

Contents

Introduction

Reasons to Attend College Among Jefferson County High School Seniors

Major Field of Study Among Jefferson County High School Seniors

College Plans and Demographic Characteristics of Jefferson County High School Seniors

Conclusion and Discussion

Reasons for Attending College and Planned Major Field of Study:

Results of a Survey of Jefferson County High School Seniors

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Contents

Introduction

Reasons to Attend College Among Jefferson County High School Seniors

Major Field of Study Among Jefferson County High School Seniors

College Plans and Demographic Characteristics of Jefferson County High School Seniors

Conclusion and Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide information on the attitudes and academic plans of Jefferson County high school seniors. This information might have implications for recruitment efforts. The findings displayed in the present report are drawn from a larger study of high school seniors in Jefferson County, *The Career and Educational Goals of Jefferson County High School Seniors* (funded by ExxonMobil) that investigated why some Jefferson County youth remain in our region, while others plan to leave. Although not the focus of this larger study, some of the results may have relevance for Lamar University. Although Lamar University attracts students from beyond the borders of Jefferson County, nearly 50% are Jefferson County residents (see *Profile At-A-Glance Lamar University*, Spring 2005). Therefore, it is important to note the academic aspirations of these Jefferson County youth.

During March and April, 2005, seniors across eight Jefferson County high schools responded to a questionnaire that asked about their career goals and their plans, if any, to leave the region. Seniors from the following eight high schools were surveyed: Ozen, West Brook, Cathedral Christian and Monsignor Kelly High School in Beaumont; Hamshire-Fannett High School in Hamshire; Nederland High School; Memorial High School in Port Arthur; Port Neches-Groves High School in Port Neches. In all, 1,521 students were surveyed. This represents 64% of the 2,369 seniors across the nine surveyed high schools, and 55% of the 2,772 seniors across all 11 high schools in Jefferson County. The demographic composition of surveyed seniors generally reflects the demographic composition of all high school seniors, although the survey somewhat under represents African Americans. Fifty-three percent of surveyed seniors identified themselves as female; 50% identified themselves as Anglo, 29% as African American, 12% as Hispanic, 6% as Asian American, and 2% as "Other." At the time of the survey, 52% of all Jefferson County high school seniors were female; 48% were Anglo, 39% were African American, 10% were Hispanic, and 3% were Asian American (according to enrollment figures obtained from the Records Office at each high school).

Seniors were asked about their plans in the fall following high school graduation: *What do you plan to do this fall, after you graduate from high school?* Thirteen percent of the 1,504 respondents to this question answered that they did not plan to attend college in the fall, or were

not sure what they would do; 49% responded that they planned to attend college locally, defined on the survey as "Lamar" (this included Lamar University, Lamar State College in Port Arthur, Lamar Institute of Technology, Lamar State College in Orange – limitations caused by the aggregation of local colleges in this survey are addressed in the final section of this report), and 38% responded that they planned to attend a college outside the region (the region was defined on the survey instrument as Jefferson, Hardin, and Orange counties). The results presented in the present report center on the responses given by those high school seniors who indicated that they planned to attend college in the fall.

Reasons to Attend College Among Jefferson County High School Seniors

Those students who responded that they planned to attend college locally in the fall were asked: *What is it that most influenced you to decide to attend Lamar?* Table 1 reports responses to this question. Included for comparison are the responses to an equivalent question asked of students who planned to attend some other college in the fall.

Table 1: Most Influential Reason to Attend College

	Attend Locally	Attend Outside of Region
<i>% Responding:</i>		
Degree/Major/Courses	31	39
Family	25	12
Cost	16	2
Location	10	4
Lamar's Reputation	5	17
Friends Attend	5	5
For Getting into Larger College	3	--
Scholarship	2	12
Gain Experience	2	1
Play Sports	1	1
Is a Large College	--	1
Good Campus/Like the Campus	--	3
Other	1	3
N =	621	460

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

For both sets of high school seniors, the ability to obtain the preferred degree in their major field (this category also includes the response that a degree from a particular college would be helpful in getting a job) is the most frequently offered reason for planning to attend a particular college, whether college locally (31%) or out of the region (39%). A significant difference emerges on a number of response categories, however. Compared to seniors who planned to attend college outside of the region, seniors who planned to attend college locally placed greater emphasis on the role of family (that includes responses that family members wanted the student to attend as well as responses that other family members had attended) (25% v. 12%), the lower cost of attending college (16% v. 2%), and convenient location (that was comprised of responses about being close to family and/or work) (10% v. 4%).

