

Who Plans to Go to College?



YouthTruth | STUDENT SURVEY
A NATIONAL NONPROFIT

Polls show that Americans are [losing faith in the value of a college education](#), and many, including high school students, are [debating](#) whether college is “worth it.” College enrollments are in decline, and undergraduate [degree attainment numbers](#) fell last year for the first time in a decade. The percentage of high school graduates enrolling in college immediately after high school has dropped, and there is widespread alarm that [community colleges in particular are in trouble](#).

In this follow-up to [The Class of 2022: Planning for the Future in Uncertain Times](#), over 25,000 high school seniors in the Class of 2023 weigh in about whether college features in *their* future plans. We explore which groups of students *want to go to college* - and which students actually *expect* to go to college.

We also spotlight three groups of students (boys/men, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latinx) in this year’s graduating class who have, in recent years, reported a *diminished* interest in college. What comes to light is a concerning pattern of mismatched aspirations and expectations that show how, for many students, navigating the pathway to [“the college dream”](#) has become increasingly difficult.

FINDINGS

1

ASPIRATIONS VERSUS EXPECTATIONS

Three out of four seniors in the class of 2023 want to go college, but there is a mismatch between students' college *aspirations* and their *expectations* that they will *actually enroll* in college. This college aspiration-expectation mismatch is more acute for some groups of students than others.

2

INEQUITY EXACERBATED

The class of 2023's aspiration for college differs significantly by race and gender, and disparities in which students want to go to college have been *exacerbated* over the last three years.

3

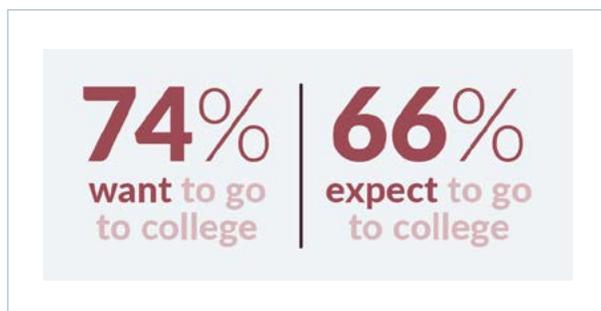
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

While the percentage of seniors expecting to attend a four-year college has held steady at 46 percent over the last three years, the percentage of seniors expecting to attend a *community college* has dropped from 25 percent in 2019 to 20 percent in 2023 as Black students are increasingly under-represented on community college campuses.

1 | THE CLASS OF 2023'S COLLEGE ASPIRATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

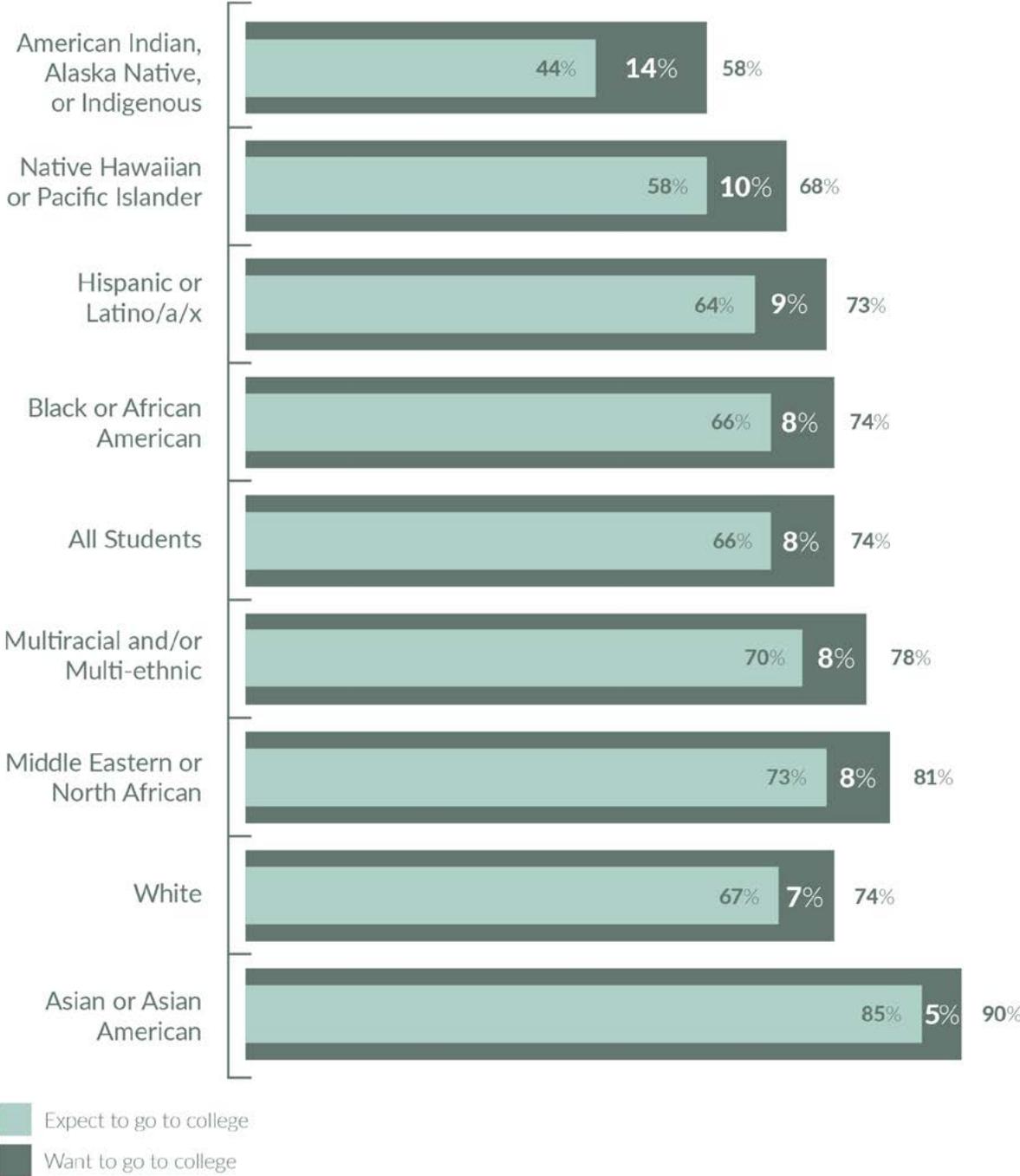
Three out of four seniors in the class of 2023 want to go college, but there is a mismatch between students' college *aspirations* and their *expectations* that they will *actually enroll* in college. This college aspiration-expectation mismatch is more acute for some groups of students than others.

