

Students who use drugs in high school are less likely to attend or complete college.

In recent years, students' experiences of college have become much more diverse, with some delaying post-high school enrollment, and attending both 2 and 4 year institutions. In new research which uses national survey data, [Megan E. Patrick](#), [John E. Schulenberg](#) and [Patrick M. O'Malley](#) give an overview of trends in college attendance and its influences. Among their results, they find that youth from two-parent families were more likely to graduate from a 4-year than a 2-year college, and that those who used cigarettes, marijuana, or other illicit drugs in high school were more likely to drop out.



For many young adults, the college experience is the first visible step of the transition to adulthood. However, in recent decades, the pathways to US college graduation have become increasingly complex, with many students attending 2-year institutions, delaying enrollment after high school graduation, and combining attendance at 2- and 4-year institutions. 7 out of 10 high school graduates attend college immediately after high school, yet only 58 percent of those attending a 4-year institution complete a degree within 6 years. Students who leave school without a degree suffer the negative effects of slimmer career prospects and lost time and money, while society bears the burden of a less educated workforce.



In new research, we aimed to address gaps in the research literature on patterns and predictors of college attendance. Questions remained because of inconsistent definitions of types of college attended (2, 4 year) and attendance patterns (continuous, periodic) across studies, and by difficulties in tracking students who transfer between colleges. Longitudinal data from the US Monitoring the Future study (MTF), used here, provided a nationally representative overview of attendance patterns. Participants were first surveyed during their final year of high school and completed up to four biennial follow-up surveys (approximately ages 18 to 25).



We focused on three groups of high school predictors: demographics (gender, race/ethnicity, and high school graduating year), family background (number of parents, parental education), and individual functioning (high school grades, substance use). The study emphasized substance use as a potentially important predictor of college attendance and showed the impact of 12th-grade cigarette use, binge drinking, marijuana use, and use of other illicit drugs on college attendance.

College attendance results showed that, overall, 47 percent graduated from a 4-year college, 12 percent graduated from a 2-year college, 27 percent did not attend college by age 25, and 14 percent spent some time in college but had not graduated 7 years post high school.



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Our findings showed a wide variety of post-high-school pathways. For example, out of the 46.6 percent of 4-year graduates, only 30.6 percent were continuously enrolled until graduation. Similarly, 61.2 percent of 2-year graduates graduated from a 2-year school after starting late, spending part of their time at a 4-year school, and/or stopping out (dropping out but returning later to graduate). Overall, the two dominant patterns were attending and graduating from a 4-year college right out of high school and not attending college at all, but neither pattern was experienced by a majority of the population.

Attendance varied significantly by cohort, race/ethnicity, parental education, and to a lesser extent gender. The never attending college decreased from 37 percent in the 1977-1985 cohort to 16 percent in the 1995-2003 cohort. Graduating from a 4-year college increased from 37 percent (1977-1985 cohort) to 59 percent (1995-2003 cohort). The highest educational attainment occurred among Asian Americans and lower attainment among Black, Hispanic, and Other race/ethnicity respondents. Respondents with parents with some college education were much more likely to graduate from a 4-year college. Race/ethnicity and parental education did not have significant interactions by cohort, indicating that these rates have not changed much over time. As expected, high school GPA was a strong predictor of any college attendance. Youth from two-parent families or parent(s) with some college education had greater odds of attending college. High school seniors who smoked cigarettes or used illicit drugs other than marijuana had lower odds of college attendance.

Among those who attended college, family background predictors were significant predictors; the likelihood of graduating from a 2-year college (versus a 4-year college) was lower for youth with two-parent families or parent(s) with some college education. Higher GPA also predicted lower likelihood of graduating from a 2-year (versus 4-year) college. High school cigarette use predicted greater likelihood of graduating from a 2-year (versus 4-year) college. Students who started college late or stopped out were more likely to get a 2-year (compared with 4-year) degree.

Dropping out was less likely for youth from two-parent or college-educated families, and also for students with higher high school GPA. Those who used cigarettes, marijuana, or other illicit drugs in high school were also more likely to drop out.

Our findings showed significant diversity in post high school pathways, including starting late, stopping out, and

switching between 2- and 4-year colleges. However, historical change in college patterns was consistent, showing a clear trend toward greater 4-year college completion. Lower college attendance continues to be found in families where parents did not attend college and among Black and Hispanic youth, corresponding with known structural inequalities in US society. High school cigarette and illicit drug use were risk factors for lower educational achievement. While this study provided a broad overview of college attendance patterns in the US, future research is needed to understand the nuances of these patterns and their effects on young adults.

This article is based on the paper 'High School Substance Use as a Predictor of College Attendance, Completion, and Dropout: A National Multicohort Longitudinal Study' in Youth & Society.

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