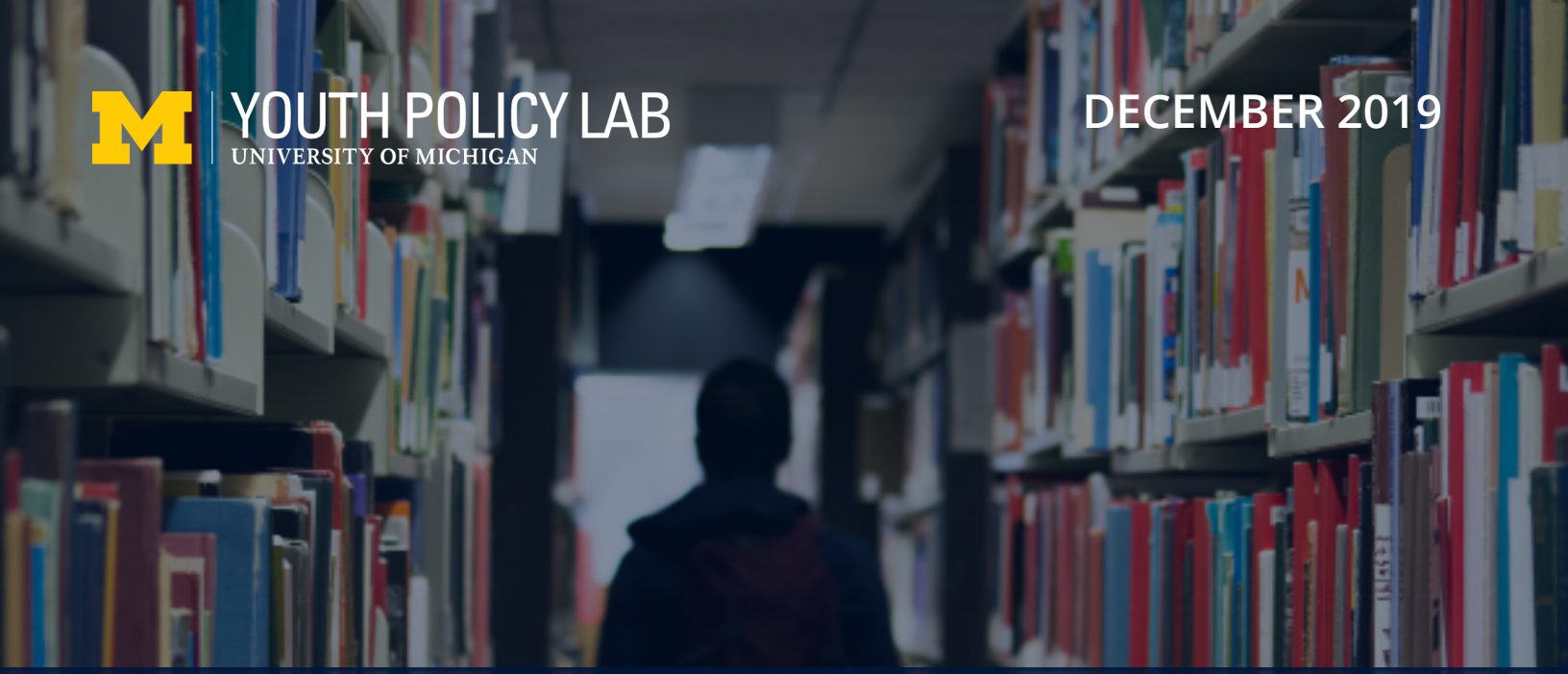

YOUTH POLICY LAB
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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MyVoice: Youth Perspectives on Barriers to College

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KEY FINDINGS:

1. Although cost is the most widely cited barrier, young people report many other barriers to college.
2. Mental health challenges are a significant barrier for many students.
3. Policy makers should attend to more than just the affordability of college when seeking to increase college access and success.

