



# Project STEP-UP

STEM Trends in Enrollment and Persistence for Underrepresented Populations



## Influences of Students' College Attendance: The Importance of Parents

Casey George-Jackson, Ph.D.

### Introduction

The need to complete a postsecondary education is increasingly important in today's economy. Despite efforts to improve college completion rates, access to and entry into higher education continues to be problematic for many students. In addition to factors such as affordability and academic preparation, students' decision to attend college is influenced by a number of factors and individuals. This brief seeks to understand who most influenced undergraduate students' decision to attend college. Although this type of investigation is not new, this study emphasizes differences in influences of college attendance by not only student demographic characteristics, but also the type of major students entered. While attending college is important to optimize career opportunities, the major that students pursue in college is also increasingly important given the need to train students in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. Examining the intersection of college attendance and major field of study, along with understanding who influences students' decision to attend college, may help to inform efforts to increase students' college enrollment.

### Data and Methodology

In 2010, undergraduate students at nine large, public, research universities were invited to participate in an online survey in order to gather data on their pre-college and college experienc-

es, with specific attention given to experiences and decisions related to entering the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. Over 1,800 students responded to the online survey, with the majority (85 percent) of the students majoring in STEM fields. Their basic demographic information is provided in Table 1.

Students were asked who most influenced their decision to attend college, and were asked to select one of the following options:

- Guidance Counselor
- Parents
- Peers
- High School Teacher
- Minister
- Sibling
- Family Friend
- Other (please specify)
- I prefer not to answer

If students answered 'Other,' they were asked to specify their answer and provide additional details in a text box. Upon examining students' responses, it was determined that a large number of students had indicated 'Other' as the most influential person in their decision to attend college (n=301). Given the high response rate for this option, the associated open-ended responses were then examined closely to determine if similar responses existed between students. The

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The open-ended responses were then classified by the following types of responses:

- Myself (n= 199)
- Social Norms or Expected to Attend (n=37)
- Career or Earnings Goals (n=17)
- Other (n=48)

Prior to conducting the analysis for this paper, the classified ‘Other’ responses were then combined with the original set of choices for each survey question.

Table 1. *Demographic and Background Information of Survey Respondents (n=1,881)*

	N	%
Gender		
Male	716	38.1%
Female	1,151	61.2%
Prefer not to Answer	14	0.7%
Race and Ethnicity		
White, not Hispanic	1,361	72.4%
Asian or Pacific Islander	218	11.6%
Latino/a	89	4.7%
Black, not Hispanic	81	4.3%
Other Race/Ethnicity	69	3.7%
Prefer not to Answer	52	2.8%
Native American or Alaskan Native	11	0.6%
First-Generation Status		
Yes	231	12.3%
No	1,639	87.1%
Prefer not to Answer	11	0.6%
Class Status		
Freshman	288	15.3%
Sophomore	393	20.9%
Junior	538	28.6%
Senior	633	33.7%
Prefer not to Answer	29	1.5%

