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The Center for Information & Research on
Civic Learning & Engagement

Civic Engagement Among Non-College Attending 18-25 Year Olds

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In 2000, there were an estimated 13.1 million 18-25 year old Americans who had no college experience. This constituted roughly 49 percent of the estimated total of 26.9 million 18-25 year olds in America. Those without a college education are diverse, but more likely to be male and Hispanic than the college attending population. Specifically, from 2000 data, we estimate that 46.5 percent of non-college attending youth are female, 58.2 percent are non-Hispanic white, 21.9 percent are Hispanic, and 15.9 percent are African-American. Additionally, we estimate 19.2 percent are legally married.² This population of young people is less likely to vote, be registered to vote, volunteer, or feel they can make a difference in their communities than their college attending counterparts.³

Table 1 – Educational Attainment Among 18-25 Year Old Citizens

	All 18-25s	Age Group				All Adults 26 and older
		18-19	20-21	22-24	25	
1972						
Less Than HS	18.6%	24.7%	16.2%	16.2%	17.1%	40.9%
HS Diploma	35.6	33.9	33.9	36.8	39.4	33.8
Some College	36.3	41.3	48.1	28.7	24.0	13.0
BA or greater	9.5	0.04	1.8	18.3	19.5	12.4
2000						
Less Than HS	16.0%	31.3%	12.6%	9.2%	8.1%	14.0%
HS Diploma	33.1	37.1	31.8	31.9	30.0	33.6
Some College	40.7	31.5	54.5	39.7	35.0	26.2
BA or greater	10.3	0.1	1.1	19.2	26.9	26.2

Source: Current Population Survey, November Supplements, 1972 and 2000.

Educational attainment in the U.S. has been rising over the past 30 years among young people. Specifically, more young people have some college experience today than in 1972, though college attendance is not evenly distributed across all racial/ethnic groups⁴. Table 1 above shows educational attainment in 1972 and in 2000 for various components of the youth population ages 18-25. Concentrating on 25 year olds, in 1972 17.1 percent of 25 year olds had less than a high school diploma, and 39.4 percent had

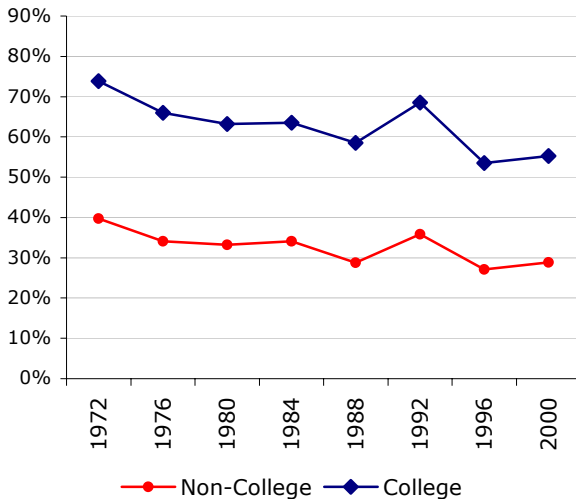
completed high school, but had never attended college. By 2000, 8.1 percent of young people had less than a high school diploma, and 30 percent had completed a high school diploma, but had never attended college. Furthermore, by 2000, 26.9 percent of 25 year olds had a bachelor’s degree, an increase of 7.4 percentage points over 1972. However, even with a rising level of educational attainment, a sizeable number of young people do not attend college.

Throughout this fact sheet, two groups of young people are compared: “college attending” and “non-college attending” young people. Non-college attending young people have completed a high school education or less than a high school education, but have not enrolled in any college courses, including technical/vocational programs, associates degree programs, or four year college programs. The college attending sample of young people is composed of students who have some exposure to college, and may also be currently enrolled. One should be cautious in interpreting the results presented here, as it is likely that some non-college attending 18-25 year olds may be contemplating attending college, and may enter college after the age of 25. People often acquire education somewhat later in life, as shown by the following fact: in 2000, within the population of 18-19 year olds, 31.3 percent reported no high school diploma, but among 25 year olds, only 8.1 percent reported no high school diploma.

