



# Future Education Expectations of High School Students Decline to the Lowest Level in 20 Years for Both First-Generation and Continuing Generation Students

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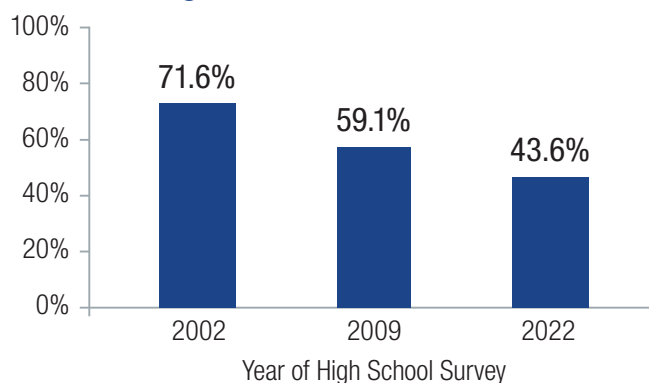
In recent years, a narrative has taken hold in the popular media that college may not be worth the investment, given the increasing costs of college (Baumhardt & Julin, 2019; CBS News, 2024; Cheung, 2023; Farrington, 2022; Mowreader, 2024; Ruppel Shell, 2018). However, national studies have consistently shown that higher levels of education are related to higher pay, upward mobility, improved health outcomes, and greater civic involvement (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2019; Perna, 2005). The purpose of this brief is to explore whether this narrative may be affecting the educational expectations of students.

A survey from Gallup and the Lumina Foundation indicates high expectations from parents with children younger than 18 years old. Fifty-nine percent of parents prefer their child to enter college after high school, with 40% wanting their child to attend a four-year institution (Markem, 2025). Students' own expectations for their higher education may not align with those of their parents.

This analysis uses data from the National Center for Education Statistics Secondary Longitudinal Studies Program.<sup>2</sup> These studies surveyed students during their freshman or sophomore years of high school and asked about their high school or postsecondary degree expectations. As shown in Figure 1, student expectations to attain a bachelor's degree were lower in 2022 (44%) than in 2009 (59%) and 2002 (72%).

First-generation students, defined here as students whose parents attained a high school diploma as their highest degree,<sup>3</sup> have consistently had lower education expectations compared to those with parents with a bachelor's degree or higher across all years. However, the expectations of both groups have decreased over time (see Figure 2). For first-generation students, in 2002, some 60% of students expected to attain at least a bachelor's degree, compared to about a third (33%) in 2022. Similar declines are evident for students with at least one parent with a bachelor's degree, with 83% wishing to attain a bachelor's degree in 2002, a rate that declined to just over half of respondents (53%) in 2022.

**FIGURE 1: Percentage of students who have education expectations at or above the bachelor's degree: 2002, 2009, and 2022**



**Source:** National Center for Education Statistics, *Education Longitudinal Study of 2002*, the *High School Longitudinal Study of 2009*, and the *High School and Beyond Study of 2022*. Analysis by authors.

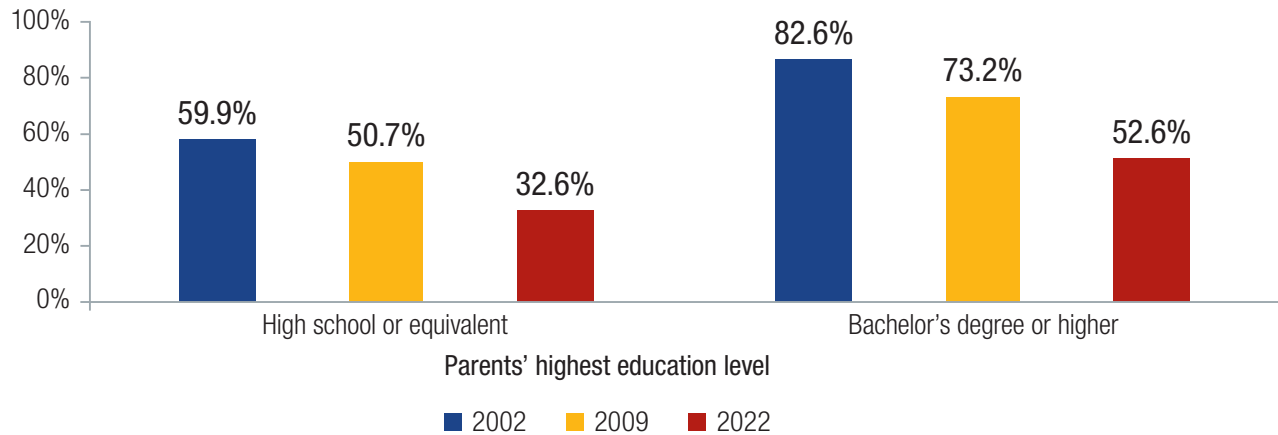
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2. This brief uses data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009, and the High School and Beyond Study of 2022. See <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/slsp>.
3. Due to data limitations, we could not combine groups of less-than-high school, high school graduates, and those with some college into one group.



