

# REVIEW and Analysis



of the  
**Class of 2008** High School Senior **Opinions Survey**

West Virginia  
Higher Education  
Policy Commission

# REVIEW and Analysis

West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission

## Executive Summary

This paper reports the results of the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission's *Class of 2008 High School Senior Opinions Survey*, a comprehensive examination of the post-graduation plans of the state's public high school seniors. The general goal of the survey was to study, using self-reported data, students' aspirations related to postsecondary education and the factors and concerns that influence their decisions regarding whether to go to college and, if so, what type of institution to attend. Of specific importance in this year's survey was the influence of the Providing Real Opportunities for Maximizing In-State Student Excellence (PROMISE) Scholarship Program on college decisions and how students' plans might change in response to potential alterations to this program.

The following summary presents a brief overview of the findings of the survey, including statewide percentage estimates based on the responses of those surveyed. Specific sections of this report are dedicated to the following areas of interest: high school preparation, post-high school plans and college participation, college cost and affordability, college choice, and the impact of PROMISE.

### High School Preparation

Table A reports survey results related to indicators measuring readiness for college or work after high school graduation. The vast majority of West Virginia's high school seniors took the curriculum designed to ready students for college. Considering that a sizable proportion of students answered that they did not know their specific curriculum path, though, the figure of 68.2 percent listed here could be even higher. Regardless, this percentage represents an increase of about 10 percent from the 2007 survey (though differences in analysis methodology make comparisons between the two surveys somewhat inexact). Additionally, over 74 percent completed Algebra II or a higher-level math course, a statistic which is important because Algebra II is ACT's bellwether course indicating preparedness for college-level mathematics. Finally, in terms of general academic performance, over three fourths of seniors had an overall high school grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or greater, reflecting at least a B average.

While the high school performance statistics for the state's seniors were good, the percentage of students earning a composite score of 22 (the score needed to get a merit-based PROMISE Scholarship) or higher was 47.7 percent. This figure suggests a disconnect between the courses high school students are taking, their grades in these courses, and how prepared the students actually are for college. It is also interesting to note that only 51.0 percent of seniors felt that their high school experience had left them either "prepared" or "very prepared" for pursuit of their post-graduation ambitions, which included college for most.

**Table A.** High School Preparation

Measure	Percentage of Seniors
Taking College Preparatory Curriculum	68.2
High School GPA $\geq$ B Average	76.4
ACT $\geq$ 22	47.7
Completed Algebra II or Higher	74.2
Feel Prepared or Very Prepared for Post-Graduation Plans	51.0

### Post-High School Plans and College Participation

As alluded to above, a large proportion of the state’s high school seniors had plans to pursue a traditional postsecondary education. As Table B shows, almost 80.0 percent of students statewide intended to go to college at some point, and 73.8 percent planned to start school in the fall of 2008. Additionally, 75.0 percent of seniors hoped to earn a bachelor’s or higher-level degree.

**Table B.** College Plans

Measure	Percentage of Seniors
Will Attend College	79.9
Will Attend College in Fall	73.8
Aspire to Bachelor's or Higher	75.0

In terms of planned attendance, there was a statistically valid association between student intentions and their self-reported family income. For example, the percentage of students from families earning greater than \$60,000 who planned to begin college in the fall was over 20 percentage points higher than that of students from families with income of \$30,000 or less.

A section of this survey was dedicated to exploring the reasons why some of West Virginia’s high school seniors decided not to pursue a college education. Table C presents the five most common factors that students viewed as either “important” or “very important” in their decision-making. The desire to begin working immediately was by far the most prevalent factor in the choice to forego traditional postsecondary education. Only about half that proportion, however, felt that a need to help support their family was a material influence on their decision. Regarding other popular reasons, the cost of college was judged to be influential by an estimated two thirds of non-attending seniors, and over half considered self-doubt about their ability to succeed in college as at least an “important” factor in choosing not to attend.

**Table C.** Reasons for Not Attending College

Factor	Percentage of Seniors
Want to Work & Earn Money	86.0
Costs Too Much	66.0
Tired of School	54.3
Would Likely Not Succeed	52.3
Want to Attend Vocational School	51.9

### College Cost and Affordability

The financial obligations of postsecondary education can play a role in a student’s decision not to enter college. Cost also can shape the experience of those who are college-bound; it can influence everything, from the specific institution selected to their financial position upon degree completion (think of those who incur student loan debt). Thus, one

objective of this survey was to measure students' confidence in their ability to pay for higher education and to examine how they planned to finance their college career.

Table D below reports that over half of West Virginia's college-going high school seniors had "some" concerns about paying for college, but felt they likely would be able to cover expenses. The proportion who had "major" financial concerns, meaning that they were uncertain about having enough money to finish college, was 21.5 percent. Predictably, there was a statistically valid inverse relationship between family income and the amount of student financial uneasiness, with 36.0 percent of seniors in families earning \$30,000 or less having "major" concerns, as compared with only 10 percent of seniors from families earning more than \$60,000.

**Table D.** Financial Concerns Related to College

Amount/Level of Concerns	Percentage of Seniors
None	22.5
Some	56.0
Major	21.5

Table E displays the five most common sources of financial support that college-going students intended to use to cover at least part of their postsecondary expenses. The highest percentage of seniors expect to employ parental or family assistance (77.4%), followed by those that intend to work part-time while in school (70.3%), and those who plan to use institution-based scholarships (56.1%).

