

# Qualitative Postsecondary Enrollment Study

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## Summary

Learn4Life (L4L) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to ensure that every child in metro Atlanta becomes a thriving citizen who achieves success in school, career, and life. L4L convenes cross-sector partners and uses data to identify and scale strategies to improve outcomes for students from cradle to career, kindergarten through postsecondary. In 2021, L4L commissioned a quantitative study examining postsecondary enrollment declines in metro Atlanta during the pandemic. One factor explored in the study, was a drop in the number of students completing the Free Application for Federal Study Aid (FAFSA), a significant finding considering the FAFSA is a leading indicator of postsecondary enrollment because of its role in accessing financial aid to pay for postsecondary education (2- year, 4-year, technical programs). Ninety percent of students who complete the FAFSA enroll in college versus fifty-five percent who do not complete the FAFSA, and every additional \$1000 secured in aid increases the probability of postsecondary persistence by 4%. During the pandemic, FAFSA completion rates declined in the metro Atlanta region by 4%, which translated into 1,100 fewer applications. This decline was consistent with national trends and contributed to the nearly \$2.6 billion in unclaimed financial support nationwide. FAFSA completion declines were most evident among students in high-poverty schools. In metro Atlanta, schools where at least 75% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch, saw a 5% year-over-year decline in FAFSA completions, and there was a 27% gap in FAFSA completion rates between high-poverty schools and low-poverty schools.

Concerned by these trends, and their implications for postsecondary success and the economic vitality of the region, L4L launched this qualitative study to develop a deeper understanding of regional youths' lived experience with navigating the high school to postsecondary (2-year, 4-year, technical program, etc.) transition during the pandemic. Through 17 semi-structured interviews of college students from metro area high schools during the COVID 19 pandemic, this study captured the challenges, motivations, and supports students encountered throughout their secondary and postsecondary journeys. While students often had similar experiences, like the transition to remote learning, they also reflected in unique ways and learned distinct lessons from the pandemic. Students often cited family, friends, and educational programs as being instrumental in their educational trajectories. Although the pandemic was a novel experience for students and educators, it is useful to note that many of the issues or points raised by students aren't new. COVID-19 exacerbated existing inequities; it did not create them. Education practitioners are encouraged to consider the ways the pandemic contributed to pre-existing, underlying issues. Based on students' responses, we recommend these interventions for educators to improve post-secondary completion:

- **Ensure access to mental health support**
  - Students are struggling with mental health. Pandemic-related isolation caused or worsened social anxiety and depression among them. A sense of belonging is instrumental in degree completion, but remote learning was an obstacle to genuine connection. Educators should model self-care and cultivate environments conducive to individual and collective well-being. They should also make

students aware of mental health resources including therapy, and coping strategies including self-help tools, journaling, meditation, and reduced screen time.

- **Early exposure cultivates a sense of belonging**
  - Early exposure to the higher education space can transform a student's sense of belonging on college campuses. Campus visits, on-campus summer enrichment programs, family days, and orientations give students a chance to experience college prior to enrollment in order to assess if it is a good fit. Early exposure helps bolster student confidence, provides an opportunity to consider whether the demographics of the institution are representative of the student's identity and/or values, and helps students understand the type of school environment where would thrive socially and academically.
- **Encourage students to articulate a clear motivation for attending college**
  - Students should be informed of their postsecondary options prior to graduating high school. If they're interested in college, help them explore their motivations behind pursuing a degree or credential, and develop an understanding of how their education maps to future career pathways. Students need to have a clear understanding of how their degrees or credentials lead to secure jobs that will allow contributions to their family, community, and larger economic ecosystem.
- **Provide intrusive advising**
  - Be proactive in reaching out to students to build connections, monitor progress, and offer support before problems or challenges arise. Key areas where students benefited from the intentional and strategic outreach that is the hallmark of intrusive advising include financial aid support, academic advising, and interpersonal skills.

## Introduction

In recent years, higher education has experienced a slow enrollment decline, but the COVID pandemic has increased this trend (NSCRC, 2022). Data shows that certain characteristics, like race, SES, and attending low-income schools are closely linked to this decline (NSCRC, 2021). For the class of 2020, this meant immediate college enrollment dropped between 4-10% (NSCRC, 2021). Similarly, students from high-poverty schools are significantly less likely to graduate from college within six years compared to their more affluent peers (NSCRC, 2021). During the pandemic, some graduating high school students postponed college to avoid online learning; some seamlessly enrolled in college in hopes of eventually pursuing a career with a livable wage to avoid some of the struggles their parents endured; others chose to forgo college and join the workforce to financially support themselves and their families. While quantitative data may lead us to make assumptions about why students made certain decisions on their educational journeys, qualitative data allow students to tell us exactly what they experienced and how they responded. For this study, we are interested in the ways college students from metro Atlanta public schools navigated enrollment and persistence in higher education during the pandemic. This process is of particular interest to L4L and its partner organizations who wish to learn from students to improve or adjust their programming and increase postsecondary completion rates among the students they serve. Our research questions are:

For students who were either in high school or college during the pandemic and graduated from regional Atlanta schools, how did the pandemic affect their enrollment and persistence in college?

- What supports or resources would they identify as being essential to their successful enrollment in higher education?
- What barriers or challenges did they find to be difficult to overcome while matriculating into college?
- What support or resources have been the most helpful in their persistence in higher education?
- What barriers or challenges would they identify as being the most burdensome in their pursuit of a college degree?

We believe these guiding research questions will aid us in identifying additional factors that lead to successful enrollment and persistence in higher education. As such, students were asked about the challenges they faced and the support they received during both high school and college, and about the impact the pandemic had on their experience.

### **What did high school students experience during the pandemic?**

When students were asked how the pandemic affected their high school experience, they often shared stories of remote learning distractions, adverse mental health, the ease of applying to college, and the ways they were supported by family, education programs, and peers. Broadly, Monica said the pandemic was “when everything went down” for her. She was referring to her relative passing away, housing and food insecurity, and academic trouble at school. Students referenced their ability to focus on academics after transitioning to online coursework. As Max explained, “...when you're at home, you're comfortable, and sometimes that's just that's just a

little too dangerous.” When his school suddenly transitioned to being online, Max quickly learned that he needed a designated space to complete his work. After changing his environment and adjusting to schooling at home, he reflected that the pandemic might have actually helped him transition from high school into college. Home was not always an environment conducive to learning for students, as described by Bobby:

Yeah, because the simple fact that I'm taking classes at home...I'm at home I know what else I can do. Like I say, I can play my game right? Now I can chill out with friends. I don't have to do this shit...It was not the best environment to be taking classes in.

The environmental change from the classroom to home also impacted some students' schedules. Karamo, whose parents decided they wanted to make a career shift during the pandemic, started working to help financially while his family was in a transition period. Normally, students learn how to manage their time once they have matriculated into college, but with remote schooling, high school students were open to working during the day and completing schoolwork whenever they had the chance. Prior to the pandemic, Karamo would finish his homework at school, but that changed when he started working the day shift.

...I didn't have the really reliable transportation. Like, I didn't have my license or permit. And my parents weren't really able... So, I had to take the bus from work to home. So, to keep myself from not failing out classes or being too late on assignments, what I did was actually bring my laptop to work with me or do some homework on my phone.

Karamo expressed that it was difficult to adjust to this new schedule that included working late and learning to balance work and school, but in the end “found some way to deal with it.” In the fall of 2020, some schools gave their students the choice to be in person, online, or a mix between the two. Tan's school decided to take a hybrid approach and allow the students to choose which structure was best suited for them. He identified both pros and cons to this approach.

So, it's the perfect advantage to be able to go inside of a classroom, actually soak up knowledge and without any distractions. So, I definitely ended up going back to school. I really liked that environment. Although, I have to admit it did kind of get lonely -- To not have anybody there for a while.

As a student, Tan enjoyed going to school and thought the classroom might be more optimal without “distractions,” but also found the setting to be isolating when many students chose to stay home. He acknowledged that “a lot of kids struggled virtual” due to the pandemic, but that “COVID really didn't impact [him].”

Unlike Tan, Neptune felt like the pandemic was a defining moment in his education. “Honestly, like school has never felt the same for me. Since the pandemic...life doesn't really feel the same anymore. Like, **but school, it just stopped feeling the same...**” Neptune went on to explain by saying that when he was younger, he was smart and enjoyed being challenged intellectually. He felt like that changed when the pandemic began.

And the type of person I am, you can't put me in an environment like that...if I'm at home, I'm comfortable. I'm in a crib, I'm chilling. I don't have to wear a uniform. I don't want to get up for early classes, classes, like 45 minutes on the computer...I didn't realize that that would have affected me so much, but it did.

Similar to Bobby, Neptune is describing the effect his environment is having on his ability to focus and learn. Being comfortable at home and being accustomed to relaxing in that environment, when suddenly needing that environment to be conducive to learning.

Perhaps one of the most significant outcomes from the pandemic was a national discussion on mental health. This outcome was certainly evident in discussions with students, but we should also remember that students experienced adverse mental health prior to the pandemic. Karamo felt depressed and anxious when he was in high school which led to poor academic outcomes.

Like, I remember my freshman year, I was probably sleeping in a class once or twice. And not actually doing work or failing exams and not worrying about it. Um, but I had those type of teachers who wouldn't let that go...And honestly, I am grateful for that attitude because it got me to where I'm at now.

Karamo noted that it probably seemed like he “wasn’t trying” or was “unfocused” especially considering that he was “sleeping” and “failing exams” while he was suffering from anxiety and depression. Ultimately, Karamo had teachers who couldn’t stand to let him fail and encouraged him to keep trying until he passed. He said he is “grateful” for their mindset and willingness to support him because it got him to college.

Students experienced poor mental health prior to the pandemic, but like most things, COVID exacerbated depression, anxiety, and solitude among students. Under normal circumstances, high school students might have been excited to miss school or sleep-in since they no longer had to take the time to get ready or travel to school. However, Lilly said when Governor Kemp announced that schools were closing, it made her “very sad” and she “cried really bad.” Lilly was upset because she genuinely enjoyed school. Other students were several weeks into the pandemic before they began to feel the effects of the global event. Chloe had that experience:

I just want to stay in my bed...you don't want to do any assignments. I mean, I did them, but it took so much out of me just to do one single assignment. And that's when I was like, 'Yeah, something's up'. This is a little bit more than the pandemic, you know?

