

Publisher's Note

Who Isn't Planning to Go to College?

In this issue of *studentPOLL* we turn our attention in a slightly different direction than is our norm. Rather than exploring decisions and choices made by students enrolling in 4-year colleges, we focus on students who are not going to college. Specifically, this issue explores with some detail a population that would likely show a higher propensity to do so than others: traditional high school seniors who, while seriously considering attending a 4-year school full-time, decided mid-process not to do so. We explore these behaviors against a backdrop of significant demographic change, political polarization, and public discourse continuing to question and even openly dispute the value of a traditional 4-year degree.

Of particular interest were the extent to which perceptions of political and social issues, as well as financial and others, might be influencing these students' decisions about going to college; the academic and career aspirations of students who decided not to go and the paths they are pursuing alternative to attending a 4-year institution; the extent to which characteristics such as race, socio-economic status, gender identity, and sexual orientation are associated with particular decisions; the actions students took as they considered higher education options; and the overall use and influence of particular information sources used in that process.

To this end, we conducted a study of traditional high school seniors, identified those who had seriously considered attending a 4-year school, and split that group in two: those now planning to go and those who've decided not to go. They were sampled in February and March of 2024, around the time when the vast majority had decided whether and where to apply and some had made or were making decisions about where to enroll. (The latter were fewer than usual, due to the significant federal delays in FAFSA processing, which resulted in delayed financial aid awards).

What did we find? Between most traditional application deadlines and notification dates, nearly all students who seriously considered but decided against attending a 4-year institution still intend to pursue postsecondary education. Half intend to pursue a 2-year program or attend a 4-year institution part-time, and almost all of the others believe they are simply delaying further education. These "non-attenders" look like the "attenders" in a number of ways, which may suggest some potential to change the decisions of such students over time. However, there are important differences that any college or university will have to address if it aspires to enroll them.

In this issue of *studentPOLL* we will answer **three** main questions...

1. Why are students who initially considered attending 4-year institutions deciding not to do so?
2. Are there cohorts or groups of students more likely not to plan to attend 4-year colleges and universities?
3. Are there differences in actions taken and resources utilized between those planning to attend 4-year institutions and those who are not?

Key Findings

53%

of once-interested students now planning not to attend a 4-year institution are planning to attend 2-year institutions this fall - **only 3%** have no plans of attending any college.

26%

of non-attending students cite cost-related concerns or a need to work to help support themselves or their families as a primary reason to not attend.

2%

indicate that political considerations played a significant role in their decision to not attend.

Lower income and first-generation students

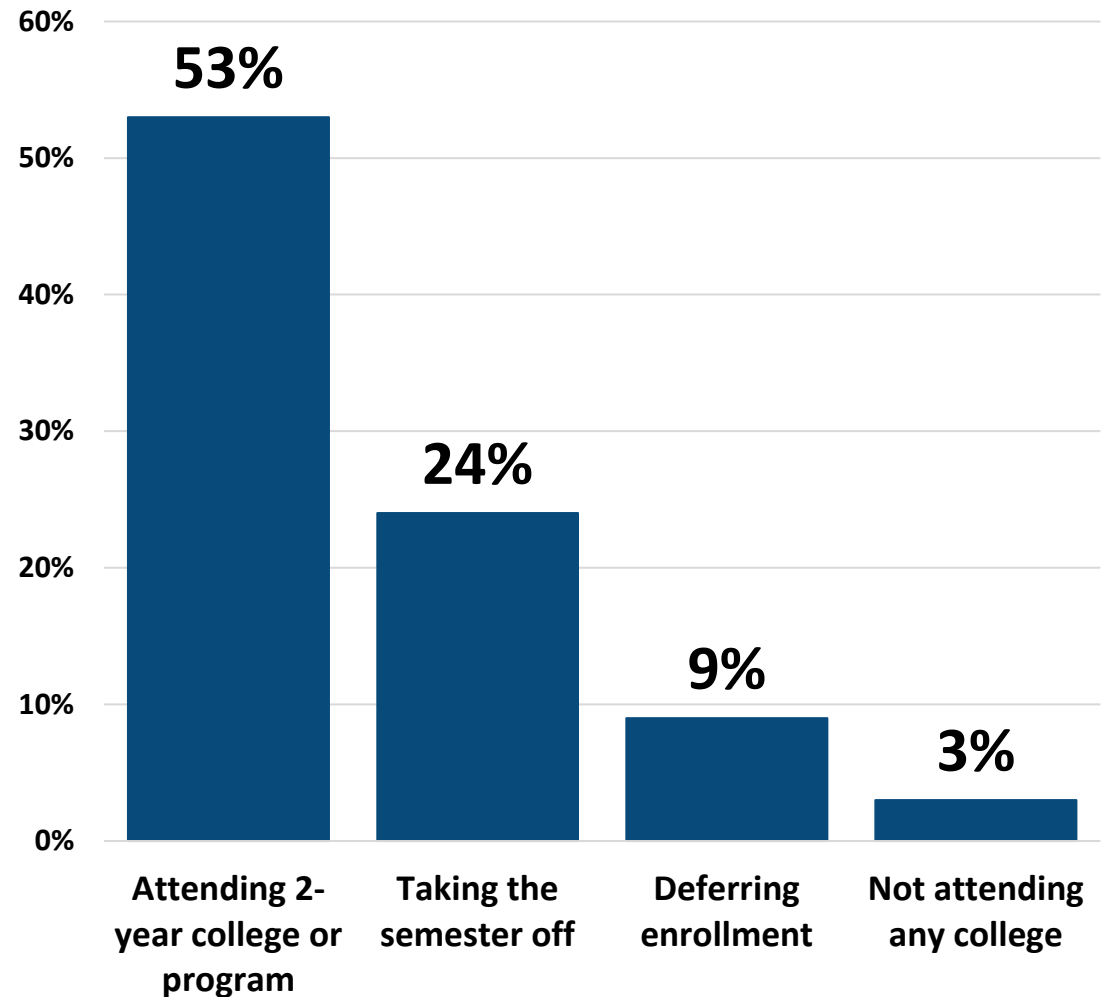
are among some groups who are less likely to have made decisions to attend a 4-year institution.