Three out of four seniors (74 percent) in the class of 2023 aspire to college; however, only 66 percent of this year's graduates *expect* to go to college. Moreover, the difference between this year's seniors' college aspirations and their expectations, when viewed by race and by gender, show that for some groups of students there is a larger mismatch between their hope to attend college and their belief that college is actually in their future. This mismatch can manifest as a [quixotic hope](#) that saps motivation and even causes depression.



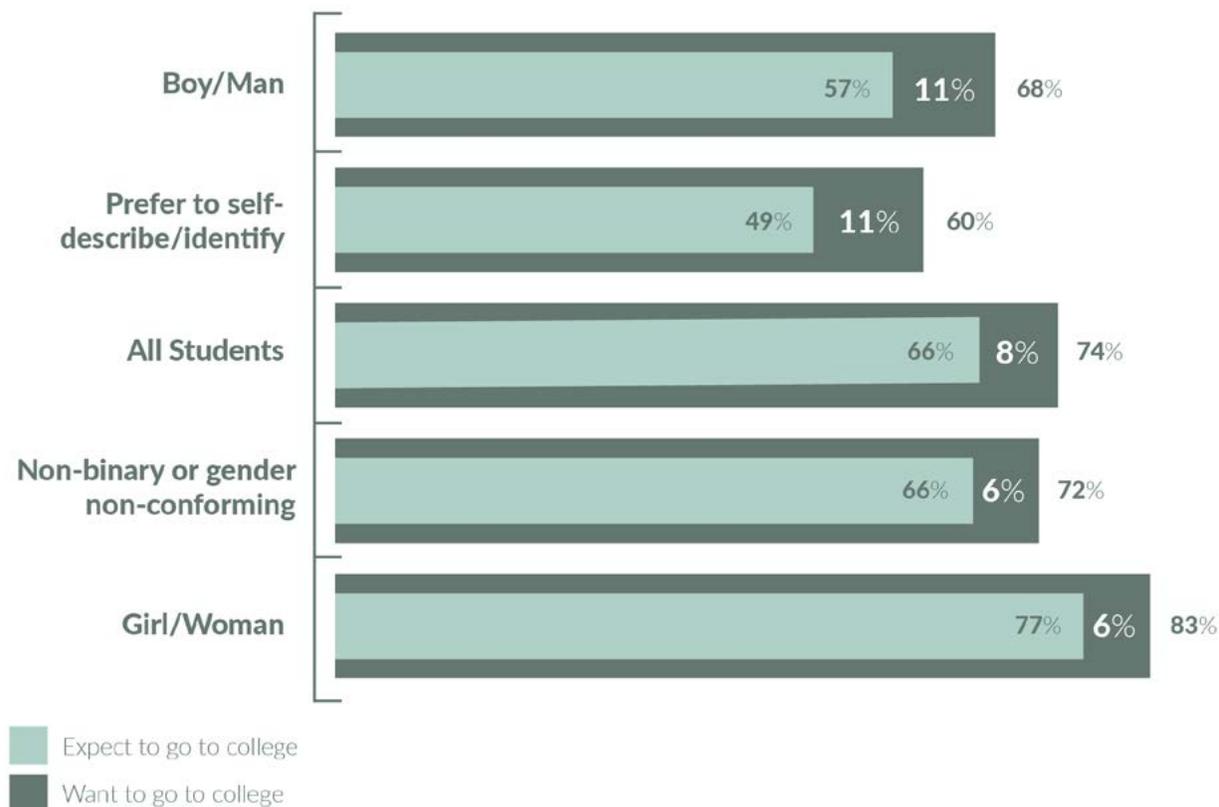
When viewed by race, particularly notable are the mismatched college aspirations and expectations for American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous students (14 percent mismatch) and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students (10 percent mismatch). In contrast, Asian or Asian American seniors' college aspirations and expectations are not only the most robust among student groups in the Class of 2023, they are also the most closely aligned (five percent mismatch).