Chloe felt exhausted from the pandemic, despite not being able to leave her home, a place that is normally known for resting. She felt that being isolated was the most significant part of her experience.

I was like my friends are acting different. I'm acting different like, there's something going on. We don't really, we can't, we can't pinpoint, we don't know what this is. This is a whole new feeling like this is more drastic than what we were feeling in high school.

Chloe notes that her and her friends had perhaps experienced negative feelings before, but the pandemic exacerbated those feelings. Chloe expressed that things got better as the seasons changed from winter to spring, and when she was able to connect with her friends. **“I got through the day because I was able to see my friends,** who are now my forever friends, shout out to them.”

Some students had a negative experience with schooling during the pandemic and felt that would continue if they immediately went to college in the fall. Like many high school students, Chloe ultimately made the decision to take a year off before going to college. Rachel and Antoni felt similarly. Rachel shared that her “mental health was in the trash and [she was] low-key kind of depressed,” which made her not very “eager” to enroll in college. Although Antoni went on to study engineering at a more selective private university, he said the pandemic almost changed that.

It dissuaded me from wanting to continue school. Because, you know, COVID was, it was an era, an era in time, where I think schools were demanding -- we had little to no guidance...**I feel like our entire generation is just exhausted or tired from the pandemic.** It was a detriment to some people...some people I've met now say, they didn't go to college because of COVID.

As Antoni points out, the pandemic will define his generation: young people, who had undergone a multitude of developmental stages within a short period of time and had to make important life decisions near the end of their secondary schooling, felt “exhausted” by the pandemic which impacted their willingness to go to college.

During the pandemic, many colleges decided to waive test scores, remove application fees, and change their typical admissions requirements. These institutional decisions factored into some students' decision-making during the college application process. Lilly found applying to college “really easy” her senior year. “I think COVID really made it easier because, like, [the colleges] waive like fees and stuff. They waive SAT scores. So, the process is really simple...I think it probably took me like 20 minutes at max to apply. So, I did.” Since Lilly did not have to worry about submitting her SAT scores or having to pay application fees, she found the process of applying to college easier than anticipated. Jennifer also found advantages to the pandemic when it came to postsecondary education.

...in a good way, because it actually, you know, made me go to college. Because, originally...like, I really wasn't taking it serious...And because of the pandemic hitting, that's when you know, it put things in perspective...**the pandemic did ruin a lot of things, but it also did help me get to where I'm at now.**

Jennifer acknowledged that there certainly were disadvantages to COVID, but it also made her become serious about life after high school. For students like Antoni, the pandemic made them reconsider college.

...**it really made me think, do I really want to go to college?** It put a lot of thoughts in my head about is it really worth it? It's expensive; is this going to be worth my time?  
...And that's also what **dissuaded me from applying to the colleges I wanted to go to.**

The pandemic made Antoni reevaluate his decision. The uncertainty of the pandemic made him question whether he was making the right choice. Ultimately, he decided to go to college, but did not apply to all of the colleges that were originally on his list. Initially, Rachel had similar feelings of uncertainty about college, but felt like the pandemic was the push she needed to go.

But after the pandemic hit, oh, my gosh, I was like, I was eager to go to college. Actually, that changed my whole mindset. Like I came out of my funk, my depressed, my depression and I was eager to go to college.

At first, the pandemic caused Rachel to have “depression,” but then she became excited about moving away to college and that changed her outlook. At the same time, the period leading up to matriculation was unsettling for her.

And then it's like, we were in this weird space, where it's like, oh, a lot of us are just waiting to go off to college, or waiting to go in the workforce or waiting to do whatever the next chapter of our lives brings us. And it just felt like I was useless. I was like, I just feel like I'm existing, like I'm not a functioning member of society...**I just felt so useless at the time.**

Rachel was excited about going to college in the fall, but in the period between high school graduation and college orientation, felt like she was “waiting” and reiterated feeling “useless.” The pandemic did not influence if or where Rachel wanted to go for college, but it did for other students, like Nikel.

I was in a state where I didn't really care what happened, because, like, **the world is different now, and that affected where I wanted to go and where I wanted to be** after being home for so many months and not knowing anything. So, **it did impact my decision, and just my attitude for college.**

Since the pandemic caused Nikel to stay home for an extended period of time, it made her want to go out of state for college. Unfortunately, the university she attended did not allow students to be on campus in the fall of 2020, so she continued to study remotely at home until traditional, classroom learning resumed. COVID also affected where Stephanie wanted to go to college:

**The pandemic made a big difference in how far I wanted to be from home**, because I saw how quickly it was taking people. So, I didn't want to be too far from home. But I did want distance. So, some of the schools that I did get into I didn't even think about after COVID started hitting as hard as it did because it was just too much distance in between me and my family... **I wanted to be close in case someone got sick.**

People getting sick, being hospitalized, and often passing away abruptly made some students, like Stephanie, reconsider living far away from family. She stated that she did not want to experience what other students had experienced: being too far away and too late when someone got sick.



Interestingly, several of the students did not mention the pandemic when discussing their college choice and application process. Instead, each of them elaborated on how exciting and motivating it was to be accepted into college, like Chloe:

I got the email that I um got into the school as well. And I was like...it just kind of changes my whole mindset like, I'm not dumb. People actually want me to come to this school, I can, and add something to this. So, it just kind of gave me a different type of confidence, or maybe like a wake up call that like, you're great, that you you, basically -- "you're great" like if they want you so, um, I feel like it really made me get that win. And that was that day. **Everything in my life -- just kind of changed the way I look at things.**

Chloe's college acceptance made her think that she wasn't "dumb." She also mentioned that her high school classmates lacked confidence in themselves and attributed this to messages students had received in high school:

And I actually **thought that I wasn't even going to be able to get in this college**, that I wasn't going to be able to go to a really good college, or be able to major in what I'm majoring in, or everything was just too hard...Everything that I learned in my school...but a lot of people don't, a lot of people from my school don't get the opportunity to be um be enlightened that way...what they were told in high school...about themselves, which is not true.

Chloe did not have confidence in herself before her college admission. She thought she would not be admitted into a "really good college" or be able to study her major. She adopted this mindset from her school and states students are taught about themselves and their potential from school personnel. She notes she was "enlightened" but that her high school classmates were told a lie about their own abilities. Monica also struggled with low self-confidence, but her feelings were based on her background and upbringing as opposed to discouraging school staff.

I know I'm smart, but I don't know. I just, I just been, I was like -- four years, you know I could have been doing it. I was like, yeah, I'm like "It's an investment." You have to invest and sacrifice for your future. You want better. You have to sacrifice, so I feel like, but at first I wasn't going for it. **I was just like "For what?" I'm from the hood.** That really was my mindset, but I'm like, okay, all right. Maybe I should go get that piece of paper.

Monica subconsciously knew she was "smart" but did not put much effort into high school or preparing for college. Eventually, educators convinced her to invest in herself by attending college. She comments that initially, they were not entirely convincing because she understood herself as being from the "from the hood." Monica implies that young people with this background do not go to college nor invest in themselves.

Like Chloe, Neptune was excited to be accepted into college and continued applying to schools because he considered it to be a "game" he could win. He applied to schools in a preparatory college course where his teacher required and assisted in applications.

...it kind of became a game to me to just apply to schools, like, you know, everybody, they put the senior picture and they put like, the logo of all the schools around it. I was trying to fill mine up. It got to the point where I was trying to like, honestly word, it it became, it became fun. I had a lot of acceptances.

Neptune's school had a college-going culture and did activities like putting college logos next to senior yearbook portraits for all to see. This type of friendly competition among students was "fun" for Neptune.

The most prominent topic discussed by students when considering the things or people that helped them enroll, matriculate, and persist in higher education fell into a "social support" category. Students most commonly spoke about their families and college preparatory programs, but sometimes also spoke about their peers, communities, or high school personnel.

Chante, Chelsea, Chloe, and Nikel all mentioned their mothers as a source of social support in high school. Chante's mom is a "private PreK teacher" who wants to make sure Chante gets a "degree and has a real education because she did not go to school... so that you know, I can be able to say like I have something to my name." Chante perceives that her mom wants her to get a college degree because Chante's mom experienced challenges without one. Chelsea also said her mom supported her "every step of the way" and alluded to race in her remarks. "My mom was very, is very, big on making something of yourself. So again, **Black families feel like the only option is college.**" Chelsea's perception of their family's values and their race's values is that higher education is the sole option for Black people and that perception likely had an influence on their enrolling in college. Chloe had a similar experience:

So, my mom, she's very, very big on education... so we're from Jamaica. So, education is a really really big deal so um she was like, even if it's not a four-year college. It's any type of extra education where you can get a -- where you get a piece of paper that gets you through many, many doors.

This student also seems to articulate that there is more to education than learning; that a "piece of paper" provides access and other forms of social capital. Nikel also said that her mom supported her decisions and that family members "helped as far as that part of applying, but not so much on like when I was studying for the SAT or ACT." Nikel's response suggests that families help where they can and allow the student to work on other aspects of college enrollment that may be unfamiliar to them. Rachel had a similar experience.

...I did have my two parents that did help me. Yeah, they helped me, they really encouraged me a lot, because neither one of my parents went to college. Their highest education was like, either a GED or high school diploma, I guess the same thing. So, they really, really did encourage me. So, I could, you know, have what they didn't.

Rachel, like other participants, reflected on the fact that her parents did not have higher education credentials, but they helped her through encouragement. She felt like that support stemmed from her parents wanting more for her, so that she could have "what they didn't." Stephanie also felt some pressure to attend college, saying her parents "pushed" her to go, and through this expectation she "kind of figured out what to do very early." For Bobby, the family

member that “pushed” him was his grandmother, who filled the role of his mother. He said she encouraged him by:

Bobby: ...just telling me I need to go to school I need to do something with my life...to actually be successful with my life.

Shellby Branch: So, you listened to her?

Bobby: Yeah, I did. I had to; my grandma raised me.