**Table E.** Sources of Financial Support

Source	Percentage of Seniors
Parents	77.4
Part-Time College Job	70.3
College Scholarship	56.1
Personal Savings	55.6
Non-Federal Loans	50.1

## College Choice

This survey also examined students' college choices and attempted to pinpoint the key factors behind their selection of a specific school. Table F presents, based only on the responses of those who intended to start college in fall 2008, the college choices of West Virginia's seniors in terms of general institution type. As the table shows, over 70 percent intended to start their college career at a public four-year school in West Virginia. The next highest estimated percentage (14.2%) planned to attend an in-state public two-year institution, while a small proportion of students intended to enroll in either an in-state private school or an out-of-state institution of some kind.

**Table F.** College Choice by Institution Type

Institution Type	Percentage of Seniors
West Virginia Public Four-Year Institution	71.0
West Virginia Public Two-Year Institution	14.2
West Virginia Private Institution	6.0
Out-of-State Institution	8.6

Table G lists the ten most prevalent factors considered by college-bound students as either “important” or “very important” in their choice of a specific school to attend. The percentage estimates below were based on the survey responses of those seniors who intended to begin college in the fall of 2008.

Almost all students (96.3%) felt that finding a school with an academic program that fit their personal goals was a significant criterion in the college selection process. Other academic-related choice factors considered important by a large percentage of seniors included the presence of an outstanding program in a chosen field of study, the overall reputation of the school, and the chances of moving from the school into a prestigious graduate or professional program.

An examination of Table G also reveals that variables tied to cost were viewed as pivotal in choosing a postsecondary institution. Affordability was deemed to be an “important” or “very important” element by 89.9 percent of students who planned to start their college careers in fall 2008. It is not surprising, then, that factors such as ease in obtaining financial aid/loans or earning an institution-awarded scholarship weighed heavily in the college choice decisions of a great many students as well.

A perhaps surprising result was the comparative impact of college marketing information and school-related correspondence on students’ selection of a specific institution. Over three fourths (76.2%) judged this type of material and information to be influential in their decision-making, which was a much higher proportion than those associated with factors such as proximity to home (57.4%), college size (56.6%), and parental desire (44.0%).

**Table G.** Influences on Specific College Choice

Factor	Percentage of Seniors
Academic Program Offering	96.3
Affordable Cost	89.9
Superior Program in Major	85.9
Ease in Obtaining Financial Aid/Loans	83.8
Academic Reputation	77.8
School Marketing Information/Correspondence	76.2
Obtained Scholarship	70.7
Social Life	66.8
Chances of Getting Into Top Graduate/Professional School	62.5
Part-Time Employment Available	58.7

## Impact of PROMISE

The 2008 High School Senior Opinions Survey contained a group of questions designed to gather information about the possible effects of West Virginia's merit-based scholarship program, PROMISE (Providing Real Opportunities for Maximizing In-State Student Excellence), on students' decisions regarding postsecondary education. One question asked college-going students if their fundamental decision to attend college was tied to earning this scholarship. Based on the responses to this question, it was estimated that 76.5 percent of PROMISE-eligible students would have gone to college even if they had not received a PROMISE Scholarship (see Table H below). Conversely, 23.5 percent would not have pursued postsecondary education without a scholarship.

**Table H.** Effect of PROMISE on College Attendance

Choice	Percentage of Seniors
Would Attend Without PROMISE	76.5
Would Not Attend Without PROMISE	23.5

In regard to the selection of a specific college to attend, obtaining a PROMISE Scholarship did convince a sizable proportion of students to stay inside the state of West Virginia for the start of their postsecondary careers. According to the results of this survey, 38.7 percent of scholarship-eligible, college-going seniors would have gone to school out of state were it not for the PROMISE Scholarship Program. The scholarship, though, appeared to have little impact on which in-state institution students chose to attend, at least as far as this issue was addressed by this year's survey. Future surveys should examine the potential impact of PROMISE on the distribution of students among the state's four-year and two-year sectors, as well as the influence it could have on students' choice of a public or private in-state institution.

Table I contains survey results related to how West Virginia students might react to possible changes to the PROMISE program. Turning the scholarship into a forgivable loan, with forgiveness contingent upon a student working in the state for a period of time after degree completion, would likely reduce considerably the number of students accepting an award. As Table I shows, just 62.1 percent of 2008's PROMISE-eligible seniors would have accepted the award with a one-year work stipulation attached, and only 42.2 percent would have done so if a multi-year requirement had been in place. Also, some students would have declined an award that mandated 20 hours of community service per year to maintain eligibility; in this case, however, the vast majority (78.5%) still would have accepted PROMISE funds.

**Table I.** Acceptance Rates of PROMISE by Eligible Students Given Potential Program Changes

Program Change	Percentage of Seniors
One-Year Work Requirement	62.1
Multi-Year Work Requirement	42.2
Community Service Requirement	78.5

## Methodology

This survey was conducted based on a stratified cluster sample design. 27 public high schools were selected randomly to administer the survey to their entire senior classes in April/May 2008. In survey design parlance, each high school represented a cluster or primary sampling unit (PSU). Before selection of the PSU's, though, the state was stratified (or divided) by congressional district.

Then potential PSU's were placed into one of three school-size categories within each of the state's three districts. 40 of West Virginia's 120 public schools were categorized as "small," with a senior class of equal to or less than 97 students; another third were classified as "medium" size (98 to 180 seniors); and the "large" category consisted of 40 schools with a senior class of 181 to 488 students. Finally, three schools of each size level were chosen randomly within each district to participate in the survey. Fortunately, all 27 schools receiving the survey instrument were able to administer it and send back valid results, even if not all seniors at the various schools could be canvassed (due to absences or other such inevitable difficulties). The district and size stratification variables were employed in selecting the PSU's to ensure that students from all areas of the state could participate in the survey and to reflect any fundamental differences that might exist between schools of different sizes.

