

# Supporting a Thriving Youth in Northern Santa Barbara County

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# Introduction

Despite living in one of California's wealthiest counties, many young Santa Barbara County residents continue to face significant social and economic barriers that impact their ability to thrive. These challenges are particularly prevalent in the Northern Santa Barbara County cities of Santa Maria and Lompoc, home to many low-income, farm-working, recently-arrived immigrant, and working-class communities. As of 2024, 7 out of 10 Lompoc high schoolers and 8 out of 10 Santa Maria high schoolers were classified as low-income, homeless, foster youth, or English-language-learner student—vulnerable youth populations facing higher barriers to high school graduation and dropout rates (Ed-Data 2025).

This research brief draws from 852 surveys conducted with Northern Santa Barbara County young adult residents, aged 18–34, from the Thriving Youth Study collected in 2024. Based on youth-led participatory action research methods, the study focuses on young adults' educational aspirations, high school experiences, and pathways to civic engagement after high school. This report highlights findings from Santa Maria (n=435), Lompoc (n=292) and Allan Hancock College (AHC) students (n=381) respondents. Our research finds that:

1. **Northern Santa Barbara County young residents have high educational aspirations, yet they could be better guided and prepared to achieve their educational goals.** Educators and counselors must take these aspirations into consideration when seeking to promote students' transition to the next level of education, whether to a community college or a four-year institution.
2. **While in high school, Northern Santa Barbara County youth are active in a range of extracurricular activities, but their participation drops after graduation.** This lack of engagement is a missed opportunity to support the leadership, skills, and talents of a promising population. Local organizations can play a key role in keeping young people active in efforts to better the community.

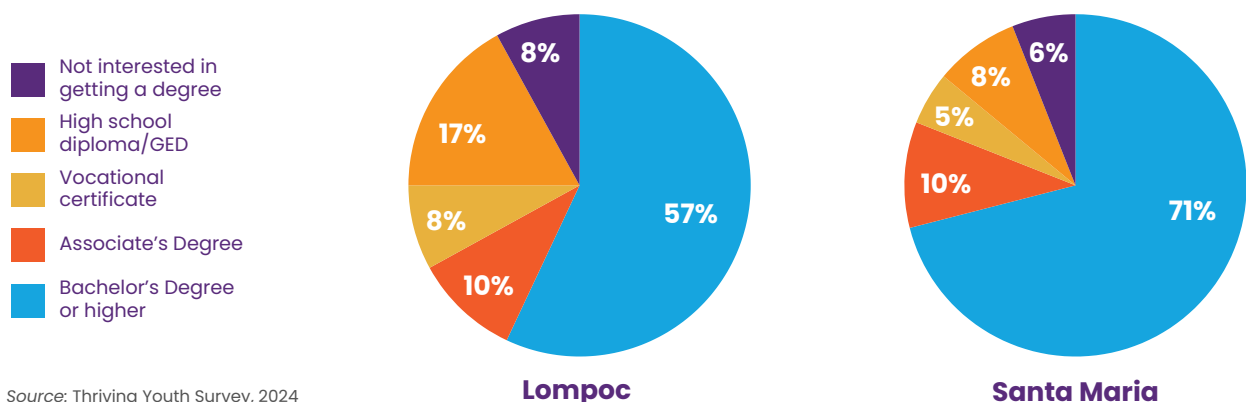
# Educational Aspirations of Santa Maria and Lompoc Young Adults

Young residents reported high educational aspirations that significantly exceeded current patterns of degree attainment in the region. As of 2023, 13% of Lompoc and 15% of Santa Maria residents aged 25 and older had attained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 50 percent of City of Santa Barbara residents (U.S. Census Bureau). Regardless of the educational attainment among residents in these cities, 65% of Santa Maria and 50% of Lompoc survey respondents reported expecting to earn a bachelor's degree or higher. In fact, 6% of Santa Maria and 7% of Lompoc survey respondents aspired to achieve a PHD, MD or EDD.

