



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

A Mixed-Methods Analysis of Barriers, Supports, and Opportunities for Postsecondary Success

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Abstract



The purpose of this research was to better **understand the structural, financial, relational, and institutional factors shaping postsecondary outcomes in Northeast Florida**. This report presents findings from a mixed-methods study examining the factors influencing postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion among Duval County students and recent graduates. The study integrates qualitative interviews with undergraduate students, recent graduates, higher education professionals, school leaders, and institutional staff, alongside survey data collected from postsecondary students and educational stakeholders.

Across all data sources, findings consistently demonstrate that **postsecondary persistence is not determined by academic ability alone**. Rather, persistence emerges from the interaction between financial sustainability, institutional navigation, emotional wellbeing, belonging, career clarity, and access to proactive support systems. Students generally remain highly aspirational and future-oriented, but many experience significant financial pressure, emotional exhaustion, and difficulty navigating institutional systems.

Institutional professionals similarly identified affordability, basic needs insecurity, onboarding complexity, mental health concerns, and fragmented support systems as major barriers to student success. While colleges and universities across Duval County provide substantial support resources, participants repeatedly emphasized that **access to services does not necessarily translate into student utilization**.

The findings suggest that improving postsecondary completion rates in Duval County will require coordinated investments across K-12 systems, higher education institutions, employers, policymakers, and community organizations. Recommendations include expanding guided pathway models, strengthening transition supports, increasing proactive advising, improving financial aid navigation, expanding workforce-aligned credentials, and developing integrated data systems capable of tracking barriers and interventions across educational sectors.

Introduction



Across the United States, postsecondary enrollment and completion rates have become increasingly important indicators of economic mobility, workforce competitiveness, and community wellbeing. Yet while college access has expanded significantly over the past several decades, persistence and completion gaps remain particularly pronounced among first-generation students, low-income students, adult learners, and students from historically underserved communities.

Duval County reflects many of the broader national trends and challenges shaping postsecondary education today. While Northeast Florida possesses a diverse ecosystem of postsecondary institutions, workforce programs, and industry partnerships, many students continue to struggle with enrollment transitions, financial barriers, interruptions in enrollment, and degree or certification completion.

This study was commissioned to better understand:

1. What factors motivate or deter Duval County high school graduates from enrolling in postsecondary institutions and certification programs?
2. Why are more Duval County students not persisting through graduation or credential completion?
3. What gaps exist in financial, curricular, and programmatic support between high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment?
4. What are the financial and labor market implications of improved postsecondary completion?
5. How can Duval County contribute to broader statewide learning around postsecondary barriers and successful interventions?



Literature Review

Postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion are shaped by a complex interaction of student aspirations, institutional structures, affordability, academic preparation, social belonging, and labor market expectations. National research consistently shows that students do not enter or leave postsecondary education because of one factor alone. Rather, enrollment and persistence decisions are cumulative, shaped by financial constraints, perceived value, institutional navigation, personal responsibilities, mental health, and whether students feel connected to a clear academic or career pathway.

The findings from Duval County align closely with national evidence. Across student interviews, student survey data, and interviews with higher education

professionals, students generally remained hopeful and career-oriented, but many experienced college as financially stressful, emotionally demanding, and difficult to navigate. National data reinforce that this is not unique to Duval County. The broader literature suggests that improving postsecondary completion requires more than increasing access; it requires building systems that make enrollment understandable, persistence sustainable, and completion clearly connected to economic opportunity.

National Postsecondary Enrollment and Completion Context

National postsecondary enrollment has begun to recover from pandemic-era declines, but enrollment remains uneven across sectors and

student populations. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported that undergraduate enrollment grew by **3.5%** in spring 2025, reaching **15.3 million students**, but remained below pre-pandemic levels by **2.4%**, or approximately **378,000** students. Community colleges saw the largest sector growth at **5.4%**, suggesting renewed interest in shorter, more affordable, and workforce-aligned pathways. ([Clearinghouse Research Center](#))

Completion remains a challenge. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that six-year graduation rates vary significantly by institutional sector and student characteristics. For students beginning at four-year institutions in 2020, six-year graduation rates were **63%** at public institutions and **68%** at private nonprofit institutions, while private for-profit institutions remained substantially lower. Graduation rates also differed by gender, with women completing at higher rates than men nationally. ([National Center for Education Statistics](#))

National Student Clearinghouse completion data further show that age at entry is a powerful predictor of completion. Students who begin college at age 20 or younger complete at much higher rates than older students. Recent national data show six-year completion rates of **63.8%** for students age 20 or younger at entry, compared with **35.6%** for students ages 21 to 24 and **36.6%** for students age 25 or older. This is especially relevant to Duval County because many students in the local qualitative data described work, family obligations, delayed enrollment, or interrupted pathways. ([Clearinghouse Research Center](#))

First-year persistence is also a critical indicator. The National Student Clearinghouse reported

that the national first-year persistence rate rose to 76.5% in 2024, while retention at the starting institution rose to 68.2%. In 2025, persistence increased again to 77.6%, with 69.5% retained at the same institution. These figures provide a useful national benchmark for Duval County because local participants repeatedly identified the first semester and first year as key points where students either stabilize or begin to disengage. ([National Student Clearinghouse](#))



These national trends establish important context for understanding Duval County's postsecondary landscape. Similar to national patterns, local institutional leaders described the **first year of college as a particularly vulnerable period**, while students frequently discussed balancing work, finances, and personal responsibilities during the transition into higher education. These similarities suggest that Duval County is experiencing many of the same structural challenges observed nationally while also facing local conditions that warrant further examination through the findings presented in this report.

National Postsecondary Benchmarks
Relevant to This Study

Indicator	National Finding	Relevance to Duval County Study
Undergraduate enrollment, spring 2025	+3.5% year-over-year, but still 2.4% below pre-pandemic levels	Suggests recovery is underway but enrollment gaps remain
Community college enrollment, spring 2025	+5.4% year-over-year	Supports local interest in affordable and workforce-aligned pathways
First-year persistence, 2024	76.5%	Provides benchmark for early postsecondary continuation
First-year retention, 2024	68.2%	Highlights risk of students leaving their starting institution
Six-year completion, start age 20 or younger	63.8%	Shows advantage of direct transition after high school
Six-year completion, start age 21-24	35.6%	Highlights risk associated with delayed or interrupted enrollment
Six-year completion, start age 25+	36.6%	Relevant to adult learners and returning students



Enrollment Motivation and Deterrence: Cost, Value, and Career Alignment

The first research question asks **what motivates or deters Duval County high school graduates from enrolling in postsecondary institutions** and certification programs in the area. National literature consistently identifies affordability, perceived return on investment, career relevance, and family knowledge of postsecondary pathways as key drivers of enrollment decisions.

Cost is one of the strongest deterrents. College Board data show that, after adjusting for inflation,

published tuition and fees increased over the past 30 years across all major sectors. Between 1994-1995 and 2024-2025, average published tuition and **fees increased from \$2,780 to \$4,050** at public two-year colleges, from **\$5,740 to \$11,610** at public four-year institutions, and from \$24,840 to \$43,350 at private nonprofit four-year institutions. Although recent inflation-adjusted increases have slowed, the long-term rise in published prices contributes to student and family concerns about affordability. ([College Board Research](#))



The Lumina Foundation and Gallup's 2024 State of Higher Education report similarly found that cost and lack of **financial aid are the primary barriers to enrollment**, while career outcomes, such as earning more money, securing a promotion, or pursuing more fulfilling work, are among the strongest motivations for pursuing postsecondary education. This aligns with Duval County findings, where students repeatedly described wanting meaningful careers but also worried about cost, debt, and whether postsecondary education would "pay off." ([Lumina Foundation](#))

The perceived value of college has become more complicated nationally. Higher education professionals in the Duval County interviews described a growing belief among students and families that college may not be "worth it," especially when shorter certificate programs, trades, apprenticeships, and workforce credentials appear faster and less expensive. National enrollment trends support this observation. Community colleges and short-term workforce pathways have seen renewed growth, while undergraduate

enrollment overall has not fully returned to pre-pandemic levels. ([Clearinghouse Research Center](#))

At the same time, national labor market data continue to show that **postsecondary education is strongly associated with higher earnings and lower unemployment**. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in 2024, workers with a bachelor's degree had median weekly earnings of \$1,543 and an **unemployment rate of 2.5%**, compared with \$930 and **4.2% for workers with only a high school diploma**. Workers with an associate degree earned \$1,099 weekly, with an unemployment rate of 2.8%. ([Bureau of Labor Statistics](#))

Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce has similarly found that **a bachelor's degree is worth approximately \$2.8 million on average over a lifetime**, and that bachelor's degree holders earn substantially more than those with only a high school diploma. However, Georgetown also emphasizes that returns vary significantly by major, credential, occupation, gender, and race, meaning that the economic value of postsecondary education is real but uneven. ([CEW Georgetown](#))



Labor Market Returns by Education Level

Education Level	Median Weekly Earnings, 2024	Unemployment Rate, 2024
Less than high school diploma	\$738	6.2%
High school diploma	\$930	4.2%
Some college, no degree	\$1,020	3.8%
Associate degree	\$1,099	2.8%
Bachelor's degree	\$1,543	2.5%
Master's degree	\$1,840	2.2%
Professional degree	\$2,363	1.3%
Doctoral degree	\$2,278	1.2%

The implication for Duval County is not simply that more students should pursue four-year degrees. Rather, the literature suggests that **students need clearer information about the full range of postsecondary options** and their labor market outcomes, including certificates, associate degrees, apprenticeships, workforce credentials, and bachelor's degrees. The local findings strongly support this: students and professionals both described the need for pathways that are affordable, career-connected, and flexible.