It seems as if older generations are associating education with “success” and passing that on to the younger generation. Bobby ultimately joined the military and took courses concurrently, then took a short break from both to determine his career path. For Lilly, both her parents and her high school counselor were working on the steps she needed to take to go to college.

My counselor was very in touch with my parents. So, like, my parents knew everything about my school and, and things like that she like she gave me like, a list of stuff that like, I wouldn't even start like, applying to school. She called me to her office, maybe like, once a week, maybe to just talk to me about school and stuff.

The counselor provided information to Lilly's parents, the parents used that information to help Lilly, and the counselor would meet with Lilly once a week. Multiple students mentioned school personnel, like counselors or teachers, when discussing their perceived support.

Several of the students identified ways they felt their high school supported their education. However, it also seemed like students communicated, whether directly or indirectly, that support stemmed from being placed in an academic track. Rachel is a student who directly pointed out how tracking benefited her.

And I'm gonna be honest, I feel like because I was an honor student that did play a part in it. I do know there -- there are other students that did want to go to college, but because they may have had like learning disabilities, or something like that, then, like, teachers and counselors, or parents probably weren't as supportive, or motivational, or trying to talk them out of it.

Rachel pointed out that she was on a collegiate track and attributed her placement to teachers, counselors and parents. But she also felt that this support was not provided to all students equitably. She continued explaining the ways she was supported by her high school through the help of her counselor.

**My counselor was the one that like she looked at my grades and asked...do you want to go to college?** And I was like, yes...Our counselor, they would basically tell us...what colleges to look up and like, as far as like, based on our grades and the requirements that are necessary to get into that college and whether they think we would be a good fit for it.

Rachel said counselors met with students “like once a year, unless you have like problems with bullying or mental health...to make sure you're like not failing any of your classes.” Rachel said she did not think meeting with a counselor once a year was enough support.

Chloe had a similar experience of support received based on grades: “It's like **my school kind of gives you the information based on your GPA** in high school, and I'm like ‘everybody should go to college!’ Reflecting on her high school years, Chloe felt it was unfair that only students with high GPAs had access to information to attend college. At the same time, the information given was often insufficient. Chloe elaborates.

‘Okay, here is some college information,’ but it wasn't. It didn't really encourage us to go to college. It was more like, Oh, here it is...Okay now figure it out. So we took the SAT, and we didn't have any tutoring or anything. It was more like everybody with high GPAs just went into the cafeteria and filled out the paper so we could take it...

Chloe felt that adults provided information about college, but not in an accessible way for students. She felt that the way the information was presented was not encouraging. She uses the SAT as an example of adults making sure the students signed up to take the test but not offering any further guidance on how to achieve a high score. The “support” of signing up for the SAT does not translate into meaningful support because completing the test on its own does not grant one admission or scholarships, but performing well on the test does.

On the other hand, students like Tan understood the resourcefulness of counselors as well as administrators and actively used them to his “advantage.”

So, like, the counselors were always like the gateway to these type of things... Like I had a really close connection to like all of the assistant principals. I was also like one of those kids who knew that if I got in where the highest hierarchy was...you probably got the most opportunities out of things, because they always kept you in mind; they always kept you on the back of their thoughts...

Tan calls counselors the “gateway” for opportunities or other resources; they decide which students get access to information. Tan recognized this and strategically networked with them and administrators by making “[him]self available to them” so that he would be the student who was selected for special opportunities. Neptune also mentioned school personnel as being pivotal in his postsecondary choice.

We just had a lot of talks -- like he he got to know me on a deeper level than me just being a kid. He got to know me before I ever came to [school], he got to know what I wanted to do outside of [school]...it's a lot that they did, honestly, like we used to play like student teacher basketball games, **just having a good relationship with teachers and educators in general...I was never used to that.** So, it just showed me that that was possible. So, **it just made me want to at least give college a chance...**

Neptune identifies having a meaningful relationship with educators in high school as different than his previous education experiences. Feeling close and supported by two male educators, Neptune wanted to “at least give college a chance.” Relationships with educators was also a prominent theme when students talked about support they received from college preparatory programs.

There were a handful of education programs that supported the study participants throughout their time in high school, and often, into college. Some programs were federally

funded, and others were national or local nonprofits focused on helping the students eligible for this study. Max said that "...without [college support program] I don't think I would have been like, as successful on making that transition from high school to college like, but as far as my like regular, you know high school there isn't like a lot of help you kind of had to like...do it on your own." Max attributes his success to a college preparatory program and comments that his high school did not provide meaningful support for college matriculation. Nikel said that the same program "introduced [her] to FAFSA [and] to schools that meet 100% financial demonstrated need." The financial piece is an important aspect for low-income students. Monica describes being excited as an under-classman to eventually be old enough to participate in this college prep program:

I couldn't wait to be this grade level so I could join...because like every year I'm seeing it, they taking trips to the college campus and stuff like that...They was there like every step of the way...I wouldn't be where I am today without [college program coach]...It just make me so happy to see somebody want to see me winning...'Oh, my God, these folks really want to see me win like let me get up, let me do it.'

The anticipation of being able to participate in a college program was a motivator for Monica, who like the other students in this study, is the first in her family to go to college. Monica also draws attention to holistic support and encouragement inside and outside of the classroom. For Monica, someone wanting her to succeed made her want to live up to their expectations. Chelsea also praised the Atlanta college preparatory program, and mentioned a second TRiO program:

...I would encourage more high school students if they, if they have [TRiO program] -- that really helped me. I found a lot of good connections, good friends there, and most importantly, learned more about just like decent options. College is not for everybody, so at the end of the day, you have to ask yourself what other things can you do?

Throughout their interview, Chelsea was consistent in noting that while they believed students needed additional support to enroll in four-year colleges, they also felt strongly that other postsecondary options were just as meaningful. Students interested in careers, military or community colleges should be more encouraged in their endeavors. Chelsea also mentioned that [TRiO program] would take students to stay overnight at Georgia State commenting that, "It was a really good like experience to feel like you're in, right?" This reflection illustrated how early exposure to the higher education space can transform a student's sense of belonging on college campuses.

Lastly, Chloe talked about a different program in the Atlanta area, one that took graduating high school seniors that wanted a "gap year" before enrolling in college and put them in local elementary schools to teach first graders how to read:

So, we're also doing something good for the community, and we're also able to take one college class [each semester] and they work heavily with us, with scholarships, with schools, colleges...If you just basically have to show up and write the essay that they give you the information. All you have to do is just put the work in. We had many, many opportunities, and we also had mentors as well.

Chloe joined a program that paid for their students to take a college course while teaching children to read. She was also in the Atlanta college program and praised them: “It's amazing, anything that you need. If you talk to any of the sponsors or advisors, they will get your questions answered, and maybe put you in touch with a person that's in that field.” Antoni was also a participant in a separate, unique program that he attributes to having the greatest influence on his college enrollment.

...my overarching reason is the [STEM program]. Because every summer we got to stay on a college campus and experience what it feels like to stay in a dorm, or how it feels like you know, going to classes in different buildings and stuff like that. So, especially...the [STEM program] really helped me because they're the sole reason I'm here at Morehouse. They provided me and a couple of others in the [STEM program] with a full ride.

Like previous participants, Antoni describes getting to act as a college student during high school. The immersion in this environment gave them an understanding of what it would be like to attend college. While these programs give high school students a sense of what college will be like, the challenges and barriers they experience as college students are something that few programs, schools, or families have prepared them for.

### **What can educators take away from students' high school experiences?**

#### **1. Environments are a barrier for students' success**

- o Students often struggled to focus on academics in their homes. This stemmed from a lack of structured routines, dedicated workspaces, and family members being a distraction. Students may continue to struggle in this regard post-COVID. Educators often assume that students have environments at home that are conducive to learning, but this is not always the case. Educators may consider teaching students how to establish work environments at home, informing them of other available spaces like libraries, or limiting the work load that students take home with them.

#### **2. Mental health is the most common theme across students' experiences**

- o Students dealt with adverse mental health problems during the pandemic. Before the crisis, researchers were concerned about the impact of social media on young people's mental health. COVID amplified their screen time. This, coupled with extended isolation from peers and uncertainty about the future, continues to impact the health and well-being of students. Educators must keep mental health front and center in their work with students. Access to therapy, self-help tools, and intentional efforts to reduce screen time are invaluable for students.

#### **3. Students are low on self-esteem, and this may stem from school culture**

- o Some students, particularly students from less supportive or stable families, lacked confidence in themselves and their scholastic abilities. Students also spoke about school staff who treated them as if they were unintelligent or incapable of success. Educators need to recognize their opinions carry a lot of weight, and the spoken and unspoken interactions they have with students can impact a student's sense of self-worth. Positive framing, high-expectations, goal setting, and workshops on self-efficacy and self-esteem, could benefit students.

**4. Counselors and tracking continue to play a role in students' college trajectories**

- o Some students alluded to being given special treatment and unrestricted access to information about attending college compared to their peers who were not on a "college track." All students should be given equitable opportunities and resources to make informed decisions. Educators and counselors should consider their own biases around student achievement and student potential when advising students. Considering the counselor to student ratio at most schools is incredibly high, there should be greater investment in counselors or supplemental services to ensure students can receive sufficient college and career advising.



## 5. Students need more meaningful, actionable support

- o Often, schools provided information for students, but this type of support was not beneficial for students. Taking the ACT or SAT, for example, was not helpful for students who performed poorly and were offered no additional support to improve their scores. This meant they were no more likely to be admitted into some colleges than if they had not taken the test at all. Other examples include having students apply to dozens of colleges without considering match and fit, institutional culture, or sense of belonging; or administering interest and aptitude assessments but doing nothing with the results. Educators should assess the support and resources they offer and consider if it is benefiting the students.

## 6. Educators should be mindful of COVID's impact on future generations

- o Lastly, it is important for educators to remember that while the pandemic has officially ended, its impact extends back to students in Pre-Kindergarten. Children as young as four years old switched to remote learning, and we have yet to discover how the effects of COVID have impacted each developmental stage. The last group of students whose education was disrupted by the pandemic will graduate in 2034. We must be attuned to the generation whose childhood is defined by a global catastrophe.

