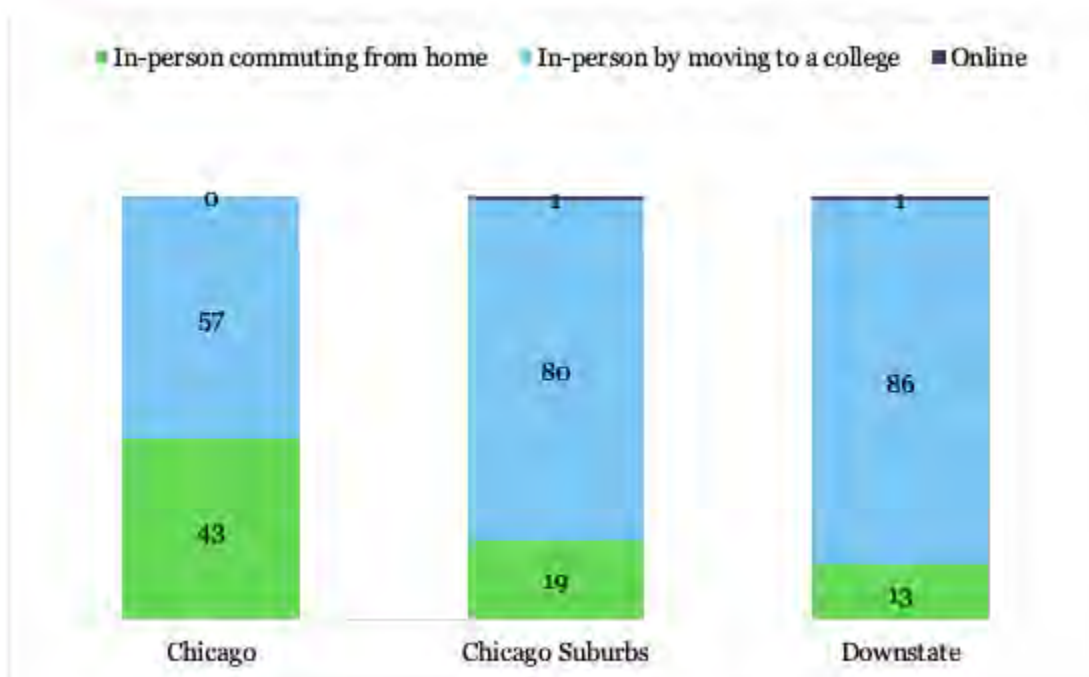
Modality of Attendance. Most of the students (85%, N=1,068) declared the mode of attendance in which they were planning to pursue their degree. Most were planning to live on a college campus (80%), whereas 19% were planning to live at home and commute to college. Only 1% of high school seniors were planning to pursue their degree online.

Differences in modality of attendance were statistically significant by race/ethnicity, region, and between *leavers* and *stayers*. In terms of race/ethnicity, Table 10 shows that White students (88%), Black students (91%), and students who identify as two or more races (82%) were more likely to live on campus. In contrast, Latinx (45%) students were more likely to be living at home and commuting to campus.

Table 10.*Mode of Attendance by Race/Ethnicity.*

	4-year sample	White	Black	Latinx	Two or More
In-person (commuting from home)	19	12	10	45	17
In-person by moving to a college	80	88	91	52	82
Online	1	0	0	3	1

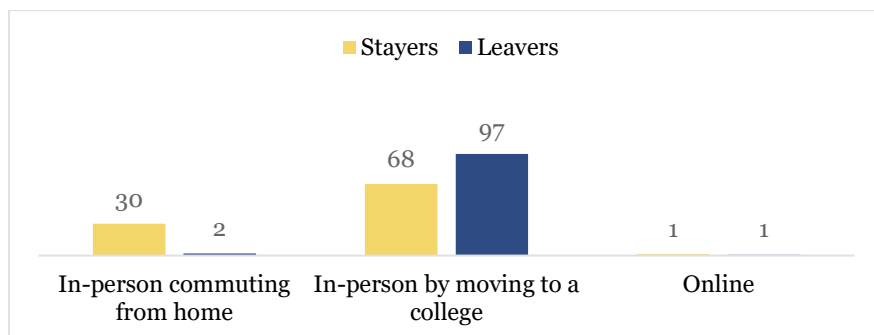
By region, we also observed some statistical differences, as there was a higher percentage of students in Chicago attending college while living at home and commuting to campus (43%) than from any other region, as shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12.*Percentages of Intended Mode of Attendance by Region.*

Finally, we observed that mode of attendance was also significantly different between *leavers* and *stayers*. Specifically, *stayers* were more likely (30%) to attend college by living at home and commuting to college, whereas most *leavers* (97%) were moving to live at the college. Differences are illustrated in Figure 13.

Figure 13.

Percentages of Intended Mode of Attendance for Stayers and Leavers.



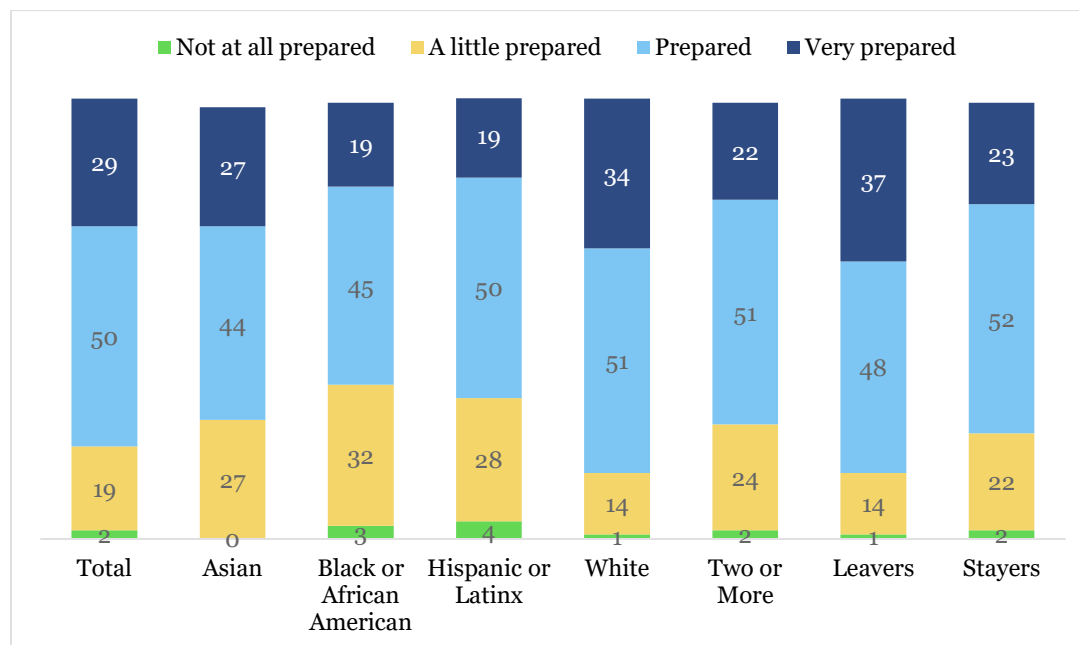
In summary, nearly all *leavers* planned to live at the college, while only two-thirds of *stayers* did. In fact, a third of *stayers* planned to live at home and commute to their given four-year college.