Source: Project STEP-UP Survey, 2011; Author’s Calculations

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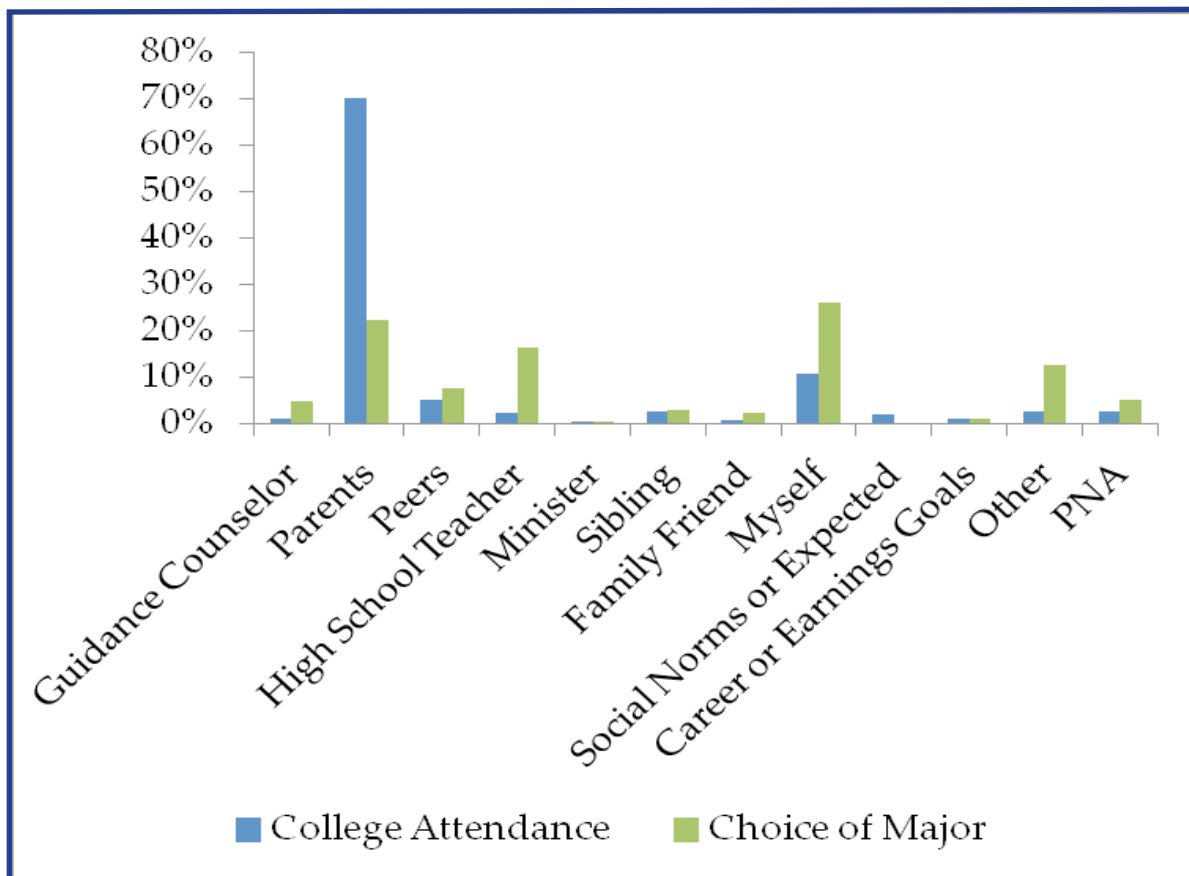
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Of those who answered Myself as the most influential person to attend college, 58.8 percent were female, 39.7 percent were male, and 1.5 percent preferred not to indicate their gender. Over 70 percent of the students who answered Myself were white, 7.5 percent were Asian or Pacific Islanders, 5 percent were Black, 3.5 percent were Latino, 1.5 percent were Native American or Alaskan Native, and 10.5 were of another race or preferred not to answer. Seniors were more likely to attribute their decision to go to college to themselves (32.2 percent), versus 13.6 percent of Freshman, 24.6 percent of Sophomores, and 28.1 percent of Juniors. An additional 1.5 percent of respondents preferred not to indicate their class status.

Figure 1 summarizes students' responses for who influenced their decision to attend college and the choice of their current major. The results for choice of major are provided for comparative purposes.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1.  
*Influences of Students' College Attendance and Choice of Major*



<sup>1</sup> See George-Jackson, C.E. (2012). *Generation Me: Influences of Students' Choice of Major*. Project STEP-UP. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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For the decision to attend college, 70 percent of students indicate that their parents most influenced their decision to attend college. Interestingly, the second-highest response originates from the open-ended responses provided by students who indicated someone else other than those listed influenced their decision. Over ten percent of students indicated that they themselves were the most influential person in making their decision to go to college. A sample of these open-ended responses reveals how students view themselves as being this source of influence:

- *Me, I'm a first generation college student*
- *I had a drive to attend [college] myself*
- *Myself. It was something I always wanted to achieve.*
- *No one influenced my decision. I simply did it for myself.*

For this study, differences in students' responses were investigated by gender, race, ethnicity, first-generation status, and type of major. Although investigated, differences by class status were not statistically significant, and are therefore not reported in this study. The differences that are discussed below are statistically significant at the  $p < 0.01$  level.

## *Differences by Student Demographics*

By gender, 71.6 percent of women attributed their decision to attend college to their parents, as compared to 68 percent of men. Peers influenced men more than women in their decision to attend college (6.7 percent versus 3.9 percent, respectively).

A greater percentage of white (71.5 percent) and Asian/Pacific Islanders (72 percent) attributed their decision to attend college to their parents, in comparison to Black (66.7 percent) and Latino (67.4 percent) students. Over 12 percent of Blacks, 10.5 percent of whites, 7.9 percent of Latinos, and 6.9 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders named themselves as the most influential person in their decision to attend college. Peers were most influential for Latinos (5.6 percent) and whites (5.4 percent), versus 3.7 percent of Blacks and 4.1 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders.

Perhaps not surprising, fewer first-generation students indicated that their parents were influential in their decision to attend college (55.8 percent versus 72.1 percent of other students). Of first-generation students, 15.6 percent named themselves as influencing their decision to attend college (versus 9.9 percent of other students).