Duval County Students rarely questioned the value of education itself. Instead, they questioned whether a particular educational pathway would justify the **financial investment required**. Many described selecting institutions based on scholarship availability, affordability, proximity to home, and anticipated career outcomes rather than institutional prestige. Higher education professionals similarly observed growing student interest in workforce credentials, technical education, and shorter-term pathways that offer more immediate labor market returns.



FAFSA, Financial Aid Navigation, and Pre-Enrollment Support



Financial aid navigation is a critical pre-enrollment barrier. The National College Attainment Network reports that FAFSA completion is one of the strongest correlates of immediate postsecondary enrollment. High school seniors who complete the FAFSA are 84% more likely to immediately enroll in postsecondary education, and students in the lowest socioeconomic quintile are 127% more likely to enroll immediately when they complete the FAFSA. (ncan.org)

This finding is highly relevant to the Duval County study because both students and **higher education professionals described confusion around financial aid**, uncertainty about cost, and limited support with enrollment steps. Students in Duval County frequently described uncertainty regarding financial aid packages, scholarship opportunities, and the true cost of attendance. Institutional leaders similarly identified financial aid literacy as a significant opportunity for improving enrollment and reducing summer melt. National FAFSA disruption in 2024 further illustrates how fragile the transition from high school to college can be. NCAN reported that **only 46% of the class of 2024 completed a FAFSA** by June 30, following a difficult rollout of the redesigned FAFSA. (ncan.org)

The FAFSA issue is not merely administrative; it is a persistence and equity issue. Students who cannot understand their aid package, estimate net cost, or complete financial aid steps on time are more likely to delay, under-enroll, or not enroll at all. These local findings suggest that increasing **FAFSA completion alone may be insufficient without complementary efforts to help students and families interpret aid offers** and make informed enrollment decisions.



Persistence and Completion: Financial Stress, Basic Needs, and Mental Health

The second research question asks why more Duval County students are not persisting through college graduation or certification completion. National evidence suggests that **financial stress, basic needs insecurity, mental health, academic pathway complexity, and lack of belonging** are all major persistence factors.

The Hope Center's 2023-2024 Student Basic Needs Survey found that **59% of surveyed students** experienced at least one form of basic needs insecurity related to food or housing. The report found that **41%** experienced food insecurity, **48%** experienced housing insecurity, and **14%** experienced homelessness. These rates were even higher among Black and Indigenous students, nearly three-fourths of whom reported at least one form of basic needs insecurity. ([The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs](#))

This national finding closely mirrors Duval County findings. Students and higher education professionals described food insecurity, housing instability, transportation barriers, and the need to work while enrolled as major pressures affecting persistence. One local institution reported increased use of a food pantry, which aligns with national evidence that basic needs supports are no longer peripheral services but central student success infrastructure.

Mental health also emerged as a major persistence factor. The Lumina Foundation and Gallup found that **35%** of currently enrolled students nationally had considered leaving their program in the previous six months. Among those students, **54%** cited emotional stress and **43%** cited mental health as important reasons for considering stopping out. ([Gallup.com](#))

Healthy Minds Study data further confirm that mental health concerns are widespread among college students. The 2024-2025 Healthy Minds Study reported that nearly **one-third of students experienced moderate to severe anxiety**, one in four reported feeling isolated, and one in ten reported suicidal ideations. (UCLA Center for Health Policy Research)

The Duval County student interviews and surveys reflected this national pattern. Students remained hopeful and career-oriented, but stress, emotional overload, financial pressure, and uncertainty were recurring themes. Students frequently discussed balancing employment, transportation, housing, family responsibilities, and mental health while remaining enrolled. Importantly, both students and institutional professionals described these challenges as interconnected rather than isolated, reinforcing the need for integrated student support systems rather than single-program interventions. This suggests that persistence interventions should not be limited to tutoring or advising alone. Mental health, belonging, workload, finances, and basic needs should be understood as interconnected components of completion.



Belonging, Advising, and Institutional Navigation

Belonging and institutional connection are among the most established predictors of persistence in higher education research. Vincent Tinto's widely cited theory of student departure emphasizes that academic and social integration, institutional commitment, and sense of belonging shape whether students persist or leave. Tinto's work remains foundational because it shifted retention research away from blaming student deficits and toward understanding the institutional conditions that support or weaken student persistence. (Tinto, 1993)

While the importance of belonging has been well established in the literature, Duval County participants added an important nuance. Students consistently described the importance of professors, mentors, peer relationships, campus organizations, and feeling known. Higher education professionals

repeatedly emphasized a “culture of care,” Thrive coaches, early alerts, residential support, first-year seminars, and personalized advising. Both students and professionals emphasized that belonging alone does not overcome financial hardship, mental health challenges, or competing life responsibilities. These findings suggest that belonging functions as a protective factor when paired with broader financial, academic, and emotional supports.

The Duval County findings strongly align with this literature.

Academic advising is especially important for first-generation students and those navigating unfamiliar systems. A study by Swecker, Fiftolt, and Searby (2014) found that for every meeting with an academic advisor, the odds that a first-generation student was retained increased by **13%**.



ACT's (2010) national retention research also identifies first-year programs, academic advising, tutoring, mandated course placement, and comprehensive learning support centers as among the institutional practices most associated with retention.

The local findings extend this literature by showing that the problem is not always absence of services. Often, services exist but students do not access them consistently. This supports a shift from passive resource availability to proactive, embedded, and relationship-based support. In other words, institutions should not assume that making a service available is the same as making it usable.



Curriculum, Program Structure, and Guided Pathways

The third research question asks what gaps exist in financial, curriculum, and programmatic support after high school graduation through pre-enrollment. National literature on guided pathways is directly relevant.

Complete College America argues that students need clear academic roadmaps, proactive guidance, structured first-year momentum, and fewer unnecessary barriers. Guided pathways models emphasize structured program maps, early academic momentum, completion of gateway math and English, and clear links between academic programs and career outcomes. ([Complete College America](#))

Complete College America's momentum framework also emphasizes early completion of gateway courses and accumulation of meaningful credits as key predictors of later completion. The organization notes that **students who earn 30 credits in their first year, complete gateway math and English, enter a program of study, and complete credits in their academic interest area** are more likely to complete a credential. ([Complete College America](#))

This literature relates to Duval County findings, because higher education professionals described significant investments in guided pathways, first-year seminars, structured advising, and proactive onboarding. However, participants also identified ongoing challenges related to limited-access programs, pathway awareness, and students' understanding of program requirements. These findings suggest that **pathway design is not solely an institutional issue** but also a communication and navigation challenge for students.

One overlooked local issue also aligns with national pathway research: limited-access program bottlenecks. Institutional professionals described students entering college with strong interest in programs such as nursing or respiratory therapy, only to discover that available seats are limited. When students are not admitted into these competitive programs, some become discouraged and leave rather than shifting to related pathways. This suggests the need for clearer "plan B" pathways, transparent program capacity information, and structured redirection into aligned credentials.



K-12 Transition, Dual Enrollment, and Career Awareness

The transition from high school to postsecondary education is a critical point of vulnerability. As previously mentioned, national research consistently shows that students who transition directly into postsecondary education at younger ages are more likely to complete credentials than students who delay enrollment. ([Clearinghouse Research Center](#))

Duval County participants repeatedly described a disconnect between K-12 preparation and postsecondary expectations. Higher education professionals identified gaps in academic readiness, emotional readiness, self-advocacy, financial aid literacy, and awareness of workforce pathways. Some professionals noted that traditional college-going students may receive more guidance than students interested in trades, certificates, or technical pathways.

This suggests that high school advising systems should expand beyond a binary “college or not college” framework. Students need structured exposure to the full postsecondary ecosystem: public four-year universities, state colleges, technical certificates, apprenticeships, military pathways, workforce credentials, and stackable programs. The literature supports this broader approach because labor market returns vary by credential, field, and pathway rather than by degree level alone.

Another nuance introduced by Duval County stakeholders participating in the community convening was that postsecondary planning begins too late. Across multiple breakout groups, **participants recommended introducing college and career exploration as early as middle school** so students can make informed



decisions regarding coursework, career academies, certifications, dual enrollment, and workforce pathways. Several participants noted that students often must make significant educational decisions by eighth grade without sufficient awareness of available opportunities. These local perspectives reinforce national calls for earlier and more comprehensive transition supports.



Financial and Labor Market Implications of Improved Completion

The fourth research question asks about the financial and labor market implications of improved graduation and certification completion rates. National data strongly indicate that increased postsecondary attainment is associated with higher earnings, lower unemployment, and stronger regional workforce capacity.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics data show a clear relationship between education and earnings. In 2024, workers with a bachelor’s degree earned **\$613** more per week than workers with only a high school diploma. Over a 52-week year, this difference equals approximately **\$31,876** in annual earnings. Associate degree holders earned **\$169** more per week than high school graduates, or approximately **\$8,788** more annually. These figures are national averages and do not account for regional wage differences, field of study, debt, or labor force participation patterns, but they provide a useful baseline for estimating the economic importance of completion. ([Bureau of Labor Statistics](#))

Credential Comparison	Weekly Earnings Difference	Approximate Annual Difference
Associate degree vs. high school diploma	+\$169	+\$8,788
Bachelor’s degree vs. high school diploma	+\$613	+\$31,876
Bachelor’s degree vs. associate degree	+\$444	+\$23,088

The economic implications are not limited to individuals. Higher credential completion can support regional economic development by increasing the supply of qualified workers in high-demand fields such as healthcare, education, information technology, logistics, public service, and skilled trades. Local institutional professionals identified healthcare and technical fields as areas where employer demand is strong, but program capacity, student preparation, and completion pipelines may constrain growth.

