

College Affordability Views and College Enrollment

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This Data Point uses data from the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSLs:09). HSLs:09 is a national study of more than 23,000 students in ninth grade in 2009. Students answered surveys between 2009 and 2016. College transcripts were collected in 2017-18.

This Data Point looks at the connection between views of college affordability in high school and college enrollment and employment 3 years after high school.¹

How do views of college affordability in high school relate to college enrollment and employment?

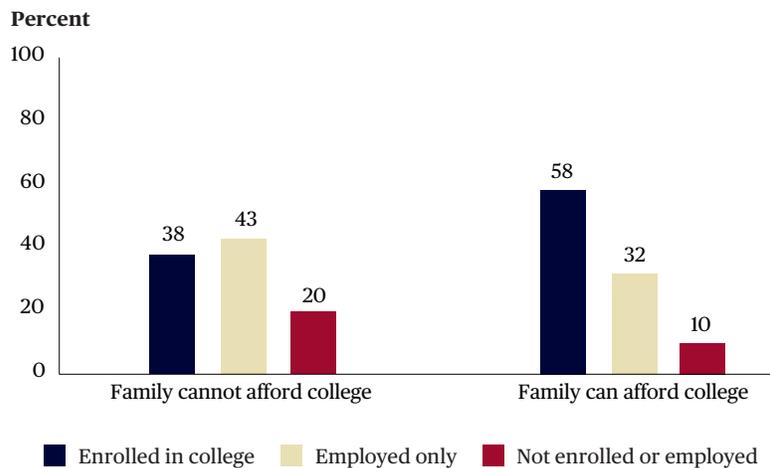
In 2012, when most study students were in eleventh grade, they were asked whether they agreed with the following statement: “Even if you get accepted to college, your family cannot afford to send you.” Thirty-two percent agreed or strongly agreed.²

Students and parents often think college costs more than it does.³ These views may be associated with decisions to apply to college. Many factors are related to students’ enrollment in postsecondary education, including but not limited to family resources, educational expectations and plans for future careers.⁴ College affordability views are just one factor in whether students enroll.

Three years after high school, 58 percent of students⁵ who thought their family could afford to send them to college (“afforders”) were enrolled in college. Only 38 percent of students who thought their family could not afford to send them to college (“non-afforders”) were enrolled (**FIGURE 1**).

For non-afforders, 43 percent were employed only⁶ versus 32 percent of afforders. Twenty percent of non-afforders were not enrolled

FIGURE 1. College enrollment and employment rates in 2016 for the high school class of 2013, by their views of college affordability in 2012



NOTE: College affordability is measured by student answers to the following question: “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Even if you get accepted to college, your family cannot afford to send you.” Enrollment and employment show the percentage of young adults in each category in February 2016. These data provide a snapshot of 2009 ninth-graders in 2016; some students who were not enrolled in 2016 already attended some college and had left or completed a degree.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSLs:09) First and Second Follow-Up.

in college or employed in 2016, compared to 10 percent of afforders.

Does the connection between affordability views and college attendance differ by parent education?

The outcome for this research question focuses on whether a student ever attended college rather

than their 2016 status. This measure includes any students who may have already completed a degree or left school by 2016. Parents’ education level is included because previous research has noted differences in college preparation and attendance by family characteristics.

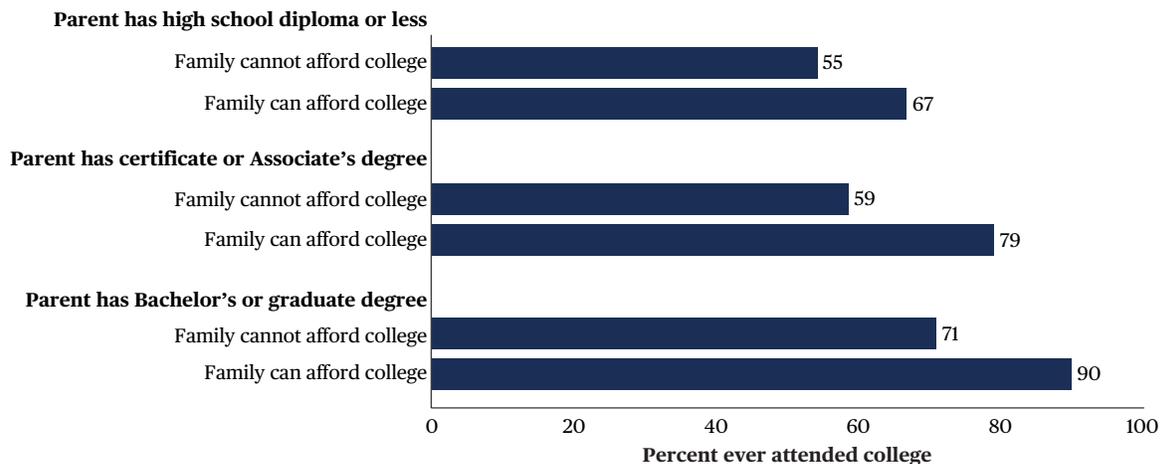
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Students are more likely to attend college within 3 years of high school if they think their family can afford it. Students are also more likely to attend any college within 3 years of high school if at least one of their parents earned a college degree or certificate.⁷

Eighty percent of afforders ever attended college, compared to 59 percent of non-afforders.⁸ The difference between afforders and non-afforders exists for students whose parents attended college and for students whose parents did not attend college. At each level of

parent education, larger percentages of afforders than non-afforders attended college (**FIGURE 2**). The difference in college attendance between afforders and non-afforders ranges from 12 percentage points to 21 percentage points.⁹

FIGURE 2. College attendance rates by 2016 for the high school class of 2013, by their views of college affordability and highest level of parent education in 2012



NOTE: College affordability is measured by student answers to the following question: "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Even if you get accepted to college, your family cannot afford to send you." Parent education is the highest level of education achieved by either parent. "Percent ever attended college" shows the percentage of young adults in each category who ever attended any college or trade school by February 2016.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSLs:09) First and Second Follow-Up.

Endnotes

¹ Three years after high school represents the timing of the HSLs:09 Second Follow-Up. In 2019, 75 percent of all undergraduates were under the age of 25. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, table 303.50. In this Data Point, the term "college enrollment" is used to refer to enrollment in any postsecondary education.

² Not in figures; see supplemental Table 1.

³ Velez, E. D., & Horn, L. (2018). *What High Schoolers and Their Parents Know about Public 4-Year Tuition and Fees in Their State*. (NCES 2019-404). U.S.

Department of Education. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019404/>.

⁴ Chen, X., Lauff, E., Arbeit, C.A., Henke, R., Skomsvold, P., and Hufford, J. (2017). *Early Millennials: The Sophomore Class of 2002 a Decade Later*. (NCES 2017-437). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017437.pdf>.

⁵ In this Data Point, the term "student" is used to refer to members of the HSLs:09 2009 ninth-grade cohort. Some of these

young adults were no longer students in 2016.

⁶ In this Data Point, "employed only" means employed full-time or part-time and not enrolled in postsecondary education.

⁷ Not in figures; see supplemental table 4.

⁸ Not in figures; see supplemental table 3.

⁹ The differences do not appear to match Figure 2 due to rounding.