### What did students experience during college?

For many first-generation, low-income, and minority students, college alone can be challenging. Academic rigor, sense of belonging, financial circumstances, and a host of other factors often create difficult situations for them. The pandemic exacerbated these challenges. Nikel had already expressed the pandemic's impact on her college selection process but also commented on the experience she had once she was enrolled. "Like when I began my first semester, even online at [university] I was not happy at all. **I didn't imagine my first year would be like that...**" Many students had pictured the "typical" college experience – on campus, orientation, living in dorm rooms, going to sporting events. Instead, many were taking courses online in the fall of 2020. Rachel did not like starting college during the pandemic. "...because a lot of the orientation things that you would normally do face-to-face, in-person, you had to do it online. And I was like, 'Oh my gosh,' like, oh, and then the first year...it was horrible." During orientation, incoming students learn about campus resources, learn how to navigate campus, start making friends, and begin to feel connected with their new environment. When orientation was moved online, the quality and comprehensiveness of programming changed. Remote orientation and a global pandemic contributed to Lilly and her mom having reservations about matriculating into college in the fall.

**Lilly:** Um, it was really different. Honestly, my mom didn't even want me to be on campus the first year because of COVID. And like, just like being there, it was different. Um, you know, everybody was wearing masks, the part -- like watching freshman move in now, versus how I moved in my freshman year, like it was very, like quiet like. Now, they're more lively, they're more interactive. They have -- like a week for the first group of freshman. They always move in a week earlier -- like that week, it's nothing but events and things like that. We didn't have none of that because of COVID.



**Shellby:** Yeah, yeah, they do really have a lot of events, for like orientation and stuff, so -- do you think that would have been helpful for you?

**Lilly:** I feel like it would have, because, um, it took me a minute to like, know, the campus a lot and like know, like, some of our school chants that like, they will usually, like, teach us during that week. I had to learn it on my own. And it is things about the campus that like I would have known if I would have had that, that...it took me awhile to figure out.

Lilly can't help but compare her experience to incoming first-year students. She describes their orientation and move-in days as "lively" and "interactive" in contrast to her experience which, at first, she only describes as "quiet." At Lilly's college, the students were not allowed to eat together, attend sporting events, or party. There is a hint of envy from Lilly toward her younger classmates and sibling who can participate in activities that she "didn't have." But Lilly did not identify any of these experiences as her greatest barrier to success in college. Instead, she named her advisor. Lilly recommends that new college students develop a relationship with their advisor because otherwise, they may not be served well.

My biggest challenge have been my advisors. Like, I thought people were joking when they were like your advisors try to screw you over, but they were not joking because my advisor did push, push me back a semester. She was just really bad at like, making my schedule. Become like really close with your advisor...because if not they will, will do a terrible job.

Advisors are largely tasked with ensuring students take the classes they need to graduate on time. Lilly believes that because her advisor was not competent at her job, she is now dealing with the consequence of graduating at least one semester late. She implies that it is a common belief that advisors are not good at their jobs. Lilly thought people were "joking" about the poor performance of advisors until she had a negative experience of her own. Rachel shared similar comments as Lilly regarding her interactions with advisors.

But colleges need to do a better job at training advisors because -- I'm pretty sure you could probably relate -- but, you know, a lot of times, your advisors are clueless, sometimes even more clueless than you. And I know some of the faculty and staff members told me, they were like, 'We don't all receive the same amount of training when it comes to advisors.'

Rachel assumed that I could relate to having an incompetent academic advisor. She suggests that students may have more knowledge of advising than the advisors themselves. Rachel then seems to substantiate her claim by sharing faculty and staff comments on the matter. It should be noted that academic advisors are solely trained to help students with their schedules, and that when students earn enough credit hours, a major professor often takes on the role of advisor. This could explain Rachel's comments about faculty receiving different amounts of training. Rachel's complaint is based on institutional structure and is not necessarily unique to the pandemic.

Chloe also faced a challenge that would have taken place regardless of a global pandemic: how to move on to campus without transportation.

So, it was just kind of hard to get the money that I needed, and also be able to move on campus that's three hours away. I didn't know how to drive. Didn't have a car. It was just too much up in the air. My parents are like, 'Okay, let's just try next year.' I'm devastated. All my friends are going to college. I'm gonna be the only one that's staying back...

Because of a lack of transportation, Chloe was unable to physically get to her college campus. She was "devastated" when her parents decided she should take a gap year because all her friends were going on to college while she stayed home. After Chloe took a gap year and enrolled in college, she reflected on the impact the pandemic had on her socially.

...it kind of changed me, and I wasn't social because I'm an introverted person already, and it kind of made me more introverted because at the beginning, I was like, I kind of like it. I don't want to go outside. And then college came, and I was like, I really don't want to interact, but I know I have to. I need to have at least one friend...

Besides academics, students often desire to attend college for the social aspects: extracurricular activities, parties, sports, and community. The pandemic took that away from students. For Chloe, she realized the pandemic was making her more introverted. She saw it as a problem, adjusted, and is now grateful she ventured out and made friends in college despite the pandemic making it more difficult for her and her peers. Stephanie observed a similar dynamic with her and her classmates.

For me and a lot of students that I've been able to talk to -- [the pandemic] made us feel disconnected from the campus. Because a lot of the activities we do now are like summer mixers, or open house events...They couldn't really have those events because of safety protocols...So, **it's like hard to try to put yourself back in the headspace of 'let's reconnect' when you've been disconnected for so long.**

Stephanie identifies current activities that her college puts on that were not allowed when she and other 2020 graduates matriculated to college. This led to her feeling "disconnected" even after safety protocols were lifted and activities were back in place. Chante, like Chloe, described herself as "shy" or "introverted" and recalled having reservations during her senior year of high school about going to college during the pandemic and having COVID restrictions alter her and her classmates' experience.

...everyone is so friendly on campus, but nobody really goes to different events because of COVID...it just kind of made me think like, how was college going to be for us? Was it going to be the same as, you know, for everybody else before COVID?...COVID kind of made me get this type of anxiety. Since we haven't like been outside, you know, for real, in so long. So, like coming to like a big campus like [university], it was kind of a lot, but it did take some getting adjusted to.

Unfortunately, Chante was not given much opportunity to "step out of [her] comfort zone" due to the pandemic. Although students on campus were "friendly," most of them did not attend the few events that the university hosted. Chante felt like getting back "outside," especially at a large

university, took “some getting adjusted to.” Nikel was also disappointed that her college campus was mostly closed down, even after her and her peers were allowed back on campus her second semester – the spring of 2021.

Just a lot of stuff that as a freshman, it couldn't be done. And so, as a sophomore, I initially still felt like a freshman, because, like [college] was still new to me like it was really just introduced...and then when I was on campus, the second semester, nobody else was really on campus...A lot of the school places wasn't open so like I didn't know where my classes were until my sophomore year.

Nikel had plans to join multiple student organizations her first semester of college to “socialize with different people.” Her university did not allow students to be on campus in the fall of 2020, which meant Nikel was unable to participate in extracurricular activities. Students were allowed on campus in the spring, but few of them returned with strict guidelines still in place. This meant that Nikel was not familiar with her campus until her sophomore year, making her “still [feel] like a freshman.” Tan had similar sentiments.

Um well, having to wear a face mask, I felt like it was hard for us to get to know one another. Um, it was just also like, you know, people were still really nervous about being in classrooms, you know, talking to people, getting close to people. So, I felt like that was where things -- that the pandemic really hurt us.

Tan felt that wearing a face mask created obstacles for students to get to know each other. Remote learning only exacerbated the issue, especially for college students. While high school students knew each other before the pandemic and had formed relationships prior to masking mandates and remote learning, college students did not have that luxury. Moving from in-person to remote learning made it harder for high school students to connect, but it was not as significant as trying to meet new people virtually during college. Max articulates this viewpoint well:

High school was better because the people, because when the pandemic hit, you know, you're like, ‘Okay? Well, I got this class online today.’...You know the teacher...And most of my classes in high school, we just, you know, left off on the topic before, you know, everything shut down...I just feel like it was -- that was a lot easier than in college. In college, you don't know anybody. You don't know how the professor is going to be...Just kind of get to know other students in the class is just -- like you're by yourself, like, and you just gotta try and figure it out...I just felt it was a lot more challenging for me when I got to college and doing it online.

Max describes the transition to virtual instruction during high school as easier because he already knew the teacher, the students, and the course material compared to college where students “don't know anybody.” Engaging in coursework online is different when you already know the people behind the screens. For Jennifer, the flexibility of virtual instruction allowed her to weigh different postsecondary choices.

...I was kind of in the middle. I wanted to go [to college], but I also didn't want to go like, I was confused...because of the pandemic, I decided to end up going fully online... And I was working like a lot, you know, because I was an online student, so I didn't really have to worry about doing all that. So, **I was like, 'Oh, like do I really want to keep working in this nine-to-five job or do I want to do something in life?'** and it kind of encouraged me to like you know, do something else.

Jennifer completed both of her senior year semesters online. Since her coursework was entirely online, she ended up working a “nine-to-five job” during the week. The experience of taking classes online while working a nine-to-five job was something she found feasible, but it made her curious about the prospect of simply remaining in the workforce full time. Once Jennifer was back on campus, and taking in-person classes, she was more assured about her decision to pursue a college degree.

Just like the sudden onset of the pandemic made adults reconsider their jobs or career paths, COVID made young people contemplate if attending a university was really in their best interest, especially if their courses would continue to be online. Interestingly, students who were still in high school at the beginning of the pandemic felt like campuses had already returned to pre-pandemic conditions by the fall of 2021. Meaning, some students a year and a half into the pandemic did not articulate any negative consequences from COVID during college. Neptune claims the pandemic did not impact his time in college but is sympathetic for the class above his – the class of 2020.

...I really -- I feel bad for the class of 2020 because 2021, we had to go through the pandemic, but it kind of like, we kind of got the benefits of it...because I watched them -- no graduation, like no, none of that like it...no parties, no in-person classes...Like, that's why everything was so fun when I got back because I was the first group that everybody could be social again. So, nah COVID it didn't affect my college experience at all, honestly.