Voter Turnout

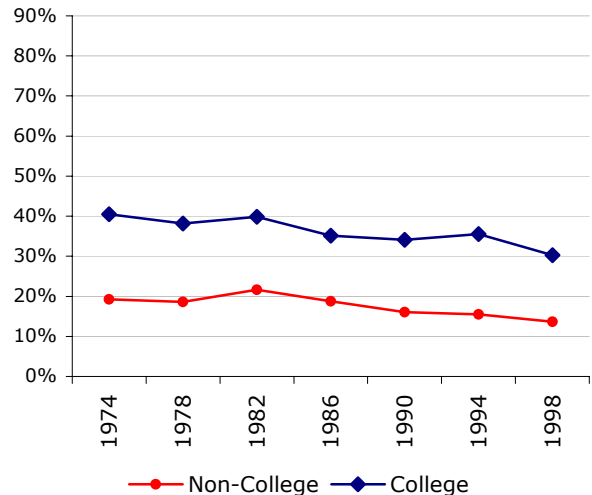
As reported in our fact sheet “Youth Voter Turnout has Declined by Any Measure,” voter turnout,⁵ for young people ages 18-25 has declined steadily since 1972. Non-college attending young Americans have consistently voted at levels below college attending youth in both Presidential and midterm election years, though the decline in voter turnout among college attending young people has been sharper than for non-college attending young people since 1972.

Graph 1: 18-25 Year Old Voter Turnout, College Attending vs. Non-College Attending Citizens, Presidential Years



Source: Current Population Survey, November Supplement, 1972-2000.

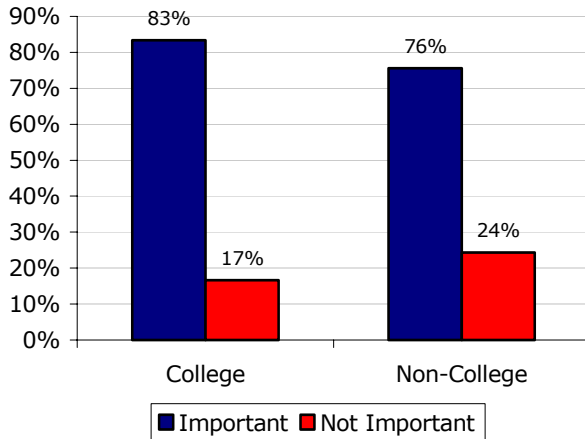
Graph 2: 18-25 Year Old Voter Turnout, College Attending vs. Non-College Attending Citizens, Midterm Election Years



Source: Current Population Survey, November Supplement, 1972-2000.

Views on Voting

Graph 3: College Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds are Less Likely to View Voting as Important

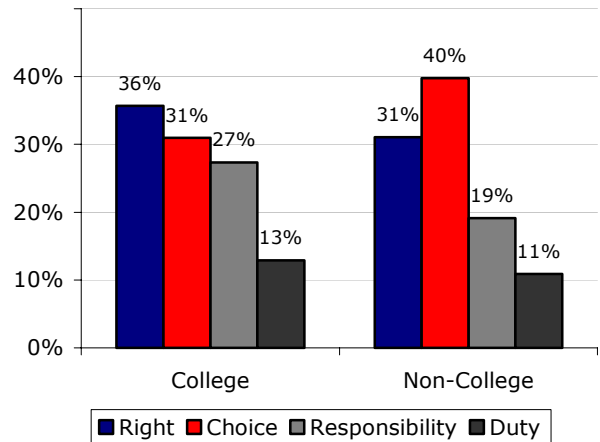


Source: CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, Jan 2002.

Seventy-one percent of non-college attending youth are likely to view voting as either a right or a choice while only 30 percent are likely to view voting as a responsibility or a duty. Among college attending youth, in contrast, 40 percent are likely to view voting as a responsibility or a duty.⁶