Why are students who initially considered attending 4-year institutions deciding not to do so?

The majority of such respondents told us they are not opting out of higher education entirely, but rather electing to pursue education in a different way and/or delay their decision about attending a 4-year school.

Just over half plan to attend a community college, some other 2-year program, or a part-time bachelor's program; nearly a quarter are taking a semester or year off before making plans; and almost one-tenth are deferring enrollment for some period. Only 3% are not planning to go to any college.

Chart 1: What are students planning to do if they're not going to a 4-year institution right after graduation from high school?

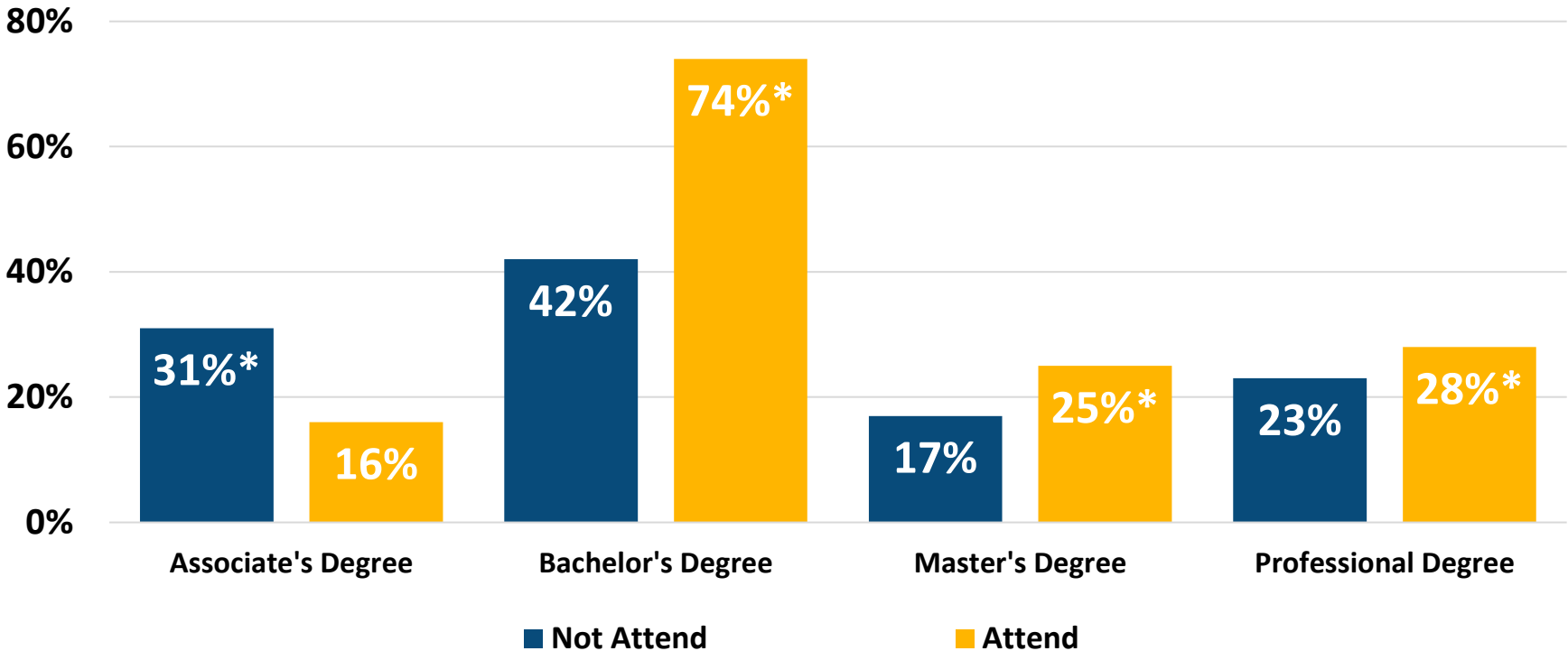


Why are students who initially considered attending 4-year institutions deciding not to do so? (cont.)

Compared with students who plan to attend a 4-year school, students who've decided not to are nearly twice as likely to have a goal of earning an associate's degree and little more than half as likely to aspire to earning a bachelor's. Fewer also aspire to a master's or professional degree (Ph.D., J.D., or M.D.).