INTRODUCTION

Obtaining a college degree has long been associated with higher income[i] and better labor market outcomes. Yet of students graduating high school in 2016, nearly one-third (32%) did not attend college. Of those who do attend college, 73% of public university students and only 46% of community college students complete their degree within six years.[ii] [iii] Of Detroit students graduating in 2016, approximately 46% did not enroll in college.[iv]

To address these challenges, Governor Gretchen Whitmer proposed that the state of Michigan launch the MI Opportunity Scholarship, a two-year debt-free plan to ensure that every Michigander is provided with two years of college debt-free—a plan that has the potential to make a college degree more financially attainable for many Michigan residents. While the MI Opportunity Scholarship is still being debated in the legislature, students still face a variety of challenges beyond financial support in attending college and earning a degree. In fact, research suggests that policy solutions must seek to address multiple barriers—not just financial barriers—that students encounter in their college transition and enrollment.[v]

While some overarching barriers to college access and success—including cost and academic preparation—are well documented in literature, the challenges individual students face are more nuanced. This policy brief uses data collected from the MyVoice project to highlight, in students' own voices, barriers to college access, factors influencing decisions to attend college, and the challenges faced en route to earning a degree.

> **"Of Detroit students graduating in 2016, approximately 46% did not enroll in college."**

About MyVoice

The MyVoice project is an ongoing national text message survey of youth ages 14 to 24. Each week, young people who have agreed to participate receive a series of short text message questions on a timely topic. Weekly iterations of the survey include both qualitative and quantitative questions, and have asked for youth opinions on issues as varied as gun control, youth needs and priorities, dietary supplements, transgender bathroom priorities, and stress.

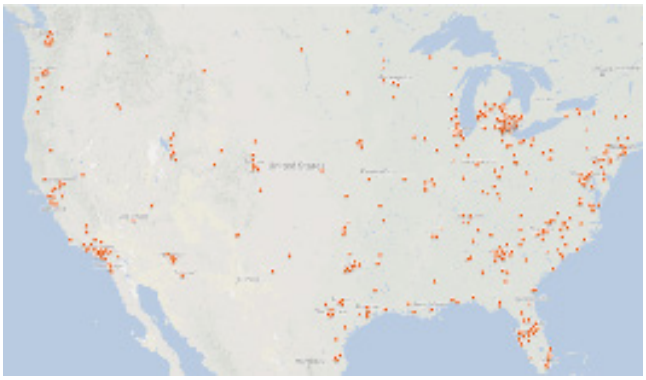
To ensure a diverse and representative sample, youth are recruited through in-person community events and social media and receive a modest incentive for their participation. Targeted recruitment was performed to meet national benchmarks based on weighted samples from the 2016 American Community Survey. The survey includes respondents from each state, with a strategic over sampling of respondents residing in southeast Michigan.[vi]

In the fall of 2017, MyVoice surveyed a sample of young people about perceived barriers to college and their attitudes regarding the costs of college. Young people were asked a series of questions including the following: (1) What are three things that might make it hard for you to go to college? And (2) should college be free? Why or Why not?

Sample

A total of 940 young people (75% of the enrolled MyVoice sample, mean age=18.2 years), responded to the two questions described. Fifty-eight percent of the sample identified as female, 35% as male, and 6% as non-binary/ transgender or other. Sixty-nine percent of the sample identified as white, 9% as African American, 10% as Asian, 7% as multiracial and 14% as Hispanic. Thirty percent were low SES and 25% had parents who had not received a post-secondary degree. While 17% lived in the South, 8% in the Northeast, and 12% in the West, a majority lived in the Midwest (62%) attributable in part to the project's strategic oversampling of youth in southeast Michigan.[vii]

Geographic Distribution of MyVoice Sample



> **"The MyVoice project is an ongoing national text message survey of youth ages 14 to 24. Each week, young people who have agreed to participate receive a series of short text message questions on a timely topic."**

Although cost is the most widely cited barrier, young people report many other barriers to college.

The cost of college attendance is by far the biggest concern for youth. As shown in Figure 1, cost was reported as a potential barrier by 89% of all respondents. When asked to list three things that might make it hard to go to college, one young person responded, "Money, money and money". This was a common theme. Many young people listed money as either the only or most important barrier they faced.