*Quick Facts: 13% of Lompoc and 15% of Santa Maria residents aged 25 and older have attained at a bachelor's degree or higher, lower rates when compared to 50% of Santa Barbara residents aged 25 and older.*

Studies have shown that children of parents with high educational attainment tend to benefit from increased parental academic support and a strong college-going culture at home (Reardon 2018). However, many respondents in our survey cannot rely on parents who can show them the path to achieve these educational goals from lived experience. Only 9 percent of Santa Maria and 17 percent of Lompoc respondents reported having a parent who had a bachelor's degree or higher. Nonetheless, the youth in our study have high educational aspirations and would benefit from strong college preparatory support in their high schools as well as from their local community college, AHC. These findings point to the importance of providing young people with guidance to achieve their degree goals.

**Figure 1. Lompoc and Santa Maria Young Adults' Expectation for Degree Attainment**



Source: Thriving Youth Survey, 2024

# High Schools and Community Colleges' Roles in Supporting a College-Going Culture

For high schoolers, a crucial step along the path to a four-year degree is completing A-G requirements, which ensure that students develop the foundational knowledge and skills necessary for college success. As of 2024, only 27% of senior high school students in the Lompoc Unified School District and 31% of senior high school students in the Santa Maria Unified School District met the A-G requirements for the state's UC/CSU system (California Department of Education).

When asked if their high school helped them to complete the A-G requirements for admission to a UC or CSU, 71% of Santa Maria respondents and 67% of Lompoc respondents strongly or somewhat agreed. Moreover, 57% of Santa Maria respondents and 63% of Lompoc respondents stated that they strongly or somewhat agreed that their high school helped them to apply to a four-year university. A greater number of participants indicated their high school helped them apply to community college, with 69% of Santa Maria and 76% of Lompoc respondents strongly or somewhat agreeing with that statement.

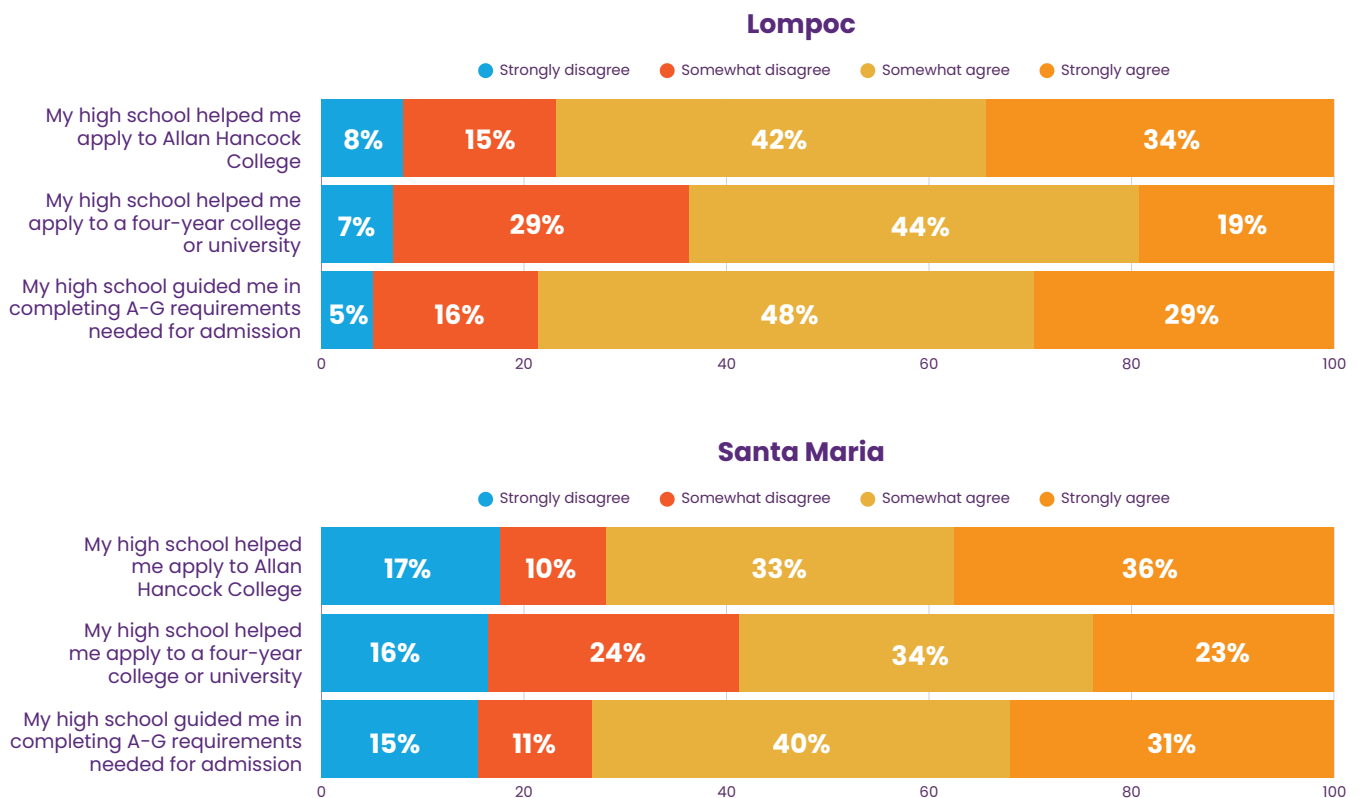
*Quick Facts: Only 27% of senior high school students in Lompoc Unified School District, and 31% of senior high school students in Santa Maria Unified School District have met A-G course completion requirements.*