College preparation. We examined the extent to which students felt prepared for college and how those feelings intersected with college choice. We found statistical differences between race/ethnicity groups and between *leavers* and *stayers*, as shown in Figure 14. In terms of race/ethnicity, we found that a large proportion of Black and Latinx students felt little prepared for college (32% and 28%, respectively) and less than one in four (19%) felt very prepared. These figures (19% very prepared) contrast with those of their Asian and White counterparts, as 27% and 34% felt very prepared for college, respectively.

The major differences between *leavers* and *stayers* concerned feeling either little prepared or well prepared for college. Specifically, *leavers* were more likely to feel very prepared and least likely to feel little prepared for college, whereas most *stayers* felt prepared (52%) and about 20% felt little prepared.

Figure 14.

Percentages of Different Perceptions of College Preparation by Race/Ethnicity.



Paying for college. We also examined the source of financial aid that students were using to attend their selected college. Out of the 76% of four-year college goers who responded to this question, most students reported having some form of financial support or resource to attend their chosen college; only 9% reported not having any. As shown in Figure 15, most had a scholarship or aid from their selected college (80%), followed by scholarships or aid from other sources (41%), a federal loan (28%), a Pell grant (24%), or some other form of financial aid for which they did not know the name (17%). Only 12% of students reported taking out a private loan, and about 13% would be part of a federal work-study program. About 9% did not know if they had any financial aid. Less than 10% said they would use a specialized program such as AIM HIGH^h (3%), MAP (8%)^{ij} or Veteran or National Guard grants (1% each). Only 20 students (2%) said

^h AIM HIGH provides assistance toward a full-time undergraduate student's cost of attendance at a participating 4-year university. <https://www.isac.org/aim-high#Description>

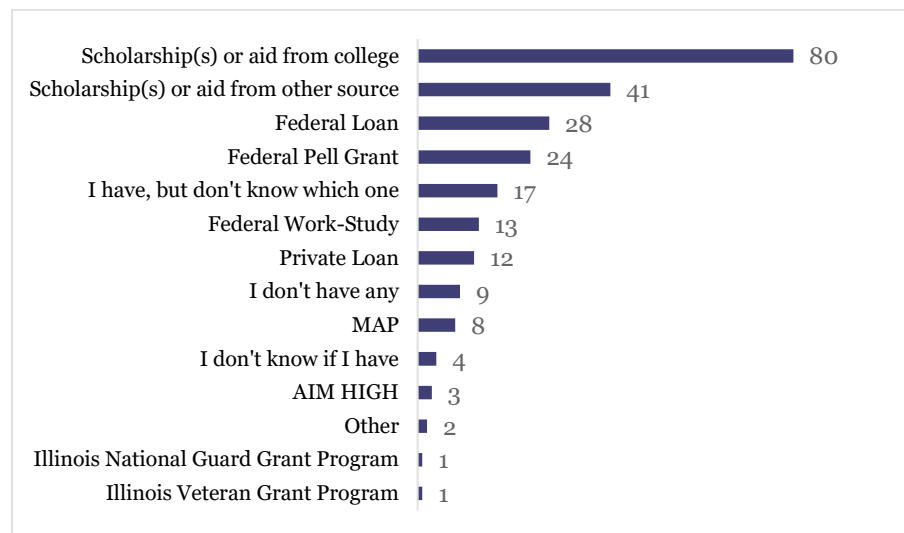
ⁱ MAP grants are available to eligible Illinois residents who attend approved Illinois colleges and demonstrate financial need, based on the information provided on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) <https://www.isac.org/students/during-college/types-of-financial-aid/grants/monetary-award-program/>

^j We recognize that this percentage is low, which could be explained by two reasons: either our sample is far from representative, or this represents the lack of understanding from students to know if they obtained a MAP grant or not.

they would use another source of funding, which were mostly inherited or transferred *G.I. Bills*.

Figure 15.

Percentages of Four-Year College Goers Utilizing Each Type of Financial Aid.



As before, we found statistically significant differences for students across the board. Table 11 shows that White students and students from two or more races were more likely to have scholarships or aid from different sources, whereas Black and Latinx students were more likely to have Pell grants and/or rely on work-study programs. At the same time, White students and students from two or more race/ethnic groups were also more likely to have private loans or not have any form of financial aid.

In terms of region, we found that similar proportions of students were likely to have a scholarship or aid from the college they were attending across regions; however, students downstate were most likely to report having a scholarship or aid from another source (51%) and twice as likely as students in Chicago. However, it was largely students in Chicago who were likely to have funding to attend college through MAP (24%), federal Pell grants (47%), and/or work-study (24%). *Stayers* were more likely to have financial support from the MAP programs (as MAP is a program for in-state college attendance) and from a federal Pell grant than *leavers*, while *leavers* were more likely to have private or federal loans for college. *Leavers* were also more likely to not have any form of financial aid (11% vs. 7%).

Table 11.

Significant Differences in Financial Aid by Race/Ethnicity, by Region, and Between Stayers and Leavers.