## *Differences by Type of Major*

To compare influences of students' decision to attend college by students' current major, the following groupings of majors were created:

1. Physical Science, Computer Science, Math and Engineering (PSCSME)
2. Agricultural and Biological Sciences (ABS)
3. Health Sciences and Psychology (HSP)
4. Non-STEM

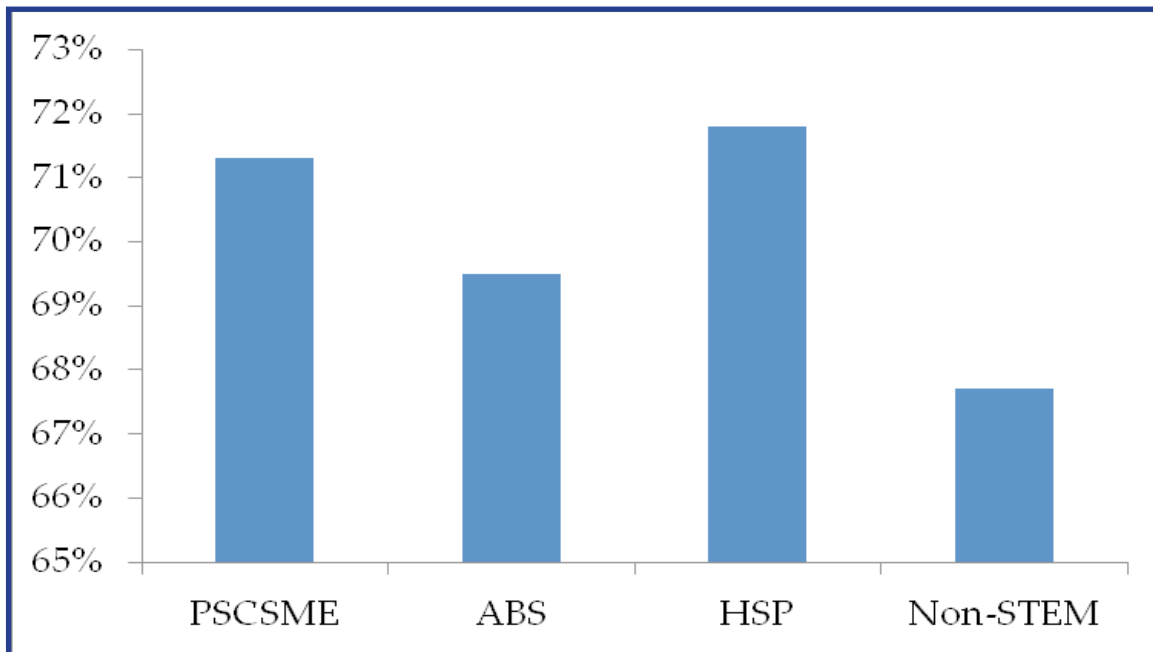
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Of the 1,881 students who completed the survey, 78 students (4.1 percent) had not yet declared a major or preferred not to respond to the question. Of those who reported their current major at the time of completing the survey, 71.3 percent of PSCSME majors, 69.5 percent of ABS majors, 71.8 percent of HSP majors, and 67.7 percent of Non-STEM Majors acknowledged their parents as having the most influence on their decision to attend college (see Figure 2). By comparison, just over ten percent of students in PSCSME, ABS, and Non-STEM majors named themselves as the reason they attended college, as compared to 8.9 percent of HSP majors.

Figure 2.  
*Parental Influence on College Attendance, by Type of Major*



Students' motivations to attend college may help to explain, in part, the differences that exist by type of major. For instance, the desire to enter a vocation-oriented career, such as in the Health Sciences, requires a postsecondary education, resulting in both the decision to attend college and the decision to enter a specific type of major. While the decision to attend college and which major to pursue may be two important and related decisions for students, the source of influence for each decision may still differ.

## Policy and Programmatic Implications

The influence parents have on a student's college attendance continues to be of great importance. The data presented here indicate that the majority of students also recognize this source of influence on their decision to attend college. In addition, the fact that fewer first-generation students

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cited their parents as being most influential on their decision to attend college than other students suggests that parents who did not attend college themselves may have less influence over their children's decision to attend college. However, over half of first-generation students still cited their parents as the most influential person on their decision to go to college. Therefore, programmatic and policy efforts to increase students' college attendance should largely be targeted towards the parents or guardians of students. Early intervention and informational programs that engage and educate parents of young children, regardless of their own college attendance, may help to increase the number of students who enroll in postsecondary education.

## About the Author

Casey George-Jackson, Ph.D., is the Project Director and Research Associate for Project STEP-UP (STEM Trends in Enrollment and Persistence for Underrepresented Populations). Her current research investigates issues of underrepresented students' access to and retention in higher education, including, but not limited to, the STEM fields. Dr. George-Jackson also serves as an Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

## About Project STEP-UP

The STEM Trends In Enrollment & Persistence for Underrepresented Populations (STEP-UP) project is a study that is investigating the underrepresented undergraduate students' participation in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields at large, public, research universities. STEP-UP focuses on the experiences of undergraduate women, students of color, and low-income students in STEM majors, and factors that impact their enrollment, persistence, and degree completion in the sciences. STEP-UP project is generously funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Ford Foundation, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

## Project STEP-UP

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
1310. South Sixth Street, MC 708  
Champaign, IL 61820  
217.244.5274

<http://stepup.education.illinois.edu/>

### Project Staff

Lorenzo Baber, Ph.D.	Mariana Martinez
Erin Castro	Blanca Rincon
Casey George-Jackson, Ph.D.	William Trent, Ph.D.
Erica Harwell	Kimberly Walker
Derek Houston	Montrisha Williams
Ife Onyenekwu	



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