The results of the 2008 High School Senior Opinions Survey were analyzed statistically and are discussed at length in the remainder of this report. Each results table in the following pages presents the actual frequency of various responses to a survey question/measure. More importantly, each table also reports the estimated population percentage related to a given response. The population under study here is that of all West Virginia public high school seniors. Percentage estimates were computed based on actual survey responses with appropriate adjustments made to account for the sampling design used for this project. Information concerning the amount of sampling error associated with these statewide percentages is contained in the confidence limits listed along with each estimate. Each set of limits bookends--with a certainty level of 95 percent--the range within which the population percentage fell. The confidence limits were also developed based on actual responses and the sampling methodology employed.

## Section One: High School Preparation

The following analysis relates to the preparedness of West Virginia's high school seniors for college. As Table 1.1 below demonstrates, an estimated 68.2 percent of the 2008 senior class took the college preparation curriculum while in secondary school. Taking sampling error into account, this proportion could have been as low as 63.3 percent or as high as 73.1 percent. Approximately 13.6 percent of seniors pursued a technical/vocational training curriculum, while a surprising 18.2 percent actually did not know their program of study. This high percentage of "unknowns" does affect the reliability of these estimates and may be reflective of a need for more thorough guidance counseling in the state's high schools or it could be the result of a poorly-worded survey question. This is an issue that needs to be explored in future administrations.

**Table 1.1** High School Curriculum

Curriculum	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
College Preparation	1526	68.2	63.3	73.1
Technical Preparation	308	13.6	11.2	16.1
Don't Know	414	18.2	14.9	21.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>2248</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

Table 1.2 conveys that the vast majority of the state's seniors performed very well in high school in terms of cumulative grade point average (GPA), with an estimated 76.4 percent having a B average or better. Earning a B average is one of the requirements for earning a PROMISE Scholarship, as is a composite ACT score of 22 or better. It should be noted that this figure is based on overall, not core, GPA and that averages were self-reported on the survey.

**Table 1.2** Cumulative High School GPA

B Average or Higher	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
No	505	23.6	20.2	27.0
Yes	1654	76.4	73.0	79.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>2159</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

Table 1.3 on the following page provides an overview of how the class of 2008 performed on the ACT. This table presents the proportion of seniors who earned a 22 or above on the test. While it is estimated that close to half of West Virginia's seniors taking the ACT made a 22 or higher, the disparity between this percentage (47.7%) and the proportion earning a B average or greater in their coursework (76.4%) is striking, even after sampling error is considered. This gap perhaps reflects a general disconnect between the level of academic rigor in the state's secondary schools and the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college, at least to the extent that those elements are measured accurately by the ACT.

**Table 1.3** Composite ACT Score

ACT $\geq$ 22	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
No	759	52.3	48.5	56.1
Yes	703	47.7	43.9	51.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>1462</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

In order to prepare for college-level work, ACT recommends that high school students take at least three years of mathematics, encompassing a sequence of Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II. Table 1.4 contains the results from the 2008 High School Senior Opinions Survey regarding the highest level math course students completed in their high school career. According to the survey, roughly three fourths of the state’s seniors had passed Algebra II or a higher-level course. This large proportion of students taking the ACT-recommended coursework, however, is not matched by the percentage of 2008 ACT-taking graduates earning at least a 22 on the math subtest, ACT’s benchmark score indicating readiness for college math. The fact that only 31 percent—according to the testing service’s Measuring College Readiness 2008 report—of the state’s test-taking seniors met this criterion is perplexing because it appears that a much larger percentage completed the appropriate secondary coursework. In fact, if the analysis is limited to just ACT takers, then approximately 87.0 percent of the class of 2008 completed the prescribed math courses or more. This discrepancy between the proportion of students having taken the recommended classes and the proportion with a satisfactory score on the ACT might point to a need to evaluate the academic rigor of the mathematics courses in the state’s high schools.

**Table 1.4** Highest Math Course Completed in High School

Highest Math	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
Less Than Algebra I	21	0.9	0.6	1.2
Algebra I	62	2.8	1.8	3.8
Geometry	475	22.1	19.3	24.8
Algebra II or Above	1648	74.2	71.5	77.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>2206</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

The following table (Table 1.5) presents how 2008’s seniors judged the adequacy of their high school education in terms of preparation for their future. Only a small estimated proportion of students (8.9%) felt that their secondary education left them totally unprepared for their post-high school plans; on the other hand, a similarly small percentage (12.0%) believed that they were exceptionally prepared. The general consensus was that students felt that they were either “prepared” or “somewhat prepared” for either college or work after high school.

**Table 1.5** Student Perception of the Quality of Their High School Education

Level of Preparation	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
Very Prepared	261	12.0	9.8	14.3
Prepared	865	39.0	36.3	41.7
Somewhat Prepared	886	40.1	37.0	43.3
Not Prepared At All	201	8.9	7.1	10.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>2213</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

The 2008 survey also asked students if they wished their high school had offered additional courses in various areas of study, such as math and science. In West Virginia, as is also the case in many other states, the cultivation of college graduates in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) is seen as vitally important to the future development of the state economy. The information in Table 1.6 can be viewed as one way of gauging whether the state's secondary system is offering enough in terms of STEM coursework. The table provides the percentage of students who desired more STEM classes in high school, both on an overall basis and among those students who intended to major in a STEM field in college. Only an estimated 22.2 percent of all West Virginia seniors wished they had had the opportunity to take more STEM classes, but this percentage doubled when only the responses of expected STEM majors were analyzed.

