



Executive Summary

Postsecondary Enrollment, Persistence, and Completion in Duval County, Florida

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Background



Postsecondary education is one of the strongest predictors of economic mobility, workforce readiness, and long-term community prosperity. Yet nationally and locally, many students who aspire to earn a degree or credential encounter financial, academic, and personal barriers that prevent them from enrolling, persisting, or completing their educational goals.

To better understand these challenges within Northeast Florida, the Scheidel Foundation commissioned this mixed-methods study examining the factors influencing postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion among Duval County students. The study was designed not only to identify barriers, but also to highlight opportunities for strengthening the region's postsecondary ecosystem and informing future community action.

The research combined student interviews, interviews with higher education professionals, institutional perspectives, survey responses from 261 students representing multiple stages of the postsecondary pipeline, and community stakeholder convenings to answer five research questions focused on enrollment, persistence, transition supports, workforce outcomes, and regional collaboration.

Key Findings at a Glance



►► **Finding 1** - Students are motivated, but systems make success difficult.

Across every phase of the study, students consistently expressed strong career aspirations, optimism about their futures, and a belief that education can improve their lives. The findings suggest that students are not struggling because they lack motivation or academic ability. Rather, many are attempting to pursue ambitious goals while navigating financial pressure, emotional strain, institutional complexity, and competing life responsibilities.

►► **Finding 2** - Financial challenges remain the greatest threat to enrollment and persistence.

Students consistently identified affordability, financial aid uncertainty, educational debt, transportation, housing, and balancing work with school as significant barriers to both enrollment and completion.

Survey respondents reported financial stress as one of the strongest challenges affecting their educational experiences, while interviews revealed that many students carefully evaluate educational pathways based on affordability and expected return on investment.

►► **Finding 3** - The transition between high school and postsecondary education remains one of the weakest points in the pipeline.

Students, educators, and institutional leaders consistently described confusion regarding financial aid, college expectations, available supports, and educational pathways during the transition into postsecondary education.

Stakeholders emphasized that preparation should begin much earlier—starting in middle school—and continue through high school and into students' first year of postsecondary education.



►► **Finding 4** - Students increasingly seek workforce-connected educational pathways.

Students demonstrated growing interest in technical education, workforce certifications, apprenticeships, associate degrees, and bachelor's degree programs that provide clear connections to employment.

Community stakeholders also noted that many students remain unaware of Career and Technical Education (CTE) opportunities, apprenticeship programs, and stackable credentials despite strong regional workforce demand.

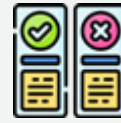
The findings suggest that improving awareness of workforce-connected pathways represents a significant opportunity for increasing both educational attainment and regional workforce development.

►► **Finding 5** - Postsecondary success is a community responsibility.

The study found that improving postsecondary outcomes requires stronger collaboration among K-12 schools, colleges and universities, employers, workforce organizations, community partners, and local government.

Stakeholders consistently emphasized that many successful programs already exist throughout Duval County. The opportunity lies in improving coordination, communication, and shared accountability rather than creating entirely new systems.

Recommendations



The findings support six interconnected recommendations for strengthening postsecondary success across Duval County.

Recommendation	Primary Purpose
1. Establish a Regional Postsecondary Success Collaborative	Strengthen cross-sector coordination and shared accountability.
2. Expand Proactive Advising and Coaching	Support students before they disengage, beginning as early as middle school.
3. Normalize and Embed Student Supports	Integrate academic, financial, and wellbeing resources into the student experience.
4. Strengthen Workforce and Career Pathway Communication	Increase awareness of workforce-connected educational opportunities.
5. Expand Mental Health and Basic Needs Supports	Address barriers that interfere with persistence and completion.
6. Develop a Regional Postsecondary Data Infrastructure	Improve cross-sector data sharing and continuous improvement.



Implications for Duval County



The findings demonstrate that Duval County is not beginning from scratch.

The region already possesses strong colleges and universities, expanding Career and Technical Education programs, engaged employers, committed community organizations, and institutional leaders dedicated to improving student success.

The challenge moving forward is not the absence of resources, it is **ensuring that these resources function as a coordinated ecosystem.**

Students consistently described barriers that arise not because support services do not exist, but because they are difficult to navigate, insufficiently coordinated, or introduced too late in the student journey.

By strengthening transitions, expanding workforce-connected pathways, improving navigation supports, addressing students' basic needs, and building stronger systems of collaboration and shared accountability, Duval County is well positioned to become a statewide leader in postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion.

Bottom Line

The central finding of this study is both **encouraging and actionable**: students in Duval County want to succeed.

They aspire to meaningful careers, recognize the value of education, and remain optimistic about their futures.

The opportunity before the community is not to convince students that education matters, it is to create educational systems that are affordable, connected, supportive, and easier to navigate.

With sustained collaboration across education, workforce, government, nonprofit, and community partners, **Duval County has the opportunity to build a more connected postsecondary ecosystem** that improves student outcomes while strengthening the region's workforce and economic future.





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