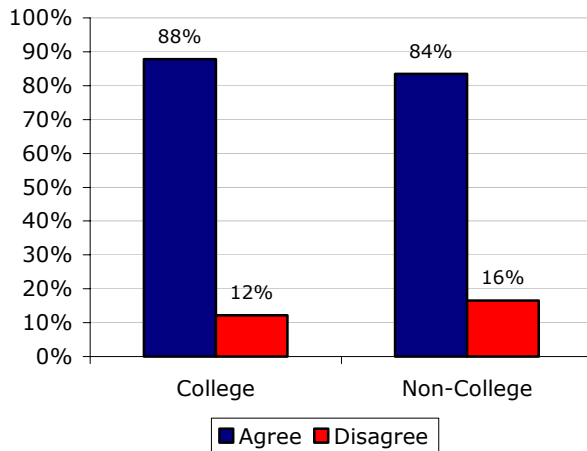
In a recent survey of 1,500 15-25 year olds commissioned by CIRCLE in collaboration with the Council for Excellence in Government's Center of Democracy and Citizenship, and the Partnership for Trust in Government, college attending youth are more likely to view voting as important than those youth with no college experience. However, over three fourths of youth without college experience still view voting as important.

Graph 4: College Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds are Less Likely to View Voting as a Responsibility or Duty



Source: CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, Jan 2002.

Graph 5: "My Vote Counts" Among College Attending and Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds



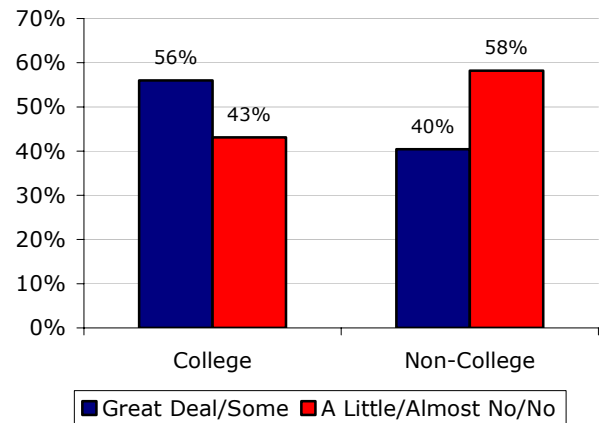
Source: CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, Jan 2002.

Young people overwhelmingly agree that "My vote counts as much as anyone else's" irrespective of educational attainment.

Efficacy and Exposure

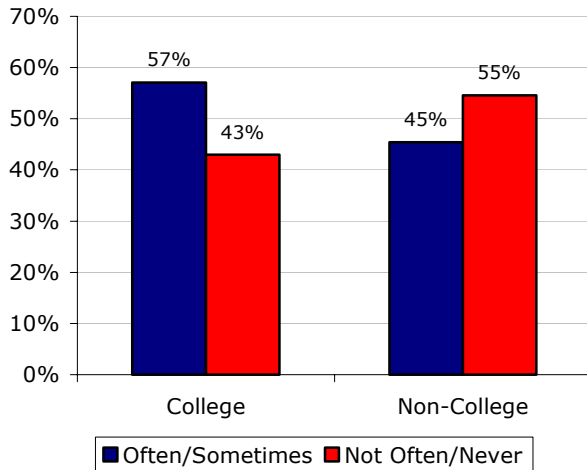
18-25 year olds with no college experience are significantly less likely to feel they can make a difference in their communities than their college-attending counterparts.

Graph 6: College Attending and Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds Who Feel They Can Make A Difference in Their Communities



Source: CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, Jan 2002.

Graph 7: College Attending and Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds Who Talked to Their Parents About Politics



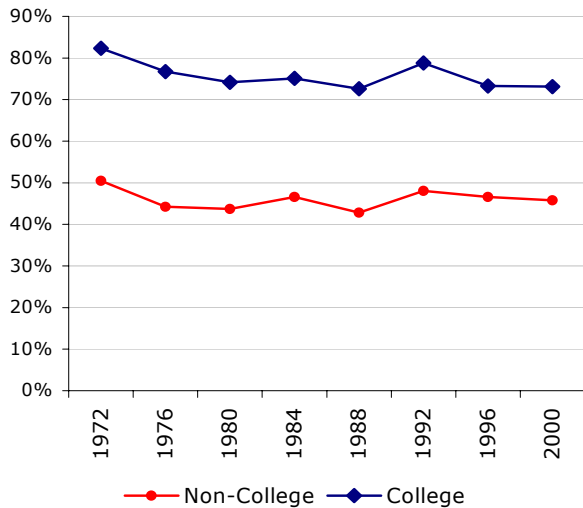
Source: CIRACLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, Jan 2002.

18-25 year olds with no college experience are significantly less likely to have discussed politics with their parents.