Neptune felt his graduating class, the class of 2021, reaped the pandemic's benefits while the class of 2020 experienced the worst. The class of 2020 missed out on milestone events like graduation, could not attend parties, and had to enroll in remote courses. Once Neptune went to university, he felt like the pandemic had subsided and students were ready to let loose and have fun. When he went to college, everyone was in the mindset to socialize. Karamo also said the pandemic did “not really” impact his college experience.

...it was like either you'll see a professor wearing a mask or have a shield around the desk that keep them from like getting any like physical contact with the students unless they had to. It wasn't difficult; they made in-class instruction easy. And if some students can't do in-person they'll have online courses, or hybrid. So, like some days the teacher will want you to be here at this class day. Some days, they want you to hop on Zoom...

Karamo's college implemented several types of precautions: mandatory masks, glass shields around instructor's desks, and flexible course requirements. Professors were flexible with online, in-person, or a hybrid instruction. Karamo said this made “COVID easy.” Bobby, who took

college coursework while enlisted in the military, felt like the pandemic presented challenges for him.

Shellby: Okay. Did you receive any kind of supports or resources while you were taking those classes?

Bobby: No...honestly college just due to the pandemic, I got nothing that everybody else would have...We got nothing the regular college student would have received. Yeah, just because of the pandemic.

Bobby said that because of the pandemic, he and his peers got “nothing” in terms of support or resources from his institution. He also mentioned he did not have some of the tools to be successful in college – like a computer camera for Zoom and reliable internet. Bobby identifies not having the resources to participate fully in class as his biggest challenge. This experience was common among low-income students during the pandemic. However, in this study, most students identified mental health as a bigger barrier. Rachel had a lot to say about trying to make friends in college during a pandemic and how it impacted her mental health.

Oh, so that first year, specifically that first semester? Horrible. When I tell you, **everybody's mental health was in the gutter**...And the thing is, it's hard going into college. It's one thing if you were in college already. And like, oh, it happened. And you already made your connections, your friends, you had already like kind of built a foundation with people you were familiar with there. But going into it like that, it was so hard, because all like **the fun things that you're supposed to do as a first timer, you didn't get to do**. And I didn't know anyone. So, even with wearing the whole mask thing, oh my gosh, like, I felt like I knew no one. I had no friends really first semester, like it was hard making friends. **I really had no real friends.**

Rachel argues that there is a difference between the students who were in college before the pandemic, and those who started college during the pandemic. The students who were in college before the pandemic were able to connect to the campus and their peers before restrictions were put in place. Because she was unable to participate in first year activities, Rachel “didn't know anyone” and “had no real friends.” She alludes to masking being a barrier to connecting with others. She continues:

It was very hard socially...And **we were all locked away in our dorms** a lot of the time. And there was no social interaction. And when I say no social interaction, I mean to the point where if you went to go hug somebody, they were like, ‘No, no hugging’...Like, I felt like I was on like, it's just the military, like, ‘Am I in boot camp?’ like, what is going on?

Rachel certainly felt the negative effect the pandemic had on the campus atmosphere. She compares her university's COVID precautions to the strictness of the military. Interestingly, neither Chante nor Neptune mention the pandemic when they discuss mental health. Instead, they highlight how physical activity helped them mentally. Chante discussed working out with her friends and its effect on them:

...me and my friends...basically, for our mental health, we just started that -- working out, we make, we made a workout group chat. So that way, we could send different workouts and stuff so we can stay, you know, on top of the game, but it does help, literally like... you worked out that morning, you'd be productive the whole day. So that means you can do all your assignments, you can do everything that you need to do. It helps you focus better.

Chante believes every college student should work out because she thinks it would help them mentally and it makes people more “productive.” Chante draws on her education in some capacity to make this argument. She and her friends create community by working out together. When considering the resources that helped Neptune persist in college, he mentions “unlimited access to the gym.”

...I was just hoopin everyday with the same guys and it was just super fun. Like I used to be in the gym for hours....I can go outside in front of my house and shoot a basketball and my headphones on for hours at a time and it will help me meditate. I can't really explain how lost I get in my thoughts and just how like, okay, I feel when it's just me music and a ball like...It's crazy how simple the world becomes like that. Like, everything just feels okay...So, it's definitely a big resource.

Neptune casually played basketball as a way to “clear [his] mind” and “meditate.” He did not explicitly mention friendship, but he did note that he would play basketball with the same students every day. For both Chante and Neptune, going to the gym and working out with a group of students improved their mental health, and arguably their physical health, sense of belonging, and academic performance. Like Chante and Neptune, Chelsea also didn't focus on the pandemic. Instead, Chelsea begins by discussing the “discomfort” and “culture shock” of a new setting. This might have been a particular challenge for Chelsea because he matriculated to a private, predominantly white institution (PWI) in the northeast.

But the challenge is the discomfort in the whole new setting, not academics. It's a culture shock...There is different backgrounds...And one thing I wish my mentors would have prepared me for is management of time. Not only for my academics, but around my mental health...Let's talk about like, how are we doing mentally?...if you're not in a healthy head space, you can't really do anything.

Chelsea wishes his mentors would have taught him time management for his academics, but also for managing his mental wellbeing. He believes that mental health is pivotal for “success” and thinks if students are not in a decent “head space” they “can't really do anything.” Stephanie also struggles with mental and emotional health and doesn't directly correlate it with the pandemic. “Being in college is very stressful, in and of itself, and I already deal with anxiety, so sometimes my anxiety can act up and I have to make sure I remember to breathe.” To cope with the stress of college, the pandemic, and mental health, students identified numerous social support systems that helped them persist through higher education.

When students were asked to identify supports or resources that helped them persist through higher education, many of them identified people that mentally or emotionally supported them. However, several students were critical of their high schools and colleges and discussed

their own ways of thinking about supports and resources. For instance, Chelsea believes educators should be more forward in their support.

...they just say 'eighteen and legal', but they are still children. You have to help them, mentor them. Okay?...If you don't give them a plan, they're going to be like deer in headlights, mhm and then people want to be like 'this generation da, da, da, da.' Are you helping us? Then what are you complaining for? Like you don't want them to grow up too fast...It's not realistic -- they need to assist these kids with a plan. If you don't, then it's just going to be more difficult for them.

As a young adult just a few years out of high school, Chelsea believed that educators should treat teenagers more like "children" than adults. Not in the sense that students are immature or incapable of accomplishing tasks themselves, but in the sense that students are navigating unfamiliar processes and may not have any meaningful support outside of school for applying and enrolling in higher education. Nickel shares similar sentiments as Chelsea and uses financial aid as a prime example.

...I do feel like we should have been um able to like learn how to apply to more scholarships. They did give us this packet full of scholarships, but that was about it. It wasn't like a formal thing of here is the scholarship packet and this is how you apply.... At least walk us through it because some people never apply for a scholarship, never apply for FAFSA and everything.

Nikel thought merely being given information on scholarships was insufficient. Students were handed scholarship information that could be beneficial for them but were not given advice on how to successfully apply. Nickel believes this barrier prevents students from submitting a scholarship or financial aid application.

Rachel went in a different direction and talked about the insufficient number of therapists at her college. She notes that students can only see a counselor "every other week" which she implies is minimal.

We do have a counselor at our college, but it's only one -- you have to make an appointment, and you make an appointment like every other week...But I feel like colleges could maybe invest more into like having multiple counselors, at least for my college because we only have one. And you know, it's hard, mentally, you know, making that transition into adulthood and everyone has their own problems outside of that -- in their personal life.

Rachel refers to the intricacies and potential difficulty of transitioning from high school to college, into "adulthood," and students' personal lives. Jennifer has similar sentiments to Rachel. "Having like someone you know, to talk to would be very supporting and having someone to encourage you, because you obviously can't really, you know, do it by yourself. Well, you can but you know, it's better to have support..." Rachel thinks that even in college, students would benefit from support and encouragement, and that it would be difficult to progress through college "by yourself." Many of the students believed that support during high school and college should be bolstered.

When students specifically listed the support they perceived during college, they often listed school or program personnel, family members, and friends that students made in college. Chelsea listed all of those individuals when he considered his college experience: "...because at the end of the day, **you can have as many resources and services you want, but it's really those encouraging and motivational words that allow you to continue...**" Chelsea listed friends he made in college, family members, mentors from education programs, and a professor he connected with. He explicitly states that resources and services are irrelevant unless students have the support of people with whom they have meaningful relationships. In some cases, students also named their institute's resources or support personnel as being helpful.

When we compare students' thoughts on their high schools versus their colleges, students were more likely to articulate specific ways that their college was helpful or supportive than their high school. Several students said they thought that once students matriculated into college, it was their personal responsibility to be motivated to be successful. After mentioning her college's lack of resources and complaining about the culture, Chloe sighs and says, "But then I have to remember college is still a business first before anything." This insight might explain why students have different expectations for secondary and postsecondary education institutions. Students may consider the individual's investment in education to be a private motive, and since students are willing to pay for the "service" the college is offering, students should accept the condition of the service. For instance, Neptune felt like 1) students who matriculate into college have what it takes to succeed without any additional support and 2) his institution provided sufficient resources for students.

I personally feel like once you get to college, you shouldn't really need any, like, more resources than they give you. Um, be honest, if you are somebody who's in college... you're gonna pass. If you want to stay there, you're gonna stay there... Colleges have everything...like, whenever I needed help in school, it was just too easy. Like, if you want to be there and thrive, you had that mindset, then it's in place. I feel like once you get to college, and you're an adult, it's really on you now...

Earlier, Neptune discussed the ways he was critical of his high school, but when he contemplates his current institution, he is more critical of the individual. He feels like since the student arrived on campus, the student has what it takes to be academically successful, and that the institution offers sufficient resources. Chloe felt similarly.

I will say my school is very, very, very -- they have opportunities for everything, and I mean everything like, if you need an internship, they'll get you an internship. You need a job. They'll get you a job. You need a club to go to -- there's millions of clubs that you can join...I can do that, like it's always something there for me...But for the most part, for the most part, there is always someone there that's able to motivate you.

Chloe lists the "opportunities" that her college has available for students: internships, jobs, clubs, and even mentions a strategic partnership between her school and a more selective institution. These resources lead Chloe to believe that someone at her institution is "always" there to "motivate" students. It's interesting that students simultaneously felt as if students should internally have the drive to succeed regardless of resources, while also listing the numerous



resources that students have at their disposal from the college. Like Neptune and Chloe, Stephanie begins by listing perceived institutional support.