THE COLLEGE ASPIRATION VERSUS EXPECTATION GAP, BY RACE



There are also striking differences in the patterns of college aspirations and expectations by gender in the class of 2023. For this year’s graduates who are boys/men and those who prefer to self-describe their gender there is an 11 percent mismatch between wanting to go to college and believing they will go to college. In contrast, the college aspirations and expectations of girls/women are more closely aligned (six percent mismatch).

THE COLLEGE ASPIRATION VERSUS EXPECTATION GAP, BY GENDER



This mismatch between college-going aspirations versus expectations is not unique to this year’s seniors; however, changes in college aspirations versus expectations for the class of 2023 relative to the class of 2019 – the last class to graduate before COVID-19 – have played out differently for different student demographic groups, as explored in following spotlight sections of this report.

“ I am almost done with my senior year, and not once been talked to about requirements for graduation let alone college. Because of this I have decided that college is out of the picture and that I guess I'm just not good enough.

–Boy/man, 12th Grade, white

“ I just don't do good in school so I don't ever feel motivated. School stays the same and I'm just trying to graduate.

–Boy/man, 12th Grade, Hispanic/Latinx

2 | THE CLASS OF 2023: WHO WANTS TO GO TO COLLEGE?

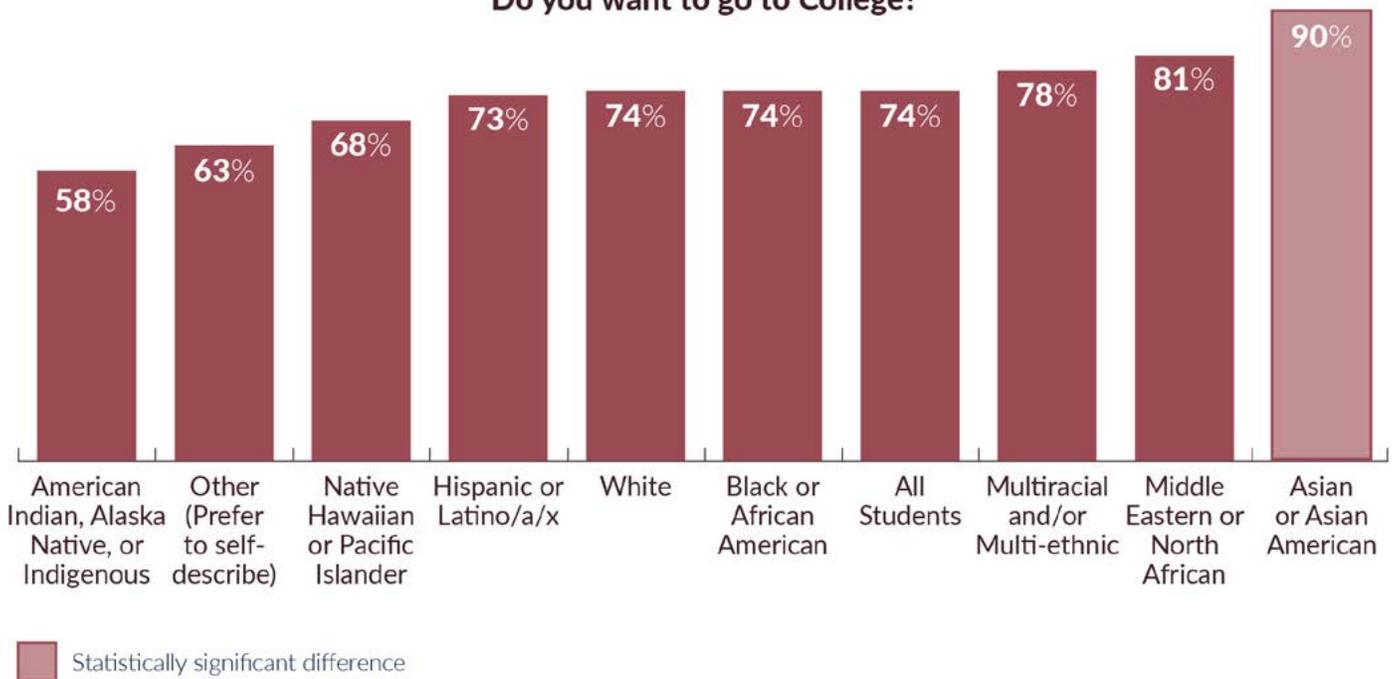
The class of 2023's aspiration for college differs significantly by race and gender, and disparities in which students want to go to college have been exacerbated over the last three years.