Voter Registration

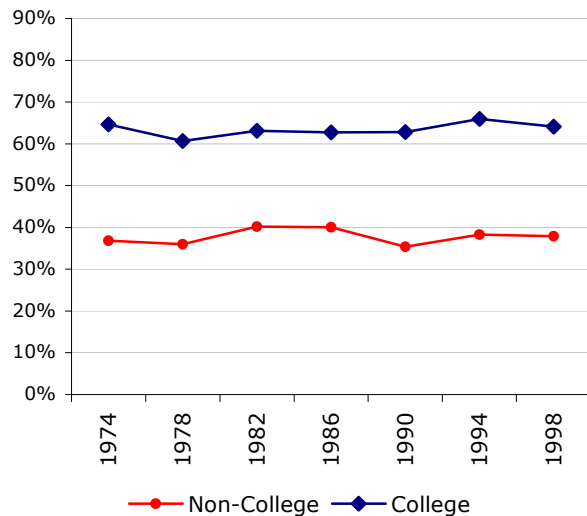
Since 1972, Voter Registration rates have remained relatively flat for both college attending and non-college attending 18-25 year olds in midterm election years. In Presidential election years, only the college attending 18-25 year olds have dropped off significantly in registration rates, from 82 percent in 1972 to 73 percent in 2000.

Graph 8: Registration Rates Among College Attending and College Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds, Presidential Years



Source: Current Population Survey, November Supplement, 1972-2000.

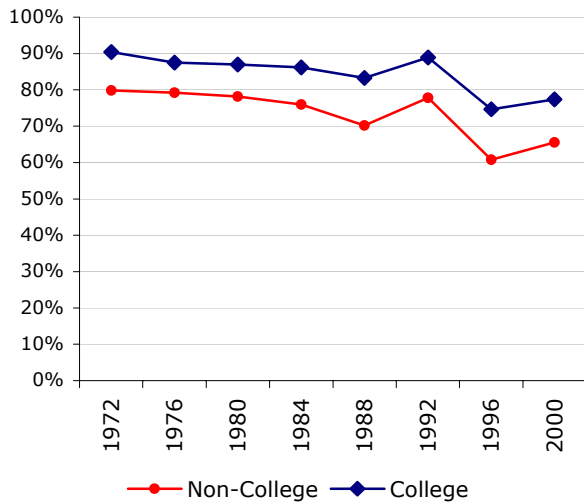
Graph 9: Registration Rates Among College Attending and College Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds, Midterm Election Years



Source: Current Population Survey, November Supplement, 1972-2000.

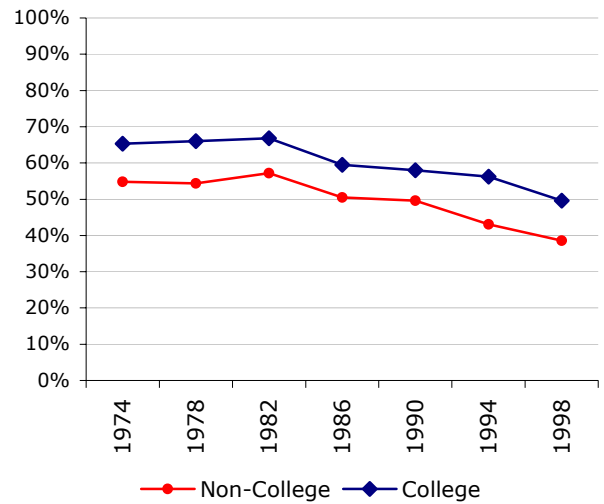
Among registered citizens, voter turnout has declined steadily since 1972 for both college attending and non-college attending youth. However, the difference in turnout rates among registered citizens between college attending and non-college attending youth is smaller than presented in Graphs 1 and 2, with the rate of decline consistent for both college attending and non-college attending 18-25 year olds.

Graph 10: Voter Turnout Among Registered College Attending and College Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds, Presidential Years



Source: Current Population Survey, November Supplement, 1972-2000.