	Black	Latinx	White	Two or more	Chicago	Suburbs	Down- state	Leavers	Stayers
Scholarship(s) or aid from college*	75	81	85	71	78	78	83	82	78
Scholarship(s) or aid from other source*+^	38	24	46	47	24	35	51	47	37
MAP*+^	16	23	5	3	24	7	5	2	12
AIM HIGH^	5	1	3	0	2	2	4	0	5
Illinois Veteran Grant Program^	3	0	1	4	1	1	2	0	2
Illinois National Guard Grant Program^	2	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
Federal Pell Grant*+^	33	46	16	29	47	20	21	16	29
Federal Work-Study*+	21	21	9	22	24	12	11	13	12
Federal Loan^	22	26	28	23	24	30	26	31	25
Private Loan^	6	8	14	13	8	12	13	14	10
I have, but don't know which one*^	21	22	17	18	16	17	18	14	19
I don't know if I have	5	3	4	10	4	4	5	4	4
I don't have any*^	3	3	10	8	7	10	7	11	7
Other	2	2	2	5	2	1	3	2	2

Note: * denotes significance for race/ethnicity; + denotes significance for region; and ^ denotes significance between leavers and stayers. All tests were corrected for error inflation.

State Connection. Because we were interested in the beliefs of students who stayed or left the state for college, we examined how state affiliation intersected with college choice. Specifically, we asked: “Which of the following states do you feel most connected to?” We offered a selection of eight states in the Midwest, including Illinois, as well as the option to write-in any other. While 41% of four-year respondents were leaving the state for college, 79% of respondents most identified with Illinois as a state. The rest identified with Missouri or Wisconsin (3%), followed by Iowa and Tennessee (2%) or Michigan (1%). All other states represented less than 1% of the sample’s affiliations.

We then also asked why they selected the state in an open-ended question. Among *leavers*, 64% had a connection with Illinois because “[i]t is where I have grown up and lived all of my life.” Many argued for the *need* to leave despite it being a difficult decision to make. For example, a White student from the Chicago region wrote, “I was born and raised here. I went to school here through high school graduation and although a lot of my family has or is in the process of leaving Illinois, I still have family here.” Another White student from downstate said that “[i]t’s where my friends and family are. Leaving them behind is gonna be the hardest thing I’ll have to do but they all have supported me in the decision making process (sic).” The rest of the *leavers* had a connection with Missouri (5%) (with one writing, “My political beliefs will be better represented in Missouri. Cost of living expenses are also lower here.”), Wisconsin (5%) (writing, “it is very close to home”), and Iowa (4%).

In terms of student characteristics, students who did not affiliate with Illinois were more likely to leave than students who did affiliate with Illinois. At the same time, this group of students was most likely to be White and live in the Chicago suburbs or downstate, regions where students in our sample were most likely to be White. Table 12 details the characteristics of students by affiliation with Illinois. As such, differences by race/ethnicity, region and between *leavers* and *stayers* were all statistically significant.

Table 12.

Percentages of State Connection by Race/Ethnicity, by Region, and Between Stayers and Leavers.

	Black	Latinx	White	Two or more	Chicago	Suburbs	Down-state	Leavers	Stayers
Illinois Affinity	81	94	72	75	91	79	71	60	89
Other Affinity	19	6	28	25	8	21	28	40	11

SECTION 6: Digging into the Considered Factors: Specific Issues

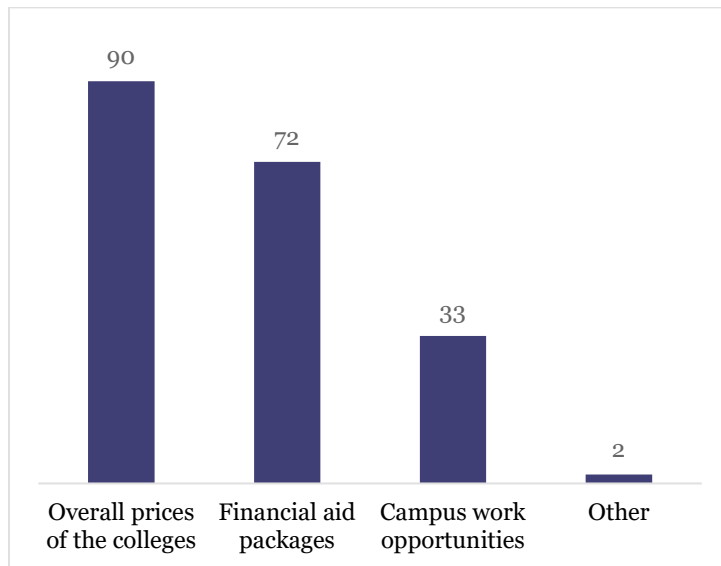
For each factor a student selected in their college decision-making process detailed in Section 2, we asked a follow-up question about the *specifics* of that factor that students considered. Below, we dig into the specifics of each consideration that high school seniors reported. We note that, for each factor, sample sizes change to reflect only those students who initially selected the factor as a consideration.

Cost of attendance. About 82% (N=878) of high school seniors reported that cost of attendance was a relevant factor they considered when selecting a higher education institution. Of this group, 95% (N=838) provided information about a specific aspect related to cost of attendance. Figure 16 shows this distribution.

Nearly all students who considered cost (90%; N=790) specifically considered the *overall prices* of colleges when making their decision. Respondents also considered *financial aid packages* (72%) followed by whether they would be able to *work on campus* (33%). Nearly 2% considered *other* factors related to cost, including being offered specific scholarships and concern about the amount of debt needed to attend school. For example, a White student who resided downstate mentioned that they considered the “*amount of debt I would be left with (EFC [Expected Family Contribution] was calculated to be high, but I am entirely paying for college on my own. EFC did not match actual family contribution, which cut me out of a lot of financial aid from scholarships and institutions).*” A couple students also compared in-state and out-of-state tuition. One claimed that “*In state tuition at all Illinois universities is far higher than almost any other state. So much so, that Illinois universities [are] comparable to out of state tuition at universities outside of Illinois. Plus, several out of state universities give generous aid to lure top students, including myself.*”

Figure 16.

Percentages of Specific Factors Considered by Respondents Concerned with Cost of Attendance.



Within these respondents concerned with cost, we examined differences by race/ethnicity and region, as well as between *leavers* and *stayers*. As shown in Table 13, most students of color (Black, Latinx, and students from two or more races), Chicago students, and *stayers* were all more likely to consider available work opportunities on campus. Downstate students were less likely to consider financial aid packages than Chicago and suburban students.

Table 13.

Significant Differences for Specific Cost-Related Factors by Race/Ethnicity, Region, and Stayers vs. Leavers (Percentages).