**Table 1.6** Percentage of Students Wanting More STEM Courses

Type of Students	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percent	
All Students	511 / 2263	22.2	20.0	24.4
STEM Majors	254 / 560	44.9	40.8	48.9

## Section 2: Post-High School Plans and College Participation

One of the objectives of this survey was to obtain information about the post-high school plans of West Virginia's seniors. Of primary importance were the intentions of college-going seniors, but an attempt also was made to examine the reasons why some students decided not to pursue a traditional postsecondary education.

Table 2.1 on the following page presents both the proportion of the state's seniors who planned to pursue a college education at some point and the proportion who were going to start school in the fall of 2008. An estimated 79.9 percent intended to go to college, but a smaller percentage (73.8%) planned to start in the fall. This latter percentage was close to the 75.2 percent reported in the 2007 survey; however, it was well above the college-going rate of 57.5 percent reported by the Higher Education Policy Commission for fall 2007. It appears that quite a few students either change their plans between the time of the survey and the fall semester or encounter some kind of obstacle that prevents them from enrolling. A closer look at this issue reveals that only about 94 percent of students with plans to start college in the fall had applied at the time of the survey, and an even lower percentage (88%) had been accepted. The proportion of students who intended to enter the freshmen class of 2008 and had actually been accepted was 64.8 percent, a figure much closer to 2007's official college-going rate (the 2008 figure is not yet available).

**Table 2.1** Plans Regarding College

College Plans	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
Will Attend	1682 / 2095	79.9	76.5	83.3
Will Attend Fall	1562 / 2110	73.8	70.7	76.8

The following table (Table 2.2) looks at the college plans of students across three self-reported family income brackets. As the table shows, both the percentage of students who planned to attend college and the proportion who intended to begin in fall 2008 rose as family income increased. Additionally, statistical testing, by means of a modified chi-square test which accounted for the sampling design used for this project, showed that there was a significant association between family income and planned college attendance. The rate at which students in the upper income bracket planned to attend the college was roughly 15 percentage points higher than that of students in the below \$30,000 category. This difference increased to over 20 percentage points when considering those students who decided to begin their postsecondary career right away.

**Table 2.2** College Plans by Family Income

Income Class	College Plans	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
≤ \$30k	Will Attend	418 / 583	71.9	67.9	75.8
	Will Attend Fall	374 / 593	63.7	60.7	66.8
> \$30k and ≤ \$60k	Will Attend	531 / 651	81.3	77.3	85.4
	Will Attend Fall	489 / 652	74.5	71.2	77.7
> \$60k	Will Attend	618 / 706	86.9	83.2	90.6
	Will Attend Fall	597 / 708	83.9	80.8	87.0

The 2008 survey contained a question asking students to recollect the point at which they first thought about pursuing a college education. The objective of this question was to gain some perspective on when the state’s public school students began to view college as a viable option. Table 2.3 displays the overall results from this question.

According to the survey results, the largest percentage of students (estimated at 36.9 percent) first considered going to college in elementary school. Additionally, approximately a quarter had their first thought while in middle school; therefore, over half of 2008’s seniors began thinking about college before reaching high school. Roughly 30 percent began considering higher education while in high school, and about 10 percent had never entertained the thought of attending college.

**Table 2.3** First Consideration of College

When First Thought of College	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
Never Thought of Going	211	9.5	7.6	11.4
Elementary School	837	36.9	32.8	40.9
Middle School	534	24.5	22.3	26.6
Early High School	323	15.0	12.9	17.1
Late High School	314	14.1	12.5	15.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>2219</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

There is an assumption that students who start thinking about college at an earlier age are more likely to prepare themselves properly for postsecondary education. This survey did contain evidence to support this hypothesis. An estimated 84.0 percent of those who considered college prior to high school were already accepted to college at the time of the survey; the acceptance rate among students who started thinking about college while in high school was only 62.2 percent. Furthermore, 55.2 percent of students in the “before high school” category earned a 22 or higher on the ACT, as compared to just 26.2 percent of the “while in high school” group. Statistical testing confirmed this relationship between time of first consideration and both acceptance rates and ACT performance.

Focusing on why some West Virginia seniors decided not to go to college, Table 2.4 gives the proportion of students who marked various reasons for non-attendance as either “important” or “very important.” As the table shows, a desire to start working and earning money, as well as the cost of post-secondary education, ranked very high in importance. A slight majority (estimated at 52.2 percent) of those not attending college felt their belief that they “probably could not do well in college” was at least an “important” reason for their decision. Additionally, a fairly large proportion (44.5%) saw a college education as irrelevant to their future career/job choice. While personal rationalization may have been the primary culprit here, it could be possible that the responses in these last two areas were partly consequences of a lack of preparation at the secondary level. Or perhaps the state’s education establishment could be more effective in stressing the benefit of post-secondary education in basically all career fields. It is important to note, however, that 51.9 percent viewed a vocational or technical school as an alternative route for continuing their studies/training. Finally, it appears that first-generation status was not a pervasive influence on why students did not go to college, as only 22.8 percent of non-attending seniors considered this influence as “important” or “very important” (though the sampling error was about 5.7 percent).