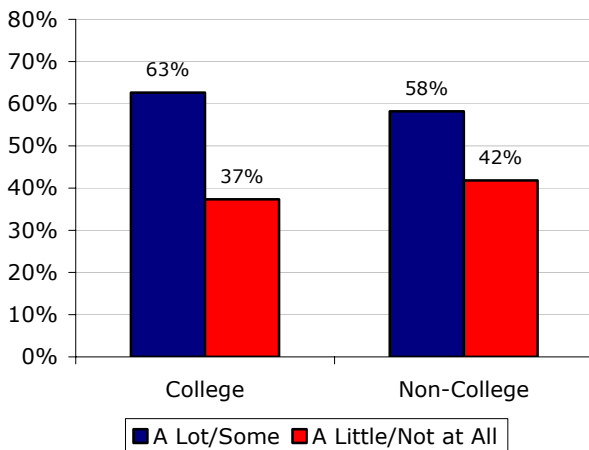
Graph 11: Voter Turnout Among Registered College Attending and College Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds, Midterm Election Years



Source: Current Population Survey, November Supplement, 1972-2000.

Trust in Government

Graph 12: Trust in Government Among College Attending and Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds

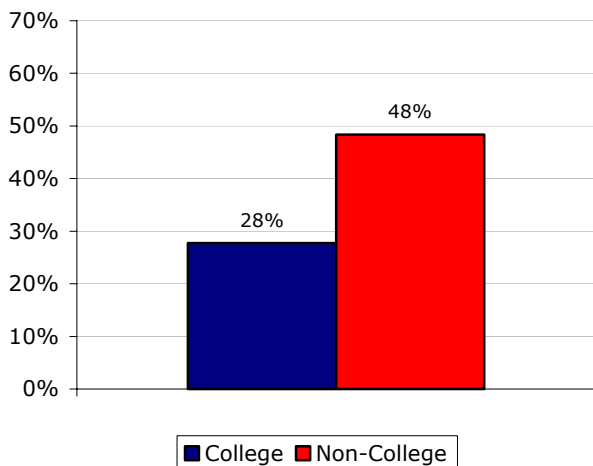


Source: CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, Jan 2002.

College attending 18-25 year olds are somewhat more likely to trust government than college non-attending 18-25 year olds.

Volunteering

Graph 13: Percentage of College Attending and Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds Who Never Volunteer

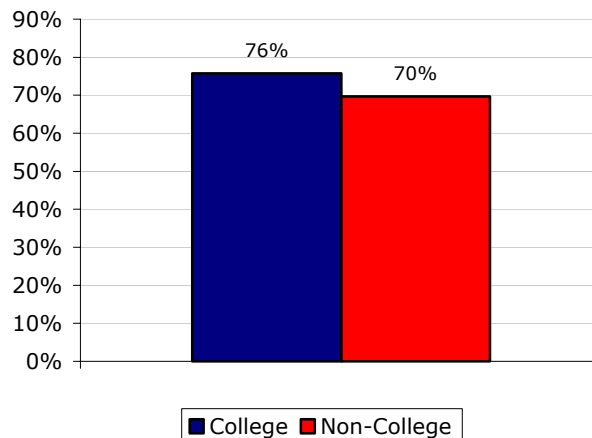


Source: CIRACLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, Jan 2002.

Non-college attending 18-25 year olds are much more likely never to have volunteered than their college attending counterparts.

However, there is little difference in the likelihood that a college attending or non-college attending young person has donated to a church or community organization.

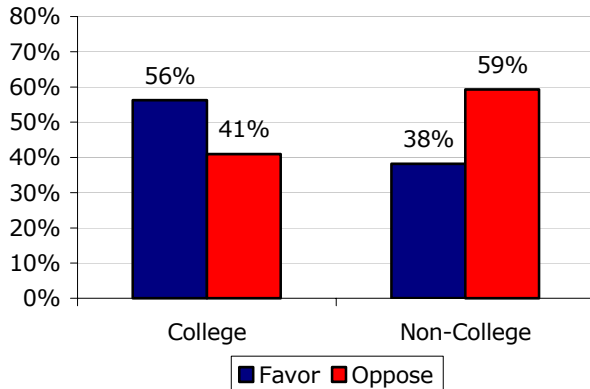
Graph 14: Percentage of College Attending and Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds Who Have Donated to a Church or Community Organization



Source: CIRACLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, Jan 2002.