However, national evidence also cautions against assuming all credentials produce equal returns. Georgetown CEW emphasizes that earnings vary substantially by major and occupation. Therefore, improving completion rates should be paired with labor market transparency, career advising, and attention to wage outcomes. ([CEW Georgetown](#))

These findings are supported locally. Duval County students increasingly evaluate postsecondary education through a workforce development lens. Students consistently expressed interest in educational pathways that provide clear connections to employment, while institutional leaders described growing demand in healthcare, skilled trades, logistics, information technology, education, and other high-demand sectors. Community stakeholders further emphasized that Career and Technical Education, apprenticeships, and workforce certifications remain underutilized because many students and families are unaware of available opportunities. These findings suggest that improving labor market outcomes requires not only increasing credential attainment but also strengthening communication regarding workforce pathways.



Building a Statewide Barrier and Strategy Database

The final research question explores how Duval County's work can contribute to broader statewide learning around postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion. **National research increasingly emphasizes the importance of longitudinal, cross-sector data systems capable of tracking student pathways from K–12 through postsecondary education and into the workforce.**

National organizations such as Complete College America and the National Student Clearinghouse have demonstrated **the value of integrated data systems for understanding enrollment patterns, persistence, completion, and workforce outcomes.** However, while national datasets provide valuable benchmarks, comparable local data are often fragmented, difficult to access, or unavailable for answering community-specific questions.

Recent changes to Florida's public education data reporting and dissemination practices have altered the availability of some detailed postsecondary datasets. While statewide summary information remains publicly available, researchers have fewer opportunities to independently access disaggregated data needed for localized analyses. This limitation underscores the importance of developing stronger regional data-sharing partnerships and locally maintained longitudinal datasets. As a result, it remains difficult to answer important local questions such as:

- 1 Where are students most likely to leave the postsecondary pipeline?
- 2 Which interventions are producing the strongest persistence outcomes?
- 3 How do students move across institutions and credential pathways?
- 4 Which student populations experience the greatest barriers to completion?
- 5 What workforce outcomes are associated with specific educational pathways in Northeast Florida?



Stakeholders participating in the community convenings similarly identified fragmented data systems and limited cross-sector information sharing as barriers to improving student success. While participants described numerous successful programs and partnerships, many emphasized that institutions often operate independently, limiting opportunities to identify shared challenges, coordinate interventions, and evaluate outcomes across the postsecondary pipeline.

Participants also emphasized that many collaborative structures already exist within Duval County. Rather than creating entirely new organizations, stakeholders suggested building upon existing partnerships while expanding data sharing and collective accountability across K–12 systems, colleges and universities, workforce organizations, employers, and community partners.

The findings suggest that Duval County has an opportunity to become a statewide leader in postsecondary data collaboration by developing a shared regional data infrastructure capable of supporting both continuous improvement and long-term policy development. Such a system would allow institutions and community partners to move beyond measuring enrollment and completion alone to understanding why students succeed, where they encounter barriers, and which interventions are most effective.

A regional data infrastructure could incorporate indicators such as:

- ▶ FAFSA completion
- ▶ Summer melt
- ▶ Postsecondary enrollment patterns
- ▶ First-year persistence
- ▶ Enrollment-interruption and re-enrollment rates
- ▶ Gateway course completion
- ▶ Financial aid utilization
- ▶ Food and housing insecurity
- ▶ Student support utilization
- ▶ Workforce credential attainment
- ▶ Employment outcomes
- ▶ Postsecondary wage progression

By combining these indicators with qualitative student experiences and institutional perspectives, Duval County could develop a more complete understanding of the postsecondary pipeline while contributing valuable lessons to statewide efforts to improve educational attainment and workforce development.



Synthesis: How the Literature Supports the Local Findings

The national literature strongly supports the Duval County findings. The most consistent point of alignment is that persistence is multidimensional. Students are not simply leaving because they lack motivation or academic ability. They are leaving when financial pressure, emotional stress, unclear pathways, weak advising, basic needs insecurity, and limited belonging accumulate beyond what they can manage.

At the same time, the literature complicates the local findings in important ways. National labor market data show that postsecondary credentials generally pay off, but returns vary by field, credential type, and student background. Therefore, the local strategy should not simply promote “college for all” in a narrow sense. Instead, **Duval County should promote postsecondary completion across a range of high-value pathways**, including certificates, associate degrees, apprenticeships, workforce credentials, and bachelor’s degrees.

The literature also underscores an overlooked finding from the local data: service availability is not enough. Institutions may provide tutoring, counseling, food pantries, advising, and financial aid support, but students may still not use those services if they are unaware, overwhelmed, ashamed, working too many hours, or unsure whether the service is “for them.” This finding suggests that the next generation of persistence work must focus on integration, normalization, and proactive delivery of support.



Literature Review Conclusion

Taken together, national research and local findings suggest that **Duval County’s postsecondary completion challenge is best understood as a systems challenge rather than a student deficit problem.** Students need clearer pathways, earlier financial guidance, stronger K-12 to postsecondary alignment, better communication about workforce value, proactive advising, basic needs support, and institutions designed around how students actually experience transition and persistence.

The strongest evidence-based opportunities are to expand FAFSA and financial aid navigation, strengthen guided pathways and first-year momentum, **improve basic needs and mental health infrastructure**, increase workforce pathway transparency, and build a shared data system that tracks not only whether students complete, but why they do or do not complete.

Methodology



This study utilized a mixed-methods research design integrating qualitative interviews, stakeholder interviews, institutional interviews, and survey findings. The research process was designed to triangulate student experiences with institutional perspectives in order to identify both individual and structural barriers influencing postsecondary persistence.

Student Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate students and recent graduates to better understand their educational pathways, persistence barriers, support systems, institutional experiences, and postsecondary decision-making processes. Interviews explored themes including affordability, belonging, mental health, academic support, career aspirations, institutional navigation, and personal motivation.

Higher Education Professional Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with higher education professionals representing multiple postsecondary institutions within Northeast Florida, including administrators, enrollment professionals, student affairs leaders, institutional researchers, advising personnel, and academic leaders. These interviews focused on:

- ▶ Enrollment trends
- ▶ Institutional barriers
- ▶ Persistence strategies
- ▶ Onboarding systems
- ▶ Workforce alignment
- ▶ Financial pressures
- ▶ Guided pathways
- ▶ Early alert systems
- ▶ K-12 transition challenges



Survey Development & Administration

Themes identified through qualitative interviews were used to develop a student survey designed to **capture broader patterns across a larger student population**. Survey items were intentionally written at approximately an eighth-grade reading level and utilized a five-point Likert scale format.

The survey explored:

- ▶ Financial stress
- ▶ Belonging
- ▶ Academic support
- ▶ Engagement
- ▶ Mental health
- ▶ Institutional navigation
- ▶ Career clarity
- ▶ Overall student satisfaction.

Survey development was informed directly by recurring themes identified in student interviews and institutional conversations.



Data Collection & Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent. Audio recordings were transcribed using AI-assisted transcription software, including Otter.ai, to improve transcription accuracy and facilitate thematic analysis. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely and reviewed only by authorized research personnel.

The analysis utilized a qualitative thematic coding approach. Themes were identified through iterative review of transcripts, recurring language patterns, emotional emphasis, and repeated concepts across participants.

Findings Overview



The findings from this study suggest that postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion in Duval County are shaped by a complex interaction of financial realities, emotional wellbeing, institutional structures, social belonging, career aspirations, and access to support systems. Across interviews, surveys, and institutional perspectives, one finding emerged with remarkable consistency: students remain highly motivated about their future, yet many struggle to navigate systems that are financially, emotionally, and structurally difficult to sustain.

Contrary to narratives that attribute enrollment and persistence challenges to a lack of motivation or academic capability, students across educational pathways consistently expressed strong career aspirations, a desire for economic mobility, and a belief in the value of education. However, many also reported significant concerns regarding affordability, mental health, institutional complexity, and uncertainty about available pathways.

The mixed-methods design of this study allowed for triangulation across student interviews, student surveys, higher education professionals, faculty and staff, and institutional leaders. While each group brought a distinct perspective, the findings revealed strong alignment around several themes:

- ▶ Students are highly motivated and career-oriented.
- ▶ Financial concerns influence both enrollment and persistence decisions.
- ▶ Mental health and emotional wellbeing are increasingly important determinants of student success.
- ▶ Postsecondary institutions provide substantial support resources, but students do not always access or utilize them.
- ▶ The transition between high school and postsecondary education remains a critical point of vulnerability.
- ▶ Postsecondary success is influenced by a combination of financial, emotional, relational, and structural factors rather than academic ability alone.