The overall percentage of seniors who want to go to college has held steady at 74 percent over the last three years despite the formidable challenges of the pandemic. However, not only have differences across student groups by race and gender persisted, but – as our analysis of the spotlight groups below shows – disparities in college aspirations have *widened* over time.

When we consider the class of 2023's college-going aspirations by race, there are striking differences between the student groups that most want to pursue higher education and their classmates. A full 32 percentage points separates Asian or Asian Americans, the group most likely to say they want to go to college (90 percent), and those who are least likely to say they want to continue their education, American Indian/Alaska Native/Indigenous students (58 percent).

DESIRE TO GO TO COLLEGE BY RACE/ETHNICITY

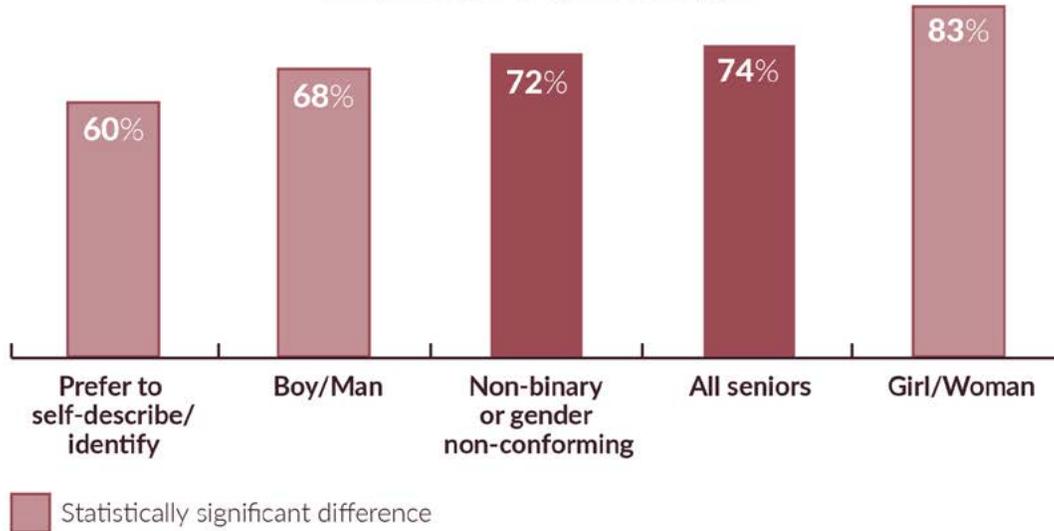
Do you want to go to College?



There are also concerning differences in the college-going aspirations of the class of 2023 by gender. Students who prefer to self describe their gender and boys/men report at a significantly lower proportion than students in the class of 2023 overall that they want to go to college. Moreover, a full 15 percentage points separate this year's graduates who are boys/men (67 percent) from the girls/women (85 percent) who say they aspire to college – adding to the evidence of a tenacious gender gap in higher education that has led to a growing recognition that [boys/men are being left behind](#) in education.

DESIRE TO GO TO COLLEGE BY GENDER

Do you want to go to College?