However, tuition was not the only financial concern held by young people. Several respondents included 'living expenses' in addition to the cost of tuition as potential barriers. One young person listed "not enough money for food" as a potential barrier, others listed travel expenses, housing costs, and the cost of books.

The more post-secondary education an individual had, the more likely they were to report cost as a barrier. Ninety-eight percent of all respondents who had received a degree (associates, bachelor's, or graduate degree) listed cost as a barrier, compared with 88% of those who had a high school education or less. This may be because respondents who are out of college are entering a repayment phase on their loans, and are re-recognizing the burden of college cost.

When asked, a majority of respondents (60%), but by no means all, indicated that they believed college should be free. Respondents see education as a means for youth to improve their own lives, and contribute to a better society. Said one respondent, "Yes, it should. Any job that is decent enough to pay for a living requires an education that some people can't afford;" another, "Yes, because making education a privilege creates a large problem with an uneducated impoverished class that is stuck in a cycle of debt and poverty;" and, "Yes, or very inexpensive. Education opens so many doors, and it's important to society to educate individuals".

Several respondents indicated that they thought community colleges and public institutions specifically, should be free, and many others indicated that even if college were not entirely free it should be much less expensive than it currently is.

However, 38% of respondents believe that college should not be free, indicating that free college is too difficult to fund and could reduce the quality of education received. Said one respondent, "No because who is going to fund free college???;" another, "No...one should have to pay for college to keep the amazing resources available;" and, "I don't think college should be free because the institution does need finances to make sure it's a great and quality school but it should be a lot cheaper."

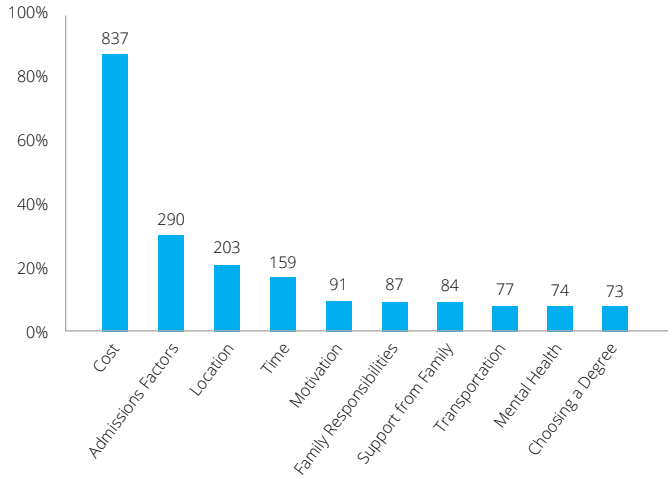
Other respondents emphasized and that the associated cost of college motivates students to work harder and value their education more: "No. College shouldn't be free because it would fall into the same problem as elementary and secondary schools. People don't value things they get for free, which is why America's public schools are struggling. College should be worked for and earned; however, it should also be affordable;" and another, "No, people don't value free."

> **"Respondents see education as a means for youth to improve their own lives, and contribute to a better society"**

Cost is not the only concern for students.

As shown in Figure 1, cost is not the only barrier that students face. A large proportion of the sample (31%) indicated that they might not have the credentials (grades and/or test scores) to get into college. Location and time were also frequently identified as barriers. Twenty-one percent of the sample indicated that location was a potential barrier to college attendance because colleges and universities are not located in close proximity to their family or work responsibilities. Time was listed as a factor by 17%, including many who worried about balancing work and school. For example, one respondent noted, "Not enough time due to the need to work to support a family…" and another listed "Other life situations such as family situations that prevent you from having enough time to attend classes." Motivation, family responsibilities, lack of family support, and transportation (e.g., no easy way to get to the college or university) were key factors identified as well. One key take away from these responses: logistical concerns beyond tuition costs run high among young people who are considering or attending college.

Figure 1: Top 10 Barriers to College
As reported by participants in MyVoice Survey



Mental health challenges are a significant barrier for many students.