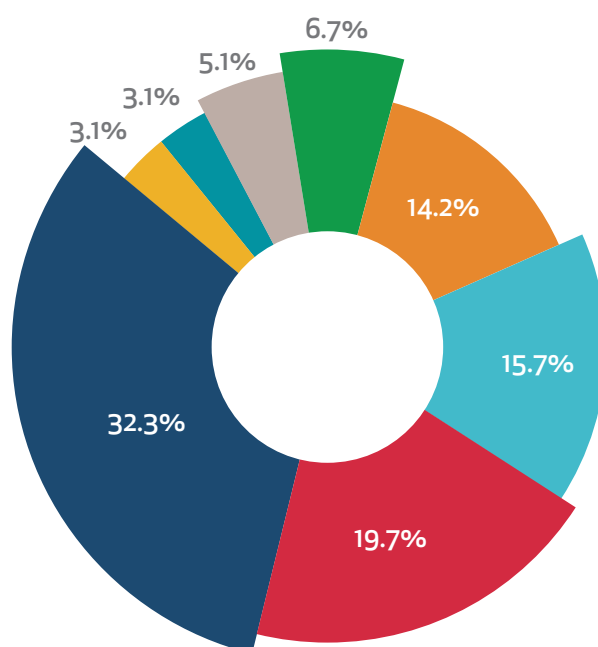
Taken together, the findings suggest that improving postsecondary outcomes in Duval County requires attention not only to academic preparation, but also to affordability, belonging, navigation, workforce alignment, and cross-sector coordination.



Quantitative Snapshot of Student Experiences

The Postsecondary Student Experience Survey included **261** respondents (percentages below are based on **254 valid responses**), representing multiple stages of the postsecondary pipeline, including currently enrolled students, recent graduates, students planning to enroll after high school, students pursuing trade and technical education, students who remained undecided about enrollment, and students who had never enrolled or did not complete a postsecondary program. This expanded sample provides a **broader perspective on both enrollment and persistence challenges** than studies focused exclusively on currently enrolled college students.

Postsecondary Status	Percent
Currently Enrolled Full-Time	32.3%
Never Enrolled / Did Not Complete	19.7%
Undecided / Will Not Immediately Enroll	15.7%
Will Enroll in College Next Fall	14.2%
Will Enroll Within One Year of Graduation	6.7%
Will Enroll in Trade School	5.1%
Currently Enrolled Part-Time	3.1%
Already Graduated from College	3.1%



One of the most notable findings from the survey is the coexistence of optimism and strain. Students generally reported strong levels of career clarity, personal growth, and academic confidence while simultaneously reporting meaningful financial and emotional challenges.



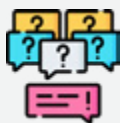
TABLE 1. STUDENT EXPERIENCE CONSTRUCT SCORES

Survey Construct	Average Score (1-5 Scale)	Interpretation
Satisfaction & Personal Growth	4.04	Students reported positive personal development, independence, and overall satisfaction.
Career Clarity & Purpose	4.02	Students expressed strong confidence in their future goals and career direction.
Academic Preparedness & Support	4.00	Students generally felt academically capable and knew how to access support.
Career Readiness	3.91	Students believed they were developing skills needed for future employment.
Mental Health & Wellbeing	3.27	Students reported moderate levels of emotional strain and stress.
Financial Stress	3.19	Students reported significant concerns regarding affordability and educational costs.

The survey findings reveal an important tension. Students generally believe in their ability to succeed and remain ambitious about their futures. However, many are pursuing those goals while experiencing financial pressure, uncertainty about educational costs, work obligations, mental health concerns, and competing life responsibilities.

This pattern was reinforced throughout the qualitative interviews. Students repeatedly described themselves as motivated and future-oriented but often overwhelmed by the realities of balancing education, employment, finances, family obligations, and personal wellbeing.

The survey also revealed that postsecondary participation in Duval County extends well beyond traditional college-going students. A substantial portion of respondents reported delaying enrollment, pursuing alternative pathways, remaining undecided, or never enrolling at all. This finding suggests that improving postsecondary attainment requires attention not only to persistence among enrolled students, but also to the broader transition from high school into postsecondary education.



Research Question 1: What Factors Motivate or Deter Duval County High School Graduates from Enrolling in Postsecondary Institutions and Certification Programs?

The findings suggest that postsecondary enrollment decisions among Duval County students are shaped by a combination of aspiration and constraint. Students remain committed to pursuing meaningful careers and economic opportunity, yet their decisions are heavily influenced by affordability, pathway awareness, institutional fit, family circumstances, and confidence that a chosen educational pathway will lead to desired outcomes.

Across both survey and interview data, students consistently expressed strong career aspirations and a desire to build stable, fulfilling futures. Measures of career clarity and purpose ranked among the highest constructs in the survey, averaging 4.02 on a five-point scale. Students frequently described wanting careers that would allow them to support their families, contribute to their communities, and achieve long-term financial security.

One student explained, and another reflected:

I found myself consumed with wanting to be happy, and that being my drive throughout everything that I do. I can't see myself doing something that's going to drain me.

I've always wanted to be a lawyer because I believe the importance of representation regardless of people's socioeconomic status.

These narratives reinforce a key finding across the study: students are not lacking ambition. Rather, they are attempting to identify educational pathways that align with their values, goals, financial realities, and desired quality of life.

Enrollment drivers and deterrents. While students identified many factors influencing enrollment decisions, several themes emerged consistently across data sources.



TABLE 2. MAJOR ENROLLMENT DRIVERS AND DETERRENENTS

Enrollment Drivers	Enrollment Deterrents
Career aspirations and future goals	Cost of attendance
Desire for meaningful employment	Financial aid uncertainty
Workforce opportunities	Student debt concerns
Personal growth and development	Limited awareness of pathways
Family encouragement and support	Mental health and personal challenges
Clear connection between education and careers	Questions about educational value

Career alignment and workforce relevance. Students increasingly view postsecondary education through the lens of career outcomes. Survey respondents reported strong confidence in their future careers and generally believed they were developing the skills necessary to succeed in the workforce. Career readiness indicators averaged 3.91 across survey items, suggesting that students place significant value on pathways that lead directly to employment and economic mobility.

Institutional leaders echoed this finding, noting growing student interest in workforce-connected programs, technical credentials, certifications, apprenticeships, and shorter-term educational pathways.

One higher education professional observed:

Enrollment in those programs is blowing up, whereas the traditional four-year degree isn't seeing the same level of growth.

The findings suggest that **students increasingly evaluate educational options based on perceived return on investment, workforce relevance**, and the speed with which programs lead to employment.

Financial cost and perceived value. Financial concerns emerged as the strongest and most consistent barrier to enrollment across every dataset collected.

Survey respondents identified affordability, **tuition costs, financial aid, and educational expenses as major factors influencing enrollment decisions**. Students who delayed enrollment, remained undecided, or never enrolled were particularly likely to identify financial concerns as a primary obstacle.

Qualitative interviews provided additional context. **One student explained:**

They were the people who gave me the highest amount of money scholarship wise... I chose where I knew I could afford.



Another student described selecting a community college because it represented the most financially realistic option:

I go to a community college right now, and that's the most affordable right now.

Institutional leaders similarly described growing concerns among students and families regarding educational debt and the long-term value of traditional college pathways.

One professional reflected:

I think some of it now, the general sentiment and mood has shifted a little bit... 'Is college worth it?' That mantra and view is a little bit stronger than it used to be.

Taken together, the findings suggest that students are not necessarily rejecting postsecondary education. Rather, they are carefully weighing educational costs against expected benefits and seeking pathways that feel financially sustainable.

Expanding postsecondary pathways. The survey revealed growing diversification in postsecondary choices. In addition to students pursuing traditional four-year institutions, respondents reported plans to enroll in trade schools, technical programs, workforce certifications, and alternative credentialing pathways.

Students pursuing these pathways frequently demonstrated the same levels of career purpose and optimism observed among traditional college-bound students. This finding challenges the notion that postsecondary success should be defined solely through enrollment in four-year institutions.

Instead, students increasingly appear to view workforce credentials, certifications, apprenticeships, associate degrees, and bachelor's degrees as part of a broader ecosystem of educational opportunities.

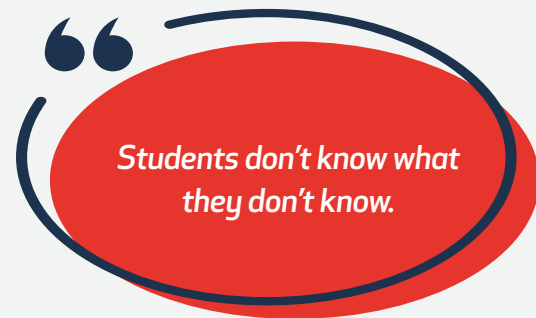
Information Gaps and Postsecondary Awareness.

Another important finding concerns awareness of available options. Students who remained undecided about enrollment or planned to delay enrollment frequently described uncertainty regarding educational pathways, financial aid, workforce opportunities, and available supports.

Institutional professionals repeatedly emphasized that many students and families continue to have

a narrow understanding of postsecondary education. Several participants noted that students often lack awareness of apprenticeships, workforce credentials, stackable certifications, and technical pathways.

As one professional explained:



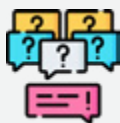
These findings suggest that **improving enrollment may require expanding exposure to the full range of postsecondary opportunities available** to students rather than focusing exclusively on traditional college pathways.