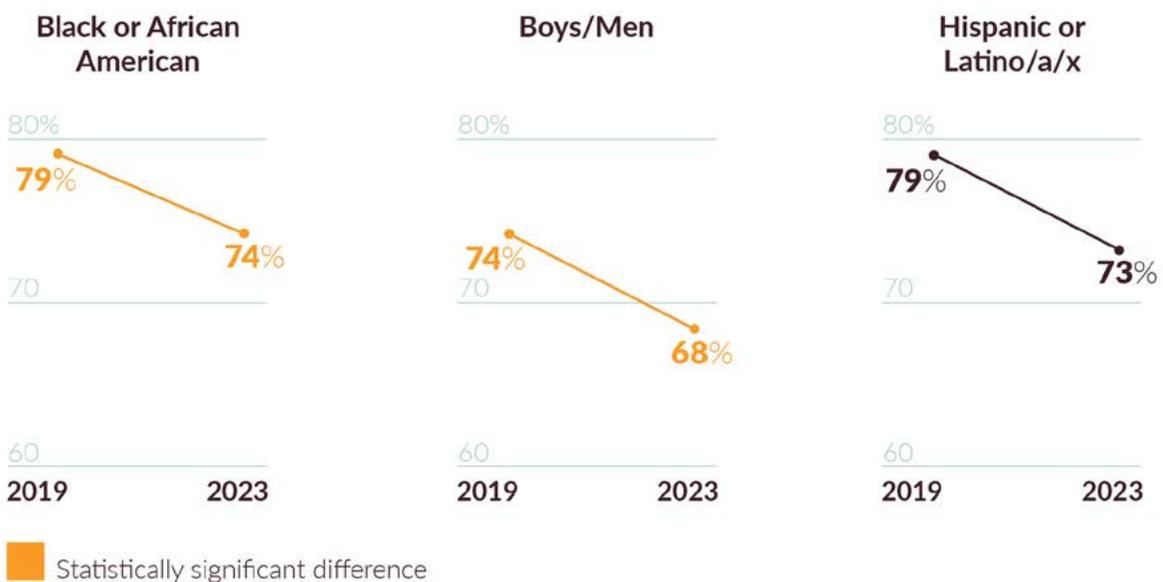


SPOTLIGHT GROUP TRENDS, 2019–2023

As was the case for the class of 2022, Black students and boys/men in the class of 2023 continue to report in significantly diminished numbers that they want to go to college when compared to their pre-pandemic peers in the class of 2019. While the proportion of Hispanic or Latinx seniors in the class of 2023 (73 percent) indicating that they want to go to college has ticked up over last year, this number is still diminished compared to their counterparts in the class of 2019.

DIMINISHED COLLEGE ASPIRATIONS

Do you want to go to College?



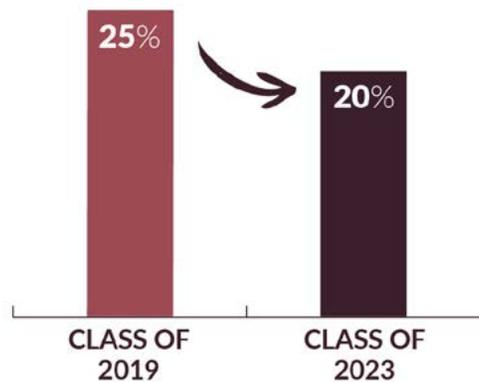
3 | THE CLASS OF 2023: WHO EXPECTS TO GO TO COLLEGE?

While the percentage of seniors expecting to attend a four-year college has held steady at 46 percent over the last three years, the percentage of seniors expecting to attend a community college has dropped from 25 percent in 2019 to 20 percent in 2023 as Black students are increasingly under-represented on community college campuses.

While sixty-six percent of seniors in the class of 2023 believe that they will go on to higher education, students' expectations for *community college* have dramatically eroded over the last three years. Even as the number of students expecting to attend a four-year college (46 percent) has held steady since 2019, the percentage of high school graduates who say that they expect to attend a *community college* has dropped from 25 percent for the class of 2019 to 20 percent for the class of 2023. And, as we discuss below, for each of the three spotlight groups, the diminished expectation that they will attend a community college that was evident in last year's data persists for this year's graduating class.

DECLINING EXPECTATIONS OF ATTENDING COMMUNITY COLLEGE

After you finish high school, what do you expect to do next?



“ A lot of students have been going on college trips with one teacher and I haven't been on a single one.

