

THE POSTSECONDARY PROJECT

# UNCOVERING THE TRIPWIRES

# TO POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS



Second Edition



STATE FARM® YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD

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“When you peek under the surface and begin asking questions, graduating college isn’t so much an example of a ‘meritocracy’ as much as it is the symbol of perpetual inequality.”

— Andrew, college freshman

# Background

**WHO WE ARE:** The Student Voice Team, consisting of over 60 self-selected youth from across the state, works to amplify, elevate, and integrate students as full partners in the effort to improve Kentucky schools. We were founded in 2012 at the Prichard Committee.

**WHAT WE DID:** Over the last year, we conducted an investigation into how our peers are preparing for life after high school. In addition to poring over the latest research and data, we interviewed academics, policymakers, parents, teachers, administrators, and most notably, students statewide to get a better handle on the challenges inherent in the postsecondary transition experience.

**WHY WE DID IT:** As students in the midst of postsecondary transitions ourselves, we felt an especially acute sense of urgency to understand why too many of our peers were faltering on the way to, or so soon after, high school graduation. We were concerned about the dire but poorly-discussed data about how many young people start but do not finish a college or associate's degree program.

In this report, we attempt to uncover what we call "tripwires" or unacknowledged barriers behind these troubling postsecondary graduation rates. Our strategy is simple: marry facts with the voices and stories of the real students to whom they refer.



By infusing the data about college transition challenges with voices from Kentucky youth, we can better illuminate the research and make it more accessible.

The ambitious hope is that by reaching out to our peers and elevating and amplifying student insight, we can use our expertise as observers on the front lines of the Commonwealth's classrooms to help bridge the gap between education policy and practice. And at the very least, we hope we can stimulate a more honest conversation among students, policymakers and the public about what it takes to ensure a smooth journey for all of our peers after high school.

**DISCLAIMER:** Though the focus of this document is the transition to college, we recognize that there are other alternatives that may be more suitable for students graduating from high school, such as trade or vocational school or military enlistment. We fully acknowledge that by focusing on the course to college, our investigation covers just one part of the postsecondary transition equation.

*ABOVE: Student Voice Team members in a meeting at Kentucky Educational Television offices.*

# Introduction

A high school diploma is no longer the same commodity it was half a century ago.

High school graduates are making slightly over \$30,000 a year while those with a bachelor's degree earn twice as much.<sup>1</sup> Over the long term, college-dropouts sacrifice nearly \$500,000 in lifetime earnings.<sup>2</sup> Unemployment among young adults whose highest level of education is a high school diploma is 17.5%, whereas a young adult whose highest level of education is a bachelor's degree is only 7%.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in Kentucky, over 60% of new job openings and 90% of new jobs in growing industries with high wages will require some postsecondary education by the year 2020.<sup>3</sup> It is strikingly clear that for a student to be economically self-sufficient beyond high school, a postsecondary education is a prerequisite.

Fortunately, the Commonwealth's college-going landscape shows some important, positive developments. Kentucky's high school graduation rate now stands at 86.1%, and according to the Kentucky Department of Education, 62.5% of Kentucky's 2014 high school students are considered "college ready."<sup>4</sup> Most significantly, more than 3 in 5 high school graduates are enrolling in a postsecondary institution.<sup>5</sup>

From these numbers alone, it would seem as though Kentucky is on track to supply our local



and national economy with a record-breaking, well-educated, highly skilled workforce.

But in fact, that is not the case.

When we examined similar indicators of success in postsecondary education, we found the results discouraging, bordering on abysmal.

**In Kentucky's public four-year institutions, 48.9% of college undergraduates finish their degree in six years and 24.2% graduate in four,** meaning that Kentucky has the 13th worst graduation rate amongst the states.<sup>6</sup> More unsettling realities lie in the Kentucky Community and Technical College System where just 12.8% of students earn an associates' degree in three years.<sup>7</sup>

What is happening between students' high school graduation day and — more than likely — their college dropout day? What is contributing to so many unsuccessful postsecondary transitions?

For over a year now, members of the Student Voice Team's Postsecondary Project have investigated just these questions.

*ABOVE: Student Voice Team members collaborate on the Postsecondary Project report.*

# The Tripwire Theme

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After doing statistical research and having conversations with students, parents, educators, policy experts, and others about the postsecondary transition experience, we identified a central theme: one that has to do with equality.

Two features students have virtually no control over, their home zip code and their family's income, determine so much of what we call college success. And while the college admissions process purports to be a meritocracy, these indicators disproportionately predict access to valuable resources and information that help successful college graduates earn a degree with manageable or no debt.