►► Research question 1 summary

Enrollment decisions reflect pragmatism, not apathy. Across all data sources, the evidence points to a consistent conclusion: enrollment decisions are not primarily driven by motivation or academic readiness. Students remain ambitious, hopeful, and future-oriented. However, they make enrollment decisions within the context of financial realities, family obligations, mental health concerns, institutional complexity, and uncertainty regarding educational value.

The challenge facing Duval County is therefore not convincing students that education matters. Rather, it is helping students identify educational pathways that are affordable, understandable, relevant to their goals, and connected to meaningful career opportunities.

These findings suggest that increasing postsecondary enrollment will require stronger financial aid navigation, expanded career exploration opportunities, greater exposure to workforce-aligned pathways, and more intensive support during the transition from high school to postsecondary education.



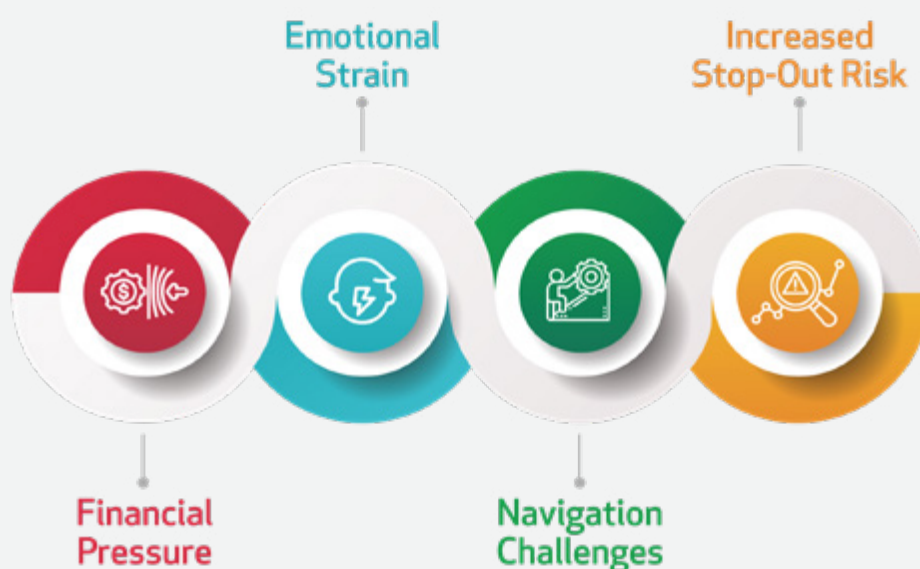
Research Question 2: Why Are More Duval County Students Not Persisting Through Graduation or Certification Completion?

The findings suggest that students most often struggle to persist when financial pressure, emotional strain, institutional complexity, and competing life responsibilities begin to accumulate. Across interviews, surveys, and institutional perspectives, students did not describe leaving college because they lacked goals or aspirations. Instead, they described the challenge of sustaining enrollment while simultaneously managing work, finances, family obligations, health concerns, and unfamiliar institutional systems.

This finding is particularly important because it challenges deficit-oriented explanations for attrition. Students who struggle to persist are not necessarily less motivated or less academically capable than those who remain enrolled. Rather, the data suggest that persistence is strongly influenced by whether students can successfully navigate a complex set of financial, emotional, and structural pressures over time.

The survey findings reinforce this interpretation. While students reported high levels of career clarity (4.02), personal growth (4.04), and academic preparedness (4.00), they also reported notable levels of financial stress (3.19) and mental health strain (3.27). Together, these findings suggest that students often remain optimistic about their futures while simultaneously experiencing challenges that threaten their ability to continue progressing toward their goals.

FIGURE 1. PERSISTENCE RISK FRAMEWORK



This framework emerged repeatedly across student interviews, institutional conversations, and survey responses and helps explain how persistence challenges often develop over time rather than through a single event.

Financial sustainability as a persistence challenge. Financial concerns emerged as the most consistent persistence barrier across all data sources. Students frequently described balancing employment and coursework while simultaneously managing tuition costs, transportation expenses, housing needs, food insecurity, and family obligations. Many students reported that financial stress affected not only

their ability to pay for college, but also their ability to focus academically and remain engaged.

One higher education professional summarized the issue directly:

It's sad, but it often comes back to money. Money is often a big factor of why people stop out for a semester, and they say they're going to come back after the fact, and then they don't.

Institutional leaders similarly reported **growing demand for food pantries, emergency aid programs, work-study opportunities, and financial support services**. One institution reported that approximately 22 percent of students utilized the campus food pantry during the previous academic year, suggesting that basic needs insecurity is increasingly intertwined with student success (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice).



TABLE 3. FINANCIAL BARRIERS AFFECTING PERSISTENCE

Financial Challenge	Evidence Across Data Sources
Tuition and educational costs	Student interviews, survey responses
Balancing work and school	Student interviews, institutional interviews
Food insecurity	Institutional interviews
Housing instability	Student and professional interviews
Transportation barriers	Student interviews
Financial aid complexity	Student and professional interviews

Importantly, the findings suggest that many students who stop out remain committed to education. Their challenge is often not academic disengagement, but financial instability that makes continued enrollment difficult to sustain.

Mental health and emotional wellbeing. Mental health emerged as one of the most significant persistence factors identified throughout the study. Survey respondents reported moderate levels of emotional strain, stress, and mental health concerns, while interviews revealed how these challenges intersect with academic performance, financial pressures, and personal responsibilities.

One student reflected on the cumulative nature of these challenges:

My first year was definitely not positive. It was post-COVID, and I was dealing with burnout. I was also figuring out my ADHD diagnosis, and that was the year I found out I had lupus.

This account illustrates how persistence challenges are often influenced by circumstances that extend beyond the classroom. Students may enter college with strong aspirations yet struggle when health concerns, family responsibilities, emotional wellbeing, and academic expectations converge simultaneously.

Institutional professionals described similar patterns.

One advisor noted:

When I first started, I can remember having meetings with students and advising them about mental health issues. Now it seems like 30 or 40 percent of the meetings I have with students involve stress, anxiety, or depression.

The consistency between student and institutional perspectives suggests that mental health should be understood as a core student success issue rather than a peripheral support service.

Belonging, relationships, and mattering. Although financial and emotional challenges were prominent, students repeatedly identified relationships as a critical source of resilience. Students frequently described professors, advisors, mentors, coaches, and peers as important contributors to their persistence. Many reported that feeling known, supported, and valued increased their confidence and willingness to seek help when challenges emerged.

Survey findings similarly indicated generally positive perceptions of belonging and support. Students often reported having someone they could turn to for assistance and feeling connected to their educational environment.

Institutional professionals reinforced this finding.

One staff member explained:

The Theory of Marginality and Mattering is a great way to help maintain retention. Students need to be recognized and individualized in order to improve retention.

At the same time, the findings suggest that belonging alone is not sufficient to guarantee persistence. Students may feel connected to their institution and still struggle when financial pressures, emotional strain, or family responsibilities become overwhelming.

Rather than serving as a complete solution, belonging appears to function as a protective factor that helps students navigate challenges when other supports are also present.

Navigating Postsecondary Systems. Students frequently described higher education systems as difficult to navigate.

Challenges included:

- ▶ Financial aid processes
- ▶ Registration procedures
- ▶ Advising systems
- ▶ Course sequencing
- ▶ Onboarding requirements
- ▶ Academic expectations
- ▶ Support service access

One student contrasted college with high school by explaining:

It wasn't like high school where the teacher saw that you were struggling. It was more you had to go and get help.

This observation reflects a broader theme throughout the study. Students are often expected to independently navigate systems they may not fully understand, particularly during the first year of enrollment.

Institutional professionals acknowledged that support services exist but are not always effectively utilized. Participants frequently cited awareness gaps, stigma, competing responsibilities, and delayed help-seeking as barriers to service utilization.

These findings suggest that **persistence efforts may be most effective when supports are embedded into the student experience** rather than requiring students to independently locate and access resources.

The first-year transition. Across interviews and institutional conversations, the first semester and first year emerged as particularly vulnerable periods. Professionals described the first six to eight weeks of enrollment as a critical period during which students often question:

- ▶ Whether they belong
- ▶ Whether they are capable of succeeding
- ▶ Whether college was the right decision

Students similarly described the transition from structured high school environments to independent postsecondary settings as difficult and sometimes overwhelming.

These findings suggest that early intervention strategies, proactive advising, first-year coaching, and structured onboarding experiences may be especially important for improving persistence outcomes.

Limited-Access Programs and Institutional Bottlenecks. An important finding emerging from institutional interviews involved capacity constraints within high-demand academic programs. Participants described situations in which students enter college intending to pursue programs such as nursing, respiratory therapy, or other healthcare fields, only to discover that available seats are limited.

One professional explained:

“

Who wants to start their college experience being defeated? It's a heavy lift to try to get them back motivated and on track for something else.

Students who are unable to access their intended programs may become discouraged and leave rather than transitioning into alternative pathways.

This finding suggests that persistence strategies should include **greater transparency regarding program capacity, stronger advising around alternative pathways**, and clearer communication regarding competitive admissions processes.

▶▶ Research question 2 summary

Taken together, the findings suggest that persistence is not primarily an academic challenge.

Students generally remain motivated, career-oriented, and positive about their futures. Instead, persistence is shaped by whether students can successfully navigate financial pressures, emotional wellbeing, institutional complexity, and life responsibilities while remaining connected to meaningful support systems.

Students who persist appear not necessarily more motivated than those who leave but better positioned to sustain enrollment amid the cumulative pressures associated with postsecondary education.