While financial considerations may play a role in decisions to attend community college, only 1 in 4 students cited financial concerns as a primary reason to not attend – counter to conventional wisdom. Among those students, 18% cite cost, aid, and affordability concerns, and 15% report that they need to work to help support themselves or their families. Importantly, only 4% of students indicate that they don't think college is a good value for the price.

Chart 2: Differences in aspirations for degree attainment between attending and not-attending students



Note: The asterisk denotes a statistically significant difference between attending and not-attending students within degree attainment categories.

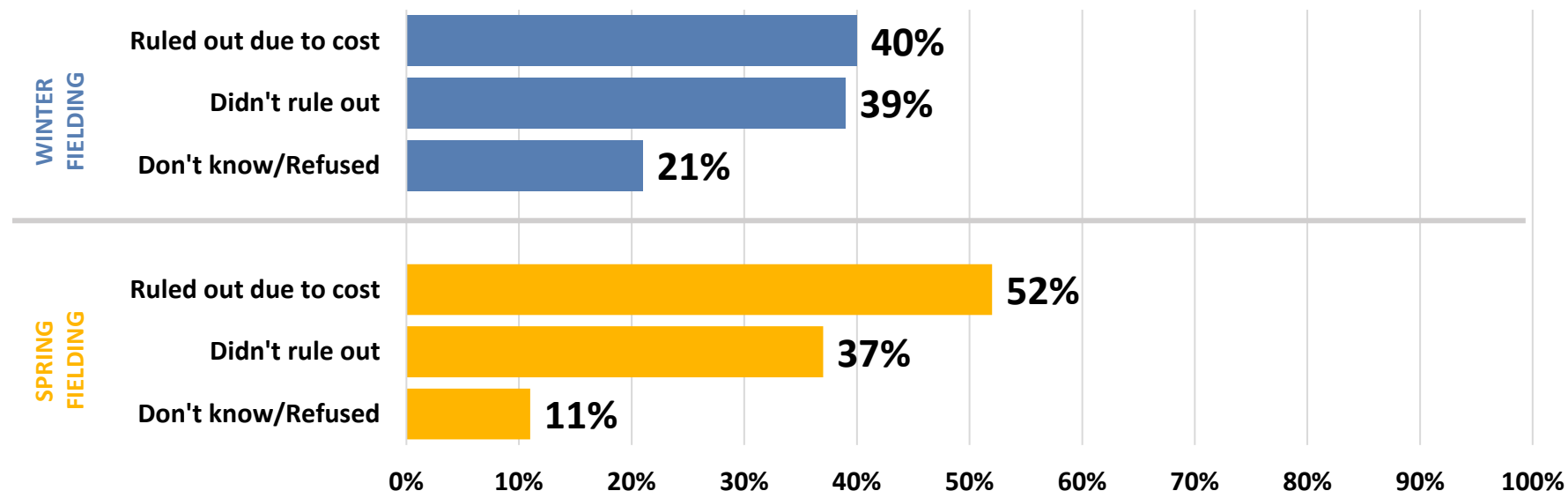
Why are students who initially considered attending 4-year institutions deciding not to do so? (cont.)

Overall, financial concerns appear to be a less prominent factor here, for students who have decided by February/March not to attend a 4-year school, than they are for students who continue through the process. In a previous issue of *studentPOLL* ([Volume 16, Issue 4: November 2023](#)), we found that cost was an important factor – though by no means the ultimate factor – for students as they weighed enrollment decisions among 4-year options – with anywhere from 40% to 50% indicating they ruled out a school due to cost.

Perhaps as interesting as the factors that are salient to students deciding mid-process against attending 4-year institutions are those that are not. The most interesting example: What of frequent assertions in the media and public discourse that college campuses are places of political indoctrination and intense polarization? While respondents may or may not agree, these views are essentially a non-factor in their decisions whether to pursue a 4-year college or university. Only 2% of those electing at this point not to attend a 4-year school cite political concerns as one of the determining factors, and only 5% of those who identify as conservative.

Chart from ‘*studentPOLL: Is Cost the Final Arbiter of College Choice?*’

What percent of students ruled out an institution solely due to cost in winter and spring of 2023?