Surprisingly, a total of 74 respondents (8% of the sample) listed mental health as one of the three things that would make going to college difficult for them. Of those who listed mental health as a barrier, two-thirds were either still in high school (32%) or currently enrolled in college (35%). More women, transgender, and nonbinary respondents reported mental health as a barrier compared to men. Fully 28% of the students who identify as nonbinary or transgender and 14% of female respondents indicated that mental health was a barrier to attending college compared to only 2% of men. Multiracial students were also more likely to indicate mental health as a barrier than students of other races (14% of students who identify as multiracial listed mental health as a barrier, as opposed to 9% of white students, 2% of black or Hispanic students, and 7% of Asian students). The percentage of students reporting mental health as a barrier did not vary by either parents' level of education or respondent poverty status.

Young people characterized mental health as a barrier to college in two different ways (see Table 1). The majority of respondents (58%) that reported mental health as a barrier mentioned stress and anxiety both in general and more specifically in relation to living independently, finances, or school work. The other 42% listed "mental health," "mental illness," or a more specific mental health diagnosis such as "depression" as the barrier to college, suggesting that they were experiencing ongoing challenges with mental health, not necessarily related to specific aspects of the college experience. Several of these respondents mentioned a lack of support either generally (e.g., "No one to help guide you through it") or specifically in relationship to their mental health concerns ("Lack of mental health resources").

Table 1–Mental Health as a Barrier to College: Perspectives from youth in the MyVoices study, 2018

Theme: Stress & Anxiety (n=43)		Theme: Mental Health (n=31)	
Selected Quotes	**Respondent Characteristics***	**Selected Quotes**	**Respondent Characteristics**
"Anxiety and the amount of money it costs for everything"	Female, 15, white, Hispanic, South, some high school, low SES	"money, depression, anxiety"	Transgender Male, 14, white, non-Hispanic, Midwest, 8th grade or less, med/high SES
"Honestly there's only one thing: stress. Expenses, academics, being away from family, peer pressure, anxiety, being an actual adult, I feel like all of things fit well under STRESS."	Transgender Male, 16, Asian and Black, non-Hispanic, South, some high school, low SES	"My mental health, Money, Being homesick"	Nonbinary, 15, white, non-Hispanic, West, some high school, med/high SES
"School is so stressful and so expensive"	Transgender Male, 16, white, non-Hispanic, South, some high school, med/high SES	"1.Money 2.Mental Health 3.Political Climate "	Transgender, 17, black, Hispanic, Midwest, some high school, low SES
"Money, girls, stress"	Male, 17, Asian, non-Hispanic, West, high school graduate, med/high SES	"Money, distance, mental illness"	Female, 18, white, non-Hispanic, Midwest, some college, med/high SES
"Anxiety about making friends, distance from home, stress about academics"	Female, 18, Asian, non-Hispanic, Midwest, some college, med/high SES	"Lack of support from friends and family, lack of financial aid, lack of mental health resources"	Female, 20, white, non-Hispanic, Midwest, some college, med/high SES
"Being away from family, social anxiety, stress"	Female, 19, white, non-Hispanic, Midwest, some college, med/high SES	"1. Money 2. Mental health complications 3. Responsibilities (i.e. family obligations)"	Female, 20, white, non-Hispanic, Midwest, some college, med/high SES
"Classes can be stressful and affect my mental health, apartments where my college is are expensive, tuition is expensive"	Female, 21, white, non-Hispanic, Midwest, some college, med/high SES	"1. Money 2. Mental illness 3. Cost of living"	Female, 21, white, non-Hispanic, Midwest, some college, med/high SES

*all characteristics were self-reported; low SES was defined as receiving Free or Reduced Price Lunch in middle or high school; age is age at time of study enrollment

Policy Implications

As policymakers in Michigan begin to think about improving the talent pipeline in the state, addressing barriers to college access and completion is a vital component of any strategy. The responses from these young people suggest that programs like the MI Opportunity Scholarship could help address a critical barrier for students. However, these student voices should also make it clear that programs that reduce only the costs of tuition for students should not be deployed in isolation. College resources to target student needs (including financial needs beyond tuition, logistical concerns, and social-emotional needs) must be mobilized in concert with financial assistance and financial assistance may need to encompass more than just support with tuition.