**Table 2.4** Reasons for Not Attending College

Reason	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
Want to Start Work to Earn Money	264 / 307	86.0	81.3	90.6
Costs Too Much	199 / 303	66.0	61.9	70.2
Tired of School	162 / 302	54.3	48.3	60.3
Would Likely Not Succeed	161 / 302	52.3	46.6	58.0
Want to Attend Vocational School	159 / 307	51.9	47.4	56.5
Unnecessary for Future Job	136 / 302	44.5	37.6	51.5
Need to Help Support Family	128 / 303	43.6	38.9	48.3
Undecided About Major	121 / 302	40.4	33.6	47.1
No Desirable School Nearby	84 / 305	27.0	20.7	33.2
Want to Join Military	75 / 302	24.9	19.2	30.7
No One in Family Has Gone	69 / 304	22.8	17.2	28.5
Friends Not Going	63 / 304	19.9	16.1	23.7
High School Staff Advice	49 / 305	15.7	12.1	19.3

Increasing the proportion of the citizenry holding a bachelor’s degree is one of the foremost long-range goals of West Virginia’s education system. Attaining this goal, of course, first requires that young adults desire to earn a college diploma. Regarding student academic aspirations, Table 2.5 below displays the estimated percentage of all West Virginia high school seniors who wanted to obtain a bachelor’s degree or higher. Based on survey results, 75.0 percent had this aspiration (with a sampling error of roughly 3.9 percent).

**Table 2.5** Degree Aspirations

Aspiration	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	1673	75.0	71.1	78.9
Less than Bachelor's Degree	547	25.0	21.1	28.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>2220</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

**Section Three: College Cost & Affordability**

This section presents information related to student responses concerning the financial obligations and constraints of postsecondary education. Only the answers of students planning to attend college were included in the analysis.

Table 3.1 below displays information regarding students’ concerns about their ability to pay for college. Over half (56.0%) of West Virginia’s high school seniors had some concerns about being able to afford postsecondary education, but felt that the necessary funds probably would be available. An estimated 21.5 percent had major concerns related to this issue. Here “major” concerns were defined as the student being unsure that he or she would have enough money to finish school. Only 22.5 percent had no financial concerns.

**Table 3.1** Level of Financial Concerns

Amount/Level of Concerns	Frequency	Percentage Population	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
None	405	22.5	19.5	25.4
Some	1007	56.0	53.1	59.1
Major	380	21.5	18.0	25.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1792</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

An analysis of student concerns by family income demonstrated that there was a statistically significant association between income category and financial uneasiness. This predictable conclusion was evidenced by the percentage of students with “major” concerns across the three income categories utilized in this report. While only 10.3 percent of students with self-reported family income of more than \$60,000 had “major” concerns, this proportion rose to 21.0 percent among those in the \$30,000 to \$60,000 range and jumped to 36.0 percent of those in the bottom third (\$30,000 or less). However, this means that 64 percent of the least affluent students did not have major concerns about financing college.

The following table (3.2) lists various forms of financial support and the percentage of students who planned to pay at least part of their educational expenses from each source. The vast majority of students (77.4%) intended to use some form of parental/family support. The table also shows that an estimated 70.3 percent planned on working a part-time job while in college.

While about a third expected to receive the state-awarded, merit-based PROMISE Scholarship, 56.1 percent were awarded institution-based scholarship money. Furthermore, almost half (49.8%) received scholarship funds from other sources. Regarding loan funding, over half (50.1%) intended to take out non-federal loans to cover at least some of the cost of college. Finally, in terms of the use of aid intended for the neediest of students, an estimated 30.6 percent of West Virginia's 2008 seniors were going to be federal Pell grant recipients, and 36.4 percent were expecting its state-awarded counterpart, the West Virginia Higher Education Grant.

Focusing only on those students who reported a family income of \$30,000 or less painted a different picture with regard to the extent to which many of the above sources of financial support would be used. For instance, only an estimated 57.1 percent of students in this lower income bracket were receiving parental/family contributions. Additionally, 53 percent of these students will be expecting a Pell grant, and 52.2 percent were planning to use a West Virginia Higher Education Grant. The fact that almost half of students with family incomes of \$30,000 or less do not plan to use need-based aid, however, merits investigation.

**Table 3.2** Sources of Financial Support

Source of Support	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
Parents	1381 / 1779	77.4	74.5	80.4
Part-Time College Job	1238 / 1762	70.3	67.6	73.1
College Scholarship	982 / 1756	56.1	53.3	58.8
Personal Savings	978 / 1765	55.6	53.1	58.1
Other Loans	861 / 1747	50.1	46.4	53.9
Other Scholarship	859 / 1740	49.8	47.1	52.5
WV Higher Education Grant	617 / 1736	36.4	32.3	40.5
PROMISE	585 / 1750	33.3	30.4	36.2
Federal Loan	568 / 1743	33.2	30.2	36.2
Pell Grant	517 / 1735	30.6	27.2	34.0
College Work/Study	469 / 1730	27.7	25.7	29.8
Full-Time College Job	257 / 1726	14.6	12.5	16.7

Concerning student efforts to procure financial aid, the survey did ask seniors if they had completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form, which is a prerequisite for receiving many types of aid, including the state Higher Education Grant and even the PROMISE Scholarship. Based on these results (see Table 3.3), it is estimated that 84.4 percent of 2008's college-going seniors completed the form. To the extent that this year's survey results can be compared to last year's, there appears to have been a fairly sizable increase in the proportion of students filling out the form, and thus initiating the process of obtaining aid. Only 75.7 percent of last year's survey respondents indicated that they had completed the FAFSA.