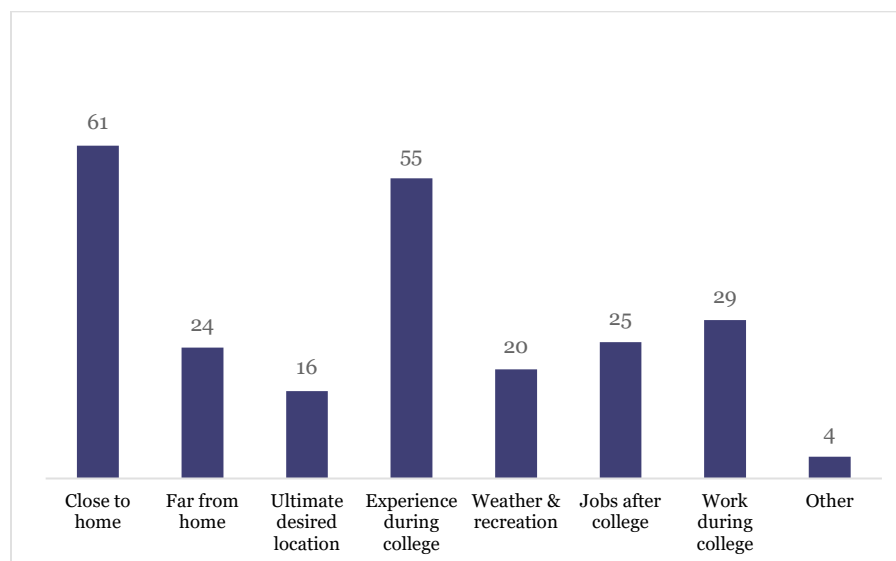
	Black	Latinx	White	Two or more	Chicago	Sub-urbs	Down-state	Leavers	Stayers
Overall prices of the colleges+	91	87	92	85	83	89	92	91	90
Financial aid packages*+	80	82	70	75	85	75	68	71	73
Campus work opportunities*+^	43	37	32	37	46	30	31	29	36

Note: * denotes significance for race/ethnicity; + denotes significance for region; and ^ denotes significance between leavers and stayers. All Chi-square tests of association were corrected for error inflation.

Location. This factor was selected by 81% of high school seniors (N=865). As shown in Figure 17, students who considered location most specifically considered staying close to home (61%), followed by experiences during college (55%). Work during (29%) and after (25%) college, as well as being far from home (24%), were also important for some students. A smaller group of these respondents considered weather and recreation (20%) and positioning themselves in their ultimate desired location (16%). About 4% of students wrote in other considerations, including being not too far but not too close to family, having family or friends in other places (for *leavers*), or being able to create community.

Figure 17.

Percentages of Specific Factors Considered by Respondents Concerned with Location.



As seen in Table 14, in terms of differences among racial groups, most Latinx students (75%) were concerned with attending a college that was closer to home. On the other hand, Black students considered attending a college that was far from home (48%). These were the only two factors that were statistically significant across racial/ethnicity groups. In terms of region, we found that Chicago students were most likely to consider being closer to home (72%). Working opportunities during college were also important for students in the Chicago region (38%).

And finally, the most evident differences between *stayers* and *leavers* concerned distance from home, both closer (75% vs. 39%, respectively) and farther (37% vs. 14%),

as well as the experiences during college--*leavers* were most likely to consider this factor (70% vs. 44%). Importantly, all location-specific factors were statistically different between *leavers* and *stayers*.

Table 14.

Significant Differences for Specific Location Factors by Race/Ethnicity, Region, and Stayers vs. Leavers.

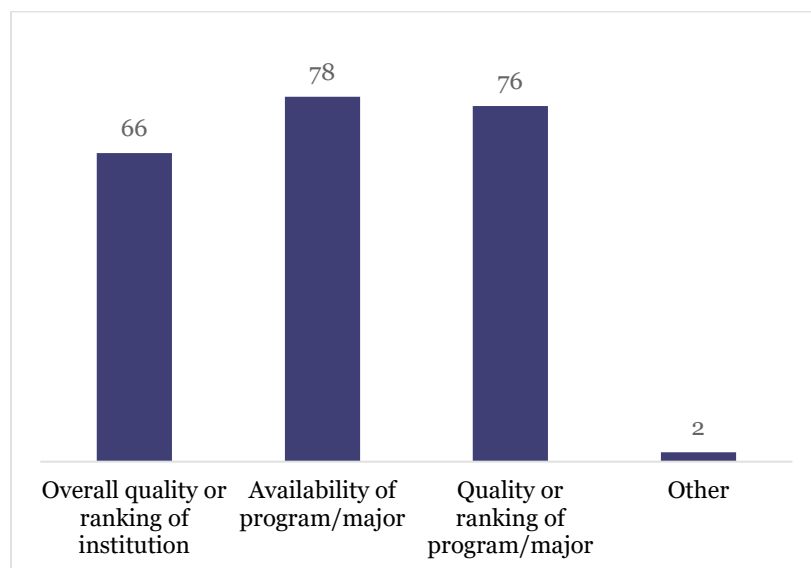
	Black	Latinx	White	Two or more	Chicago	Sub-urbs	Downstate	Leavers	Stayers
Close to home*+^	60	75	57	58	72	60	59	39	75
Far from home*^	48	23	23	25	27	24	23	37	14
Ultimate desired location^	17	17	16	23	20	18	14	22	12
Experiences during college^	50	46	59	58	46	55	58	70	44
Weather and recreation+^	25	11	19	23	13	23	17	31	12
Jobs after college^	29	19	23	32	26	23	25	29	20
Work during college+^	31	28	30	35	38	24	31	26	31

Note: * denotes significance for race/ethnicity; + denotes significance for region; and ^ denotes significance between leavers and stayers. All Chi-square tests of association were corrected for error inflation.

Academic Reputation. Academic reputation was considered by a majority of respondents (62%; N=668). Within this group, 76% (N=474) considered quality or ranking of program/major for their decision-making, as well as the availability of the program or major of interest (78%), as shown in Figure 18. Sixty-six percent considered the overall quality or ranking of the institution. A White student in the Chicago suburban region expressed the need for high quality-universities, writing “*Outside of the top three [...] there isn't another viable option. No other university within the state even cracks the top 100 on most rankings.*” Less than 2% wrote in an additional consideration, including research opportunities or a desire to work with specific professors.