Some of the students we talked with, for example, told us they needed to work for pay during the school year and forgo the often expensive extracurricular activities which would otherwise make them more attractive to competitive postsecondary admissions offices.

And then there were the students we spoke with who came from families with no history of college graduates, making the cultural leap they were hoping to take that much more difficult. We found too that some students who were uncertain about whether they would make it to the next level of education after high school also had insufficient access to critical

information like whether and how to apply for financial aid or what, besides academic achievement, a person needs to thrive in a college setting.

In this report, we are calling the inequalities that thwart students from making successful postsecondary education transitions “tripwires.” These are the little-discussed, powerful obstacles that tend to sabotage students on the way to a self-sufficient, thriving life after high school. Specifically, we found these tripwires falling into three broad categories, ones we are calling:

- The Birthright Lottery,
- Veiled College Costs, and
- College and Career Unreadiness

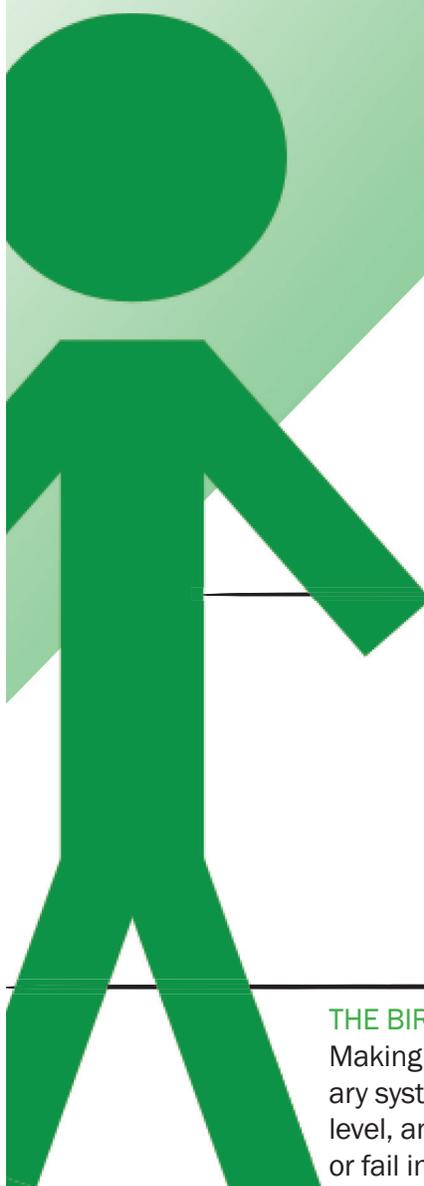
The tripwires we highlight in this report represent our attempt to raise the level of informed discussion among people who most stand to directly benefit from it — students and families.

In reviewing the stark statistics, poignant voices and simple graphics we present in these pages, consider what it would mean to have more transparent conversations about them not only in the public policy arena, but also in our homes and in our schools.

## ADDRESSING THE TRIPWIRES

The notion of becoming college ready seems plain enough to high school leaders and students, but significant structural and societal issues provide barriers many students find difficult to overcome.

Three key tripwires emerged in discussing postsecondary success in conversations across the state. These barriers need to be acknowledged and addressed to expect higher rates of student success in earning college degrees.



### COLLEGE AND CAREER UNREADINESS

Being ready for college is about more than earning a diploma or reaching certain ACT scores. Many students lack the habits and abilities required to succeed as a college student.

### VEILED COLLEGE COSTS

Expenses for college preparation while still in high school, the ability to handle rising college costs, and readiness for years of college expenses to make it to graduation are major barriers for many students who might be academically prepared.

### THE BIRTHRIGHT LOTTERY

Making a successful transition from public schools to the postsecondary system is greatly affected by students' family background, income level, and other socioeconomic factors that can help students succeed or fail in making it to college and persisting to a degree.

## TRIPWIRE 1

# The Birthright Lottery

In Kentucky, only 21.3% of Appalachians over 25 hold a bachelor's degree.<sup>8</sup> The idea that the college admissions process is or has ever been a meritocracy misrepresents the reality. The zip code, tax bracket, and/or academic background that students are born into are significant determinants of the likelihood of navigating the postsecondary transition process with any degree of success.