At [my school], you have a graduation coach...you have student peer leaders, you might have the ambassador, you have a program coordinator. And then you also have your college success team...they have internship advisors, career advisors...And so I feel like it's important to have a major program advisor but also a person to go to for internships, a person for counseling, and like different areas like that.

Stephanie lists the support resources that are available at her college and seems to be quite knowledgeable about the different areas they cover. This could be because of Stephanie's position as a student ambassador for an Atlanta scholarship program or because her department makes these resources known to students. In addition to a major advisor, Stephanie believes students should also have an advisor for internships, counseling, and "different areas."

Rachel and Karamo both mentioned therapy and mental health when they were asked about support from their colleges. Rachel begins by naming the weekly events the college puts on, calling special attention to the way her institution "prioritized mental health."

...our school has prioritized mental health, they made it a point to they had this thing called Mental Health Mondays, they would do that. They would have Morning Pause... And they really just tried to encourage students like take care of their mental health and prioritize their mental health...there's certain professors where if it wasn't for them, I don't know how I would have gotten out of certain sticky situations...I don't know how I would have navigated certain hardships that I was experiencing on that campus.

Rachel also commented that relationships at the institution, outside of friends or family, are pivotal. For instance, her relationship with professors has gotten her out of "sticky situations" and helped her get through the "hardships" she was experiencing at her school. Karamo also mentions how helpful on campus mental health support was for him:

Here at the school, they offer all therapy sessions, so I've taken some of those...like [therapist name]...it was like she already knew how to connect with me, how to speak to me, to get me on that level to understand like, what's going on?...my parents they're.... I'll say those are my best support systems. But therapy is like second because you know, that's my...with them, I can come to them about stuff. Emotionally.

Karamo was impressed with how good his therapist was at her job, despite being a graduate student who was training to be a professional counselor. He was quick to mention how helpful therapy has been, but then seems to hesitate and wants to mention the support of his parents. He ultimately names his parents as his "best support system" but notes that therapy is second because he can come to therapy "emotionally." Plenty of other students also listed their families as their biggest resource during college.

When Max was asked what he felt the biggest support was for him he said, "definitely my parents and [college prep program]." Max did feel like at this point in college (3<sup>rd</sup> year) he was getting the swing of things himself:

But you know, if I do ever have you know certain questions about uh you know any documents like registration or certain things that, you know, I go to one of my [college prep program] coaches, or I go to one of my parents, you know, but like I said at this point for the most part you know I pretty much do everything by myself.

Max felt like he navigated higher education processes fairly well on his own, but still needed additional support to complete pretty important tasks, like registering for courses. When asked in what other ways his parents support him, Max mentioned the “little things:”

...just pushing me, just you know. Ask me how school was. You know just little things like that, you know. just seeing if I'm in a good space, you know, like mentally um, because you know, college can be hard -- it's a lot going on all the time... just the basics just pushing me you know.

Max's parents provide support in small but profound ways: checking in on him and encouraging him through his time in college. Perhaps the most moving story of family support comes from Monica, who identified her grandmother as her biggest supporter during college.

She supports me in every which way. I learned a lot of stuff from my granny, but I feel like everybody don't have my grandmother. You see what I'm saying? Especially in that neighborhood...she trying to go back and get her diploma. She need one more class. So, when I'm on my last year she's gonna go back and take that one class so we can um walk across the stage together...

Monica's dad was in prison throughout her childhood, and her mother struggled with drug addiction and homelessness. Still, Monica felt grateful that she had her grandmother – someone who was willing to support, discipline, and guide her. She felt lucky to have at least one person because not everyone she knew growing up had someone to support them. Monica persists through college with the goal of one day being able to walk across the stage and receive her diploma with her grandmother, who plans to return and finish the one class she needs for her degree. Karamo also mentioned a beloved maternal figure:

Oh, I have my great grandma, she really listens to me when I can't talk to my parents. She's like my main, one of my main support systems...she's been helping me out I think ever since I started college. Some stuff I couldn't pay for on my own, some stuff my parents couldn't pay for -- she was like that main support system financially...She's always been there for me.

Karamo talks about his close relationship with his great grandmother. She supports him financially and emotionally when his parents are unable to. Karamo refers to her as his “rock” and says she has “always been there for [him].” Jennifer also identifies her family as being the reason she is persisting through college. Her reasons are twofold: their support, and a goal for her parents to no longer have to work: “my parents, you know...I want to, you know, be able to retire them and for them to stop working...be making all the money for them. And they don't have to do it anymore.” Jennifer wants to graduate from college to make enough money to support her parents.

My family has been supportive throughout this...I don't work as much. And they're not like, you know, pushing me like, go to work, you know, because they know that I'm in college, you know, college is difficult...Like, I went from full time to part time. And they, you know, they supported that too, even though obviously...they help with financial issues, too, just like, you know, if I need it, because obviously, I'm not really working that much. And I can't really afford to pay for some stuff, but they really do help.

Jennifer describes her parents as supportive in allowing her to prioritize her education over working full-time while in college. Since dropping from full-time to part-time means less money for Jennifer, her family makes up for the financial difference. Lilly also identifies her family as a primary source of support but added that her boyfriend has been encouraging when she has felt discouraged.

My boyfriend has been like a huge support towards me, and just having me motivated in school because there have been times I was like, 'I can't do this anymore. I want to drop out.' He's like, 'No, you got this. You think about what you want to do, what you want to do it for'...

Lilly and her boyfriend have been together for several years. He did not matriculate into college, but he does remind Lilly why she enrolled, and why she should continue. Students find support among other young people, often through their peers.

A few of the students also mentioned friends as having a meaningful impact on their college journey. Nikel moved out of state for college and said she might not have continued if she had not made the friends that she did freshman year. "...when I actually came to DC, the second semester, if I never would have met the three, four people I met, I probably would have gone back [to Georgia. **My friends gave me] just a sense of a family** like who remind me of like friends from home and just home, like activities and conversations." Nikel's remarks seem to point us towards not only friends as being meaningful for students, but specific friends that culturally and socially remind us of "home," especially for students who move several hours away. Chloe and Chelsea also mentioned friends but included interesting remarks on some people not being "genuine."

I know a lot of people don't have genuine friends, but they kind of don't care. They just hang out with people that do them dirty...But now this year I've met new friends like genuine friends...I'm able to create memories with people who want to be around me and enjoy my company, and I enjoy their company. So, I feel like a big part of college, it doesn't matter what college you go to as long as you have, like a good group of people that you can have fun with...

Chloe must have experienced something to make them mention that "in college, not everybody is a genuine person." Fortunately, Chloe was able to find "genuine" friends who improved their collegiate experience. Chelsea also spoke about friendships in college and warned future students that "everyone's not your friend."

Everyone's not your friend...people need to hear that. People want to be cute, especially like share a meal with you, especially here. You like 'Oh, my gosh! It's my friend!' No, she's not. He's not. He's your associate. They are acquaintances. There is a distinct thing. You better make those boundaries...boundaries are important for your own sanity as well, because at the end of the day you and I must make friends. So, find a friend.

Chelsea assumes students enter college with the idea that other students want to be "your friend" and advises students to be cautious, to set boundaries. They continue by saying they made the mistake of thinking everyone was their friend, when they should have considered them an "acquaintance." Chelsea ends by saying students do need friends, but to make sure they are genuine. Stephanie also shared experiences with friends in college.

...and the people there are either a hit or miss, you could find a great group of friends. Or you can find friends who will lead you to failure. I did find a solid group. But before I found that solid group, I found a group of people who said they were my friends, but their actions did not show and I did not want to keep myself in that type of environment.

Like Chloe and Chelsea, Stephanie feels slighted by some of the peers she made in college but eventually found a "solid group" that made her feel "supported." Students who can come together and encourage each other to attain their goals.

Tan did not run into the issue of disingenuous friends but did confirm that "find[ing] out who your real friends are" is a "proverb" commonly heard by college students.

...orientation was beautiful. I really felt a sense of, you know, belonging there. Because we were all new, none of us knew what we were stepping into, so I never had all of like, the things that people would say, like, you know, like, 'you'll find out who your real friends are.' You know, all those little proverbs people used to tell you...

Tan found meaning in his college's orientation which seemed to have a positive impact on creating social circles. Antoni also agrees with friends being supporters academically, but also emphasizes the mental health component.

I feel like my friends were like, my biggest aides in college. I honestly don't think I'd be where I would be right now if it weren't for some of my closest friends. They constantly push me every day to make the right decisions and tell me it's important to take care of your mental health... college is something, but the connections I've made have helped me get through.

Antoni contributes his success in college to the friends that he made. Lilly would also list her friends for helping her persist. "...my friends have also been a big motivator. We all are going through it together -- college life." Both Lilly and Antoni allude to the uniqueness of the college experience by referencing it as "definitely something" and "college life." There is something about going through this experience with other students that they perceive as helpful or motivating.

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Although most college preparatory education programs' missions are only focused on supporting high school students, many college students maintain those relationships and refer back to the programs for guidance and support. Jennifer's college preparatory program continued to check in on her during her time in college. They were able to help her navigate the bureaucratic side of her university.

...they still check up on me. They still, you know, helped me with financial aid...they still go out of their way to help me. Like they, they've helped me with appeals and stuff like that -- they're the ones that email them, they have contacts in, like, the whole financial field. So, if I needed anything, they helped me. So, having that extra hand through, throughout high school, and then you know, after high school really, really does help you...

This particular program seemed to be proactive in reaching out to their students who enrolled in college. Jennifer found their assistance with financial aid to be especially helpful. Chante also relied on her program to help her navigate her financial situation during college and said she would have dropped out without their support.

**...I was almost going to fall into that category of students that almost dropped out...I almost dropped out of college** because of those financial problems. And its just a lot on somebody you know, like I said, it takes a lot to get used to being in a different environment without your family -- I'm so sorry.