**Table 3.3** Completion of FAFSA

Completed FAFSA	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
No	275	15.6	12.9	18.3
Yes	1531	84.4	81.7	87.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>1806</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

An examination of FAFSA completion rates by the family income categories used throughout this report revealed that there was no statistically valid relationship between income level and form completion. All income groups basically filled out the form at the same rate; so in this respect, the state seems to have been doing a good job in educating students from all economic backgrounds about the college aid process.

**Section 4: College Choice**

One objective of the 2008 High School Senior Opinions Survey was to examine the distribution of the state’s high school graduates in terms of college choice. With regard to type of institution, the following table (4.1) presents the aggregated choices of the class of 2008. Only the results of students who indicated which school they planned to go to in the fall were analyzed. As Table 4.1 shows, the vast majority of West Virginia’s graduating seniors planned to enroll in an in-state four-year institution (71.0%). Taking sampling error into consideration, this proportion could have been as low as 65.7 percent or as high as 76.4 percent. The percentage attending a state two-year institution was estimated to be 14.2 percent, with a 95 percent probability range of 8.8 percent to 19.6 percent. A small percentage of graduating seniors (6.0%) picked one of the state’s private schools, while 8.6 percent intended to go to an out-of-state institution.

**Table 4.1** College Choice by Institution Type

Institution Type	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
West Virginia Public Four-Year Institution	909	71.0	65.7	76.4
West Virginia Public Two-Year Institution	173	14.2	8.8	19.6
West Virginia Private Institution	75	6.0	3.7	8.3
Out-of-State Institution	112	8.6	5.8	11.5
Other	2	0.1	0.0	0.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>1271</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

Considering the need for more STEM graduates in West Virginia, it was instructive to analyze the college choice patterns of those who intended to major in STEM fields versus non-STEM majors. Table 4.2 displays the results of this analysis and demonstrates that the institution-type choices of the state’s high school seniors were quite similar for STEM and non-STEM students in 2008. This general conclusion was supported by statistical testing which provided no evidence of an association between whether a student planned to study a STEM discipline and the type of institution chosen. Last year’s survey seemed to show

that STEM majors enrolled in out-of-state institutions at twice the rate of non-STEM students; however, the population estimates from this year’s study were much closer than 2007’s sample results. Also, a look at the 95 percent probability ranges for the two estimates suggests that sampling variation, not some underlying reality, was likely the reason for last year’s large discrepancy.

**Table 4.2** Institution Type by STEM Major

Student Major	Institution Type	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
<b>Non-STEM</b>	Out-of-State Institution	68	8.0	5.6	10.5
	West Virginia Private Institution	52	6.5	3.8	9.1
	West Virginia Public Two-Year Institution	124	15.7	9.7	21.8
	West Virginia Public Four-Year Institution	580	69.8	63.3	76.3
<b>STEM</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>824</b>	<b>100.0</b>		
	Out-of-State Institution	41	9.5	5.5	13.6
	West Virginia Private Institution	22	5.12.2	8.1	
	West Virginia Public Two-Year Institution	48	11.5	5.6	17.4
	West Virginia Public Four-Year Institution	317	73.8	68.2	79.4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>428</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

Another purpose of this survey was to obtain information regarding the factors that influence West Virginia’s high school seniors in deciding which college to attend. The table below (4.3) lists, in descending order, the estimated percentage of students who rated various factors as either “important” or “very important” in the process of selecting their postsecondary institution. Based on these results, most students (96.3%) chose a school based on the availability of an academic program that matched individual needs or goals. In fact, over 74 percent of students considered this criterion “very important,” a far higher proportion than any other criterion. Closely related to this factor, 85.9 percent of students indicated that attending a school with a “superior program in my major” was important or very important.

The second highest ranked college choice factor, however, was the affordability of the selected school, with almost 90 percent giving weight to this feature. Over half of 2008’s seniors (53.8%) felt that the impact of cost was highly important, making it the only factor other than program availability to be viewed as “very important” by a majority of students.

The significance of cost in the college selection process was echoed in how students ranked the influence of variables such as the ease in obtaining financial aid/loans at a school or the benefit of an institution-awarded scholarship. A majority of seniors also considered the availability of part-time employment to be a material factor in choosing an institution. This result was not surprising, given the large percentage of seniors who expected to work part-time while in college (see Section Three above).

Finally, it is interesting to note the percentage of students (76.2%) who relied in their institutional choice on correspondence sent to them by their selected school. This ranked far ahead of other factors such as parental wishes, teacher/counselor recommendations, and national rankings.