—Boy/man, Grade 12, Black

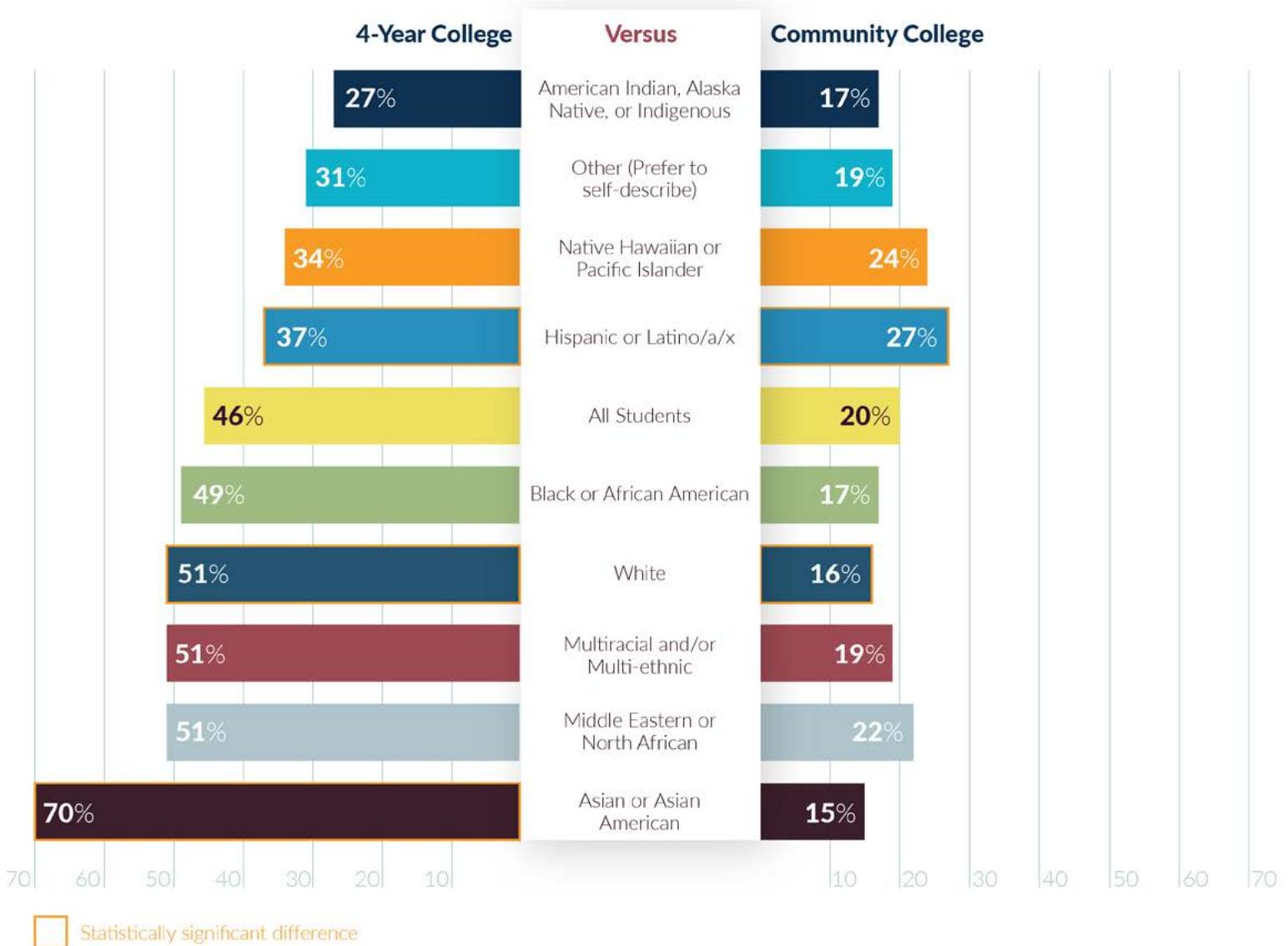
“ My school focuses on the grades you need for college, but when it comes to the steps to actually apply to colleges they don't tell you what you need, or how you should prepare for it.

—Girl/woman, Grade 12, Hispanic/Latinx

When the class of 2023's college expectations are disaggregated by race we can see which higher-education pathways each group of students believe are open to them, and how these beliefs differ across student groups. For example, while a lower proportion of Hispanic/Latinx students expect to attend a four-year college (37 percent), a larger proportion expects to attend a community college (27 percent) when compared to this year's graduates overall. In contrast, white seniors are *more* likely to expect to attend a four-year college (51 percent) than their peers overall but *less* likely than their peers to expect to attend a community college (16 percent).