Reflecting on the challenges she encountered during college and the support she received from her program, Chante began to cry. After a moment, she continued:

But yes, um, the organization um, I'm not sure if you know, but her name is [name]. She contacted me and she just -- so she was telling me how, you know, I shouldn't [drop out], you know? Basically encouraged me to stay and you know, I told her you know, what the reasons were of course, my financial problems. You know? She contacted the school for me and she help me so much with that. And I just feel like everybody needs like, an organization like that -- I'm so sorry.

Chante began to cry again. She wanted to continue with the interview but did not want to elaborate on the challenges she faced in college. She concluded by articulating the ways this individual was helpful. "...her encouraging me. And helping me financially, helped me continue my education. And, just the drive for me to just be a better person. And just get something out of life if that makes sense." Chante notes finances as being a major barrier for her education. For some students, encouragement from educators motivates them because they want to make the educator proud.

Many of the students had close, personal relationships with educators. Tan describes being passed from a secondary education program to a post-secondary education program and the support he received from them.

And I was assigned with, I guess, you can kinda say, like a coach...And, for me, she, I look at her almost sometimes as like a counselor, or a therapist. And as I feel like we can

have those really intense, informal conversations with each other, like, as there's like, she's a friend and not even necessarily a coach. So, it makes it very easy for me to be able to, you know, come to her, have these conversations, be able to take her advice...

Tan has an education “coach” that he is able to connect with on an emotional level. He uses the official term “coach” but also describes her as a “therapist” and “friend.” He comments that this personal relationship makes it easier to have “conversations” and to “take her advice.” Lilly also talks about staying in contact with a former program advisor.

She was super helpful. And like, I still talk to her now, from time to time. I feel like they've really prepared me. Like, everybody should have a chance to be in that program...even though I sometimes would hate going to school during the summer... **I feel like being able to sit in a classroom and have that college feel really did help.**

Lilly felt like the program prepared her for college. She recounts that she hated taking “school” in the summer at the local college, but that the university environment helped her conceptualize being a college student.

Stephanie does not discuss a high school program but a local scholarship program that she became a part of when she matriculated into college. The program provides both mental and financial support to students.

The biggest support is definitely the [program] team that I have now...[Student discussed how the program at another university calls students to support them] **But it's so much easier to fake that you're okay on a phone call** than in person with someone to share resources and help you like create your resume, do interview preps, get into internships.

Stephanie has been enrolled at two different colleges. At her first college, the program would call the students to check in on them. At her second college, the program would physically show up to meet with students. Stephanie says that the students at her first college would fake being “okay” over the phone. However, at her second college, personal interaction was more conducive to students disclosing their challenges and accepting help.

More than anything, these findings illustrate the significance students place on the impact *of people* on their persistence through college. Relationships with family members, college peers, education program staff, or institutional staff were paramount for their success. This type of support, or encouragement, is distinct from the motivations that students articulated for pursuing their degrees.

When students considered their motivations for pursuing and persevering in higher education, many of them noted, like Max, “career prospects [as] a driving force.” Their dream of entering a profession and having a dream career or the lifestyle afforded to them through a job with high earnings were top reasons students listed for continuing in their collegiate journeys. Max describes the benefits of being on campus while learning about his desired field, film.

...trying to get more knowledge about, you know, what I want to do as far as like film and theater, and you know now that I'm on campus, I get to meet more people and make connections, network. So, ultimately, I want that to lead to getting a good job in my field and doing, you know, what I really want to do.

Max believes that the “connections” he makes during college through networking will help him enter his field and get a job he sincerely enjoys. Lilly also has her sights set on her career path, which is motivating her to complete her degree. “...the fact that I want to be a scientist really, really bad. And also I want my doctorate, too...I will be like the first person in my family with a doctorate.” Lilly has her sights set on being the first person in her family to have a doctoral degree which will help her in her career. For Antoni, his dream of going to space keeps him motivated through tough coursework.

I want to go to space...Like, some days I just have to push myself and remember, we're not gonna get here unless we finish this -- unless we get through this first. Because I want to be an astrophysicist or aeronautical engineer, aerospace. So, I can learn -- I just want to be a rocket scientist essentially.

Antoni refers to assignments, exams, and courses when he says he must “finish” and “get through this first.” The ultimate goal is to become a literal “rocket scientist” and that dream keeps him motivated. Stephanie also has a dream career that keeps her dedicated to school, along with the legacy of her family members.

...I love helping people. And so when I graduate, I want to go into grad school for marriage and family counseling. So that's my biggest motivation is getting through that. And also, my grandmother passed away a couple years ago, and I just lost my auntie a couple months ago. And so those two things are like, making me keep pushing forward, because I know how proud they would be of me when I reached those goals. And how proud of me they are for even making it this far.

Stephanie knows she will have to get a graduate degree to become a licensed therapist which means she will have to be academically successful during her undergraduate studies. Additionally, she remembers family members who were incredibly proud of her, and their memory motivates her to continue to be successful. Stephanie also mentions that she loves helping others and that led her to her chosen major. Other students also had a desire to help others through their professions, like Chloe.

I really want to be a PA...I just like everything that they stand for...I also want to make a change, because it's not many Black women in that field as well...and it's a high demand field, so I just want to be able to help people because PAs are actually the first people you see after you've seen a nurse.

Chloe articulates her desire to be a physician’s assistant because of their values, to make a difference in other’s lives, and to improve representation within the field. Tan also draws on his own identity and desire to give back to his community when he considers the reasoning and motivation behind his degree.

So, as a queer male, I also realized that I wanted to do a lot of work in my community... being able to work inside of, hopefully someday, inside of the city's office LGBT affairs, where my Urban Studies degree comes into play...for me to be able to help with how --

the way we're planning our city right now...I'm not liking how -- the way gentrification is causing so much displacement of people.

Tan raises the issue of gentrification of his community and hopes a degree in Urban Studies will enable him to solve the issue. He also mentions a secondary reason for his degree:

“to just basically be someone's light or somebody else's, you know, figure to cling to, to want to do better or to push forth in their life.” Tan hopes to be a model for a younger person and his degree is one way he feels he is accomplishing that. Karamo continues the theme of altruism through a promise he made to his late grandfather.

...growing up around him, he didn't have his legs he had got..was it hypothermia?...So, he had to get them cut off. And he could not afford the program to be able to walk again...it kind of motivated -- because I love, when I was younger, I always loved to create stuff... And he was my main motivation because I told him one day, like, if I ever get to this point, “I'm gonna make legs for you because I want you to be able to walk again.”

As a child, Karamo hated that his grandfather could not walk nor afford the programs that would enable him to walk. His solution to this problem was to go to college to become an engineer so that he could create prosthetics for his loved one. Although Karamo's grandfather passed away before he enrolled in college, he is still pursuing an engineering degree. For Rachel, the desire to be a good human being keeps her in school.

The kind of life I want to have...wisdom and knowledge...I want to be the best that I can be. Overall, as a human being not just like, ‘Oh, I'm smart.’...And I feel like college is helping me with that honestly...It's not even just about the degree but the, the journey, I guess, and the experience, I get out of it. And I will say like, as far as character development wise, I see myself growing and changing a lot...**I'm learning so much more outside of just academics**, in class, like, I'm learning about me as a human being...

Rachel values knowledge, wisdom, and being a better person. She states that her time in college has helped her attain those qualities. For Rachel, a college education is less about her career or earnings potential and more about personal growth and development. For Tan, a degree is the only option. “**For me, education was my only way to survival**, coming from a disadvantaged background. So, I just need to just always challenge myself when it comes down to education.” Tan's attitude towards education has continued from secondary school into post-secondary. He believes a degree is his best chance at “survival” considering his background. Other students also identify motives outside of jobs and income. These motives range considerably -- from the fear of failure to feeling privileged to be in their position at a university.

Students persist through higher education for various reasons-- family, personal, and social expectations play a role in their decision-making. Each student brings a unique and valuable perspective through their own lived experience. Chloe's fear of failure is what keeps her going.

I feel like it's the fear of failing. It's what motivates me... I don't like to see myself as a failure. I know what I'm capable of, and so I know sometimes I can be really hard on myself that you know, you're your biggest judge...I just know what I want to do in life,



and I know that I can do it. I know that I have the capacity to do it. I'm very passionate about the things I'm going to do...I just kind of have to do it, especially society kind of does play a role in it, because we do live in a capitalistic world.

Chloe acknowledges that she has high expectations of herself but recognizes that society could be influencing those self-imposed expectations. She is continuing in her postsecondary journey because she wants to avoid being “a failure.” Nikel feels both a societal expectation or “pressure” to complete her college degree and also finds a positive aspect of the pandemic: **“Yeah. So, the pandemic did do something positive. It did motivate me to walk across the stage.”** Because the pandemic hit in March of 2020, her high school and associate’s graduations were cancelled. The desire to have at least one graduation, the symbolic moment of walking across the stage to receive her diploma, motivated Nikel to progress through her studies.

... I'm almost done so may as well finish...I'm almost to the finish line. And I want to walk across the stage once I graduate...I feel like people expect me to graduate one, if not early, but two on time, so like I've been up here for one, going on two and a half, three years now, so I'm pretty sure people are expecting a lot.

Nikel feels pressure to not only graduate but graduate in a timely fashion. When asked where this pressure comes from, she names “everyone” from teachers to peers she has had since kindergarten. Students had a wide variety of motivations and reasons for persistence. It seems evident that a specific motivator is not as significant as just having a personal reason to persist.

## What can educators take away from students' college experiences?

### 1. Mental health continues to be a top issue among college students

- o Students often spoke of isolation or adverse mental health in college. The good news is that COVID will not continue to impact students the way it did when the pandemic first began. Policy-mandated isolation is unlikely to happen on a large scale again. However, students will likely continue to deal with depression, social anxiety, and other mental health issues. A few students mentioned physical activity as a method of coping while others attended therapy. Educators should model self-care, cultivate environments conducive to individual and collective well-being, and make students aware of mental health coping strategies and resources.

