

# **College Aspiration vs. College Preparation**

Analyzing Northeast Ohio High School Students' Desire to Attend College and Activities that Prepare Students for the Dream

N O R T H E A S T O H I O C O U N C I L O N H I G H E R E D U C A T I O N

August 2009

Study conducted for NOCHE by

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Made possible through support from



## About NOCHE

The Northeast Ohio Council on Higher Education (NOCHE) has promoted the region's colleges and universities and

the talent they produce for more than half a century. Its driving mission is to mobilize the region's higher education and business communities for collaborative action to advance the region's development. NOCHE's membership consists of public and private institutions in a sixteen-county region in Northeast Ohio; the Board consists of the presidents of these institutions and a comparable number of business leaders from across the region.

NOCHE has three areas of focus: (1) Public Policy Advocacy, engaging higher education and business leaders to positively impact higher education and economic development; (2) Access and Aspiration, generating greater support for and participation in higher education; and (3) Talent Development, strengthening the alignment between higher education and business to produce and retain more college graduates. For more information, visit [www.noche.org](http://www.noche.org).



Northeast Ohio Council on Higher Education

## “College Aspiration vs. College Preparation” Study

This study, funded by The Cleveland Foundation, is an evaluation of College Caravan, a program that is the cornerstone of the Northeast Ohio Council on Higher Education’s Access and Aspiration initiative. The overall research goal was to assess College Caravan’s impact on student attitudes and understanding of key facts and higher education institutions in Northeast Ohio, with the goal of maximizing student college aspirations and college readiness among at-risk students in the region’s high schools.

This study reveals that a vast majority of high school students in underserved Northeast Ohio high schools aspire to go to college. The data also highlight gaps between college aspiration and college preparation; yet with targeted interactions with students, such as those offered in College Caravan, aspiration-enhancing programs have a recognizable impact on high school students’ college readiness.

## NOCHE’s Spring 2009 College Caravan

The College Caravan program is coordinated by NOCHE in partnership with high school guidance counselors and admissions officers at regional colleges and universities twice a year. Each spring and fall, over a two- to three-week period, College Caravan teams visit high schools to show underserved students that higher education is a realistic goal—and that Northeast Ohio has many higher education options.

The spring College Caravan, primarily for freshmen and sophomores, is an interactive game-show format where questions are designed to help students understand the basics of the higher education process. Spring 2009 College Caravan participants included admissions counselors from Baldwin-Wallace College, Case Western Reserve University, Chancellor University, Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland State University, Cuyahoga Community College, Hiram College, John Carroll University, Kent State University (Main and Geauga campuses), Lakeland Community College, Lake Erie College, Lorain County Community College, Malone University, Mount Union College, the Northeastern Ohio Universities Colleges of Medicine and Pharmacy (NEOUCOM), The University of Akron, and Youngstown State University.

NOCHE and representatives of these institutions reached 2,047 students at the following 31 high schools in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD), Akron Public School District, Canton City and Local School Districts, Warrensville Heights School District, and Youngstown City School District:

- |                                 |  |  |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| ◆ <i>Canton South (Canton)</i>  | ◆ <i>Genesis Option @ Margaret Ireland</i> | ◆ <i>Max Hayes</i>                         |
| ◆ <i>Carl Shuler</i>            | ◆ <i>Glenville</i>                         | ◆ <i>McKinley</i>                          |
| ◆ <i>Collinwood</i>             | ◆ <i>Health Careers @ MLK</i>              | ◆ <i>Lincoln-West</i>                      |
| ◆ <i>Chaney (Youngstown)</i>    | ◆ <i>James Ford Rhodes</i>                 | ◆ <i>Martin Luther King Jr.</i>            |
| ◆ <i>Early College (Canton)</i> | ◆ <i>Jane Addams</i>                       | ◆ <i>Option Complex @ Margaret Ireland</i> |
| ◆ <i>East High</i>              | ◆ <i>John Adams</i>                        | ◆ <i>South</i>                             |
| ◆ <i>East High (Youngstown)</i> | ◆ <i>John F. Kennedy</i>                   | ◆ <i>Success Tech</i>                      |
| ◆ <i>East High (Akron)</i>      | ◆ <i>John Hay</i>                          | ◆ <i>Timken (Canton)</i>                   |
| ◆ <i>East Tech</i>              | ◆ <i>John Marshall</i>                     | ◆ <i>Warrensville Heights</i>              |
| ◆ <i>Garfield (Akron)</i>       | ◆ <i>Kenmore (Akron)</i>                   | ◆ <i>Whitney Young</i>                     |
| ◆ <i>Garrett Morgan</i>         |  |  |