The first step is recognizing that barriers and needs are not the same for everyone. Strategically leveraging resources that already exist on campuses, including financial aid, mental health counseling, and academic support, can alleviate some of the barriers described in survey responses. Colleges must continue their work of supporting students once they are on campus and should also enhance services to support students in the transition to college in part by increasing awareness of these existing programs.

Some challenges reported by youth (e.g. transportation and affordable housing) are more systemic and may be difficult for a single institution or community to address. Local and regional cooperation may be necessary to alleviate these barriers for youth. Further, policymakers should consider the potential benefits of incorporating youth voices into important decision-making processes around housing and transportation as a part of an overall strategy to support college-going.

Finally, mental health is likely an under-recognized barrier to going to college despite a high prevalence of mental health disorders among youth.[viii] Our study sampled a diverse population of youth from across the country and found that, without priming, a significant proportion reported mental health concerns as a top barrier to going to college. While stress and low support have both been documented barriers to attending and completing college for first generation college students,[ix x] youth in our sample reported mental health as a barrier regardless of parental educational status. Our findings suggest that many youth perceive a lack of support overall, including support to manage their mental illness, if they were to attend college. Where mental health supports already exist to support young people in college, policymakers could examine communication, outreach, and enrollment practices to improve awareness and uptake among youth. And where supports may not be sufficient or present at all, there is a clear opportunity to invest in mental health programming as a means to support college success.

Limitations: Our findings are qualitative and should not be seen as generalizable to the overall US population of youth. Rather, our findings identify deeper narratives provided by youth in their own words about barriers to higher education.

ENDNOTES

i Zimmerman, S. D. (2014). The returns to college admission for academically marginal students. Journal of Labor Economics, 32(4), 711-754

ii MI School Data. College enrollment by high school snapshot, statewide, 2015-16. http://bit.ly/2Q54Mwq

iii MI School Data. 2018 State of Michigan postsecondary success rates. https://www.mischooldata.org/CareerAndCollegeReadiness2/IheGraduationSuccessRatesSummary.aspx

iv Detroit Regional Chamber. State of Education, 2019-2020. https://issuu.com/detroitregionalchamber/docs/soe_book_web

v Page, L. C., & Scott-Clayton, J. (2016). Improving college access in the United States: Barriers and policy responses. Economics of Education Review, 51, 4-22.

vi Further details on the MyVoice study protocol can be found in DeJonckheere M, Nichols LP, Moniz MH, Sonneville KR, Vydiswaran VV, Zhao X, Guetterman TC, Chang T. MyVoice National Text Message Survey of Youth Aged 14 to 24 Years: Study Protocol. JMIR research protocols. 2017 Dec;6(12)

vii The sample responding to the question "Should college be free? Why or why not?" included a total of 912 respondents. Although slightly smaller, the demographic composition of this group was similar to the demographics of the group responding to the question about barriers.

viii Merikangas, K. R., He, J. P., Burstein, M., Swanson, S. A., Avenevoli, S., Cui, L., Swendsen, J. (2010). Lifetime prevalence of mental disorders in U.S. adolescents: results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication--Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A). Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 49(10), 980–989. doi:10.1016/j.jaac.2010.05.017

ix https://www.league.org/innovation-showcase/breaking-down-barriers-first-generation-college-students-and-college-success

x https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02673843.2019.1596823

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Youth Policy Lab Mission

The University of Michigan Youth Policy Lab helps community and government agencies make better decisions by measuring what really works. We're data experts who believe that government can and must do better for the people of Michigan. We're also parents and community members who dream of a brighter future for all of our children. At the Youth Policy Lab, we're working to make that dream a reality by strengthening programs that address some of our most pressing social challenges.

We recognize that the wellbeing of youth is intricately linked to the wellbeing of families and communities, so we engage in work that impacts all age ranges. Using rigorous evaluation design and data analysis, we're working closely with our partners to build a future where public investments are based on strong evidence, so all Michiganders have a pathway to prosperity.

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