A community college education can open up educational and career opportunities for young adults. In our survey, a subgroup of 381 respondents were currently enrolled at AHC. With a broad geographical reach in the region, a main campus in Santa Maria, and satellite campuses in Lompoc, Santa Ynez Valley and Vandenberg Space Force Base Center, AHC plays a pivotal role in helping students to achieve their high educational aspirations. Respondents praised AHC's positive campus climate, 3 out of 5 of respondents strongly agreed that AHC offered courses they needed to advance their educational goals. Students also overwhelmingly reported positive attitudes toward AHC faculty and students, with 65% strongly agreeing that faculty treated them with respect and 60% of students strongly agreeing that other students treated them with respect. Yet these positive experiences did not

necessarily translate into higher educational attainment. According to data collected in 2021 by the Community Colleges' Chancellor's Office Management Information System, only 9 percent of AHC students eventually transferred to a four-year university to pursue their studies beyond an associate's degree (California Community Colleges' Chancellor's Office of Management Information System).

Given that young people's educational aspirations significantly exceed current patterns of educational attainment, it is essential to provide Lompoc and Santa Maria high school and community college students with tailored guidance to help them pursue their goals effectively. They should also receive support in reassessing and adjusting their plans as needed to align with their academic progress and circumstances. Such tailored guidance is especially important because AHC serves many first-generation college students who may not have access to social networks that offer reliable information and advice.

**Figure 2. Lompoc and Santa Maria Young Adults Perspectives on High School Preparation to Apply to a Four-Year University and Community College**