## Program Evaluation

A program assessment of the spring College Caravan was conducted in May 2009. A total of 1,693 high school student College Caravan participants (hereinafter “respondents”) completed a “pre” and “post” questionnaire assessing their attitudes toward college, their understanding of key facts regarding college preparation, and their interest in Northeast Ohio higher education institutions.

## Major Findings

- College aspiration among College Caravan respondents was *very high* (90%).
- Consideration of college appears to start relatively early among College Caravan respondents: 45% reported considering college by 7th grade, and almost all (91%) reported considering college by 9th grade.
- Students reported many sources of encouragement for college attendance, including parents (91%), teachers (61%), and friends (51%). There were sources of discouragement for one-third of respondents, including “adults outside of school” (16%) and/or “friends” (12%).
- Although evidence of college aspiration was high, the markings of true college preparation were not as high. Only one-half of 10th graders had taken or registered for a preparatory college entrance exam (PSAT or PLAN). Overall, only about one-half of respondents had received guidance on the correct courses to take for college admission. However, most respondents (72%) believed that they were taking the right courses.
- Approximately one-half of College Caravan respondents correctly named the required number of high school years of study for physical science, social sciences, math, and English. About one-third of those who were initially unfamiliar with the required number of years correctly responded after College Caravan.
- College Caravan programming had a marked impact on students’ proper understanding of certain college “facts,” including the opportunity of attending two-year or four-year colleges and the importance of high school grades in addition to college preparatory exam scores.

The following sections describe respondents’ demographics, levels and sources of college aspiration, and college preparatory activities. Additional data demonstrate the impact of College Caravan messages, including an understanding of the years of preparatory course work needed, college facts, and interest in Northeast Ohio’s higher education institutions.

## Demographics

Key demographics of the 1,693 respondents were as follows:

- School District Representation: 69% CMSD; 12% Canton City/Local; 10% Akron Public; 6% Youngstown; 3% Warrensville Heights
- Grade: 44% 9th Grade; 45% 10th Grade
- Gender: 61% Female; 39% Male
- Race: 63% African American; 19% White; 17% Other; 1% Asian
- Hispanic/Latino Descent: 86% No; 14% Yes
- Language Spoken at Home: 92% English; 5% Spanish; 2% Other; 1% Mandarin/Cantonese
- Internet Access: 87% School; 76% Home; 74% Other
- Parental College Attendance: 47% Either or Both Parents; 35% Neither Parent; 19% Not Sure

## College Aspiration

When asked if they were planning on going to college after high school, respondents responded at a very high level, with **90% “yes,”** 1% “no,” and 9% “not sure.” Differences in college aspiration were noted based on race: African American students (93%) were more likely than White students (84%) to report they would attend college.

Almost *all* (91%) respondents had thought about going to college by the 9th grade.

### Sources of Encouragement and Involvement in the College Decision

Adolescents’ college aspirations are highly influenced by people in their lives. All College Caravan respondents had at least one family member, adult or peer who was a source of encouragement about going to college (multiple responses accepted):

- 91% Mother/Father; 61% Teachers; 51% Friends; 44% Siblings; 43% Other Adult Outside School; 31% Other Adult at School

A majority (57%) of respondents reported having only one family member involved in the college decision-making process, with mothers (83%) having the largest involvement. White students (55%) were more likely than African American (33%) or Hispanic/Latino (39%) students to report that their fathers were involved in the process.

Sources of *discouragement* about college can also play an important, negative role in college aspiration. One-third of respondents reported having at least one source of discouragement, with the most commonly cited sources “other adult outside of school” (16%) or “friends” (12%).