Attitudes Towards Civic Education

Graph 15: Percentage of College Attending and Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds Who Favor or Oppose Community Service Requirements for HS Graduation

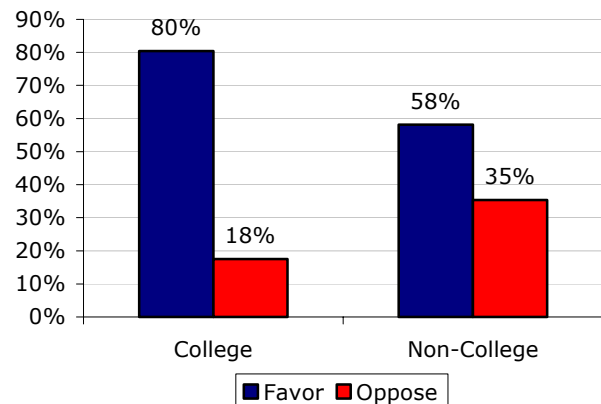


Source: CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, Jan 2002.

College attending 18-25 year olds are more likely to support a community service requirement than their non-college counterparts.

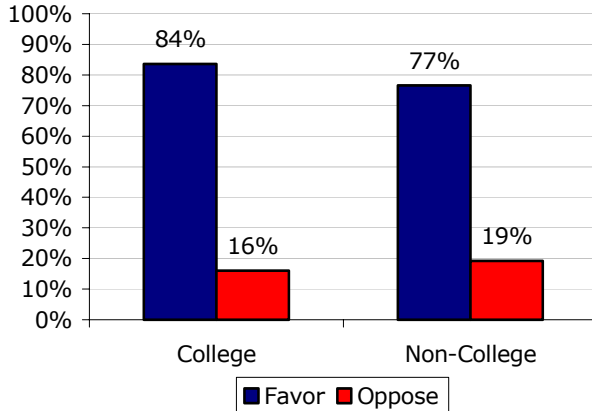
Similarly, college attending 18-25 year olds are significantly more likely to support civics or government class requirements in high schools than non-college attending 18-25 year olds.

Graph 16: Percentage of College Attending and Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds Who Favor or Oppose Civics Or Government Course Requirements for HS Graduation



Source: CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, Jan 2002.

Graph 17: Percentage of College Attending & Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds Who Favor or Oppose Offering Chance to do Community Service in Exchange for College Money

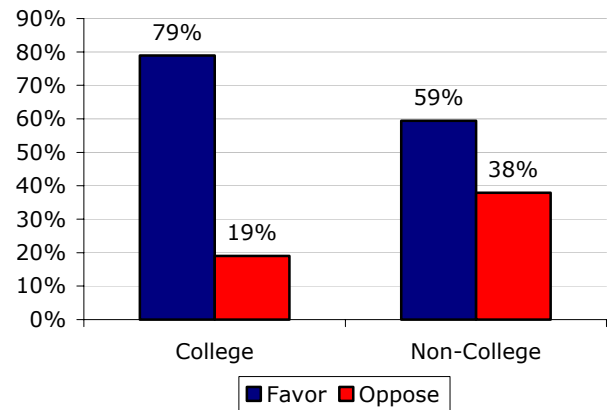


Source: CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, Jan 2002.

However, college attending and non-college attending 18-25 year olds hold similar views on earning money for college in exchange for community service.

While both college attending and non-college attending 18-25 year olds support requiring a civics or government course in middle school, college attending youth show stronger support for middle school civics or government courses than their non-college attending counterparts.

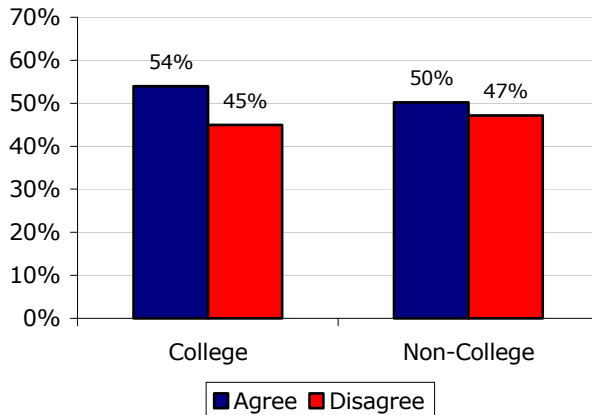
Graph 18: Percentage of College Attending and Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds Who Favor or Oppose Civics Or Government Course Requirements for Middle School



Source: CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, Jan 2002.