**Just 10.9% of first-generation, low-income students will graduate college in six years.**<sup>9</sup>

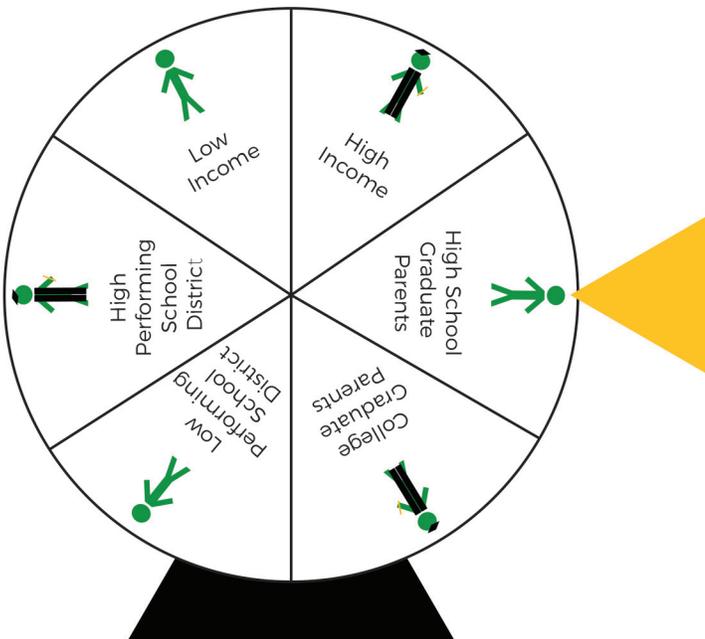
I constantly feel pressure to follow in the footsteps of everyone else. I don't feel like I will reach my full potential here (rural eastern Kentucky). Play football, basketball, or cheer, then find a nice job in the coal or lumber industries. It's constantly perpetuating itself.

— Robbie, high school junior

A friend of mine had to drop out after his first semester at Union College because he had pressure back home to go work and make money rather than go to college and spend money. The thousands of dollars he spent for that first semester are now wasted.

— Jesse, high school junior

Spin the wheel to find out your educational fate



My family has very little money, but I just scored a 23 on my ACT. Am I proud of that? Definitely. No one in my family has gotten a score close to that high, but no one in my family has ever gone to college, so I have a feeling that score will go to waste.

— Keegan, high school senior

## OUR TAKE

*Even for those low-income students who do manage to take advantage of financial aid programs, the difference between what they can get and what a postsecondary degree actually costs is typically many thousands of additional dollars. This is even more confounding when you consider what Dr. Jim Ziliak, University of Kentucky professor of economics, told us: “There is a substantial mismatch between the knowledge of how you finance college and the eligibility for assistance. This is a real problem because a lot of these kids could afford to go to college, they just don’t know it.”*

*But there are at least a few proven solutions. Research shows that in Kentucky, access to services like intensive academic advising and career counseling raise completion rates and shorten the time students take to get a degree—approaches that help low-income students overcome both financial and cultural barriers to success after high school.*

*The fact that these very programs are often facing challenges in Frankfort is disheartening. As an informed, poor kid from Eastern Kentucky, I hope our policymakers will understand that budget cuts will make it difficult to afford intensive student supports.*

*Surely when it comes to ensuring a successful transition after high school, there is more we can do to support and encourage students with less in Kentucky.*

— Amanda Jean Wahlstedt, Student Voice Team

I'll be taking on college on my own. Neither of my parents nor siblings attended college, and all my counselor does is scheduling and testing. I don't know where to go.

— LeAnna, high school junior



*Student Voice Team members meet with Professor Jim Ziliak of University of Kentucky Gatton College of Business and Economics*

# Veiled College Costs

How much does it really cost to attend college? The College Board might report an average annual tuition and fee cost of \$31,000 for a private university and \$9,000 for state residents at public colleges, but does that really cover it all? <sup>10</sup> What about paying for the three ACT tests, the six AP tests, and the violin lessons and travel soccer team we know students need to be competitive? Additionally, there is a substantial mismatch between the knowledge of financing college and the eligibility for assistance. Underrepresenting both the cost of college and the support available makes students the brunt of a brutal college accessibility joke. These are the Veiled College Costs.

**77% of students under 24 years old who are top income quartile earned a college degree, whereas only 9% of their peers who are in the bottom income quartile earned a college degree.**<sup>11</sup>

I've paid hundreds of dollars for ACT preparation, actually taking the ACT multiple times, and sending my scores to colleges. I haven't even begun to count how much money I've spent on other miscellaneous 'college prep' type stuff.  
— Mariah, high school senior

## An Expensive Resume



Our school doesn't support the arts very much, so after my sophomore year of theater, I had to drop out because operating costs increased too much for my parents. I spend that time working now.