Research Question 3: What Specific Gaps Exist in Financial, Curriculum, and Programmatic Support Between High School Graduation and Postsecondary Enrollment?

The findings suggest that **one of the most significant vulnerabilities within the postsecondary pipeline occurs during the transition between high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment.** Students and institutional professionals consistently described gaps in awareness, navigation, advising, financial aid support, and readiness for postsecondary independence.

Across the data, the challenge was rarely the complete absence of support. Rather, students often struggled to find, understand, access, or utilize available supports at the moment they were needed.



TABLE 4. TRANSITION GAPS IDENTIFIED ACROSS STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

Transition Gap	Student Perspective	Institutional Perspective
Financial Aid Navigation	Confusing and difficult to understand	Underutilized and misunderstood
Postsecondary Awareness	Limited knowledge of options	Exposure gaps across pathways
Career Exploration	Uncertainty about pathways	Need for earlier workforce awareness
Postsecondary Readiness	Difficulty adjusting to independence	Gaps in self-advocacy and navigation
Support Utilization	Unsure where to seek help	Resources available but underused

Financial aid navigation and affordability. Financial aid emerged as one of the most significant transition challenges. Students frequently described uncertainty regarding college costs, scholarships, financial aid packages, and FAFSA processes. Institutional professionals similarly noted that many students struggle to understand how to pay for college or accurately estimate educational expenses.

Because affordability strongly influences enrollment decisions, financial aid navigation appears to be one of the most important intervention opportunities available to schools and institutions.

Postsecondary awareness and career exposure. Students and professionals repeatedly described a disconnect between available opportunities and student awareness of those opportunities. Many students appeared unfamiliar with:

- ▶ Workforce certifications
- ▶ Apprenticeships
- ▶ Technical education programs
- ▶ Stackable credentials
- ▶ Alternative postsecondary pathways

Several professionals expressed concern that students interested in workforce pathways often receive less guidance than students pursuing traditional college enrollment.

The findings suggest that postsecondary advising should expand beyond a college-versus-no-college framework and expose students to the full ecosystem of educational and workforce opportunities.

Readiness for postsecondary independence. Participants consistently identified challenges related to self-advocacy, independent decision-making, and navigating unfamiliar systems. Professionals described growing concerns regarding:

- ▶ Emotional readiness
- ▶ Interpersonal skills
- ▶ Conflict resolution
- ▶ Self-management
- ▶ Help-seeking behavior

Many students appear academically prepared for postsecondary education but less prepared for the independence and responsibility required to navigate complex institutional environments.

Support awareness and utilization. One of the most consistent findings across institutional interviews was that students frequently fail to utilize available support services.

As one professional explained, and another noted:

You'd have a student who lived in the building for four years and in their last semester say, 'I didn't even know we had a food pantry or academic advising or financial aid.'

At orientation they're talking about all these amazing services, but students don't yet know which ones they're going to need.

These findings suggest that institutions may need to move beyond awareness campaigns and instead embed supports directly into coursework, advising structures, and routine student interactions.

K-12 and postsecondary coordination. The transition findings also reveal opportunities for stronger coordination between K-12 systems and postsecondary institutions. Several professionals described students falling through gaps because institutions often operate independently rather than as part of a coordinated student success ecosystem.

Participants repeatedly identified the need for:

- ▶ Stronger alignment between K-12 and higher education
- ▶ Shared student success strategies
- ▶ Integrated data systems
- ▶ Cross-sector collaboration
- ▶ Coordinated transition supports

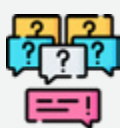
These findings suggest that improving postsecondary outcomes will require attention not only to individual student supports, but also to how educational systems work together across the student journey.

▶▶ **Research question 3 summary**

The findings indicate that **the transition between high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment remains one of the most vulnerable points within the educational pipeline.**

Students require more than access to opportunities; they require guidance, navigation support, financial aid literacy, workforce awareness, and structured assistance as they move into increasingly complex educational environments.

The strongest transition strategies appear likely to be those that help students understand their options, navigate systems confidently, and access support before challenges become barriers.

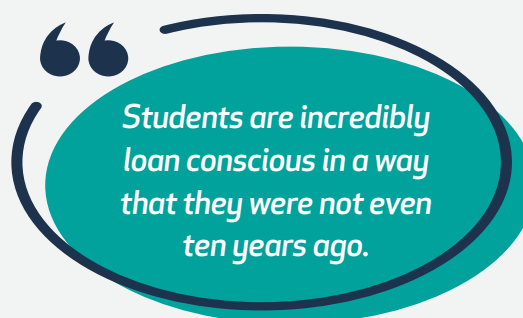


Research Question 4: What Are the Financial and Labor Market Implications of Improved Postsecondary Enrollment, Persistence, and Completion?

The findings suggest that **students are increasingly evaluating postsecondary education through an economic lens**. Across interviews, surveys, institutional conversations, and stakeholder convenings, students consistently questioned whether educational pathways would provide sufficient value relative to their financial investment. Students were not simply asking whether education was important; they were asking whether specific pathways were affordable, connected to employment opportunities, and likely to improve their long-term economic prospects.

This emphasis on return on investment emerged repeatedly throughout the study. Students frequently described concerns about educational debt, tuition costs, opportunity costs, and the financial realities of balancing work and school. Institutional leaders similarly reported that students and families increasingly seek clear evidence that educational investments will lead to meaningful employment outcomes.

One higher education professional observed:



This finding aligns with the survey data, which identified financial stress as one of the strongest challenges reported by students. While students generally expressed strong confidence in their future goals and career aspirations, many remained concerned about the financial burden associated with achieving those goals.

At the same time, the findings suggest that students continue to view education as an important pathway to economic mobility. Students consistently described pursuing postsecondary education because they believed it would increase their opportunities, improve their quality of life, and create greater financial stability. Survey respondents reported strong levels of career clarity and purpose (**4.02**) and career readiness (**3.91**), suggesting that most students remain optimistic about their futures despite concerns about affordability and educational costs.



TABLE 5. ECONOMIC BENEFITS ASSOCIATED WITH POSTSECONDARY COMPLETION

Individual Outcomes	Regional Outcomes
Higher lifetime earnings	Stronger workforce pipelines
Lower unemployment risk	Reduced labor shortages
Greater career mobility	Improved economic competitiveness
Increased financial stability	Expanded employer talent pools
Improved quality of life	Increased regional productivity
Greater access to professional careers	Stronger long-term economic growth

Workforce alignment is increasingly central to student decision-making. One of the clearest findings across both the research and stakeholder convenings is that students increasingly want educational pathways that are directly connected to employment opportunities.

Students frequently expressed interest in programs that provide clear career outcomes, industry-recognized credentials, and opportunities for immediate workforce entry. While many continue to pursue traditional bachelor's degree pathways, students also demonstrated growing interest in workforce certifications, technical credentials, apprenticeships, associate degrees, and shorter-term training programs.

Stakeholders repeatedly emphasized that students are seeking pathways that combine affordability with workforce relevance. During the community convening, participants noted that many students are interested in technical education and workforce credentials but often lack awareness of available opportunities.

One stakeholder summarized the challenge directly, and another participant emphasized the need for stronger alignment between education and employment::

Students don't know these opportunities exist. The programs are there. The information isn't

We need workforce and employers helping educators understand what skills students actually need.

These comments suggest that students are increasingly making educational decisions based on perceived labor market value rather than educational prestige alone.

Career and technical education represents an underutilized opportunity. Stakeholder discussions highlighted the growing importance of Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs as workforce development pathways.

Participants described successful examples of students graduating from high school with industry certifications and workforce-ready skills. One stakeholder shared examples of students earning Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) credentials while still in high school and entering the workforce immediately after graduation. Others described programs that provide certifications in agriculture, construction, aviation, manufacturing, and other high-demand sectors.

Despite these opportunities, participants repeatedly noted that many students and families remain unaware of available CTE options. Several stakeholders described limited awareness of technical education pathways and persistent misconceptions that workforce credentials are less valuable than traditional academic pathways.

One participant reflected:

*The programs are there,
but the information isn't.*

Another described how students often must make important pathway decisions as early as middle school without sufficient exposure to available options. Participants emphasized that many career academies, magnet programs, and technical pathways require students and families to make enrollment decisions before they fully understand the opportunities available to them.

These findings suggest that improving postsecondary outcomes requires not only expanding workforce pathways but also improving awareness and access to those pathways.

Apprenticeships and workforce credentials remain underrecognized. A recurring theme throughout the convening discussions was the limited visibility of apprenticeships, certifications, and workforce credentials.

Institutional leaders and community stakeholders repeatedly emphasized that many students continue to view postsecondary education through a narrow “college versus no college” framework. Participants suggested that students often receive significantly more information about traditional college enrollment than about apprenticeships, technical certifications, and workforce-aligned credential programs.

Several stakeholders argued that workforce exploration should begin much earlier than high school graduation. Participants recommended introducing career awareness, workforce exposure, and pathway exploration during middle school so students can make informed decisions regarding coursework, career academies, dual enrollment opportunities, and postsecondary planning.

The findings suggest that students may be more likely to pursue workforce-aligned pathways if they understand the wages, employment opportunities, credential requirements, and advancement potential associated with those careers.

Postsecondary completion is also a workforce development strategy. The implications of improved enrollment, persistence, and completion extend beyond individual students.