## College Preparatory Activities

As noted above, 90% of respondents stated that they aspire to go to college, yet the “markings” of college preparatory work for college were not nearly as high.

### College Entrance Exams

College entrance exams are not a mandatory component of the college application process, but their completion is part of the “college-going-path” for most students. A majority (62%) of respondents had not yet taken either of the preparatory college entrance exams (PSAT or PLAN (Pre-ACT)). Of respondents in 10th grade—the year in which PSAT/PLAN exams are generally taken—49% had not yet taken either test. Of respondents in 11th grade, 30% had not taken either test.

### Guidance Received

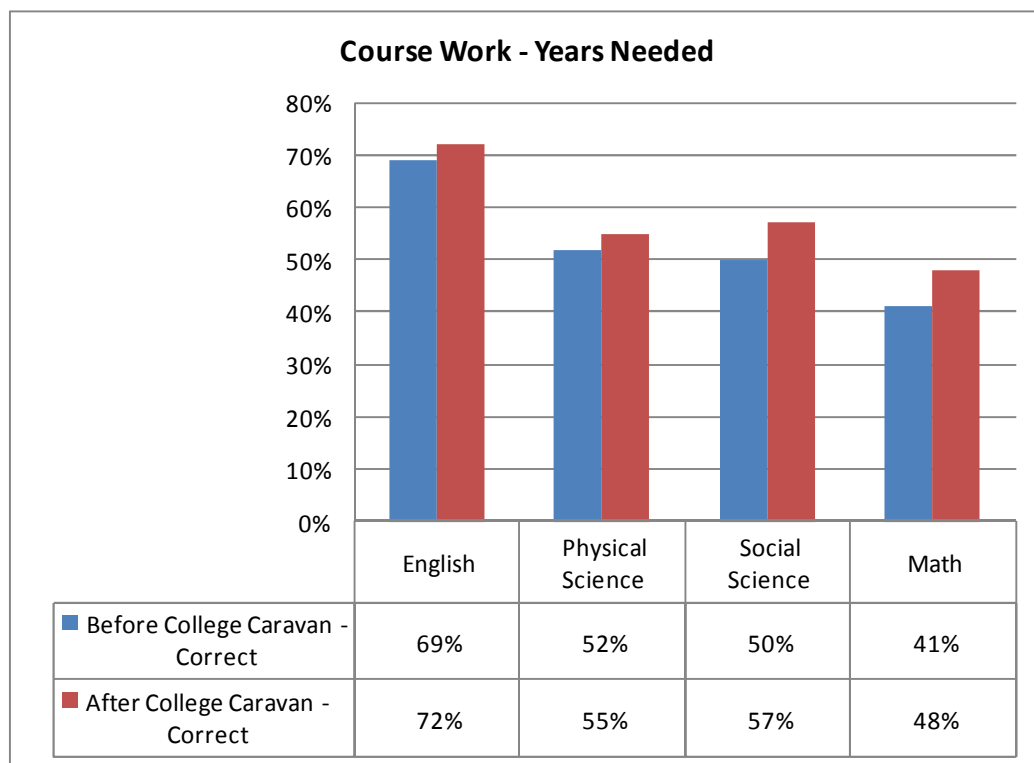
Equal percentages (47%) of respondents reported that they had—or had not—received guidance from school personnel regarding courses necessary for college preparation and entrance; 6% were not sure.

### Summary of College Prep Activities by School District

	Akron Public Schools	Canton Local School District	Canton City School District	CMSD/ Eastside	CMSD/ Westside	Warr. Hts. School District	Youngstown City Schools	Total
Students who (1) took an entrance exam, (2) are getting guidance on course selection, <b>and</b> (3) are taking college prep courses	14%	38%	32%	16%	13%	4%	4%	16%
Students who have done/are doing at least <b>two</b> college prep activities described above	71%	52%	53%	66%	71%	77%	78%	67%
Students who have done/are doing <b>none</b> of the college prep activities described above	15%	10%	15%	18%	15%	20%	19%	16%

## College Caravan Impact—Curriculum

Ensuring that the proper college preparatory courses are taken by students is a critical part of counseling students with college aspirations. Respondents were given a “pre” and “post” questionnaire to evaluate their knowledge of the college preparation process and to measure the change in knowledge before and after College Caravan.