— John, high school senior

## OUR TAKE

*The average ratio of guidance counselors to students in Kentucky schools is 1:444, nearly twice the recommended average. This public school guidance crisis prompts many people to hire private counselors to assist them in navigating the college admissions process. In Lexington where I live, families routinely shell out \$3,000 and more, in order to give their kids the college guidance that they need to apply to a competitive school or identify the most lucrative scholarship opportunities.*

*But the students who cannot afford this bill are put at a major disadvantage, especially if their families cannot navigate the complicated and ever-changing admissions process.*

*The fact of the matter is that the extra requirements and large caseload assigned to guidance counselors stop them from effectively doing their job. And that is unfair.*

— Susie Smith, Student Voice Team

My family can't afford to hire a private counselor to help me in the college admissions process, and I'm the first one applying to schools. So far, my college guidance has been through the Internet.

— Mason, high school senior

I wasn't even aware that scholarships (to Youth in Government, study abroad, and other capacity-building programs) were available. My school doesn't tell us about these extra programs.

— Niven, high school junior



**In Kentucky, there is an average of 444 students to every counselor.**

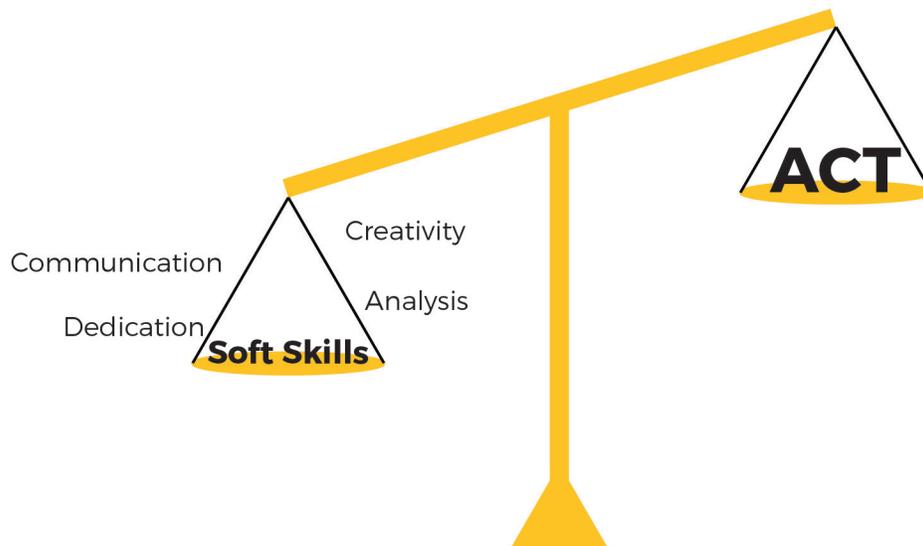
# College and Career Unreadiness

There's more to being successful in college than just academics. After all, success in college isn't only about drawing logical conclusions from a textbook. What about people skills, financial literacy, or time management? Too many students buy into the narrative that college success is exclusively dependent on knowing how to do well on the ACT. The numbers, however, tell a different story and call into question the legitimacy of how we prepare students for college. The discrepancy between what is popularly described as college readiness and what a student actually needs to be ready for college is what we mean by this third categorical tripwire.

**The average ACT score of a student who failed to earn a bachelor's degree was 17.67, whereas students who graduated with a bachelor's degree had an average of 19.59 — less than a two-point difference.<sup>12</sup>**

My older brother dropped out after Thanksgiving of his sophomore year in college because he didn't know how to manage his job and the hard classes. He's paying off something like \$26,000 on loans without an education.

— Hunter, high school junior



**When it comes to college success, soft skills matter more than a test score.**

I wish there were ways teachers could prove to me that my education means something, why geometry could help me in journalism. I look forward to the day I watch what I learned in the classroom work in the community.

— Zoha, high school senior

## OUR TAKE

*When it comes to postsecondary transitions, there seems to be a huge disconnect between middle school expectations and reality. Research shows that 93% of middle school students report that their goal is to attend college but only 44% of us enroll in college, and only 26% graduate with a college diploma within six years of enrolling.*

*There is another reason why talking about our plans after high school may need to start earlier than we want. Research shows that the decisions we make about what classes to take matter even at our age. For example, if students do not pass key “gatekeeper courses” such as Algebra I on time, it can be difficult to complete the full sequence of coursework needed for postsecondary education, particularly in four-year colleges.*

*Are middle schoolers really too young to start thinking about these things?*

— Ashton Bishop, Student Voice Team

I'm not convinced I really know what 'college ready' means. My high school has made me believe college success comes to those who read the textbook, not knowing how to learn and survive on your own.

— Zach, high school senior

I wasn't identified as gifted when I was in third grade, and I feel like it really stunted my growth. The label prevented me from tapping into a better environment to learn in.

