



INDIANA COMMISSION for
HIGHER EDUCATION

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Around 80 Percent of Hoosier High School Students and Parents Believe College is Worth Investment

Higher Education Commission shares key findings from nine-month statewide research endeavor

(INDIANAPOLIS) – The [Indiana Commission for Higher Education](#) (Commission) announced today key findings from the nine-month research endeavor into the factors impacting Indiana’s declining higher education enrollment. Through a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc., the Commission contracted award-winning research-led consulting firm [Heart+Mind Strategies](#) to lead the project beginning in January 2024.

The research found that **around 80 percent of Hoosier high school students and parents believe continuing education beyond high school is worth the investment in their future.** Despite this, the Indiana college-going rate has held steady at around 53 percent during the last few years, demonstrating nearly a 30 percentage-point gap between students who see the value of higher education and those who are pursuing it. The college-going rate includes any type of postsecondary education ranging from certificates to associate and bachelor’s degree programs.

“Throughout this process with Heart+Mind Strategies, we unanimously agreed on the importance of going beyond merely researching the state of higher education in Indiana to expand into Hoosiers’ personal perceptions that drive their realities and lead to action,” said Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education Chris Lowery. “This thorough research uncovered areas where the Commission has historically fallen short in reaching individuals who recognize the value of training and education beyond a high school diploma and drives them to pursue it.”

Expanding further on that finding, Heart+Mind Strategies and the Commission identified three additional key findings of the research:

Parents and guardians serve as more significant influences in their students’, especially male students’, decisions than they perceive themselves to be.

- Historically, the Commission’s programming and outreach have been predominantly student-centered. While there are resources available for parents and guardians through [LearnMoreIndiana.org](#), it was not until [Indiana Pre-Admissions](#) in 2023 that parents became the intentional recipients of some outreach and marketing. The research indicates greater focus is needed to honor the role of parents in these important decisions.

Understanding and selecting a career path is a top challenge cited by high school students and parents and guardians, leading to a need for career coaching and navigation resources and work-based learning opportunities for students to explore career options earlier.

- Many students and parents and guardians also listed a lack of knowledge of future career possibilities that could relate to students’ interests or the relevant career paths, including knowledge of the educational options that fit their desired careers as main concerns. During the 2023 legislative session, legislation passed that supported the Commission in providing additional career coaching and navigation for middle and high school students,

including Career Coaching Grants, Career Discovery Meetings, and Career Scholarship Accounts. These efforts are designed to improve career and higher education exploration, engagement, and experience for PK-12 students.

- Indiana also recently passed new high school diploma requirements, which will go into effect for all students beginning with the class of 2029. This includes the option to earn readiness seals in enrollment, employment, and enlistment and service. These readiness seals seek to increase skill development, work-based learning experiences, as well as opportunities for students to increase their educational attainment by earning a credential of value. Increased access to work-based learning will be key in helping more students understand the range of career opportunities that exist for them.

“Thanks to the generous support of the Indiana General Assembly, we have been able to introduce and expand career coaching and navigation initiatives to younger students,” said Commissioner Lowery. “Effective implementation and possible expansion of these related career coaching efforts will be critical in helping students make well-informed decisions.”

While cost is still cited as the largest barrier to education beyond high school, students and parents and guardians over-inflated their understanding of the cost of tuition by more than 100 percent.

- Through both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research, participants were asked about their perception of the cost of tuition at a four-year Indiana public institution and a two-year Indiana public institution. Respondents tended to over-inflate the cost of annual in-state tuition upwards of twice the actual tuition prices.
- Informed by this research, Indiana must be more transparent in its financial aid tools and availability of aid. Indiana ranks third in the Midwest and ninth in the nation in providing need-based financial aid. In addition, while students and parents recognized the names of some of Indiana’s grants, scholarships, and other financial supports, individuals had limited understanding of their applicability and availability.

Increasing college enrollment is a key goal of the [Commission’s HOPE \(Hoosier Opportunities & Possibilities through Education\) Agenda](#). Indiana currently ranks 33rd in the nation in the college-going rate for recent high school graduates. The Commission aims to become a top 10 state in post-high school training and education by 2030.

The project utilized input from a range of stakeholders such as high school students, young adult students, adult learners, the general public, parents and family members, high school teachers, school counselors, additional school personnel, Indiana employers, youth-serving community- and faith-based organizations, and representatives from Indiana’s higher education institutions. Stakeholder participation in the research included 136 in-depth interviews, 2,711 survey responses, and 184 participants in focus group sessions.

“We must act on the findings from this research – the future of Indiana’s civil society and economy depends on it,” said Lowery. “The Commission is eager to continue work with the Heart+Mind Strategies team and work with Governor Mike Braun, the General Assembly, Indiana employers, educators, and non-profit organizations to refine our strategies and programming. It will require an all-hands-on-deck effort to support Hoosiers in their decision-making and increase college enrollment and hope for a bright future.”

Heart+Mind Strategies was founded in 2008. Its leadership team has been awarded 11 David Ogilvy awards which is the industry's highest award for market research that leads to game-changing campaigns. Heart+Mind Strategies previously conducted research on behalf of Strada Education Network, Pearson, and Western Governors University.

“The data from Hoosiers is inspiring, revealing aspirations and possibilities that can flourish as barriers to higher education after high school are addressed through new strategies and the dedicated plans and work of the Commission, the state, and their partners,” said Heart+Mind Strategies Founding Partner Jennifer Airey. “We can see a path forward to positively impact the Commission’s goals and align with the needs and motivations of tomorrow’s students.”

Summaries of the [methodology](#) and the [quantitative data](#) are available.

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About the Indiana Commission for Higher Education

Created in 1971, the Indiana Commission for Higher Education plans, coordinates, and defines Indiana's postsecondary education system to align higher learning with the needs of students and the state. The Commission also administers Indiana's financial aid programs, including the [21st Century Scholars](#) early college promise scholarship, which celebrated 30 years in 2020.