**Table 4.3** Impact of Various Factors on College Choice\*

Choice Factor	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percent	
Academic Program Offering	1757 / 1823	96.3	95.2	97.4
Affordable Cost	1652 / 1834	89.9	88.3	91.5
Superior Program in Major	1564 / 1820	85.9	83.8	87.9
Ease in Obtaining Financial Aid/Loans	1524 / 1822	83.8	82.1	85.6
Academic Reputation	1414 / 1822	77.8	75.4	80.1
School Marketing Information/ Correspondence	1379 / 1813	76.2	73.8	78.5
Obtained Scholarship	1285 / 1819	70.7	67.8	73.5
Social Life	1220 / 1825	66.8	62.5	71.0
Chances of Getting Into Top Graduate/ Professional School	1133 / 1818	62.5	59.6	65.4
Part-Time Employment Available	1052 / 1816	58.7	55.9	61.5
Near Home	1053 / 1825	57.4	53.1	61.7
College Size	1023 / 1820	56.6	53.9	59.3
PROMISE Accepted	1009 / 1820	55.6	52.9	58.4
Ease of Admittance	891 / 1820	49.0	46.0	52.1
Plan to Work/Live in Same State	814 / 1817	44.8	39.5	50.5
Choice of Friends	806 / 1827	44.0	40.5	47.5
Athletic Program	782 / 1821	42.7	38.1	47.3
Advanced Academic Programs	740 / 1825	40.8	37.9	43.6
Live at Home	791 / 1825	43.0	38.3	47.6
Parental Wishes	674 / 1824	36.7	33.8	39.5
Campus Religious Life	636 / 1819	34.8	31.1	38.6
Teacher/Counselor Recommendation	600 / 1813	33.7	31.0	36.3
Racial/Ethnic Mix of Students/Faculty	513 / 1822	28.5	25.6	31.3
College Recruiters	461 / 1821	25.6	23.9	27.4
Religious Affiliation	457 / 1816	25.1	21.7	28.4
National Rankings	442 / 1824	24.1	22.6	25.67
Legacy (Parents)	273 / 1827	14.5	12.4	16.62

\* Rankings were based on point estimates of the population percentages; sampling error could result in a different rank order among some of the choice factors.

**Section 5: Impact of PROMISE**

Like Georgia, Tennessee, and several other states, West Virginia has a broad, merit-based scholarship program. The PROMISE (Providing Real Opportunities for Maximizing In-State Student Excellence) Scholarship provides, for those high school graduates who qualify, coverage of tuition and fees at any of the state’s four-year or two-year institutions or an amount equal to the average four-year public cost if a student attends one of West Virginia’s private schools. The revenue source for this award is largely limited video lottery.

Several questions in this section of the survey examined the possible influence of PROMISE on the college-going choices of high school students. Specifically, the impact of PROMISE eligibility on students' decisions to pursue college and where to attend were studied.

As the program, which began in fall of 2002, has matured, a practical and predictable problem has emerged. Large numbers of students qualifying for the scholarship as well as rising tuition have caused scholarship costs to exceed the allotted revenue. The state has responded three times by raising the academic eligibility standards of the scholarship in order to reduce the number of recipients. Despite these adjustments, the scholarship probably still will have difficulty fulfilling all its obligations as the program is currently constituted.

Therefore, the state presently is undertaking a comprehensive review of the program and is studying the possible impact of potential changes to PROMISE. One initial-stage proposal, which would allay concerns that West Virginia taxpayers are subsidizing the educational capital of other states too heavily via college graduate out-migration, is to transform the scholarship into a forgivable loan. College graduates would agree to work in West Virginia for a certain length of time or repay the funds they received. This section of the 2008 high school senior survey examines the impact this stipulation might have had on the decision of likely PROMISE recipients to accept the award.

The survey also collected the responses of students to the hypothetical attachment of a yearly community service requirement to the receipt of PROMISE funds. The idea is that a service stipulation would increase the extent to which scholarship holders would be benefiting the state community directly.

To be eligible to receive a PROMISE award, a high school student must meet the following requirements:

- graduate with both an overall and core GPA of 3.00 or better
- earn a composite score of 22 or more on the ACT (or a 1020 on the SAT)
- make at least a 20 on the ACT math, science, reading, and English subtests (or a 490 and a 480 on the SAT critical reading and math subsections, respectively)

Overall, 33.8 percent of West Virginia's 2008 high school seniors were eligible for a PROMISE Scholarship, based on self-reported data from the survey. Taking sampling error into account, this percentage ranged from 30.2 percent to 37.5 percent (at a confidence level of 95 percent). The table below (5.1) reports college-going, scholarship-eligible students' feelings about the impact of PROMISE on their decision to pursue a college education. Approximately 76.5 percent of these students would have attended college with or without the scholarship; conversely, though, 23.5 percent would not have gone without a PROMISE award. Obviously there was a segment of college-bound seniors in the class of 2008 whose college-going decisions were affected positively by the program. Whether this proportion is considered "large" or not is, of course, a more subjective question.

**Table 5.1** Effect of PROMISE on College Attendance

Would Attend Anyway	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
No	144	23.5	19.7	27.2
Yes	477	76.5	72.8	80.3

The following analysis pertains to the influence of PROMISE on where students chose to attend college. Table 5.2 displays the results. The program seemed to have little influence on the distribution of students among state colleges and universities, at least as far as this process was gauged in this particular survey. A plurality of students (an estimated 44 percent) indicated that the scholarship had no bearing on their school choice; these students would have attended the same in-state institution with or without PROMISE. Very few students switched to a different West Virginia public or private school because of PROMISE. A nice addition to future surveys would be a question designed to measure the impact of PROMISE on student decision-making regarding selection of a state public versus a state private school. It might also be worthwhile to study any possible effect of the program in relation to two-year or four-year institution selection.

Of significant note, though, is the fact that an estimated 38.7 percent of PROMISE-eligible students chose an in-state college instead of an out-of-state school as a direct result of the scholarship. This suggests that the program has been successful in keeping more of the state's better-performing high school students in West Virginia for their postsecondary education.