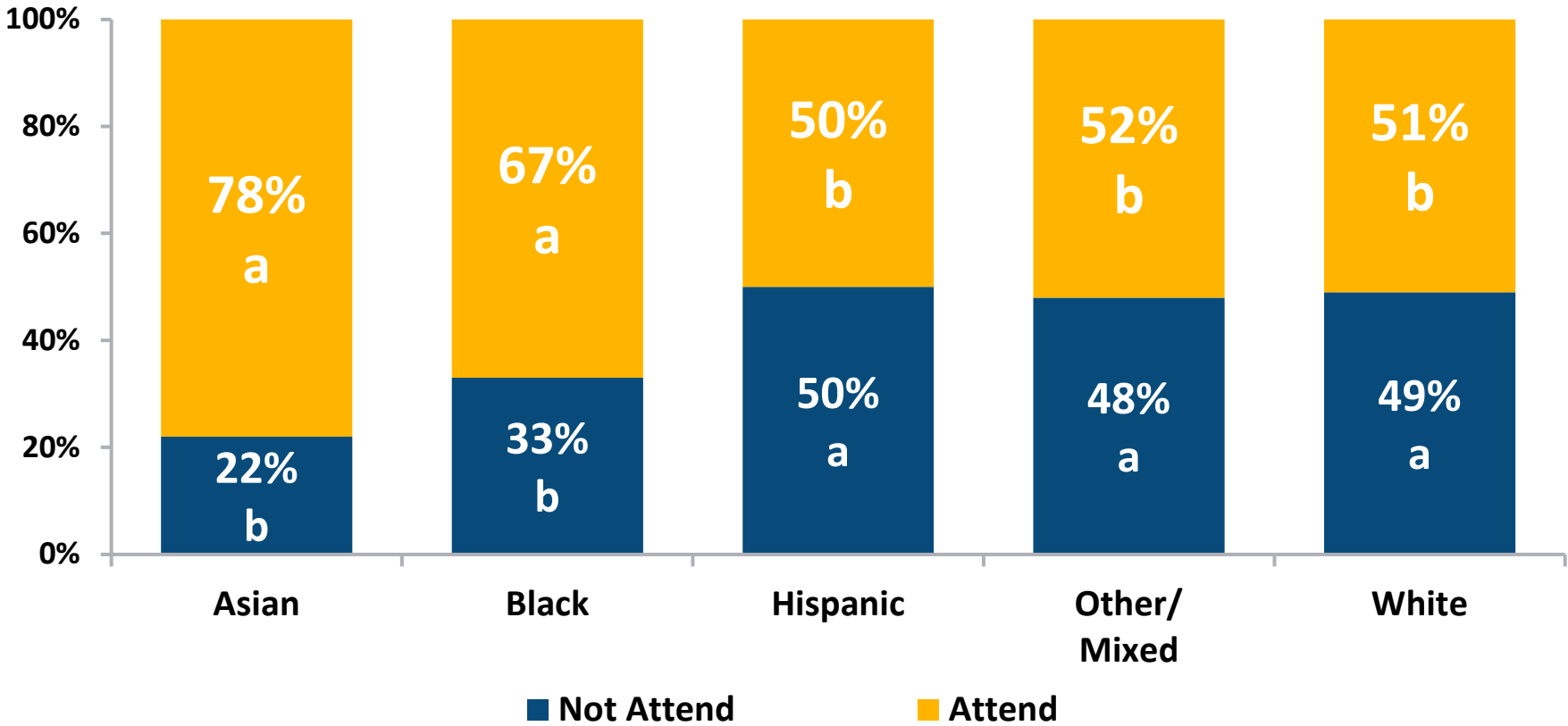


Note: Those who ruled out an institution due to cost in the spring are statistically different than those who ruled out institutions due to cost in the winter. Methodology information for this chart can be found in [studentPOLL Volume 16, Issue 4](#).

Are there cohorts or groups of students more likely not to plan to attend 4-year colleges and universities?

Race emerged as a significant factor across students who plan to attend 4-year institutions and previously interested students who now do not plan to do so – but results were mixed. Asian and Black students are more likely to plan to attend than are Hispanic, Other/Mixed, and White students. There are no significant differences in attendance decisions between Hispanic, Other/Mixed, and White students, however.

Chart 3: Students attending and not-attending decisions by racial/ethnic subgroup



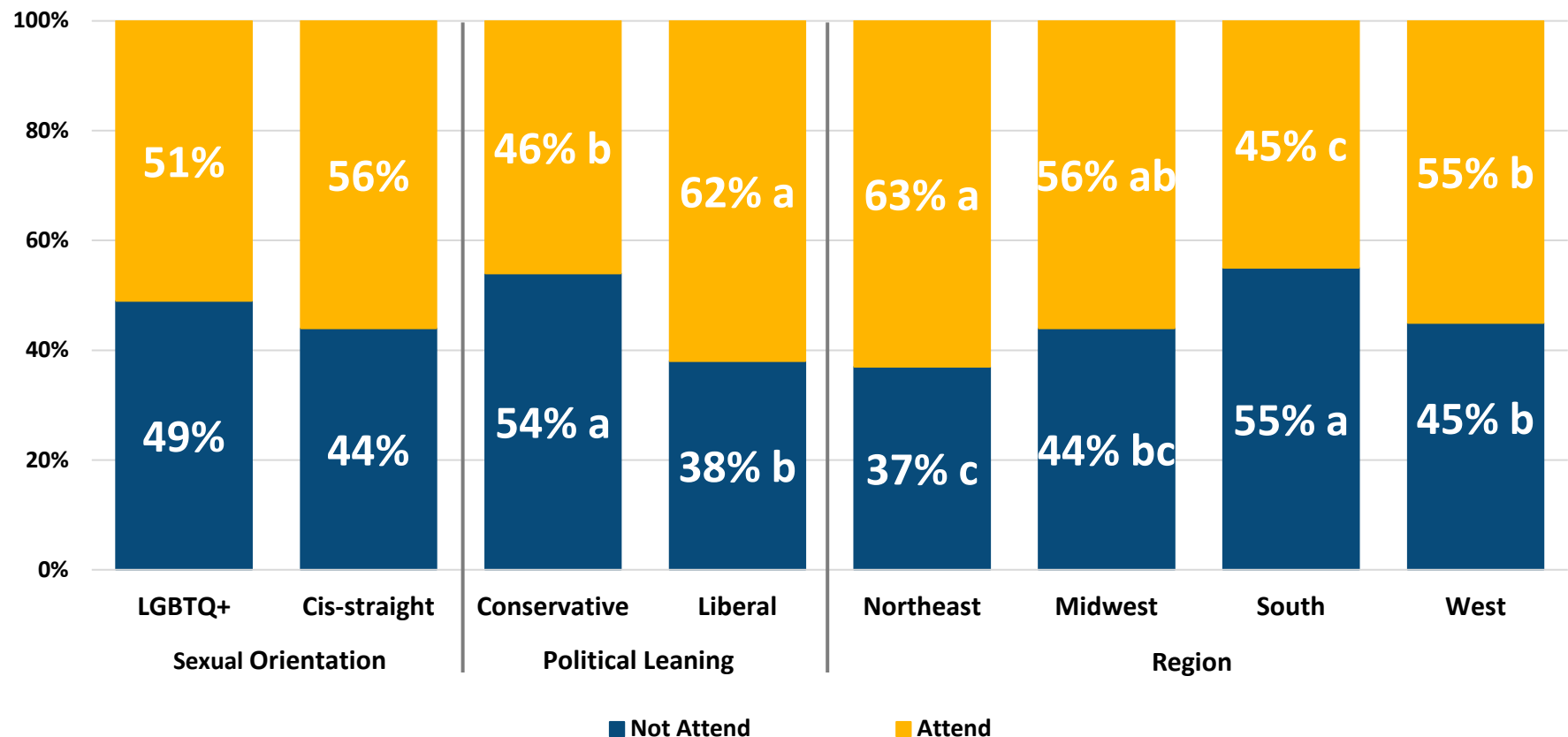
Note: Percentages that share a letter across groups are statistically similar.