— Sara, high school sophomore

*Students discuss postsecondary transitions at a meeting with the Student Voice Team*



## What's Next

# Students should help discover solutions

The Student Voice Team started this research project for two reasons: [1] To raise the level of informed discussion around postsecondary transitions, and [2] To demonstrate ways students can be integrated into the policymaking process.

The hours of roundtables and interviews represent our attempt to capture authentic student voice and bring the larger, but largely dull, data to life. We wanted the content we produced to be responsive to the research and stories we collected and allow us to avoid imposing any preconceived narratives about postsecondary transitions.

I found that this project did more than just supply us with an idea of why students may be dropping out; it helped us discover what's already working in the system.

— Meghana Kudrimoti,  
Student Voice Team

Although our project grew out of an attempt to understand why college dropout rates were dangerously high, the research lent itself to an equally strong understanding of what already is working within the system to help students make successful transitions.

Rarely do students enjoy the opportunity to experience and learn from peers outside of their own classrooms, but our project team's most triumphant work involved seeing what it is like to live and attend school in communities across the state. In the midst of high school, applying to and actually attending college, members of our team were able to connect our own personal journeys with those of students elsewhere to better appreciate the inequity that Kentucky students are facing when it comes to making

### **POLICY BRIGHT SPOTS**

While this report focuses on the support gap between policy focusing on postsecondary transitions and the students in desperate need of assistance, there are some initiatives within and beyond Kentucky from which we can draw inspiration. Here are just a few:

**COLLEGE ADVISING CORPS:** The Corps works to increase the number of low-income, first-generation college, and underrepresented high school students who enter and complete higher education. The Corps uses a “near-peer” model, leveraging recent college graduates as counselors to target populations most in need. Find out more at [www.advisingcorps.org](http://www.advisingcorps.org).

### **DELAWARE COLLEGE BOARD**

**PARTNERSHIP:** In 2013, the state of Delaware joined forces with the College Board and launched a program “to ensure high school students statewide are best equipped for the college application process.” As part of the work, the program sent specialized information packets to low-income students who scored well on the SAT. The packets include not only explanations of the college admissions process but also full application fee waivers.

**INDIVIDUAL LEARNING PLAN:** The ILP is a tool available to Kentucky middle and high school students to help them prepare themselves for the future. Among other things, it aims to match students with career tracks and goals based on skills and interests and help them to develop and maintain a resume. It can also supplement personal guidance from school counselors.

smooth postsecondary transitions.

As we talked with students, it really became apparent we were applying to college twice: once as the student who knows the ins and outs of the college-going process but also as the Eastern Kentucky student who doesn't have the same support.

— Eliza Jane Schaeffer,  
Student Voice Team

After taking a step back from the research and seeing our work wholly, we see the broader mission of the Student Voice Team taking on even more poignancy. All too often, we students are excluded from the work of improving our schools.

From the lack of student representation on school governance bodies to the limited or superficial opportunities to work in partnership with adults to improve our schools at the classroom and systems level, it seems that we are selling young people short. If we truly want to realize the best possible education for all Ken-

tucky youth, that needs to change.

But we students have a responsibility too to be partners in our own education and to help initiate the conversations that demonstrate what is possible when we more fully participate in making our schools better. And ultimately, we students also have to be the ones who help engage other students in this very important work.

Students really are the missing component in education policy. It takes the faces and stories of students to fully grasp and begin to solve these issues plaguing our system.

— Gentry Fitch,  
Student Voice Team

We hope this report, which focuses so explicitly on a single education issue is just the beginning of a more expansive dialogue around why, when it comes to Kentucky schools, student voice matters.

## MOVING FORWARD

Some questions worthy of more discussion:

**Birthright Lottery: Thinking about Postsecondary Education**

- What is most valuable to help students reach their educational goals?
- What types of divisions, if any, exist among college-bound students and non-college-bound students in schools? Why do they exist?

**Veiled Costs to College: Getting Ready for Postsecondary Education**

- To what extent are programs like the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) used in schools? Do students find them useful?
- How do students work with guidance counselors in schools? Do they find them approachable and valuable to their education? What should students expect from a person in that position?

**College/Career Unreadiness: Completing Postsecondary Education**

- What types of skills make a college graduate successful? What can students do to ensure that they acquire these skills? What about teachers and parents?
- What are non-academic skills our schools could be teaching to help students succeed in college?

# The Postsecondary Project Team



**PICTURED:** Student Voice Team with roundtable participants in Barbourville after leading conversations about the barriers students there face as they prepare for college.

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