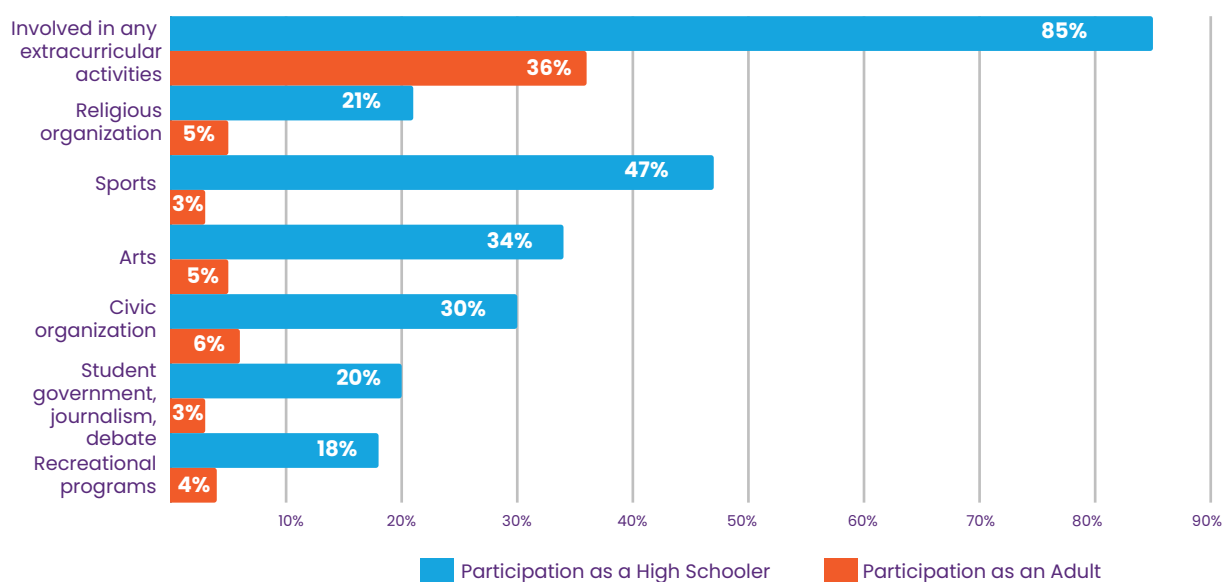
Source: Thriving Youth Survey, 2024



# Extracurricular Activities and Civic Engagement

Extracurricular and civic activities can play an important role in expanding young people’s social networks, increasing their academic achievement and skills, and fostering a college-going culture. However, respondents reported a steep engagement drop in such activities between high school and young adulthood, from 85 percent of respondents participating in high school to only 36% afterward. This trend was observed across various types of extracurricular activities including sports, arts, student government, debate, journalism, and other recreational and religious programs.

**Figure 3. Participation in Civic Activities During and After High School**



Source: Thriving Youth Survey, 2024

It is therefore crucial that local organizations build a civic engagement infrastructure that keeps young people participating in activities that connect them to their peers, expose them to a variety of diverse viewpoints, and involve them in community change-making efforts throughout high school and beyond. When asked if they had worked with others in the past year on an issue that affected their community, 6 out of 10 respondents stated they had not. Yet, 8 out of 10 respondents agreed that they believed they could make a difference in their community. Thus, even though young residents may not currently be working with other community members on a local issue, they do feel they can make a difference. Local organizations can build on this confidence and develop paths for young people to remain connected to the community and have a voice in local issues, which can help cultivate a healthy democracy.

# Recommendations for Educators and Regional Leaders

The following recommendations are designed to improve and advance awareness of the services available to Northern Santa Barbara County young adult residents. They focus on increasing students' use of existing resources, which range from academic counseling to community outreach organizations. These recommendations are directed to administrators of area high schools, community colleges, and municipal leaders.

- **Support efforts to expand college preparatory coursework in high school for all students.** With such high educational aspirations in the region, it is important to ensure all students complete the necessary courses to be eligible to enroll in a four-year university.
- **Increase the availability of academic counseling at high schools and two-year institutions.** Bring together academic counselors at local high schools and community colleges with the goal of developing mentoring programs for first-generation high school and community college students.
- **Expand access to civic and community organizations that nurture peer connection.** Local organizations are leading work to connect young people to issues that are relevant to them. With respondents participating less in extracurricular and civic activities after graduating high school and feeling disconnected from change-making efforts, civic organizations can play a key role in engaging young people in local matters that are relevant to them and help forge connections with their peers.

Young residents aspire to bright educational futures. Existing organizations that strengthen youth development and educational training, as well as initiatives at the community college and high school district levels, can help student realize these aspirations. It is crucial, therefore, that organizations and leaders continue to invest in organizations that keep young people engaged and motivated to make a positive change in their local communities.

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Photographs courtesy of Dr. Ana Guerrerro, Linsey Rodriguez and Yaquilina Aguirre.

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