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**FIGURE 2: Percentage of students who have education expectations at or above the bachelor's degree, by parents' education level: 2002, 2009, and 2022**

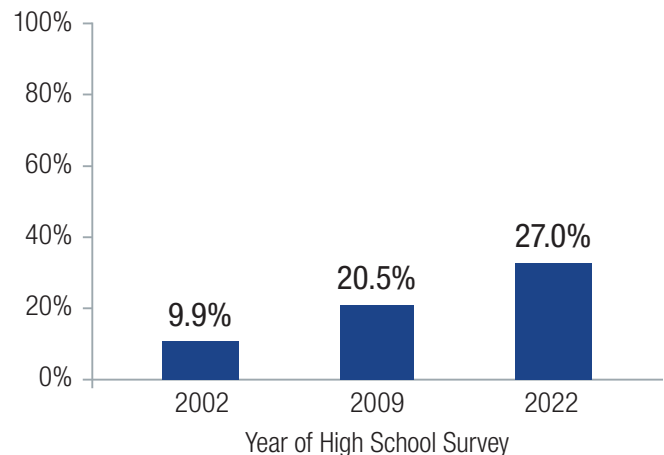


**Source:** National Center for Education Statistics, Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009, and the High School and Beyond Study of 2022. Analysis by authors.

As shown in Figure 3, the percentage of students who are uncertain about their education expectations has increased over time. In 2002, 10% of high school students indicated that they did not yet know their intended highest degree. In contrast, 21% of students reported they did not know in 2009, a proportion that rose to 27% in 2022.

This analysis demonstrates that student views on attaining higher degrees have changed over time, with fewer high school students indicating aspirations for bachelor's degrees. While the data are correlational, the narrative on the uncertainty in paying for college likely increases uncertainty for high schoolers as they plan for their future education.

**FIGURE 3: Percentage of students who responded that they didn't know what their highest degree was going to be: 2002, 2009, and 2022**



**Source:** National Center for Education Statistics, Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009, and the High School and Beyond Study of 2022. Analysis by authors.



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### TECHNICAL NOTES

The source tables and statistical tests for this brief can be located on the Pell Institute website (<https://www.pellinstitute.org/resources/future-ed-expectations-2022>). All differences mentioned in the text reflect a significant statistical test at the 0.01 level to account for Type I error in conducting multiple comparison tests. The data from this brief were produced using the PowerStats application on the National Center for Education Statistics' website (<https://nces.ed.gov/datalab>). The QuickRetrieve codes for the estimates are as follows: ELS:2022 – apkvuu and mvmzdb using the BYSTUWT weight; HSLS:09 – flfgpr and qikckk using the W1PARENT weight. Data from HS&B:2022 was derived from the Digest of Education Statistics table 104.94. For analysts wishing to replicate and interpret these tables, please note the following data limitations:

- HS&B:2022 has not released any microdata due to the reduction in staffing at NCES. As such, accurate standard errors could not be calculated. For statistical testing, the largest standard error for a subgroup in each estimate was used as a conservative standard error estimate.
- Parents' education was defined slightly differently in 2009 and may exclude those who completed a credential beyond high school, but with no bachelor's or associate degree. We think this has a negligible impact on the estimates.
- The ELS:2002 survey occurred during the sophomore (10th grade) year. The HSLS:09 and HS&B:2022 occurred during the freshman (9th grade) year.
- NELS:88 was not used for this analysis because the education expectation question was asked differently. "Don't Know" responses were not explicit in 1988. Estimates from NELS:88 are included in the source tables for reference. Analysts may elect to exclude "Don't Know" responses for comparability in future analyses as long as data are interpreted with that caution.