Institutional leaders repeatedly identified workforce shortages in sectors such as healthcare, skilled trades, logistics, education, information technology, and technical occupations. Participants described situations in which employer demand remains high while educational pipelines struggle to produce enough qualified workers.

One professional summarized this challenge by asking:



This observation reflects a broader opportunity for Duval County. Improving postsecondary attainment is not solely a student success strategy. It is also an **economic development strategy**.

Higher completion rates can increase the supply of qualified workers, strengthen workforce pipelines, improve employer recruitment, reduce labor shortages, and support regional economic growth. However, the findings suggest that these benefits will only be realized if students can successfully navigate the barriers that currently interfere with enrollment and completion.

►► Research question 4 summary

The findings suggest that postsecondary education remains a critical driver of economic mobility for both students and the region. Students increasingly evaluate educational pathways based on affordability, workforce relevance, and expected return on investment, while employers continue to report growing demand for skilled workers across multiple sectors. Improving enrollment, persistence, and completion therefore represents both a student success strategy and an economic development strategy. However, realizing these benefits will require expanding awareness of workforce-connected pathways, strengthening Career and Technical Education and apprenticeship opportunities, and ensuring that students have the financial and institutional supports necessary to complete high-value credentials.



Research Question 5: How Can Other Counties Leverage Lessons from Duval County to Improve Postsecondary Outcomes?

The findings suggest that Duval County's greatest contribution may not be a single program or intervention. Rather, it is the development of a comprehensive approach that combines student voice, institutional perspective, survey data, cross-sector collaboration, and workforce considerations to better understand the factors influencing postsecondary success.

One of the most important lessons emerging from this study is that **postsecondary success should be understood as a systems challenge rather than an individual student problem.**

Students do not move through the postsecondary pipeline in isolation. Their experiences are shaped by K–12 schools, colleges and universities, workforce systems, employers, community organizations, families, and public policies. As a result, solutions must extend beyond individual institutions and involve coordinated action across sectors.

FIGURE 2. EMERGING POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS FRAMEWORK



Throughout the study, institutional leaders repeatedly emphasized the importance of collaboration and shared responsibility.

One professional described higher education institutions as:

Loosely coupled organizational systems.

This observation highlights a challenge identified throughout the research. Valuable supports often exist, but they are not always coordinated, connected, or visible to students. As a result, students may struggle to navigate systems even when resources are available.

The Duval County approach offers several lessons that may be applicable to other counties seeking to improve postsecondary outcomes.



TABLE 6. COMPONENTS OF A POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS FRAMEWORK

Component	Purpose
Student Voice	Understand lived experiences and barriers
Survey Data	Identify patterns and measure outcomes
Institutional Interviews	Understand system-level challenges
Cross-Sector Partnerships	Align efforts across organizations
Workforce Engagement	Connect education to labor market demand
Shared Data Systems	Track barriers, interventions, and outcomes

The findings suggest that counties can strengthen postsecondary outcomes by focusing on four interconnected strategies.



STRATEGY 1: BUILD STRONGER TRANSITION SYSTEMS

Students consistently identified the transition from high school to postsecondary education as a vulnerable period. Counties can strengthen outcomes by improving advising, financial aid navigation, summer melt interventions, and career exploration during this transition period.



STRATEGY 3: EXPAND WORKFORCE-ALIGNED PATHWAY

Students increasingly seek pathways that are affordable, flexible, and connected to employment. Counties can strengthen postsecondary participation by expanding awareness of apprenticeships, certifications, technical programs, stackable credentials, and other workforce-aligned opportunities.



STRATEGY 2: INTEGRATE STUDENT SUPPORTS

Institutions frequently described support services that students either did not know about or did not access. Counties can **encourage more integrated support systems that combine advising, coaching, counseling, basic needs supports**, and workforce navigation into coordinated student success models.

Potential indicators include:

- ▶ FAFSA completion
- ▶ Summer melt
- ▶ First-semester momentum
- ▶ Enrollment-interruption patterns
- ▶ Support utilization



STRATEGY 4: DEVELOP SHARED DATA AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

Participants repeatedly described the need for stronger data sharing and cross-sector coordination. Counties can **improve outcomes by tracking not only enrollment and completion rates**, but also the barriers and supports that influence those outcomes.

- ▶ Food insecurity
- ▶ Housing instability
- ▶ Limited-access program outcomes
- ▶ Workforce placement
- ▶ Post-completion earnings

▶▶ Research question 5 summary

The findings suggest that **improving postsecondary outcomes requires coordinated action across educational institutions, workforce systems, community organizations, employers, and policymakers**. Duval County's emerging approach demonstrates the value of combining student voice, institutional perspective, quantitative data, and cross-sector collaboration to better understand why students enroll, persist, and complete.

Perhaps the most important lesson from this study is that postsecondary success is not solely a college issue. It is a community issue. Counties that align stakeholders around shared goals, shared data, and shared responsibility will be better positioned to improve educational attainment, workforce development, and economic opportunity for future generations.

Cross-Cutting Insights



Across all data sources, one finding remained remarkably consistent: students are driven to succeed, hopeful, and future-oriented. They generally understand the importance of education and possess strong aspirations for their futures. The primary challenge is not motivation. Rather, students are attempting to pursue ambitious goals while navigating financial pressure, emotional strain, institutional complexity, and competing life responsibilities.

Students who successfully enroll, persist, and complete educational pathways appear to do so not because they face fewer obstacles, but because they have access to the financial, relational, informational, and institutional supports necessary to navigate those obstacles.

The findings therefore suggest that improving postsecondary outcomes in Duval County will require more than increasing access. It will require creating educational systems that are financially sustainable, emotionally supportive, workforce-connected, and easier for students to navigate.

The recommendations that follow are designed to address the barriers and opportunities identified throughout this study and provide a roadmap for strengthening postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion across Duval County.

Several important findings emerged across multiple research questions and warrant special attention because they challenge common assumptions about postsecondary success.



Postsecondary Challenges Are Not Primarily a Motivation Problem

Perhaps the most consistent finding across the study is that students generally remain optimistic, ambitious, and driven. Survey respondents reported strong career clarity, personal growth, and confidence in their future goals. Students frequently described education as a **pathway to opportunity, stability, and meaningful work.**

The challenge facing many students is not a lack of aspiration. Rather, it is the difficulty of sustaining progress within systems that can be financially, emotionally, and structurally demanding.



Belonging Supports Persistence but Does Not Eliminate Risk

Students repeatedly described the importance of supportive relationships with faculty, advisors, mentors, and peers. Survey findings similarly indicated generally **positive perceptions of belonging and institutional connection.**

However, the findings also **demonstrate that belonging alone is insufficient.** Students may feel connected to their institution and still experience financial hardship, emotional strain, or life circumstances that threaten their ability to remain enrolled.

Persistence appears strongest when belonging is paired with practical supports that address financial, emotional, and academic needs.



Workforce Messaging Does Not Reach All Students Equally

The study suggests that students interested in workforce pathways may not always receive the same level of exposure, advising, or encouragement as students pursuing traditional college pathways.

As educational options continue to diversify, **students may benefit from more balanced messaging that highlights the full range of postsecondary opportunities,** including certifications, apprenticeships, technical education, associate degrees, and bachelor's degrees.



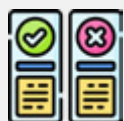
Systems Often Respond After Students Begin Struggling

Although institutions have made significant investments in advising, coaching, and early alert systems, many supports remain reactive rather than preventive. Students frequently seek assistance only after challenges have already affected their academic performance, wellbeing, or enrollment status.

The findings suggest that **future student success efforts may be most effective when interventions occur earlier** and are embedded more proactively throughout the student experience.

Recommendations with Community Stakeholder Input

The findings point toward six interconnected recommendations designed to strengthen postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion across Duval County. **JPEF convened community stakeholders to receive their input on five of the six recommendations and develop the beginnings of a coalition action plan.**



Recommendation 1: Establish a Regional Postsecondary Success Collaborative

The findings suggest that improving postsecondary outcomes will require **stronger coordination across educational institutions**, workforce partners, community organizations, employers, and local government. While many stakeholders described existing partnerships and collaborative efforts, participants repeatedly noted that valuable information, resources, and interventions often remain siloed across organizations.

Convening participants emphasized that Duval County already possesses many of the foundational elements needed for a regional collaborative. Several stakeholders pointed to existing college access networks, postsecondary partnerships, and cross-sector initiatives that could serve as the foundation for broader coordination efforts. Rather than creating entirely new structures, participants encouraged building upon collaborations that already exist and strengthening information sharing among partners.

As one participant noted:

“Everything works in silos. Why doesn’t every university partner with the school districts and community organizations so we’re sharing information and solving problems together?”

Stakeholders further emphasized that student success should be viewed as a shared community responsibility rather than the responsibility of any single institution. Several participants described **the need for a coordinated ecosystem that follows students from middle school through workforce entry and career advancement.**

This collaborative should focus on:

- ▶ Transition support
- ▶ Cross-sector communication
- ▶ Shared accountability
- ▶ Workforce alignment
- ▶ Data-informed decision-making
- ▶ Coordinated intervention strategies



Recommendation 2: Expand Proactive Advising, Coaching, and Student Navigation Supports

The findings consistently demonstrate that **students benefit from trusted relationships and proactive guidance**, particularly during periods of transition and vulnerability.