**Table 5.2** Effect of PROMISE on College Choice

Effect/Choice Decision	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
No impact: attend same WV college	250	44.1	38.2	50.1
No impact: attend same out-of-state college	67	10.8	7.3	14.2
Significant impact: attend WV college vs. out-of-state	229	38.7	34.0	43.3
Significant impact: attend different WV public college	27	4.5	2.6	6.4
Significant impact: attend different WV private college	7	1.1	0.4	1.8
Do not know where attending yet	5	0.8	0.2	1.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>585</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

In regard to a potential transformation of the scholarship into a forgivable loan, Table 5.3 presents how PROMISE-eligible students would have responded to such a modification. If a one-year in-state work requirement was attached, approximately 62.1 percent of eligible students still would have accepted the award, while, of course, about 37.9 percent would have declined. The proportion which would have refused a PROMISE jumped to 57.8 percent when the hypothetical work requirement was extended to one year for every year of scholarship receipt. It should be noted, though, that the sampling error associated with these estimates was roughly 7.7 percent. Regardless, it is apparent that turning the PROMISE into a forgivable loan likely will reduce the number of those who accept the award significantly.

**Table 5.3** Impact of In-State Work Requirement

In-State Work Requirement	Decision to Accept Award	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
One Year	Not Accept	230	37.9	31.3	44.5
	Still Accept	354	62.1	55.5	68.7
Multi-Year	<b>Total</b>	<b>584</b>	<b>100.0</b>		
	Not Accept	348	57.8	50.1	65.5
	Still Accept	237	42.2	34.5	49.9
	<b>Total</b>	<b>585</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

Finally, Table 5.4 measures how PROMISE-eligible students would have reacted to the imposition of a community service requirement. Over three fourths indicated that they still would have accepted the scholarship with a service requirement of 20 hours per year.

**Table 5.4** Impact of Community Service Requirement

Decision to Accept Award	Frequency	Population Percentage	95% Confidence Limits for Percentage	
Not Accept	125	21.5	18.8	24.2
Still Accept	460	78.5	75.8	81.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>585</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

## Conclusion

The purpose of this survey was to examine the postsecondary education plans and decisions of West Virginia's high school seniors. This objective required looking at such variables as students' academic preparation at the secondary level, their educational/career aspirations, and their financial circumstances. While caution often should be exercised when drawing conclusions from opinion-based or self-reported data, the results of the Class of 2008 High School Senior Opinions Survey do offer some insights into the process that leads young adults into the state's higher education system.

First, a large majority of West Virginia's public high school students take the college preparatory curriculum and perform quite well at the secondary level in terms of GPA. This does not mean, however, that they are fully prepared for the academic demands of higher education as indicated by student performance on the ACT. Also, a large percentage of students themselves felt less than adequately prepared for their post-graduation plans.

Secondly, a vast majority—around 74 percent for the class of 2008—of the state's high school students intend to start college right away. A smaller percentage of students, however, will actually attend a postsecondary institution in the fall after graduation, if history is any guide. Last year's estimated college-going rate, for instance, was 57.5 percent. Perhaps at some point

students are lured away from college by the immediate monetary rewards of going straight into the workforce, as this was the most common reason given in this year's survey for not attending college. Whatever the reason, narrowing the gap that appears to exist between intentions and reality with regard to college participation should be a goal of the state's education establishment.

In addition to gauging college ambitions, the High School Senior Opinions Survey was also designed to gather feedback related to how students planned to meet the financial obligations of a postsecondary education. Cost can have a profound influence on one's college experience, including whether one is able to remain in school long enough to earn a degree. Based on the survey results, about half of West Virginia's college-going seniors harbor "some" concerns about paying for college, but believe they will likely have sufficient funds. Roughly a fifth have serious doubts about being able to stay in school, however. Many students are counting on sources of financial support such as a part-time job and scholarship funds to cover at least part of their expenses, in addition to parental/family assistance.

This survey also explored students' reasons for choosing their college as well as the distribution of students across different types of institutions. Seventy-one percent of students who indicated a college choice plan to attend one of the state's public four-year institutions. Only 14 percent plan to attend a public two-year college and smaller numbers intend either to enroll in a state private school or go out of state.

With respect to the factors that influence the selection of a specific institution, almost all students selected their institution based on it having an academic program that suits their goals/needs. Other academic features that students view as key in their decision-making include the overall reputation of the institution and the opportunity to progress from there into a top graduate or professional program. As might be expected, factors linked to cost and affordability, such as receiving an institutional scholarship, also play a significant role in college selection.

Finally, the High School Senior Opinions Survey looked at the impact of the PROMISE Scholarship Program on the college-related decisions of West Virginia high school students. Based on the evidence provided by the survey, the large majority of PROMISE awardees (77%) would go to college with or without the scholarship. However, there is a group (23%) for whom the scholarship was critical in their decision to attend college. In terms of where students go to school, PROMISE seems to convince a healthy number of West Virginians to stay in the state for their college education. As evidence of this effect, approximately 39 percent of last year's PROMISE-eligible seniors indicated they would have gone out of state were it not for the scholarship.

This year's survey also asked scholarship-eligible students to consider whether they still would accept the award given certain hypothetical changes to the program. The responses to these questions indicated that many eligible students would decline the PROMISE award if it were transformed into a forgivable loan, with students agreeing to work in West Virginia for a certain length of time after college graduation. This is especially true if a multi-year work requirement were put in place; an estimated 58 percent of 2008's eligible high school seniors would have turned down an award with such a stipulation. Students appear to be much more agreeable to the attachment of a community service requirement, however. Over three fourths of last year's eligible students would have accepted an award with an obligation of 20 service hours annually.





**West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission**

1018 Kanawha Blvd. East  
Charleston, West Virginia 25301-2025