Are there cohorts or groups of students more likely not to plan to attend 4-year colleges and universities? (cont.)

There are no significant differences across gender identity or sexual orientation. Geographically, those from the Northeast are more likely to plan to attend, while those residing in the South are less likely.

Students identifying as ‘Liberal,’ are more likely to plan to attend than those identifying as ‘Conservative’. Further, ‘Conservative’ students are more likely than ‘Liberal’ students to be planning to not attend – although, as noted previously, perceptions of college as overly politicized are not a significant factor for either group.

Chart 4: Students attending and not-attending decisions by noted subgroups

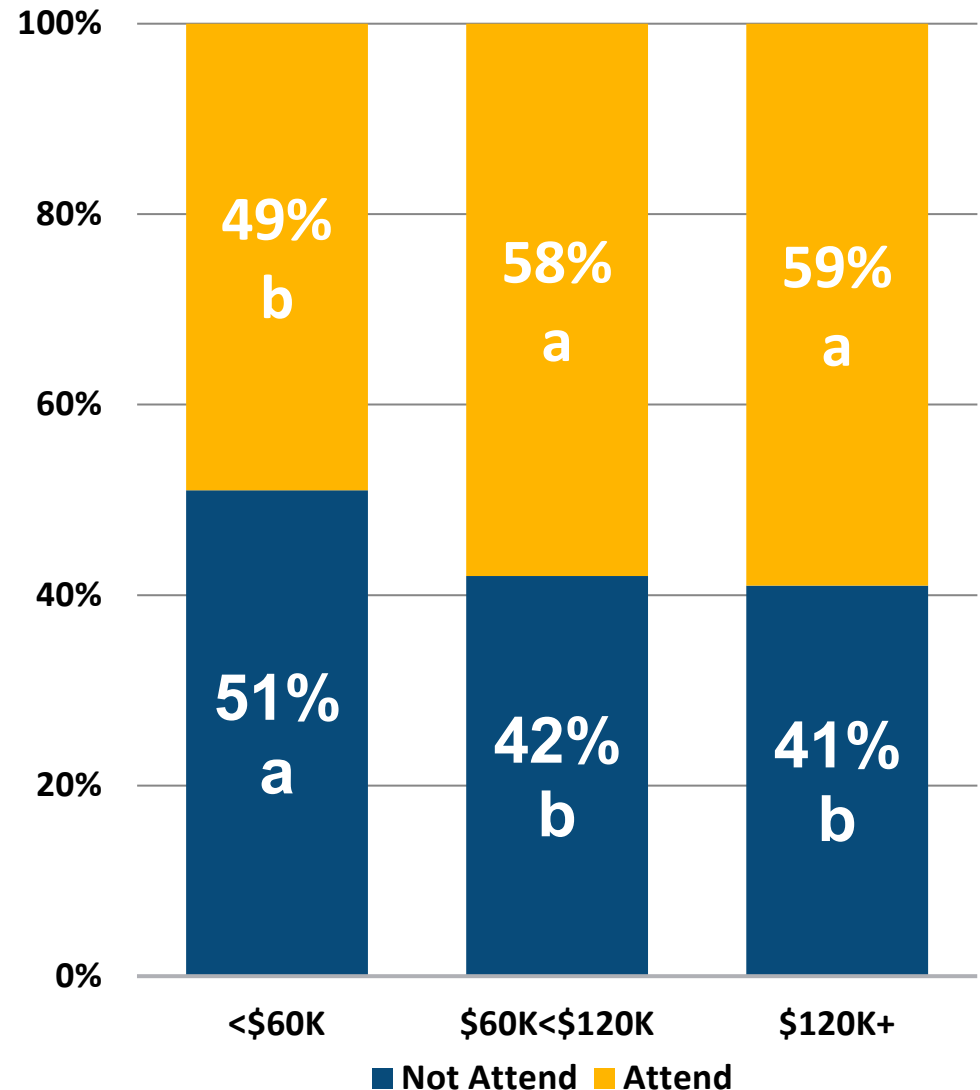


Note: Percentages that share a letter across groups are statistically similar.