Figure 18.

Percentages of Specific Factors Considered by Respondents Concerned with Academic Reputation.



As before, we examined differences across respondents by race/ethnicity, region, and *stayers vs. leavers*. We found statistically significant differences for both the availability and quality of program/major by race/ethnicity; quality was also significant across regions. As shown in Table 15, Latinx students were most likely to consider the availability of a program or major compared to any other group (91%). Black students, however, were less likely to consider the quality or ranking of a specific program or major (54%). In terms of region, we noted that students in Chicago were generally more concerned about quality of a program/major. There were no statistical differences between *leavers* and *stayers*.

Table 15.

Significant Differences for Specific Academic Reputation Factors by Race/Ethnicity, Region, and Stayers vs. Leavers.

	Black	Latinx	White	Two or more	Chicago	Sub-urbs	Down-state	Leavers	Stayers
Overall quality or ranking of institution	62	69	64	62	73	67	64	68	65

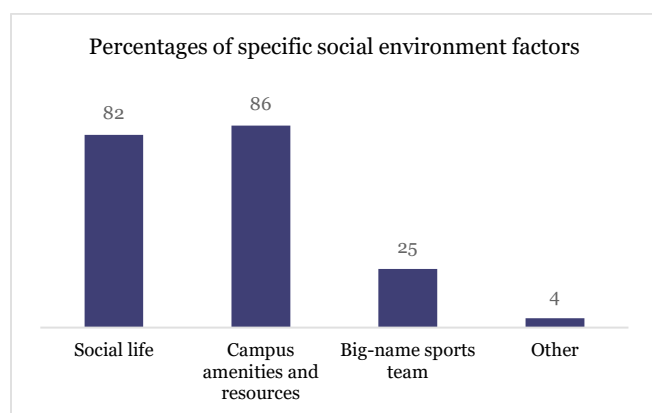
Availability of program/ major*	78	91	78	76	84	79	76	78	77
Quality or ranking of program/ major*+	54	73	76	88	88	77	73	78	76

Note: * denotes significance for race/ethnicity; + denotes significance for region; and ^ denotes significance between leavers and stayers. All Chi-square tests of association were corrected for error inflation.

Social Environment. An important factor for many students (51%; N=551) was the social environment of colleges. Of these 551 students, most (86%; N=452) referred to campus amenities and resources as the main environmental factor they considered, closely followed by social life at the college (82%), as described in Figure 19. Only 25% considered if a college had a “big-name sports team” or not. Close to 4% provided alternative social environment specifics such as a “*good environment*” or “*good vibes*,” an opportunity to practice their religion, or the availability or lack thereof of Greek life.

Figure 19.

Percentages of Specific Factors Considered by Respondents Concerned with Social Environment.



Differences by region were not statistically significant, but we did find differences in terms of race/ethnicity and *leavers* versus *stayers*. As shown in Table 16, only Black (37%) and White (28%) students were more likely to consider having a “big name” sports team as a factor—Latinx students were the least likely to select this aspect (6%). Differences between *leavers* and *stayers* were more prevalent. *Leavers* were more likely

to have considered campus amenities and resources, as well as if a college had a “big name” sports team, than *stayers*.

Table 16.

Significant Differences for Specific Social Environment Factors by Race/Ethnicity, Region, and Leavers vs. Stayers.

	Black	Latinx	White	Two or more	Chicago	Sub-urbs	Down-state	Leavers	Stayers
Social life	89	79	82	84	86	82	82	83	82
Campus amenities and resources [^]	80	83	87	92	84	88	85	92	82
Big-name sports team ^{*^}	37	6	28	16	26	24	24	34	17

Note: * denotes significance for race/ethnicity; + denotes significance for region; and ^ denotes significance between leavers and stayers. All tests were corrected for error inflation.

Economic Opportunities. Forty-four percent of high school seniors (N=473) reported having considered economic opportunities during and after college as a factor for their decision-making. Specifically, 82% considered job placement of graduates, 72% considered internship and apprenticeship opportunities, and 43% were interested in graduate school placement rates.

Only 2% of high school seniors who selected economic opportunities as a factor reported *other* aspects—all were leaving the state for college. A couple students who were leaving the state and were students of color reported concerns about the cost of living during college. One wrote, “*I wouldn’t be making much as a social worker so i rather be somewhere where the cost of living is cheaper so i can afford things besides for college [sic]*” and “*Being able to get a good job during school without it interfering with my school work.*” Other student groups, specifically White students who were choosing an out-of-state college, reported being advised to leave by their parents; for example, “*due to tax burden, corruption and dismal future in this dying state*” and because they perceive that “[...] *the state of Illinois is in serious decline economically and always lags most other states in economic opportunity. Going to a good school where the economies are good is key.*”

Significant differences across racial/ethnic groups and regions were found for job placement and graduate school placement (see Table 17). We observed that Black students were more likely to consider graduate school placement rates than other groups. Students in the Chicago suburbs were more likely to consider job placement than students in Chicago. There were no significant differences between responses from *leavers* and *stayers*.

Table 17.

Significant Differences for Specific Economic Opportunity Factors by Race/Ethnicity and Region.

	Black	Latinx	White	Two or more	Chicago	Suburbs	Downstate
Job placement ⁺	78	86	83	82	75	87	81
Graduate school placement [*]	53	34	38	47	50	41	40
Internships and apprenticeships	72	71	71	82	80	72	70

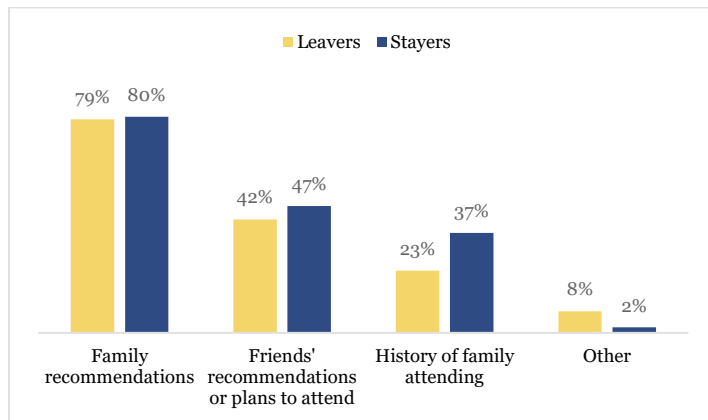
Note: * denotes significance for race/ethnicity; + denotes significance for region; and ^ denotes significance between leavers and stayers. All tests were corrected for error inflation.