COLLEGE EXPECTATIONS, BY RACE

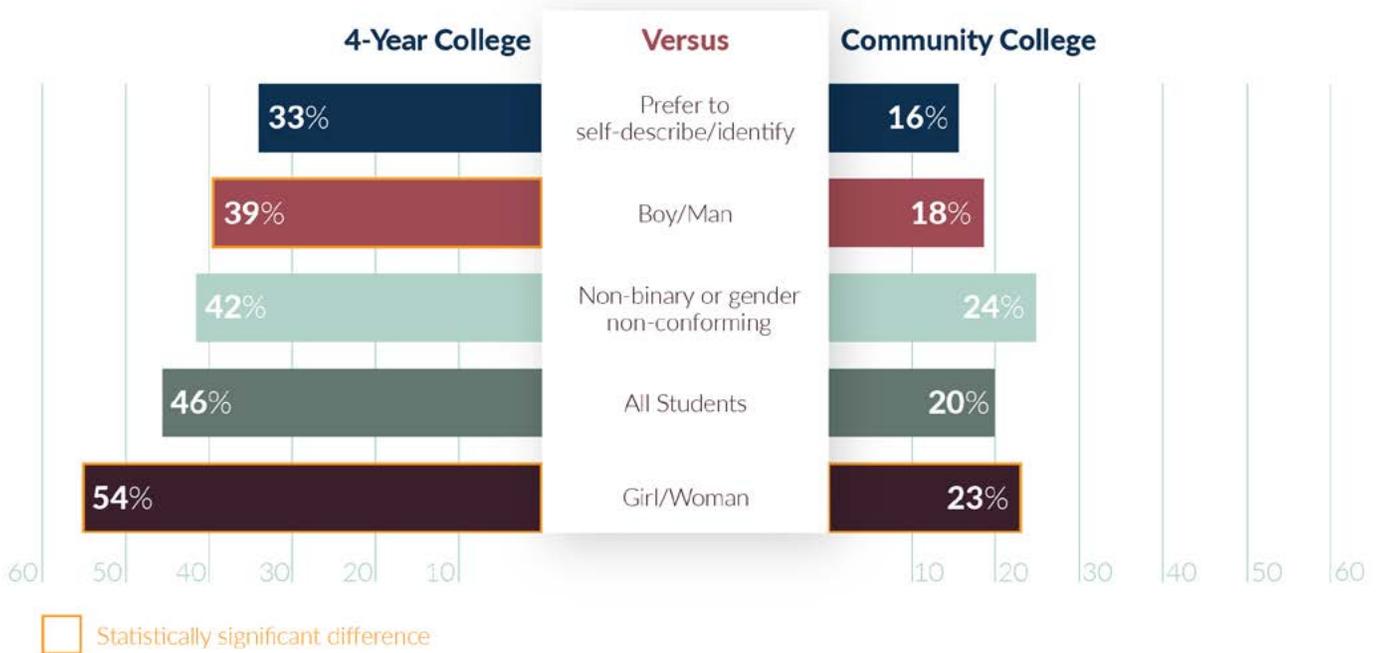
After you finish high school, what do you expect to do next?



Gender also significantly shapes students' expectations for the kind of higher education they expect to pursue, as girls/women are the only gender group in the class of 2023 who are significantly more likely than this year's graduates overall to believe that they will attend either a four-year college (54 percent) or a community college (23 percent).

COLLEGE EXPECTATIONS, BY GENDER

After you finish high school, what do you expect to do next?



““ I like that my school allows me to take college classes directly through community college, which helped me get accepted.
 –Boy/man, Grade 12, Hispanic/Latinx

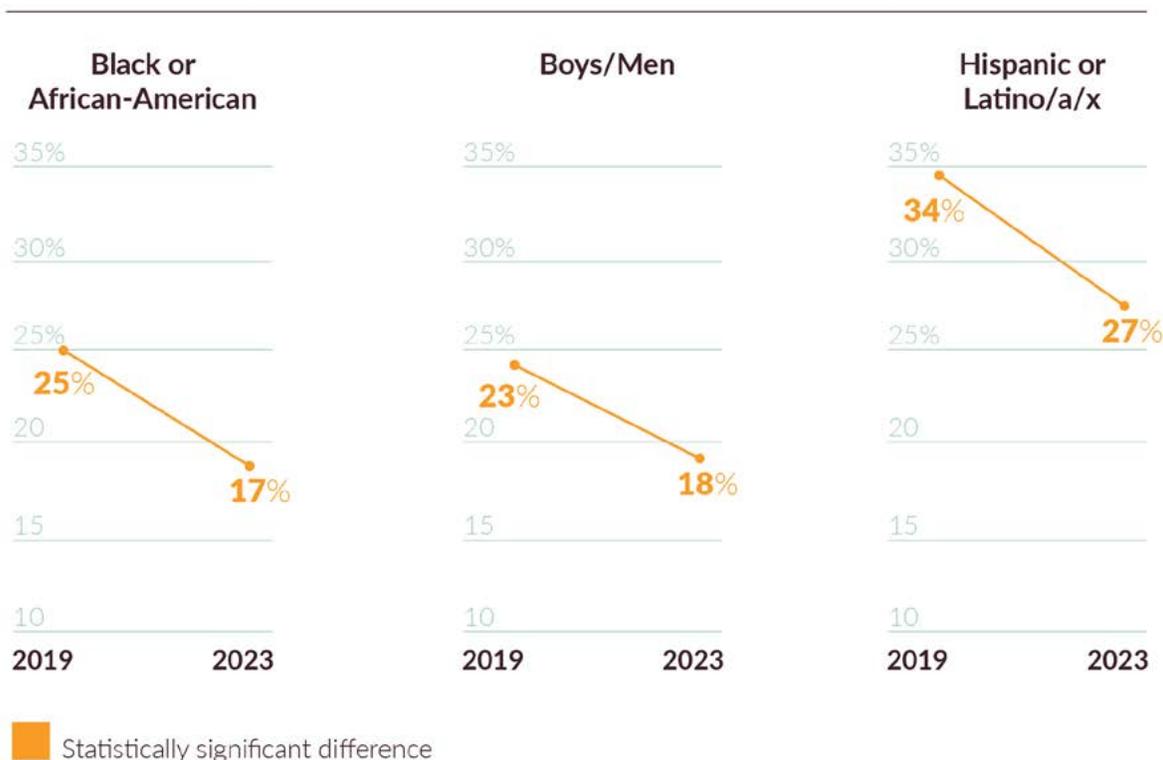
““ My school makes sure I am on the path to graduate and they let me know about many college options. They also allow college groups to come to my school. I like that they talk to us about our future.
 –Girl/woman, Grade 12, Black

