



# **Survey of College Plans of Maryland High Ability Students**

**May 2005**

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## Introduction

Since 1979, the Maryland Higher Education Commission has conducted annual surveys of talented Maryland high school seniors to learn about their college plans. Intentions of the most promising students are important because a college's reputation depends, in part, on its ability to attract these students. This report examines the results of the survey of high ability students who graduated from a Maryland high school in spring 2004. Findings include college plans, factors that students considered important in deciding what college to attend, academic major, and financial aid. Comparisons are made with results of earlier surveys.

## Method

Questionnaires were mailed in June 2004 to all 696 Maryland high school seniors who were named National Merit/National Achievement semifinalists or finalists or were Maryland Distinguished Scholar finalists. The response rate was 47 percent. Some students fell in both categories (National Merit/National Achievement and Distinguished Scholars); these individuals were retained only in the former group to avoid the mailing and receipt of duplicative questionnaires).

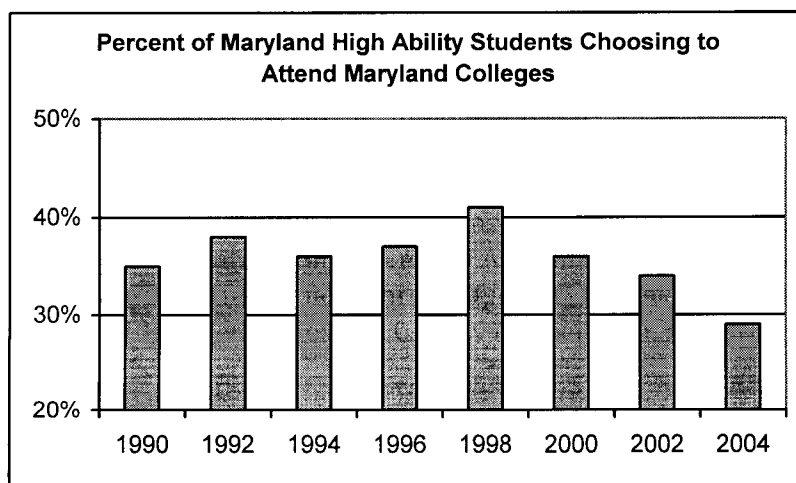
The majority of survey respondents were female (55 percent). More than two-thirds (69 percent) were white; 19 percent, Asian; 8 percent, African American, and 2 percent, Hispanic. The largest percentage came from Montgomery County (46 percent), followed by Baltimore County (13 percent), Howard County (11 percent), and Prince George's County (6 percent).

## Highlights

### College Choice

After peaking in 1998, the percent of Maryland's most talented high school graduates deciding to enroll in a Maryland public or independent institution has dropped steadily.

**In 2004, only 29 percent of Maryland's high ability students chose to remain in-state, the lowest figure since the Commission has included Distinguished Scholar finalists in the survey.**



In every category of the State's high-caliber students, fewer are choosing to enroll at a Maryland post-secondary institution. The decline since 1998 was particularly notable among Distinguished Scholar finalists (both Academic and Arts). This might be due to the increased quality of Distinguished Scholar finalists in recent years. The composite SAT score of finalists rose from 1470 to 1500 between 1998 and 2004. Only a quarter of National Merit/National Achievement semifinalists (down from a third in 1998), 27 percent of Maryland Academic Distinguished Scholar finalists (down from 40 percent in 1998), and 46 percent of Maryland Arts Distinguished Scholar finalists decided to remain in-state in 2004.

	<b>1994</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>2004</b>
National Merit Semifinalists	29.8%	33.1%	25.1%
Maryland Distinguished Scholar Finalists- Academic	36.0%	39.8%	27.2%
Maryland Distinguished Scholar Finalists- Arts	58.1%	72.7%	45.8%
All High Ability Students	36.1%	40.8%	29.3%

Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of Maryland's high ability students selected an independent out-of-state institution. The universities chosen most frequently were Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, and University of Pennsylvania.

Maryland public four-year colleges and universities were selected by 20 percent, the same as a decade ago. The big drop came at Maryland independent campuses: they were chosen by only 9 percent of high ability students in 2004, down from 14 percent in 1994. University of Maryland, College Park continues to be chosen by the highest percent of Maryland's high ability students among institutions in the State: 14.5 percent (about the same as 10 years ago).