Are there cohorts or groups of students more likely not to plan to attend 4-year colleges and universities? (cont.)

Household income is a pertinent factor delineating attenders from non-attenders. Students from households in the lowest band of self-reported annual income (less than \$60,000) are less likely to plan to attend a 4-year institution, while those from the middle and higher bands (more than \$60,000) are more likely to do so. Similarly, first-generation students (where neither parent has a 4-year degree or higher) are also less likely to intend to attend than are non-first-generation students.

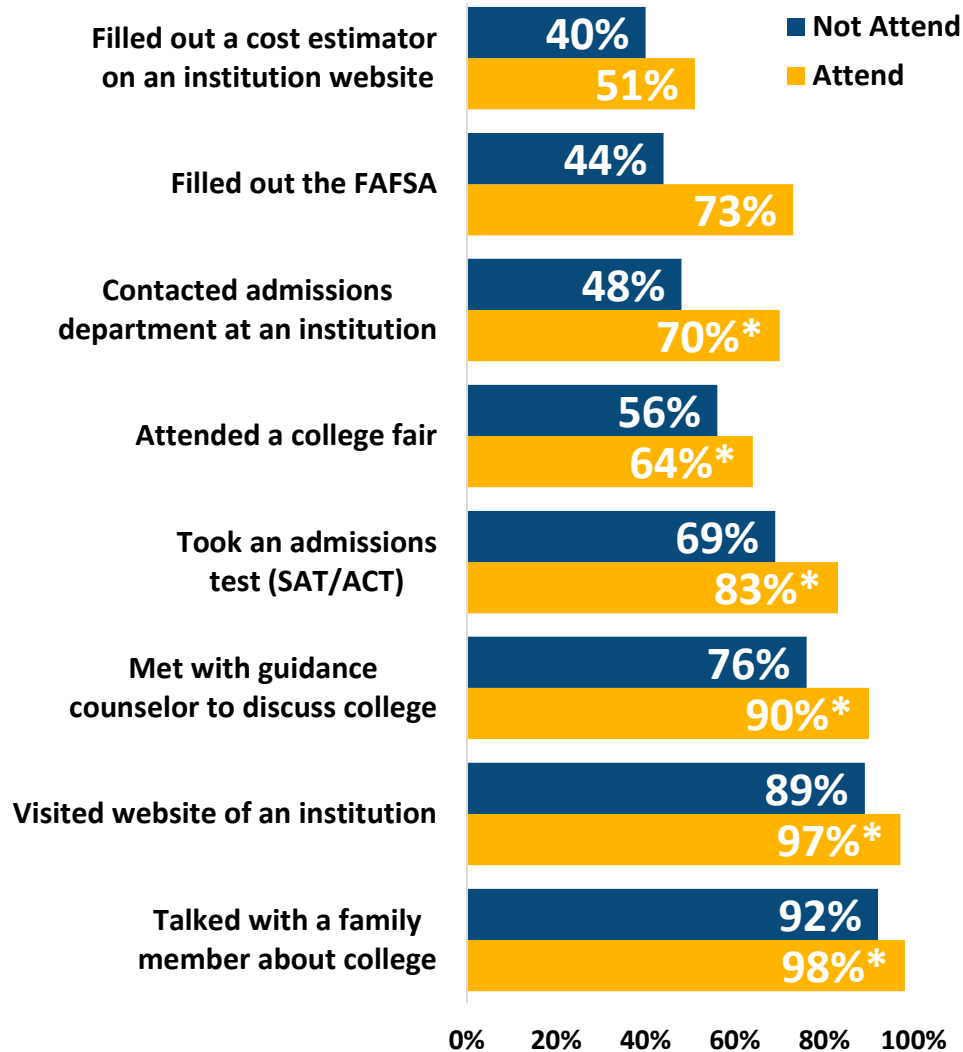
Chart 5: Students attending and not-attending decisions by income



Note: Percentages that share a letter across groups are statistically similar.

Are there differences in actions taken and resources utilized between those planning to attend 4-year institutions and those who are not?

Chart 6: Actions taken by attending and not attending students in the college search process



Note: The asterisks denote a statistically significant difference between attending and not attending students within each response.

Students deciding against doing so typically appear to have gone some distance in seeking information about college. Nine out of ten report speaking with family or visiting websites, and two-thirds to three-quarters cite meeting with counselors or taking the SAT or ACT.

Yet they are less likely than those favoring 4-year institutions to have taken any of the actions we put before them. This includes such steps as visiting a college or university website, meeting with a guidance counselor to discuss college, attending a college fair, contacting an admissions department, beginning or completing a college application, and filling out a cost estimator on a college website, among others.

