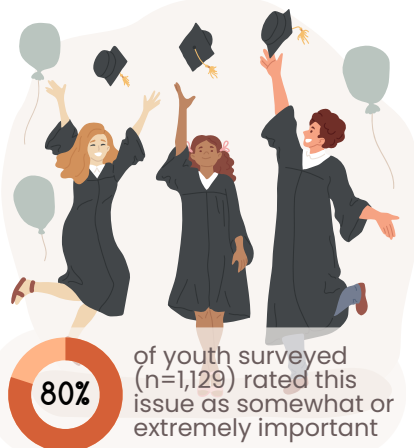


Youth Perspectives on:

Pathways to College & Careers



Overview



This theme, which emerged roughly 85 times during youth listening sessions, explores how students envision and experience support for their postsecondary goals, whether college, career, or other life paths. While many students acknowledged existing supports like the College and Career Center and helpful counselors, they also described significant barriers: the high cost of college, inequitable access to guidance and opportunities, and a narrow definition of success that often excludes alternative pathways.

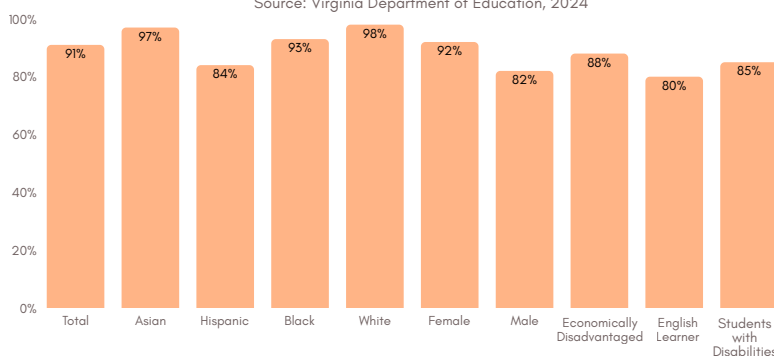
WHY IT MATTERS

Young people's ability to imagine and prepare for their futures is deeply tied to the opportunities and supports they encounter in high school. Equitable access to college and career planning, especially for first-generation students and those from low-income backgrounds, is critical for advancing long-term well-being and economic mobility. When guidance is limited, affordability is a barrier, or certain pathways are undervalued, students are more likely to feel disoriented or excluded from success.

WHAT THE DATA SAY

Graduation Rates by Subgroups, 2024

Source: Virginia Department of Education, 2024



WHAT YOUTH WANT

50+ mentions

"Make college free; not a lot of people can get into college because of money."

"More chances of scholarships as long as you're passing."

Equity, Access, & Affordability

- Affordable or free college options and robust scholarship access
- Equal opportunity regardless of income, background, or immigration status

10+ mentions

"Everyone should have their own personal college advisor."

"Better resources for first-generation college students."

"Support minority groups in planning for life projects (such as school)."

"More help with college applications and scholarships."

Guidance & Counseling

- More hands-on support from college and career counselors
- Culturally responsive guidance for first-generation students
- Broader definitions of success
- Exposure to real-world experiences like internships, apprenticeships, and job training

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

20+ mentions

"People have to pay A LOT OF MONEY for college causing people to end school at 12th grade."

"Not everyone gets to go to college."

"Lack of scholarship access."

Positive mention: "The scholarship fund of Alexandria is super helpful."

Financial Barriers

Concerns about the cost of college, limited scholarship access, and a belief that higher education is out of reach without major financial sacrifices.

90+ mentions

"Another important issue is students not being aware of the many resources that we do have. For instance, there are so many certifications available that can help so many different career pathways yet not enough students know about them."

Inconsistent Support

Not all students feel adequately guided, especially those pursuing alternatives to four-year colleges or who are the first in their families to navigate the system. They also feel there is a dominant narrative that equates success with college admission, which can stigmatize other valuable career paths.