Perceptions of local college distinguish seniors who planned to attend locally from those who planned to attend college outside of the region. Reputation was a major influence among 5% of seniors who planned to attend college locally (although respondents were not asked to elaborate, presumably this particular response among this particular group of seniors indicates a positive perception). By contrast, reputation (presumably negative for this group of seniors) was a major influence for 17% of seniors who planned to attend college outside of the region in the fall. A negative perception was in fact the second most frequently offered reason to attend college outside of the region.

Another pronounced difference is the reported role of scholarships. Seniors who planned on attending college locally much less frequently reported the influence of a scholarship on their decision by comparison to seniors who planned to attend college outside of the region (2% v. 12%). A small but measurable percentage of seniors who planned to attend locally (3%) viewed local college as a stepping stone to a larger college; this influence did not show up among seniors who planned to attend outside of the region.

Major Field of Study Among Jefferson County High School Senior

Students who planned to attend college locally in the fall were also asked to report the field of study in which they planned to major: *What will you major in?* Table 2 reports responses to this question. Included for comparison are the responses to this question from students who

planned to attend college outside of the region in the fall.

Table 2: Major Field of Study

	Attend Locally	Attend Outside of Region
<i>% Responding:</i>		
Medical	28	16
Business	11	17
Engineering	5	7
Computer Science	4	4
Social/Behavioral Sciences	4	7
Natural Sciences	3	10
Communications	3	5
Performing Arts	3	4
Education	3	3
Criminal Justice/Law Enforcement	3	3
Design and Fashion	2	3
Languages	1	--
General Studies	1	*
Architecture	*	3
Physical Education	*	1
Undecided	25	14
Other	3	3
N =	731	559

*: Less than 1%.

Percentages may not round to 0 due to rounding.

These two groups of Jefferson County high school seniors exhibited some significant differences in their planned major. By far, the most frequently reported major among seniors who planned to attend locally was the medical field, particularly nursing (28%). The second most frequently reported major was business (11%). Although medical and business were also the top two majors among seniors who planned to attend college outside of the region, this group reported interest in a major in the medical field far less frequently (16%), and a major in business somewhat more frequently (17%) compared with seniors who planned to attend college locally.

* A major in the natural sciences (such as chemistry or biology) was mentioned less frequently by seniors who planned to attend locally relative to those who planned college outside

of the region (3% v. 10%). A further notable difference was the percentage of seniors who were undecided about what their major would be. Almost twice as many high school seniors who planned to attend college locally, than who planned to attend college outside the region, had not decided on a major (25% v. 14%).

College Plans and Demographic Characteristics of Jefferson County High School Seniors

An interesting and potentially relevant concern is the extent to which differences in college plans are associated with differences in demographic characteristics. The survey asked respondents to designate their gender as well as their racial/ethnic background. Although the GPA for students was not obtained, the survey did ask respondents to classify themselves as either an "A," "B," "C," or "*some other level*" student. Although there is the possibility that self-reported grades inflate true grades, there is variation on this measure (discussed below).

Table 3 reports college plans by gender, race/ethnicity, and self-reported grade. Fifty-six percent of all seniors who had college plans in the fall said that they planned to attend locally. College plans varied to some extent by gender. A higher percentage of females (59%) than males (53%) planned to attend locally. College plans also varied by race/ethnicity. A large percentage of Hispanic seniors planned to attend local college (69%). The percentage of Anglo as well as Asian American students who planned to attend locally was equivalent to the overall (base-line) percentage of seniors who planned on local college (56%). However, though African American seniors planned to attend locally no less frequently than they planned to attend outside of the region, the percentage of African American seniors who planned on local college (50%) was well below the overall percentage of high school seniors who planned to attend college locally.

