

May 1 College Decision Day Brings Relief, Excitement And Big Worries About Money



May 1 is an exciting day for many high school seniors. It's decision day, when students commit to college and send in those deposits— to hold their spot on campus.

Across the country, schools celebrate the achievement in different ways. Some hold assemblies where students get up and announce their decisions. In other places, students wear their college gear a T-shirt or ball cap or sweatshirt.

Walk down any high school hallway or sit in a college adviser's office and you'll likely hear a chorus of "Where are you going next year? What's your school choice? Where are you going?"

That's what I hear in an adviser's office at McKinley Tech High School in Washington, D.C. The room is abuzz with activity. Students are filling out scholarship prompts, trying to access their financial award letters to inform last minute decisions and announcing their final college choice to anyone who asks.

Alexis Liggins, a senior, is hunched over her laptop, putting the final touches on a scholarship application due tomorrow. She's committed to [Florida A&M University](#) a highly ranked public, historically black university in Tallahassee, Fla and she's planning to major in biology. When she visited the campus earlier this year, she said she just knew.

"It was a nurturing environment when we went," she explains. "It was like a big family." Later this week, she'll get up in front of her peers and say her school choice out loud.

The relief of finally deciding is palpable in this room, but it doesn't mean all the anxiety is gone. For many, here and across the country, there are still a number of questions. **The biggest: Can I actually afford to go?**

"I kind of like the idea that there's glorification of the academic. I think that's awesome," says Lindsay Page, an education professor at the University of Pittsburgh. She studies college access and says she's glad high schools have moved away from only celebrating sports. But decision day can be a bit misleading especially for low-income students.

"We know that plenty of students can look like they have it all together at the end of high school, and lots of those students don't successfully make the transition."

In some places, **nearly 40 percent of high school seniors never make it to campus in the fall**, according to research Page has worked on.

In so many cases, it relates back to money.

"Oftentimes there's a big gap in between what students and their families are able to pay and what is their unmet need, basically what's left in their bill that they're supposed to make up," Page says.

Alexis, the student who committed to Florida A&M, says she didn't get as much financial aid as she had hoped for, and she has to come up with about \$20,000 per year.

She knows that \$20,000 is a big number and that over four years, that net cost is actually \$80,000. But she's determined that come August, she'll be soaking up that warm weather in Tallahassee.

"I'm still gonna go," she explains. Her plan is to apply for as many outside scholarships as possible.

"Every single day," she says. "During class, during lunch. During my sleep time that I wish I get."

She says she'll work her grocery store job all summer and see if she can transfer — or find a new job — when she moves to Florida in the fall.

A Johnson/NPR Tags high school, low income, college financial aid