SPOTLIGHT GROUP TRENDS, 2019–2023

Black (17 percent), Hispanic or Latinx seniors (27 percent) and seniors who are boys/men (18 percent) in the class of 2023 *all* report at significantly smaller percentages when compared to their pre-pandemic peers that they expect to attend community college. While the diminished community college-expectation trends for *all three* of these groups raise serious concerns, they are particularly alarming for Black students who are increasingly underrepresented on America’s college campuses, and particularly at community colleges.

DIMINISHED COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXPECTATIONS

After you finish high school, what do you expect to do next?



CONCLUSION

High school graduations bring communities together to celebrate America’s youth as they embark on the pathway to adulthood, which for some young people will include packing the car and heading off to college. However, as this report shows, for all too many of America’s youth, the road to college remains obscured, blocked, or just plain closed. And, since 2019, successfully navigating the road to college has become even more challenging for many, including the groups spotlighted in this report. From college counselors and admissions officers to policymakers and philanthropic funders the time is past due for all adults concerned with equity of educational opportunity to tune into the perceptions of students themselves and enlist young people as partners in constructing more clearly marked paths that are open to all who aspire to college.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The insights shared in this report are based on data collected from 53,266 high school seniors from 21 states in the classes of 2019, 2022, and 2023.

➤ Respondents came from 21 states (CA, CO, FL, GA, IL, IN, MA, ME, MI, MN, MO, NC, NJ, NY, OH, OR, PA, TN, TX, WA, WY)

This report builds on analyses in the *Class of 2022: Planning for the Future in Uncertain Times*, which presented insights from 28,240 seniors (from 271 high schools across 119 school systems) in the class of 2019 and 2022, and adds to this responses from 25,026 seniors (from 223 schools across 83 school systems) in the class of 2023.

	Class of 2023	Class of 2022	Class of 2019	Overall
Boy/man	45.62%	43.95%	45.21%	44.88%
Girl/woman	44.45%	44.19%	46.17%	44.54%
Non-binary or gender non-conforming	2.28%	3.23%	N/A	2.42%
Prefer to self-describe/identify	3.11%	2.34%	2.86%	2.76%
No Response	4.54%	6.29%	5.76%	5.41%

Hispanic or Latinx	35.00%	33.37%	25.18%	33.21%
White	32.14%	37.34%	36.09%	34.75%
Black or African American	6.10%	6.38%	8.84%	6.53%
American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous	1.29%	1.13%	.48%	1.13%
Asian or Asian American	8.75%	7.89%	5.23%	7.99%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	.96%	1.00%	.75%	.95%
Other/self-described	2.67%	2.80%	1.68%	2.61%
Multiracial and/or multi-ethnic	3.48%	3.42%	13.95%	4.64%
Middle Eastern or North African	.81%	1.02%	N/A	.81%
No response	8.80%	5.66%	7.81%	7.38%

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSES

The survey data were examined using descriptive statistics, chi-squares, and effect size testing. An alpha level of 0.05 was used to determine statistical significance, and effect sizes were examined for all analyses. Only analyses with at least a small effect size are reported.