Stakeholders repeatedly emphasized that support systems should begin much earlier than college orientation. Multiple breakout groups recommended introducing college and career navigation support during middle school and continuing that support through high school and postsecondary education. Participants described **the importance of helping students build self-advocacy skills**, understand available resources, and develop clear educational plans before they reach college.

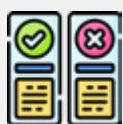
One participant explained:

“

At middle school, you should be focused on exposure. In high school, you should be focused on the game plan. And once they get to college, it should be the execution of that game plan.

Participants also emphasized that students often seek help from peers before approaching institutional staff. Several stakeholders suggested expanding peer mentoring, student ambassador programs, and near-peer coaching models that connect incoming students with upperclassmen who can **help normalize help-seeking behavior and connect students to resources**.

Stakeholders further noted that students often require support navigating life decisions, financial challenges, and personal circumstances in addition to academic questions. Effective advising therefore requires a more holistic approach that recognizes the interconnected nature of student experiences.



Recommendation 3: Normalize and Embed Support Services Into The Student Experience

The research found that support services frequently exist but remain underutilized. Convening participants strongly reinforced this finding.

Stakeholders repeatedly described situations in which students were unaware of available services despite those services being available for years. Participants emphasized that information alone is insufficient. Students need repeated exposure to resources, personal introductions to support systems, and opportunities to engage with services before they experience a crisis.

One participant noted:

The pathways and opportunities are there. We just don't know about them or how to access them.

Several groups suggested:

- ▶ First-year resource seminars
- ▶ Monthly student check-ins
- ▶ Scavenger hunts introducing campus services
- ▶ Peer resource ambassadors
- ▶ Embedded classroom presentations
- ▶ Structured introductions to support offices

Participants also emphasized that support systems should not depend solely on students initiating contact. Institutions should increasingly move toward proactive outreach models that identify students before challenges become crises.

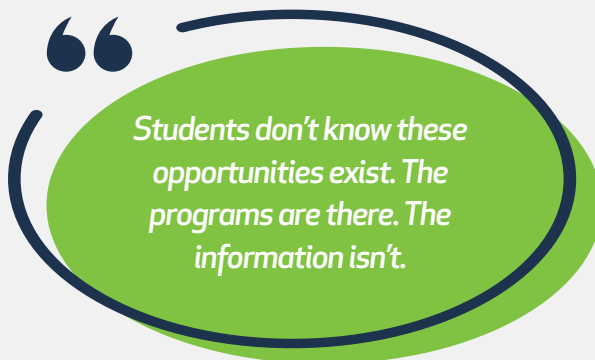


Recommendation 4: Strengthen Workforce and Career Pathway Communication

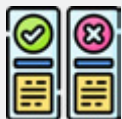
The findings suggest that **students increasingly evaluate educational pathways based on employment outcomes, affordability, and return on investment.**

Stakeholders consistently emphasized that workforce pathways should receive the same level of visibility and support as traditional college pathways. Several participants noted that many students remain unaware of available certifications, apprenticeships, technical education opportunities, and career-connected programs. Others described lingering stigma associated with career and technical education despite strong labor market demand and promising earnings potential.

One participant observed, and another noted:



Participants further emphasized that **career exploration should begin much earlier than high school graduation.** Several groups recommended introducing workforce awareness in middle school so students can make more informed decisions regarding coursework, career academies, certifications, and postsecondary options.



Recommendation 5: Expand Mental Health and Basic Needs Supports

Mental health and basic needs insecurity emerged across every phase of the research process and generated some of the strongest discussion during the convening. (HCCCJ)

Participants repeatedly emphasized that **students cannot focus on academics when struggling with food insecurity, transportation challenges, housing instability, emotional distress, or unmet mental health needs.** Stakeholders described transportation as a particularly significant challenge within Jacksonville's geographic landscape and noted that many students face barriers simply accessing educational opportunities.

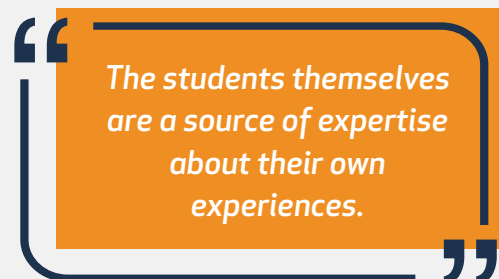
One participant summarized the challenge:



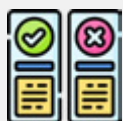
Several participants also emphasized that support often already exists within communities but may not be recognized as part of the broader student success ecosystem. Stakeholders highlighted the role of faith-based organizations, coaches, mentors, community leaders, extended family members, and trusted adults who often provide informal support to students.

Participants further stressed the importance of including students themselves in conversations about mental health and wellbeing.

As one stakeholder noted:



This recommendation therefore extends beyond traditional counseling services and includes a broader approach that recognizes mental health, belonging, basic needs, and **community support as interconnected components of student success.**



Recommendation 6: Develop a Postsecondary Barriers and Outcomes Data System

Duval County has an opportunity to become a statewide leader in **postsecondary data integration and student success analytics**. A shared data infrastructure could support the identification of common barriers, evaluation of interventions, longitudinal outcome tracking, and cross-sector collaboration. This recommendation was not discussed in breakout groups as a distinct recommendation but stakeholders participating in the convening repeatedly emphasized the need for stronger information sharing and cross-sector visibility into student pathways, suggesting that a shared data infrastructure could support both accountability and collaboration across organizations.

Potential indicators include:

- ▶ FAFSA completion
- ▶ Summer melt
- ▶ Enrollment patterns
- ▶ persistence and enrollment-interruption rates.
- ▶ Support utilization
- ▶ Food and housing insecurity
- ▶ Workforce placement
- ▶ Post-completion outcomes

Conclusion



This study set out to better understand the factors influencing postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion in Duval County. While many of the barriers identified mirror national trends, the findings reveal a distinctly local story—one characterized not only by persistent challenges, but also by significant strengths and opportunities for transformation.

Across every phase of the research, one finding remained remarkably consistent: **Duval County students want to succeed.** Students described ambitious career goals, a desire to create better futures for themselves and their families, and a belief that postsecondary education can serve as a pathway to economic mobility and meaningful work. **Survey findings similarly reflected high levels of career clarity, personal growth, and academic confidence.** The evidence suggests that the primary challenge facing students is not a lack of motivation or aspiration, but the ability to sustain progress while navigating financial pressures, mental health concerns, institutional complexity, and competing life responsibilities.

The findings also reveal that *students are becoming increasingly strategic in how they approach postsecondary education.* Rather than asking simply, “Should I go to college?” many students are asking, “Which pathway provides the greatest value?” Affordability, workforce relevance, flexibility, and return on investment now play a central role in enrollment decisions. Students demonstrated growing interest in workforce certifications, technical education, apprenticeships, and career-connected pathways alongside traditional bachelor’s degree programs. However, the research suggests that **many students and families remain unaware of the full range of postsecondary opportunities available to them,** limiting their ability to make informed decisions about their futures.

Perhaps the most significant finding is that **the greatest vulnerabilities often occur before students ever begin college and during the critical transition into postsecondary education.** Students and institutional leaders alike described confusion surrounding financial aid, limited awareness of available pathways, uncertainty about institutional expectations, and difficulty navigating unfamiliar systems. These findings suggest that **strengthening the transition from high school to postsecondary education may represent one of the greatest opportunities for improving long-term enrollment and completion outcomes in Duval County.**

At the same time, the research highlights numerous assets already present within the community. **Duval County benefits from a strong network of public and private colleges and universities, expanding Career and Technical Education programs, workforce development initiatives, engaged employers, community-based organizations, and institutional leaders who are deeply**

committed to improving student success. Throughout the stakeholder convenings, participants consistently demonstrated a willingness to collaborate across sectors, share expertise, and develop coordinated solutions that place students at the center of decision-making.

The challenge, therefore, is not the absence of resources or innovation. Rather, it is ensuring that these resources operate as a connected ecosystem rather than a collection of independent initiatives. Students repeatedly 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.** Likewise, stakeholders emphasized that collaboration, communication, and shared accountability are essential to helping students successfully move from middle school to high school, from high school to postsecondary education, and ultimately into the workforce.

This study also identified important opportunities for future research. While national datasets provide valuable benchmarks, local longitudinal data on enrollment pathways, persistence, workforce outcomes, and student support utilization remain limited. Developing **stronger regional data systems will not only improve decision-making within Duval County** but also position the community to contribute meaningful insights to statewide conversations about postsecondary success.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that **improving postsecondary outcomes in Duval County will require more than increasing access to higher education.** It will require creating educational pathways that are affordable, workforce-connected, emotionally supportive, and intentionally designed around the realities students experience. It will also require continued partnership among K–12 schools, colleges and universities, employers, workforce organizations, community partners, families, and students themselves.

Duval County is well positioned to lead this work. The community possesses the institutional capacity, collaborative spirit, and shared commitment necessary to strengthen postsecondary success for future generations. By investing in earlier transitions, expanding workforce-connected pathways, improving navigation supports, addressing students' basic needs, and building stronger systems of collaboration and shared accountability, **Duval County has the opportunity not only to improve outcomes for its own students, but also to serve as a model for communities across Florida** seeking to strengthen postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion.

The findings presented in this report provide both a call to action and a roadmap for moving forward. The opportunity now is to translate these insights into sustained, coordinated action that ensures every student has not only access to postsecondary education, but the support necessary to complete it and thrive.

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