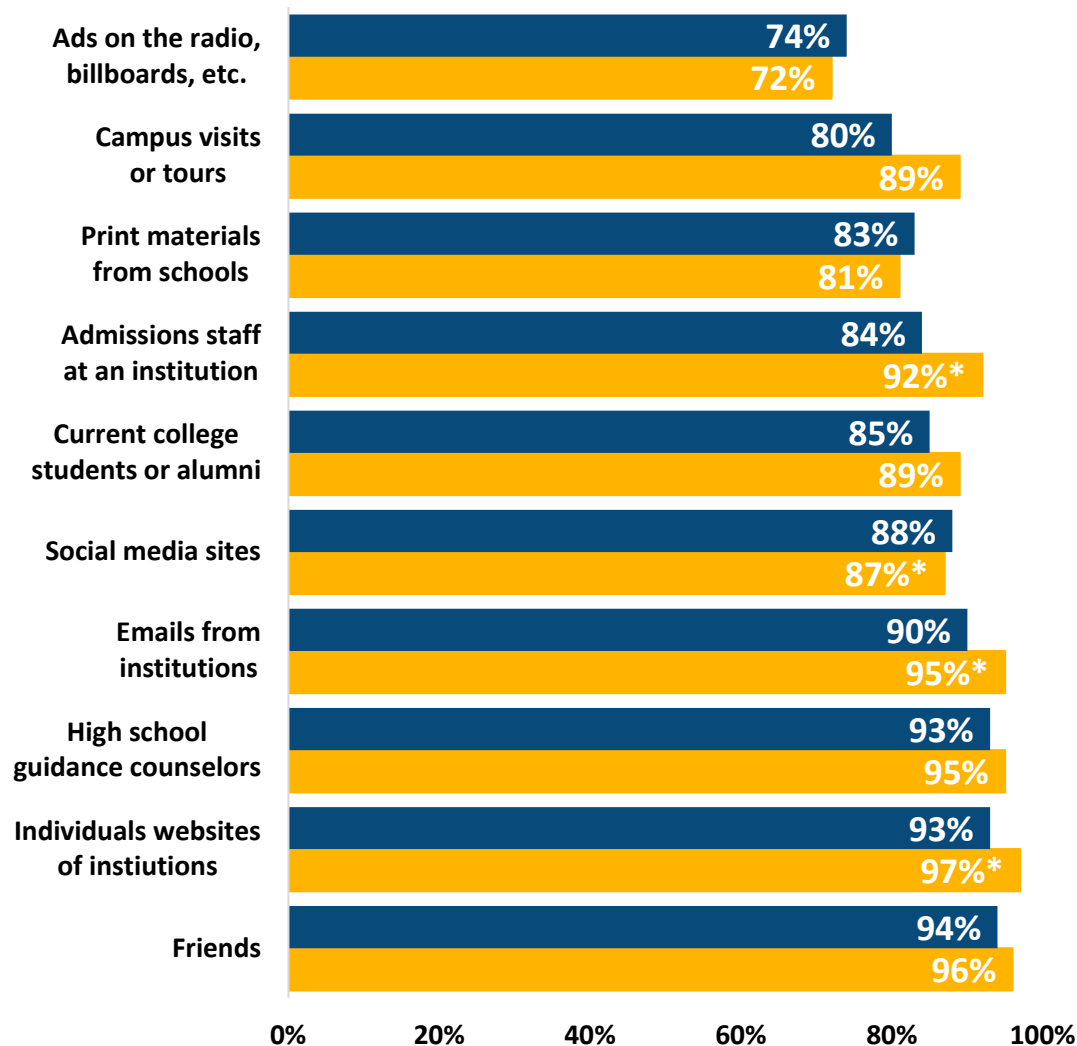
Of note, while filling out a cost estimator was the least utilized action across both not attending and attending groups (40% and 51%, respectively), the proportions of students doing so far exceed what we have observed earlier in studies of students pursuing 4-year institutions. In the aforementioned issue of *studentPOLL* focused on cost ([Volume 16, Issue 4: November 2023](#)), 27% to 33% of such students indicated they had used an estimator. This difference could be an early indication of increased use of estimators but may be, and perhaps more likely is, a direct result of federal delays in FAFSA processing and the cascading effect of delayed aid award notifications.

Are there differences in actions taken and resources utilized between those planning to attend 4-year institutions and those who are not? (cont.)

Non-attenders are just as likely as their attending counterparts to have used some of the more exploratory information sources we put before them in the survey. This includes sources such as friends, high school guidance counselors, social media sites, print materials from colleges and universities, and media advertisements.

They were marginally but consistently less likely, though, to have used more institution-specific sources, such as college websites, email from colleges and universities, admissions staff, current students or alumni, and campus tours, among others. Importantly, where we found a difference in the use of a source between the groups, we also found that non-attending students reported those sources as less influential. Across both groups, media ads are noted as the least influential source and parents and family members as the most influential. For attending students, campus visits were in second place (third for non-attenders).

Chart 7: Resources used by attending and not attending students in the college search process



Note: The asterisks denote a statistically significant difference between attending and not attending students within each response.

Conclusion

Students deciding by the middle of the process not to attend a 4-year institution full-time logically seem the most potentially convertible cohort of graduating high school seniors. In fact, they do not see themselves, for the most part, opting out of further education, but rather deciding to pursue it in a different way – via community college, 2-year program, part-time bachelor’s program, or a gap period. They differ in important ways, though, from their 4-year college-going peers. For instance, their educational and career goals and aspirations are not generally equivalent to those of students moving directly into 4-year programs, though some of them seem to be making decisions with those goals and aspirations in mind.