Family and Friends' Opinions. Forty-five percent of high school seniors reported having considered family and friends' opinions as a factor for their decision making. Within those respondents, the specific aspects considered included family recommendations (80%), friends' recommendations or friends also planning to attend the same college (45%), and a history of family members attending (32%). Other aspects (4%) reported by students were staying close to family, having family support, and even “[t]he pressure of being the first of my family to attend college.”

Differences in specific factors related to family and friends' opinions were not significantly different across race/ethnicity groups or across regions. However, they were significantly different between *leavers* and *stayers*. As shown in Figure 20, *stayers* were more likely to have a history of family attending a specific college in Illinois, more likely to have friends attending or recommending a college, and slightly more likely to base their decision on family recommendations. *Leavers*, on the other hand, were more likely to select *other* factors related to friends and family. These *other* factors included having their family's encouragement or approval for moving to a different state for college.

Figure 20.

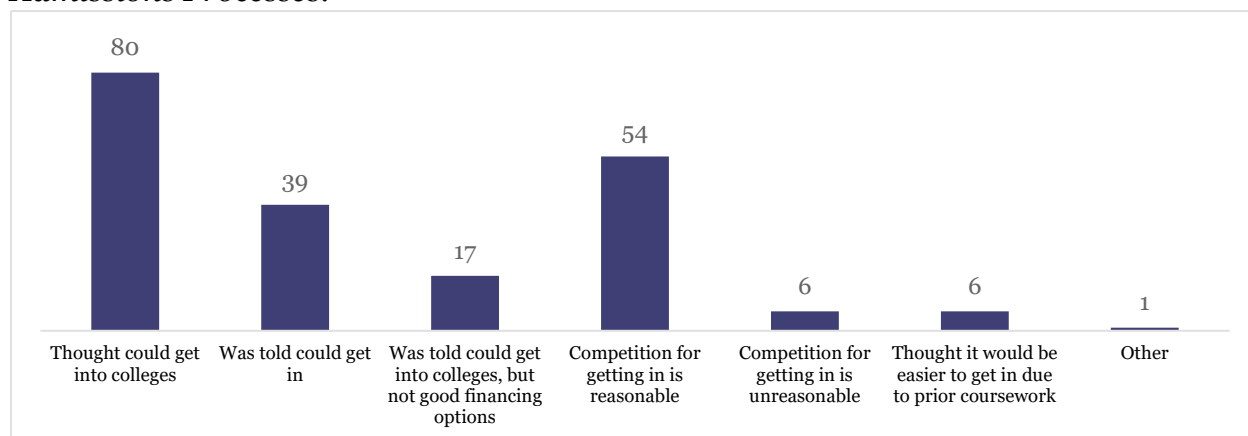
Percentages of Significant Differences for Specific Family and Friends Factors Between Leavers and Stayers.



Admissions Processes. Forty-one percent of seniors considered admission processes as a factor. Among these respondents, feasibility of getting into college was important, as most students considered the belief they could get into a college (80%) or reasonable competition for getting into a college (54%), as shown in Figure 21. A considerable percentage (39%) considered that they were *told* they could get into a college, but fewer considered that they were told they were unlikely to receive *good* financial aid or packages (17%). Even a smaller number of students considered they could get into a college due to prior coursework, such as dual coursework (6%), as well as competition of getting into a college being *unreasonable* (6%). Fewer than 2% offered other admission related considerations. One student wrote that “[...] *selectivity was important to me, so I could find a social sphere with other competitive scholars.*”

Figure 21.

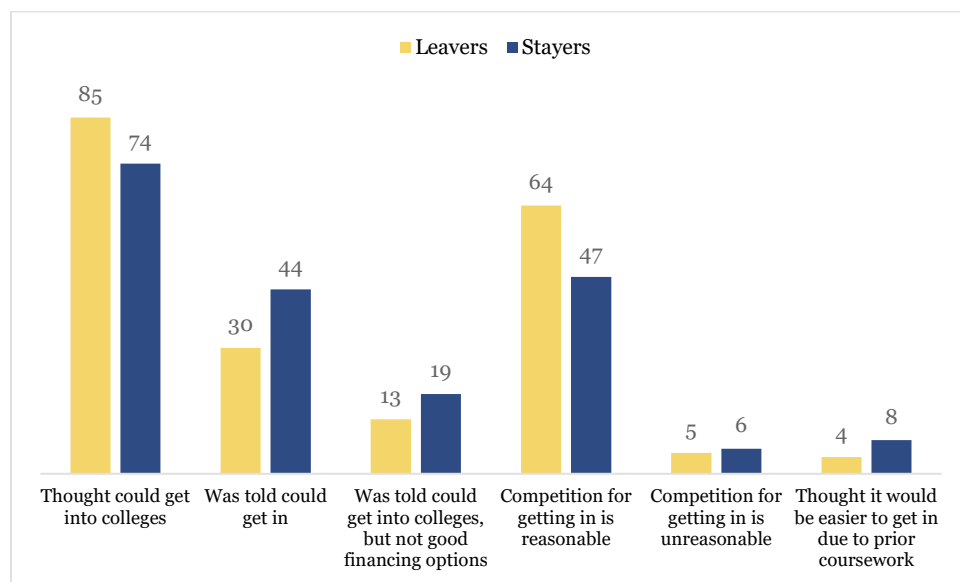
Percentages of Specific Factors Considered by Respondents Concerned with Admissions Processes.



In terms of region, 10% of students in Chicago selected the factor of “competition for getting in is *unreasonable*,” compared to 8% in the Chicago suburbs and 3% in downstate. Between *leavers* and *stayers*, we uncovered that most items were statistically different. *Leavers* were more likely to consider reasonable competition for getting into a selected college (64% vs. 47%) and thinking they could get in (85% vs. 74%). However, *stayers* were more likely to consider being *told* they could get into a college (44% vs. 30%) and getting into a college due to prior coursework, such as dual enrollment (8% vs. 4%). All differences between *stayers* and *leavers* are shown in Figure 22.

Figure 22.

Percentages of Significant Differences for Specific Admission Process Factors Between Leavers and Stayers.



