

Costs keep students from first-choice colleges

'Surprising' number accepted by top pick go elsewhere, study finds

By Mary Beth Marklein
USA TODAY

Fewer college freshmen are attending their top choice of schools, and many appear to be doing so not because they were rejected by their first choice but for financial reasons, a national survey shows.

More than two-thirds (67.3%) are attending their No. 1 choice, the survey says. Of those who are not, 52.6% said they were accepted and opted not to go.

That was "quite surprising," says John Pryor, director of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, which conducted the survey, out today. "The general assumption is that if you're not going to your first choice, it's because you didn't get in."

The survey, an annual snapshot of student behavior and beliefs, is based on responses of 271,441 first-time, full-time students at 393 four-year colleges and universities and is adjusted to reflect the 1.3 million freshmen who entered four-year colleges last fall.

Most students cited "academic reputation" and evidence that graduates "get good jobs" as "very important" reasons for attending the college where they're now enrolled. For students attending a school other than their first choice, "the cost of higher education is really the trump card," says survey research manager Victor Saenz.

One in five attending their second choice said they "could not afford my first choice." Among students attending their third or fourth choices, 26% and 28.4%, respectively, said affordability was the reason.

Students enrolled in a school other than their first choice were more likely than those at their first choice to cite "the cost of attending this college" as one of their top five reasons for enrolling.

Students attending their second or third choice were more likely than those attending their top choice to include money-related concerns as very important factors in their decision. Students attending their fourth choice or lower were the most

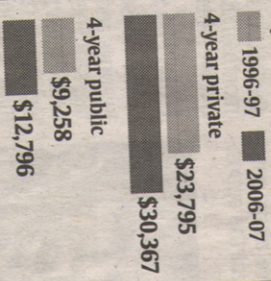
likely of all to cite reasons related to cost. The number of students attending their top choice has fluctuated over the years, but has generally declined from 77.2% in 1974 when the question was first asked. This year, the number attending a choice other than their first is up 2.5 percentage points from last year and 4.2 percentage points from a decade ago.

Rising tuitions likely explain some of the attention to finances. Second- or third-choice colleges may also be luring top students away from their top choice by offering merit aid, says David Hawkins, director of public policy at the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

An increase in the numbers of college-bound low-income students is also a factor. While 64.1% of students said they have "some" or "major" concerns about their ability to pay for their education, low-income and middle-income students were most likely to choose a college based on financial issues, Pryor says.

Rising college costs

Average annual tuition, fees, room and board charges, adjusted for inflation:



Source: The College Board, Trends in College Pricing, 2006

By Julie Sneider, USA TODAY

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