Views on Government and Politics

Graph 19: Government Addresses the Needs of Young People, Responses of College Attending and Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds

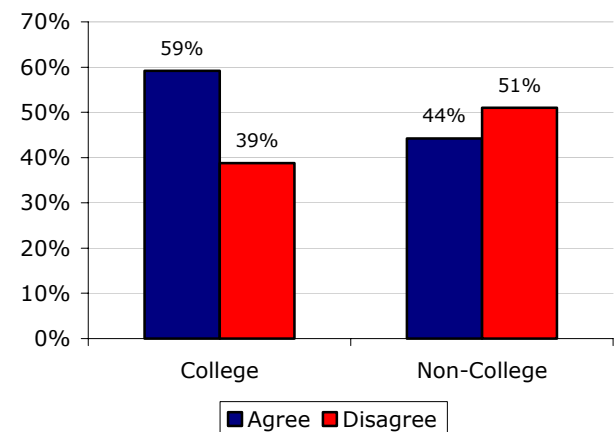


Source: CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, Jan 2002.

Both non-college attending 18-25 year olds and college attending 18-25 year olds believe that the government is addressing the needs of young people.

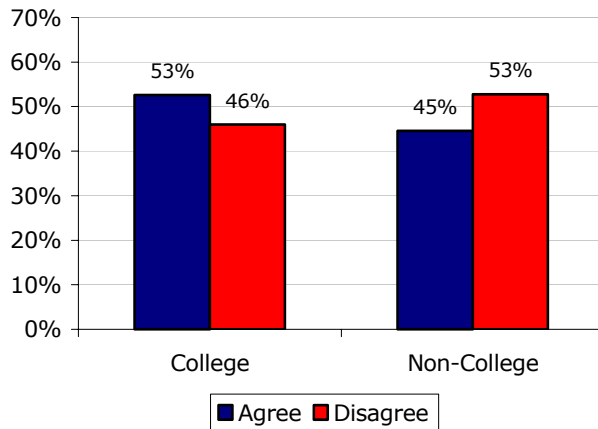
However, non-college attending 18-25 year olds are not as likely as college attending 18-25 year olds to believe that politics and elections address the needs of young people.

Graph 20: Politics and Elections Address the Needs of Young People, Responses of College Attending and Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds



Source: CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, Jan 2002.

Graph 21: Political Leaders Pay Attention to the Concerns of Young People Like Themselves, Responses of College Attending and Non-Attending 18-25 Year Olds



Source: CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey, Jan 2002.

Similarly, non-college attending 18-25 year olds are not as likely as college attending 18-25 year olds to believe that political leaders pay attention to the concerns of people like themselves.

Notes

¹ Research Director and Research Assistant respectively, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, University of Maryland School of Public Affairs. We thank Peter Levine, William Galston, Deborah Both, Carrie Donovan and Emily Kirby for comments on previous drafts of this fact sheet. All errors in fact or interpretation are our own.

² These figures are estimates of the number of non-institutionalized young people in the U.S. Estimates are based on the 2000 November supplement of the Current Population Survey.

³ According to Norman Nie, Jane Junn, and Kenneth Stehlik-Barry in *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America* (Chicago 1996), the relationship between political participation and educational attainment is “the best documented finding in American political behavior research.

⁴ See the CIRCLE fact sheet, “Youth Demographics” by Mark Hugo Lopez, October 2002 for more information on the trend in educational attainment among different ethnic/racial groups.

⁵ Data for Voter Turnout rates and Registration rates are taken from the 1972 to 2000 November Supplements of the Current Population Surveys. Each survey is completed within two weeks of the November elections, and interviews over 50,000 non-institutionalized individuals. Calculation of the voter turnout rate by the CIRCLE method excludes survey participants who did not answer the voting question or the registration question. Inclusion of “no answers” would result in a lower turnout rate than that reported here. For this fact sheet, voter turnout and voter registration rates are calculated for U.S. citizens only.

⁶ Percentages add up to more than 100% as respondents could answer they viewed voting as all of the categories.