		<b>1994</b>	<b>2004</b>
Maryland	Community College	1.6%	0.6%
	Public Four-year	20.2%	20.0%
	Independent	14.1%	8.7%
	<i>Total Maryland</i>	<i>35.9%</i>	<i>29.3%</i>
Other States	Public	13.0%	7.2%
	Independent	51.1%	63.5%
	<i>Total Other States</i>	<i>64.1%</i>	<i>70.7%</i>

### Academic Plans

Engineering, biological and physical sciences and fine/applied arts (among Distinguished Scholar-Arts finalists) continue to be the most popular majors among these students. This has been true throughout the history of the survey.

	<i>Percent</i>
Engineering	22.0%
Fine/Applied Arts	18.8%
Biological Science	15.1%
Physical Science	8.6%
Social Science	8.1%
Computer Science	6.5%
Business	4.3%
Letters	3.8%
Math	2.2%
Architecture	1.6%
Education	1.6%
Health	1.6%
Psychology	1.6%
Law	1.1%

### Factors Influencing College Choice

Maryland's high ability students indicated several factors as being very important in their decision. The most popular factors were related to institutional quality: the overall reputation of the college (67 percent), superior program in the intended major (64 percent), and faculty commitment to good teaching (64 percent). A majority also listed as being important the quality of the student body (59 percent), campus appearance (59 percent) and the success of graduates (55 percent). Other factors and their relative importance, which varied by college choice, are presented in the following table.

<b>Table 4. Percent of 2004 Maryland High Ability Students Listing Factors as Very Important to College Choice, by Type of College Selected</b>					
	<b>All</b>	<b>Maryland</b>		<b>Out-of-state</b>	
		<b>Public</b>	<b>Indep.</b>	<b>Public</b>	<b>Indep.</b>
Reputation of school	67%	46%	65%	64%	75%
Superior program in intended major	64%	67%	58%	55%	65%
Faculty commitment to good teaching	64%	48%	58%	50%	72%
Quality of student body	59%	29%	31%	55%	73%
Appearance of campus	59%	41%	50%	59%	65%
Graduates are successful	55%	37%	62%	41%	62%
Good faculty/student ratio	42%	18%	54%	24%	51%
School made a good impression	37%	33%	39%	23%	39%
Size of student body not too large	36%	19%	50%	9%	42%
Special programs for academically talented	35%	52%	15%	59%	29%
Social life at college	35%	24%	12%	23%	43%
Better financial aid offered	29%	55%	31%	32%	21%
Wanted to live away from home	25%	10%	4%	27%	34%
College location	21%	21%	23%	14%	21%
Parent(s) recommended	19%	21%	31%	9%	18%
Good graduate program in major	18%	19%	35%	23%	15%
Friends in attendance	18%	18%	8%	14%	20%
Tuition costs less	16%	52%	4%	18%	6%
Knew more about this college	14%	19%	23%	9%	11%
Teacher or counselor recommended	11%	10%	12%	9%	11%
Sports/athletics program	11%	10%	12%	14%	11%
Friends recommended	10%	6%	8%	9%	11%
Wanted to stay close to home	9%	19%	35%	0	3%
Religious/ethnic reasons	9%	3%	15%	0	11%

Students choosing Maryland public institutions reported a slightly different mix of influential factors. Better financial aid offer, special programs for the academically talented, and lower tuition were among the top four for this group.

<b>Table 5. High Ability Students Choosing Maryland Public Institutions: Most Popular Factors</b>	
	<i>Percent</i>
Superior program in intended major	67%
Better financial assistance offered	55%
Special programs for academically talented	52%
Tuition costs less	52%

## National Merit/National Achievement Semifinalists

More than two-thirds (69 percent) of Maryland's National Merit/National Achievement semifinalists in 2004 chose out-of-state independent institutions, up sharply from 57 percent in 1994. While a slightly higher percentage chose Maryland public institutions compared to a decade ago (21.4 percent vs. 19.3 percent), those choosing a Maryland independent campus dropped by more than half (from 10.6 percent to 3.8 percent).

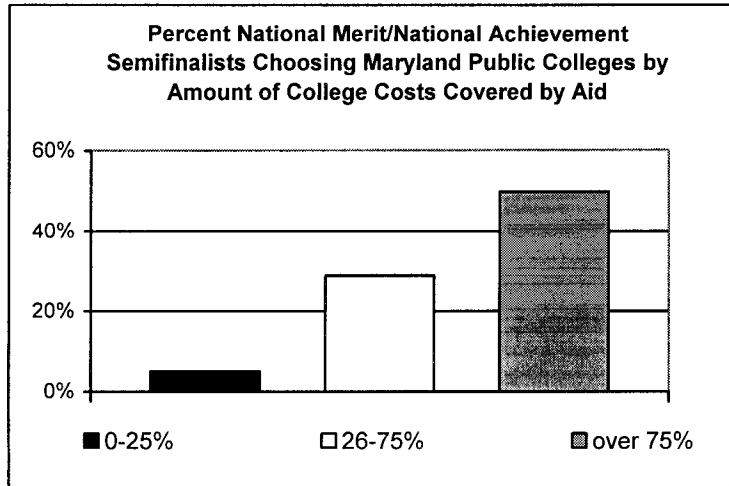
	<b>1994</b>	<b>2004</b>
Maryland public	19.3%	21.4%
Maryland independent	10.6%	3.8%
Out-of-State public	13.0%	6.1%
Out-of-State independent	57.1%	68.7%