### 2. Sense of Belonging and Friendship were common obstacles students faced

- o A sense of belonging [is a predictor of college student success](#). Early exposure to the higher education space can transform a student's sense of belonging on college campuses. Campus visits, programs like TRIO (which provide summer experiential opportunities that include living, eating, and taking classes on college campuses), family days, and orientations give students a chance to experience college prior to enrollment to assess if it is a good fit. Seeing oneself at a given college or university is critical to student success. Relationships with instructors, peers, and the campus play a role in this. Therefore, when educators advise students through the college selection process, it would be helpful to consider the demographics of the institution, whether the faculty, staff, and student body are representative of the student's identity and or values, and if the environment is one where the student sees themselves thriving socially and academically. Implicit and explicit bias training, and workshops on trauma awareness for faculty and staff could also help cultivate a more inclusive campus climate.
- o Friendship can also be an important aspect of belonging. Several of the students mentioned that they learned hard lessons about friendship in college. Educators should consider helping students navigate definitions and values surrounding friendship and explore what friendship looks like after leaving high school and matriculating into college.

### 3. Provide supplemental aid with academic advising

- o Several students complained about the quality of academic advising at their institutions. Concerningly, many institutions lack adequate resources to meet the needs of students. Black students are disproportionately enrolled in under-resourced institutions that spend on average [\\$2000](#) less on instruction and student services than well-funded colleges and universities. In the short term, educators can warn students who are matriculating to under-resourced institutions of potential gaps in academic advising so they can anticipate potential challenges when selecting courses. Students can also be encouraged to pursue a second opinion on their course schedule each semester to ensure they remain on track. Doing so can save time and money and increase completion rates. In the long term, states, institutions, and other entities must make direct investments in learners' needs. Value statements made with their budgets can promote systemic

change and bolster the resources available to students on campus, including the availability of quality advising.

#### **4. Low financial resources continue to plague students' college experiences**

- o In congruence with [literature](#) on low-income students, several students mentioned transportation, working, and financial circumstances as a challenge during their time in college. Black students are about [twice as likely](#) as other students to have additional responsibilities as caregivers or full-time workers. Educators should continue to consider ways financial scarcity can impact students' experiences. Financial education, support with finding scholarships, and time management workshops can help. Emergency funds provided by educational programs can be the difference between a student dropping out or persisting. In addition, flexible course delivery modes such as course length, schedule, and virtual or hybrid instruction are options that institutions can implement to be more responsive to student needs.

#### **5. Educators should engage in intrusive advising: proactive outreach**

- o A few students appreciated that educators from high school kept contact with them in college, and in some instances attributed it to their college persistence. Educators often went out of their way to provide emotional, financial, and informational support. In higher education, this is referred to as "intrusive advising," a proactive form of advising characterized by intentional and strategic outreach to students before problems or challenges arise. Educators who leverage this approach to advising develop caring relationships with their students that leads to increased academic motivation and persistence.

#### **6. Students must identify a reason to attend college to sustain their educational efforts**

- o Students often mentioned incredibly focused or inspirational reasons for attending college. Since this study only interviewed students who went to college, it is difficult to know if these motivations and career-centered objectives were the primary reason for students' success. Yet, it may be beneficial for educators to have students identify a clear and consistent reason to attend college. Students with greater clarity are more likely to persist and graduate on time.

### **What theme emerged from both high school and college?**

This study examined the impact of the pandemic on low-income, first-generation students who transitioned to college from Atlanta area high schools. Although this study did not center race as a factor in their experience, nor asked questions about their racial identities, many of the students chose to express how being Black influenced their educational experiences. For instance, Chelsea felt that he had to attend college because his Jamaican parents and the Black community placed a high value on education. Chelsea was socialized through his family to seek education, but also encountered discouragement along the way in an education program. "I literally had a lady discourage me from going out of state... So, the thing is really believing that we have opportunities to go to other institutions, one like this." Chelsea notes that he and his classmates were told not to attend out of state institutions similar to his current college. He also reflects on how he navigates being Black at a primarily white institution (PWI) and gives advice for future students of color.

They probably have, like a cultural program where it's like predominantly people of color (POC). So, you can see if they have prioritized programs that fit you. That's for you...can I see myself, friends, here, that I can start with? That's how it started off for me...It was a challenge. It was a lot, because again on the PWI they want to box you in so bad...So, my high school, probably shouldn't say it but ghetto...I even had [former HS peer], who he was here with me...and he dropped out. So, for me that was my, **“Damn should I continue?”**

Chelsea suggests that students who are POC find a community on campus that is “predominately POC.” Even so, Chelsea struggled and considered being a POC at a PWI a “challenge” because the PWI “box[ed]” in students who are POC. Chelsea likely meant that the institution made assumptions about students who are POC and that students, therefore, felt restrictions placed upon themselves. Chelsea further articulates his point by mentioning his friend who enrolled in the same college as him but eventually “dropped out” and alludes to the culture as being part of the problem. His friend leaving made him question his own enrollment at a PWI, but he ultimately decided to stay. Chelsea also stated that while the regional norms of “New England” is quite different than the South, he also felt that his experience was specifically unique because of the way he “navigate[s] as a Black man.”

Several of the students articulated how their parents or Black culture highly prioritized postsecondary education. This may have also played a role in where students decided to enroll in college, like it did for Antoni:

But I also kind of was concerned and I, and I also told myself, I don't know if I'm ready to leave this type of specific space just yet. I wanted to go to a college where I could understand myself and find myself more as an individual and a Black person in America, especially so -- I wanted to attend an HBCU because I wanted to connect more with Black men. I wanted to see if I can connect more with Black culture, understand who I am, where I'm from.

Antoni states that he was primarily focused on the academic aspect of getting into college. His grade point average, test scores, and where he “fit in” academically across institutions. But he also considered where he should go socially, personally. He ultimately decided he wanted to stay in a space with a similar racial makeup to his high school and enrolled at an HBCU. His goal was to be at an institution where he could learn more about himself, his history and “connect more with Black men...Black culture.” Antoni might have had a better experience with race at his high school compared to Chloe, who felt like staff and administration gave students lackluster college preparation because of their race.

So, with my high school it was very, very like generalized. Oh, if you want to go to college go to college, but they're more like pushing for like ROTC whatever, because we were in a low-income area already, and I know this might sound bad, but it's the truth: a lot of our administrators were basically preparing for us to go to prison...If you're late to class, you could get suspended really easy at my school. So, it was just like basically a prison, because you were just always in trouble...[The school administrators] were all Black, which is kind of disappointing to say, because we were predominantly Black

school. I'm like we would expect encouragement from people that look like us rather than you know...

From Chloe's perspective, because her and her fellow students were low-income, the school tried to push them into the military or other postsecondary options outside of college. Not only that, she also thought, given the treatment of the students by staff and administrators, that she and her classmates were treated like prisoners because that is where the school believed students would be upon graduation. Additionally, Chloe expressed that it was particularly disappointing for school staff to treat students this way because they were Black themselves. Unfortunately, race continued to play a role in students' lives when they matriculated into college. Some of the students attended predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and experienced racial microaggressions.

I originally went to go to [college] to put some type of distance between me and my family...But [college] just wasn't a place for me. I encountered many different racist people and encountered very different types of microaggressions and discrimination. And I realized that's just not a place that I want to put myself in already in a mentally draining environment. With it being college, I mean, my first year and I was like, it's not good place.

Stephanie enrolled in her first-choice college after graduating from high school. Unfortunately, she experienced "microaggressions and discrimination" and decided that the stress of those social interactions, coupled with the stress that comes with college in general, was not worth it. She ended up leaving a more rural state school for an urban campus. Fortunately, Stephanie successfully transferred to a new school. She did not allow a racist campus or culture deter her from pursuing her education.

### **What can educators take away from this theme?**

The year 2020 is well known as the year of the pandemic, but we must remember that 2020 was also a year of national racial unrest. The killing of George Floyd sparked marches and demonstrations across the US, once again bringing Black Lives Matter into focus. This study analyzed a specific demographic: low-income students in Atlanta, Georgia. Given the demographics of the city, study participants were largely Black. Students often referred to their race, community or background when asked questions about the pursuit of their education. Students often spoke of discrimination they encountered in the public school system, microaggressions at college, the education values of the Black community, and navigating the world as a Black person. Most of them mentioned their identity as being integral in their educational experience.

### **Recommendations for educators**

Given the current political climate, it may be difficult for educators to help foster racial identity with their students. However, considering how often students mentioned race, it is a pivotal point that educators must learn to navigate. Educators should consider the racial dynamics at their school and how they can be improved. Students may internalize indirect messages about themselves based on how they are treated by school personnel. This could contribute to low self-esteem and a poor sense of belonging, concerns identified by participants that have implications on college persistence and completion. Additionally, educators and counselors should encourage students to consider their own identities and comfort with the “unfamiliar” when choosing where to apply. In some cases, campuses where the student body and faculty reflect the student’s racial identity may be a better fit than predominantly white institutions (PWI) that have potential to be a culture shock.

### **Conclusion**

These findings give educators and other practitioners insight into young people’s journeys from high school to college during the pandemic. These students faced challenges along the way; mental health was principal among them. Isolation from peers and school communities either caused or worsened social anxiety and depression. The impact of social media and increased screen time during this period should not be taken lightly. Studies link social media and screen time to depression, anxiety, sleep troubles, and worsening social skills and motivation (Stillwaggon Swan, 2022) in young people. Other challenges mentioned included academic tracking and preferential treatment for higher performing students in high school, inadequate college and career advising at both the secondary and postsecondary levels, and a poor sense of belonging on college campuses.

Several meaningful supports were named. Students identified family members, peers, teachers, and education programs that helped them matriculate into, and persist through college during the pandemic. In general, foundational relationships with at least one person was the reason for educational success rather than a singular resource. Researchers and educators are frequently of the mind that supporting students must involve big or expensive interventions, when what students most often want (and need) is someone to guide them along the way. This “someone” can be a family member or friend, but it does seem, based on students’ responses, that advisors who are trained specifically in intrusive advising and college access are the most helpful, especially for students who do not have present or active family members.

The pandemic came and went, but the event transformed the education landscape and altered the educational experience of not only the students in this study, but the students coming up after them. As such, it is important to honor the voices of the students who contributed to this research by “lifting up” supports that contributed to their success in college during one of the most turbulent times in recent history. If these strategies worked when the world was “flipped on its head,” they should work, and perhaps even be more effective, now that the world is “right side up.” The insights shared by the 17 participants in this study can help guide future generations on their journeys to and through college and can be used to inform future college access programming for better postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion in our region.

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