Diversity. Thirty-five percent of seniors (N=352) considered diversity as a factor when choosing a 4-year college. Most of these students (85%; N=300) considered the diversity of the student bodies. Most also cared about other students sharing their own background or demographics (68%) and the reputation of colleges for supporting students of color (65%). More than 4% of students selected other aspects of diversity and nearly all were related to support offered to the LGBTQ+ community. This aspect was important for students as *“They have a safe place for people of the LGBTQIA community.”*

Table 18 shows the percentages of answers by race/ethnicity. We noted that White students were more likely to care about having a diverse student body, least likely to consider the reputation for supporting students of color and having students of the same background on campus, and more likely to consider the support for the LGBTQ+ community (“Other”). Students who identify with two or more races are less likely to consider specific students having their same background as other students of color, but most likely to consider the reputation of colleges for supporting students of color. Differences by region were only significant for colleges having “people who share my background,” where 80% of students in Chicago considered this factor compared to 60%

and 67% of students downstate and in the Chicago suburbs, respectively. The same factor was significant between *leavers* and *stayers*, where 71% of *stayers* considered this factor compared to 63% of *leavers*.

Table 18.

Significant Differences for Specific Diversity Factors by Race/Ethnicity.

	Black	Latinx	White	Two or More
The student bodies are diverse*	73	78	92	95
People who share my background*+^	83	82	47	73
Reputation for supporting students of color*	78	71	49	85
Other	3	2	8	0

Note: * denotes significance for race/ethnicity; + denotes significance for region; and ^ denotes significance between leavers and stayers. All tests were corrected for error inflation. Percentages for region and stayers vs. leavers are not depicted, but they are given in the text above the table for significant differences.

Athletics and Extracurriculars. Thirty-four percent of students selected athletics/extracurriculars as an important factor to consider for college selection. About 58% of those students (N=200) wanted the opportunity to play sports and only 22% (N=75) considered obtaining a scholarship for playing sports. More than half of these respondents (56%; N=194) considered the opportunity to participate in non-sports extracurricular activities, like music. A considerable proportion (46%, N=158) considered the opportunity to root for sports teams. And 3% (N=10) wrote in other extracurricular opportunities, such as having a relaxing place to work out and recreate after class and the existence of cultural organizations. Due to sample sizes, we were unable to test for significance by race/ethnicity but noted that White students more considered the opportunity to play sports and the scholarships to do so. Differences by region and between *leavers* and *stayers* were not statistically significant.

Recruitment. Finally, 14% (N=152) of high school seniors considered colleges' recruitment processes for the college selection. Of these respondents, 68% considered colleges that sent them lots of information, 61% considered colleges that worked together with students on their financial needs, 54% considered colleges that had interesting recruitment materials, and 54% considered colleges that contacted them or their families frequently. About 10% considered colleges having a specific partnership with their high school (10%), including those who may have taken a course or visited the

college. Two percent considered other recruitment strategies. Due to small sample sizes, we could not calculate significant differences by race/ethnicity. We found that *stayers* were statistically more likely to consider their high school having partnerships with colleges (14% vs. 6%) than *leavers*. But all other differences by region and between *leavers* and *stayers* were not statistically significant.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this survey provide immediate information on the decisions that different Illinois college-goers make about college, while also contributing to a broader literature regarding the college choice process. Prior to this point, this report had been organized around sharing the results for each research question for each population within our sample. In this section, we flip this approach—summarizing what can be gleaned about each population’s unique college decision-making process across these research questions, and the implications for statewide policy and practice.

Overall. Cost is clearly the most important factor for Illinois four-year college-goers, particularly when examining general and decisive considerations together. **Cost** was considered by, and was decisive for, most students. This means that students cast their net for potential colleges based on cost and also weigh final decisions about a college with cost front and center. **Academic reputation** and, to a lesser extent, **social environment** also show to be strong considerations, even decisive ones.

Location is also vitally important, but perhaps in a different way than the other factors. It is clearly a strong general consideration, but much less of a decisive one. This may be because students limit the final decisions to institutions within their locational preference, then choose the institution with the best cost, academic reputation, social environment, or a combination of these top 3 factors. As such, it is important to consider how locational preferences may ultimately limit or expand a student’s college choice process.

Our findings largely mirror national findings about college choice factors (Lafave et al., 2018), wherein academic reputation, program of study, and job placement opportunities are central. However, cost and location come out more clearly as central in this Illinois analysis.

Staying in or Leaving the State for College. This report has several findings related to the profile and decision-making processes of students who stay in or leave the state for college. First, a clear student profile emerges of the **demographic characteristics of stayers and leavers**. *Leavers* are more likely to be White, from the Chicago suburbs or downstate, children of parents with a high educational

attainment level, and feel very prepared for college. In contrast, *stayers* are more likely to be Black or Latinx, from Chicago, children of parents with lower educational attainment levels, and feel less prepared for college. These findings from our sample echo other research showing that White (IBHE, 2023), wealthy or “not low-income” (IBHE, 2023; Lichtenberger & Dietrich, 2014), academically prepared (Lichtenberger & Dietrich, 2014), and suburban (Lichtenberger & Dietrich, 2014) students are more likely to leave, while Latinx, low-income, and Chicago students are more likely to stay (IBHE, 2023; Lichtenberger & Dietrich, 2014).

Second, while both groups consider overall cost as an important factor in their decision-making, **stayers and leavers weigh factors differently** when choosing a college. *Stayers* are focused on near-term *pragmatics*, with cost being a heavy and decisive consideration, along with family and friends’ opinions and the possibility of working during college. *Leavers* emphasize the college experience and college’s longer-term (rather than short-term) economic benefits. They are more likely to consider social environment and athletics/extracurriculars, as well as the academic reputation and reputation for job placement of colleges. For *leavers*, social environment and academic reputation are more decisive. These findings align with previous research on the importance of academic prestige and lifestyle for Illinois college *leavers* (Dean et al., 2006).