Plans to attend college locally or attend college outside of the region also varied by grade. Fifty-six percent of self-reported "A" students planned to attend college outside of the region. By contrast, 61% of self-reported "B" seniors and 63% of self-reported "C" students planned on local college in the fall.

Table 3: College Plans by Demographic Characteristic

	Attend Locally	Attend Outside of Region	
	%	%	N
All Seniors w/ College Plans	56	44	1,305
Female	59	41	699
Male	53	47	599
African American	50	50	360
Anglo	57	43	668
Asian American	58	42	86
Hispanic	69	31	151
"A" Student	44	56	453
"B" Student	61	39	638
"C" Student	63	37	146

Conclusions and Discussion

In summation, Jefferson County high school seniors who planned to attend college locally (i.e., Lamar University, Lamar State College in Port Arthur, Lamar Institute of Technology, Lamar State College in Orange) in the fall were most influenced by the availability of a degree in their major field of study, by their family, by the low cost of attending college locally, and by the convenient location to family and work. Seniors who planned to college outside of the region were most influenced by the availability of a degree in their major field of study, by local college reputation, by family and by scholarships.

Jefferson County high school seniors who planned to attend college locally in the fall were most interested in majoring in the medical field, particularly nursing, and business. One-quarter of these seniors were undecided about what they would major in. Seniors who planned to attend college outside of the region in the fall were also most interested in a major in the medical field and in business, and a large percentage were also interested in majoring in one of the physical sciences. A relatively small percentage of this group of seniors was undecided about

what to major in.

Most Jefferson County high school seniors who planned to attend college in the fall, planned to attend locally. With the percentage of seniors who planned to attend local college considered a base-line, local colleges did better among females than among males, better among Hispanics than among other racial/ethnic groups, and better among "B" and "C" students than among "A" students.

The goal of this report is to make information available that is potentially relevant for recruitment. Some of these findings deserve particular emphasis. Before a review of findings from the perspective of recruitment, however, limitations of this study must be noted. Results presented here are drawn from a larger study whose focus was not specifically on college choices among high school seniors. Accordingly, the survey instrument did not differentiate between students who planned to attend Lamar University and those who planned to attend another local college. Although Lamar University has the largest enrollment among local colleges, caution must still be taken when results are applied specifically to Lamar University. Similarly, because the focus was not on college choices, the survey provided little attention to the investigation of perceptions of local colleges, or Lamar University in particular.

With this said, it is important to reflect on the finding that almost nine out of ten Jefferson County high school seniors planned to attend college in the fall. This represents a sizable pool from which to recruit. The size of this pool is even more impressive in the context of survey findings that 82% of Jefferson County high school seniors who did not have plans for college in the fall, said they planned to attend college at some point in the future. It is, of course, good news that the majority of seniors who had college plans, planned to attend a local college.

There were numerous influences that determined the choice of what college to attend. The reasons students offered for planning to attend a particular college can be broadly categorized into those that "attract" students to, and reasons that "repel" students away from a particular college. Findings presented in this report indicate that the availability of a degree in the preferred major field of study is a pronounced attraction for many students. For roughly one-third of all college-bound Jefferson County high school seniors, this was the primary consideration in deciding on what college to attend. This finding strongly suggests that efforts to

inform high school youth about the various available majors and degrees available have a positive impact on recruitment.

Among seniors who planned to attend college outside of the region, responses concerning local college reputation can be considered the leading factor that repels a significant number of potential recruits. These data do not allow us to speak about the causes of any negative image. Neither do these data provide us with a precise "picture" of what these negative images "look like." These findings do suggest that a negative reputation potentially hinders recruitment. Accordingly, findings point to the importance of determining with greater specificity the nature of negative perceptions in order that these may be properly addressed.

The findings in this report also indicate that successful recruitment efforts target African American high school students, as well as high school students with a high GPA. These are groups who planned on local college in substantially lower percentages than would be expected on the basis of college plans among high school seniors overall.