As shown above, College Caravan respondents possessed a moderately strong grasp of the necessary courses, in that approximately one-half of respondents were able to correctly name the required number of high school years of study for physical science, social sciences, math and English before College Caravan. Even so, students with college aspirations cannot be armed with too much information, and each category demonstrated an improvement in understanding after participation in College Caravan.

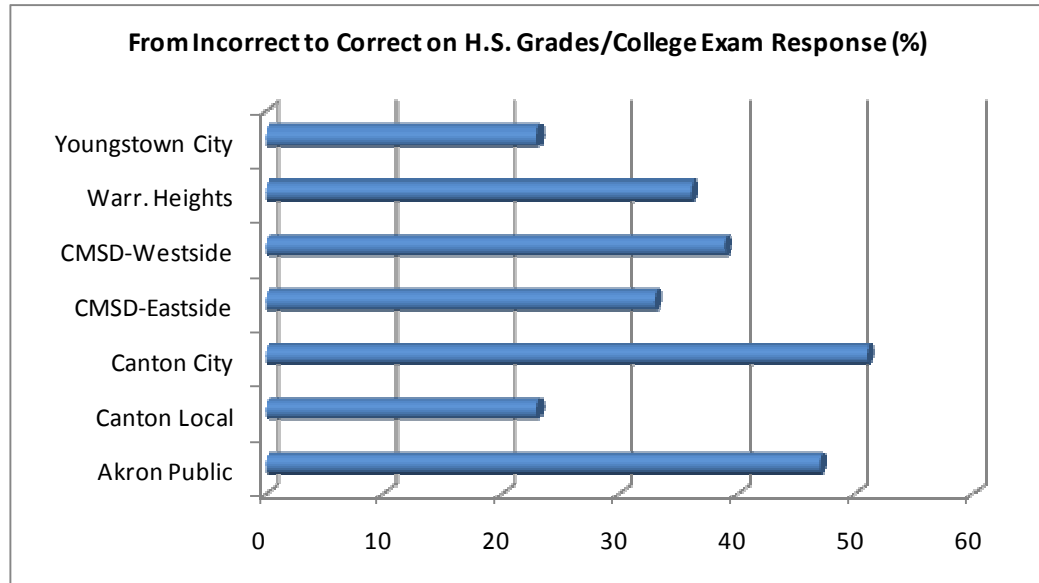
## College Caravan Impact—College Prep Facts

In addition to assessing students' knowledge on preparatory college courses, respondents were asked about their understanding of nine statements regarding college. As part of the "pre" and "post" questionnaire, respondents were asked whether the statements below were true or false. The impact of College Caravan is illustrated in the following chart, which shows the effectiveness of specific messages before and after College Caravan participation:

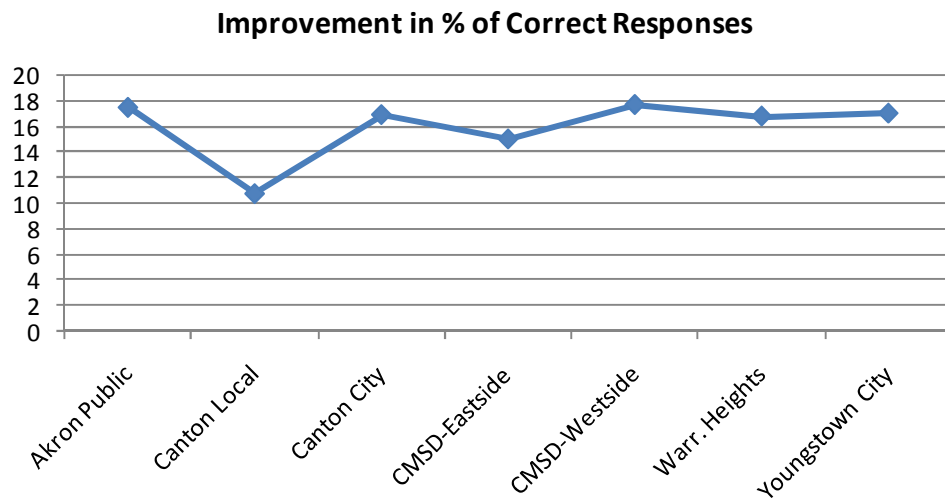
	Statements	Pre-College Caravan % Correct	Post-College Caravan % Correct	% Improvement after College Caravan
TRUE	High school grades are more important than standardized test scores (SAT, ACT).	41	69	28
	Some colleges have open enrollment where they accept any students with a high school diploma or a G.E.D.	78	87	9
	Most students who went to college from high schools like mine receive financial aid from their colleges.	66	71	5
	You can choose to go to college for four years, and obtain a Bachelor's Degree, or two years, and obtain an Associate Degree.	94	97	3
FALSE	Colleges give financial aid only to students with very good grades.	30	24	6
	The amount of financial aid available for college students is lower now than it was a few years ago.	46	42	4
	Most college students graduate with large loans to repay.	76	74	2
	Colleges want you to choose a major before starting first-year classes.	52	51	1
	Before applying to college, most colleges require you to take two different standardized tests called the SAT and the ACT.	91	91	0

## College Caravan Impact—Message Correction

Certain College Caravan messaging resonated especially well with participants. For example, respondents moved from incorrect to correct on the statement pertaining to high school grades/college exams, ranging from 23 to 51% per school.\*



Overall, respondents' "correct" responses improved by an average of 16%, with variations among school districts as follows:



\* Note: Canton Local schools showed a lower "incorrect to correct" percentage improvement, but had a higher level of initially correct responses.

## Northeast Ohio Colleges of Interest

Finally, respondents were asked which Northeast Ohio colleges they were interested in. Multiple responses were accepted; on average, students checked three schools, with response numbers/percentages below:

Institution	Number of students interested	% of students who selected each college
Kent State University	701	41
Cleveland State University	582	34
The University of Akron	511	30
Baldwin-Wallace College	302	18
Case Western Reserve University	302	18
Youngstown State University	222	13
Notre Dame College	218	13
Cuyahoga Community College	216	13
John Carroll University	198	12
Cleveland Institute of Art	172	10
Cleveland Institute of Music	152	9
Mount Union College	124	7
Walsh University	122	7
NEOUCOM	114	7
Malone University	106	6
Lake Erie College	97	6
Ashland University	93	5
Stark State College	92	5
Ursuline College	88	5
Lakeland Community College	68	4
Lorain County Community College	60	4
Hiram College	56	3
Oberlin College	56	3
College of Wooster	41	2
Chancellor University	35	2
Siegal College of Judaic Studies	17	1

## Conclusion

This study of 1,693 high school students from Akron, Canton, Cleveland, Warrensville Heights and Youngstown school districts demonstrates that the vast majority of these students—90%, representing more than 1,500 high school students in these cities—**want to go to college.**

What this study also revealed is that there are **gaps between college aspiration and college preparation.** Only one-half of 10th grade respondents had taken or registered for a preparatory college entrance exam, and a roughly equal number (47%) of overall students had received guidance from school personnel regarding which courses are needed for college preparation and admission.

Most importantly, however, this study demonstrates that **targeted interactions with students have a positive impact on students' understanding of key facts leading to college readiness.** After the completion of NOCHE's Spring 2009 College Caravan, it is clear that students absorb the information that is presented during interactive, engaging, age-appropriate programs. Certain messages from College Caravan, such as educating students that college is not "just" about four-year programs, but that two-year options are available as well, were well-received. Other messages, such as those pertaining to financial aid, are highlighted as areas for improvement.

The Cleveland Foundation's support, and Cypress Research Group's expertise, were instrumental in conducting this survey and compiling these results. NOCHE looks forward to continued progress in closing the gap between high college aspiration—and the preparations to make that dream a reality.

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August 2009*