Our findings serve to bust some myths about why these students are making decisions to delay or altogether forego enrollment in 4-year colleges and universities. Responses indicate that their decisions to not attend are not influenced by public discourse claiming political indoctrination on campus or perceptions of a general politicization of the college experience. Further, there is little here to suggest that students perceive in a 4-year education a lack of value. And while cost is a major factor for some, it is not for most. Our findings also provide evidence that certain groups of less affluent and historically

marginalized students continue to face more significant challenges around access.

Students making the decision to not attend a 4-year program take many of the same steps that their peers planning to attend do, and they use most of the same information sources, indicating that there may remain opportunity at some level to encourage them to go straight onto a bachelor’s degree program. Yet many of these students seem to have been at least leaning against going for some time – engaging less frequently in behaviors more typical of those planning to attend 4-year institutions, utilizing institution-specific information sources less frequently, and finding those sources less influential. For some, this may be largely a conscious decision, while for others, it may be symptomatic of more systemic and structural disadvantages.

It is difficult to say with any authority how these findings may translate for any individual institution. Every college or university has its own market strengths and challenges, and each must contend with idiosyncrasies particular to its markets and competitors. That said, these findings may provide a mechanism for institutions to consider the perceptions and motivations extant within their own pools of prospective students and the need to position themselves to better attract, retain, and graduate students who are on the margins of attending college.

Conclusion (cont.)

At a tactical level, efforts might include greater attention to community college-oriented efforts, earlier and more impactful points of contact and outreach to prospective students, and an even more concerted focus on issues of affordability.

At the broader level of strategy, however, what remains true for all institutions is this: Careful and continued attention to the overall value proposition – the nature and appeal of the substantive student experience – will never be time wasted. Institutional leaders would be wise to invest in deep, empirical understandings of their particular markets, and how their institutions are perceived to stack up against competing options available to students on factors that are most important to them as they differentiate among those options. Most critically, institutional leaders should identify the ways in which they might improve their competitive position by building and effectively articulating a more compelling value proposition centered squarely on evolving the substance of the experience they provide. That will be true of all institutions, from the most ambitious to those that will need to rely in part on luring students now on the margins of attending a 4-year college or university.

Study Methodology

The findings in this issue of *student**POLL*** are based on survey research fielded in February and March of 2024. The survey was completed by 2,408 domestic high school seniors; 847 of whom intended at that point to attend a 4-year institution as a full-time student next fall and 625 of whom had seriously considered being a full-time student at a 4-year institution but then ruled it out. The remaining 936 did not consider attending a 4-year institution.

Respondents were 63% female and 34% white. The median household income was around \$90,000. Responses are weighted by income, race, region, and gender so that findings represent the larger domestic college-going population. The margin of error for both populations of students was plus or minus 2.6%.

The study was designed to provide a broad perspective on the market challenges facing institutions. Findings and conclusions, therefore, do not reflect the circumstances, challenges, and opportunities of any individual institution, which tend to be highly idiosyncratic. Rather, they are intended to contribute to the national conversation around access to higher education, inform policy makers, and prompt each individual institution to consider what its own particular situation might be with regard to this *student**POLL*** topic and how it can determine its own best solution(s).

Footnote: For the purpose of assessing differences across student populations, our analysis divided students into the following racial/ethnic groups. Students self-identified as: “Asian”, which included Asian or Asian American and Indian, Indian American, Indo-American, or Asian Indian; “Black” included Black, African American, African, or Caribbean; “Hispanic” included Hispanic, Latino/Latina/Latinx, or Mexican American; “White” included White, Caucasian, or European; and “Multi-racial/Other” included American Indian or Alaskan Native, Middle Eastern, Arab American, North African, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and those who identified with multiple groups.

About *studentPOLL*

The publication by Art & Science Group, LLC, *studentPOLL*, presents the results from a series of national surveys that measure the opinions, perceptions and behaviors of high school students and their parents. Published for the benefit of college and university senior leaders and enrollment officers, as well as secondary school college counselors, *studentPOLL* seeks to provide insights and understanding that will result in better communication and service to college-bound students across the nation.

First published in 1995 by Art & Science Group, a leading national source of market intelligence for higher education, *studentPOLL* has become a trusted and widely cited source of reliable data and insights on many critical questions concerning college choice. *studentPOLL* findings and analysis are provided free on the [Art & Science Group website](#).

About Art & Science Group

Art & Science Group offers market-informed strategy to higher education, independent schools and the non-profit sector. Since our founding in 1994, we have provided our clients with strategic market research and recommendations, built on a foundation of both creative thinking and empirical rigor — art and science. We work in a variety of arenas, leveraging a foundation of market data, analysis and inventive ideas, to guide and advance our institution's strategic interests and critical investments. Our firm is dedicated to helping each institution position itself in ways that positively affect the decisions of its key constituents — whether to apply, matriculate, give and so on — in an institution's favor. We provide a customized and collaborative approach for each client, with recommendations rooted in sophisticated research and thorough analysis. Our experienced consultants and researchers produce the highest quality findings and recommendations on the market.