Third, **stayers and leavers have different informational, logistical, and financial contexts** related to college attendance that affect their decision-making. *Stayers* are more likely to commute to college and more likely to rely on funding given to students with financial need (like state MAP grants and federal Pell grants), factors which may compel them to choose colleges closer to home with a lower cost and opportunity to receive state-funded grants. *Leavers* are more likely to have loans or no financial aid at all, widening their possible college pool. These findings again echo previous research regarding both the income and college attendance mechanisms of *stayers* and *leavers* (IBHE, 2023; Lichtenberger & Dietrich, 2014). It is also worth noting that *stayers* are more likely to get information about colleges from teachers and counselors—who logically might be more connected to and informed about in-state colleges—while *leavers* are more likely to get information from the internet. This

disparity is consistent with previous research (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000) showing that low-income students are more likely to get college information from school counselors, while wealthier students get information via their parents' resources and networks.

Fourth, **stayers and leavers have divergent views of the state's college offerings**. Majorities of *stayers* and *leavers* believe that Illinois colleges have the best overall cost across public and private universities, although *stayers* believed this much more than *leavers*. Earlier research on Illinois college outmigration (see Dean et al., 2006) found a much more negative sentiment among *leavers* about Illinois college costs, so this finding bodes well for the state's policy efforts related to college cost (while suggesting there is still room to grow). On all other factors, student perception of Illinois colleges is directly aligned to whether they stay or leave. Students who *stay* think Illinois colleges have better reputations, social environments, and so forth, while students who *leave* think the opposite. For both *stayers* and *leavers*, perception is reality.

Finally, **leavers do report some factors that would make them stay in-state**. Key factors included lower tuition, better quality of colleges, and more financial aid. Essentially, *leavers* might be swayed by cost or by better perception of the academic reputation of Illinois institutions. This makes sense, as *leavers* had a dimmer perception of cost and academic reputation than *stayers*, although a better perception of cost than in previous research (Dean et al., 2006). It seems that cost is a key opportunity, particularly as *leavers* in our sample (as in previous research; see Dean et al., 2006; IBHE, 2023; Lichtenberger & Dietrich, 2014) don't go far—they largely go to neighboring states—and it seems that perceptions of cost can be changed.

In summary, *stayers* and *leavers* differ in important ways that make addressing the issue of leaving the state for college a challenge for policymakers. The implications for state policymakers are potentially two-fold: (1) invest in students with a profile suggesting that they will stay in the state, supporting them with access to college information, applications, and recruitment; support for college preparation in the high schools they attend; and need-based financial aid, and (2) improve the perception and reality of Illinois as a state and Illinois colleges' cost, academic reputation (including program offerings), job placement rates, and the location—starting before high school—

with students with the profile of a *leaver*. In practice, this might look like improving and dedicating resources to high schools' support for low-income students and students of color with college counseling, pre-college coursework, and financial aid applications, while doing targeted marketing and college recruitment campaigns for students around the quality and cost of the state's public institutions.

Race/ethnicity. While we found many similarities in decision-making processes across students of different races and ethnicities, we found several significant differences in how students weighed those factors. Given the intersectionality in samples across race/ethnicity, income, region, and leaving vs. staying in the state for college, some of these findings may sound familiar to findings for *leavers* vs. *stayers*. However, racial/ethnic groups did have unique college choice processes that are worth exploring in detail.

To begin, **Latinx students** (who made up 14% of our four-year sample) were more likely to consider college diversity than other students, more likely to decide based on cost and opportunities to work during college, and less likely to consider or decide based on a college social environment. For those concerned about location, being closer to home was vital. Latinx students concerned about college diversity also wanted students who shared their background and support for students of that background. Logistically, Latinx students were also more likely to be commuting to campus from home than other students, more likely to have federal Pell grants and work-study for college financing, and more likely to gain information about college from teachers, counselors, and college fairs.

Black students (who made up 8% of our four-year sample) were more likely to consider college diversity and athletics/extracurriculars than other students, but less likely to consider family and friends' opinions. Curiously, though, they made a final decision more based on family, as well as on admissions processes, support for students sharing their background, and opportunity to work during college. They decided less based on social environment. Black students concerned with location wished to be further from home. Like Latinx students, Black students concerned about college diversity wanted students who shared their background and support for students of that

background. Logistically, Black students were more likely to live on campus, more likely to have federal Pell grants and work-study for college financing, and more likely to gain information about college from counselors and college fairs.

Finally, **White students** (who made up 58% of our sample) more generally considered athletics and extracurriculars and opinions of family and friends than other populations, and more made their final decision based on social environment and job placement after college. Unlike Black and Latinx students, White students were more likely to gather information about college from family and friends. White students were also more likely to live on campus and have multiple funding sources, private loans, or no aid at all.

Before moving on, we note three things. First, Asian students also had unique decision-making processes, but we did not report on this here because the sample size was too low for the Asian population to draw conclusions for all questions. Second, we see that while students of all races/ethnicities considered cost, Latinx students were the most likely to consider cost of all. This tracks with previous research showing the centrality of college cost for Latinx students, as well as hesitation to take on college debt (Flores et al., 2021).

Finally, we do see that Black and Latinx students are aligned on some factors but not others. Black and Latinx students share concerns about how colleges support and enroll students of color. They also share factors that relate to wealth/income, such as financial aid sources, resources for learning about college, and intention to work during college. These findings are supported by extant research on Black and Latinx student college decision-making in terms of enrolling in colleges with a history of supporting same-race peers (Black et al., 2020) and relying on counselors/teachers for college information (Cochran & Coles, 2012). However, Black and Latinx students differ on locational preference and living on campus versus commuting. Prior research indicates that Latinx students are indeed more uniquely interested in being close to home than other populations (Black et al., 2020; Gonzalez, 2012).

Region. Finally, we share results by region, acknowledging that regional differences may be highly related to the diversity of the population within each region.

In general, Chicago students more considered college diversity, and less considered academic reputation and social environment. In contrast, suburban and downstate students more considered academic reputation and social environment. Chicago students were also more likely to commute and to be receiving state MAP grants, federal Pell grants, and work-study funding. Suburban and downstate students were more likely to live on campus.

Conclusion. In general, this study reveals that, while students share some concerns about cost, location, academic reputation, and social environment, different student populations have different logistical and practical constraints, as well as long-term outlooks. In designing a college system that appeals to and works for all, consideration of these different needs is critical. We hope this report can support state policymakers and colleges in meeting the needs, hopes, and dreams of Illinois' diverse student population.

We also recognize that this report contributes to the literature on college-decision-making by providing details on how diverse student groups make their choices. Differential weighing of factors by race/ethnicity and region suggests that students have different access to resources and information. The design of more equitable postsecondary pathways remains, thus, more essential than ever.

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