Maryland's National Merit/National Achievement semifinalists did not differ from other Maryland high ability students in rating factors very important to college choice. The most popular factor was overall reputation of the college, cited by 71 percent.

The financial aid package offered was also related to college choice. As the following table shows, of National Merit/National Achievement semifinalists selecting Maryland public institutions, half had over 75 percent of their college costs covered by financial aid, while 43 percent had 100 percent of costs covered. Just 11 percent had 25 percent or less of their expenses met.

	<i>Percent College Costs Paid by Aid</i>			
	<i>0-25%</i>	<i>26-75%</i>	<i>76-99%</i>	<i>100%</i>
Maryland Public	11%	39%	7%	43%
Maryland Independent	40%	40%	20%	0
Out-state Public	43%	29%	14%	14%
Out-state Independent	61%	26%	9%	3%

The following graph presents the survey data in a different way. Of those offered aid packages covering less than 25 percent of college costs, only five percent chose Maryland public institutions. As the amount of aid relative to college cost increased, so did the percent choosing Maryland public institutions.



Of those National Merit/National Achievement semifinalists who rated a better financial aid offer as very important to their college choice, half were offered aid to cover more than 75 percent of college costs. Of this group, 57 percent chose Maryland colleges.

The importance of financial aid is illustrated in the students' comments. One student wrote, "I chose the University of Maryland College Park ...mainly because of the two scholarships being offered to me by the university, in combination with my strong liking of the energy of the people within the campus the first time I ever visited UMCP. Additionally, I recognized that from an academic standpoint, the instruction at UMCP was a bargain for the tuition fees." Another National Merit/National Achievement semifinalist who did not select a Maryland school wrote, "I was ready to go to University of Maryland College Park but did not receive enough financial aid. I will be paying a similar amount to go to Stanford as I would pay had I gone to Maryland. UMCP is an amazing school and I loved it but my resources made it less of an option."

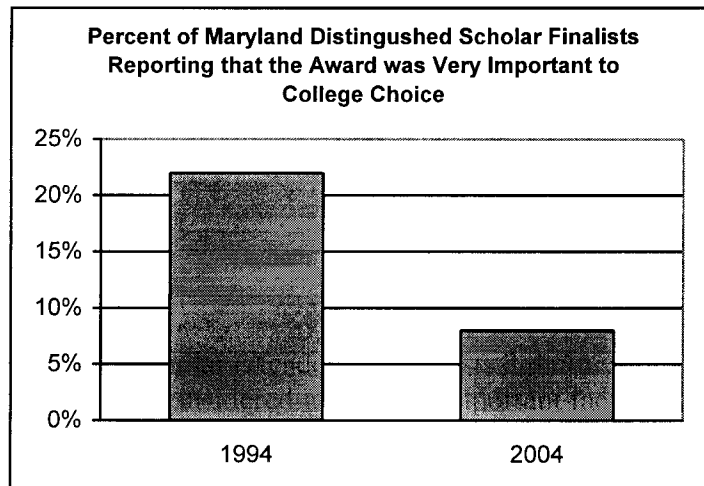
### Maryland Distinguished Scholar (Academic) Finalists

Slightly fewer Maryland Distinguished Scholar (Academic) finalists chose Maryland public institutions compared to 1994, but the percent choosing Maryland independent schools dropped by nearly half. In contrast, the percent selecting out-of-state independent institutions increased from 51 percent to 66 percent.

	<b>1994</b>	<b>2004</b>
Maryland public	20.1%	18.4%
Maryland independent	15.9%	8.8%
Out-of-State public	13.4%	7.2%
Out-of-State independent	50.6%	65.6%



Maryland's Distinguished Scholar (Academic) finalists did not differ from other high ability students in what they considered to be very important factors in college choice. Asked specifically about the Maryland Distinguished Scholar award, only 8 percent said that it had played a very important role in their decision. Over half (54 percent) said it was not important. This is a significant change in attitude from past years: a decade ago, the percent reporting that the Maryland Distinguished Scholar award was very important ranged from 18 to 29 percent, while the percent saying the award was not important ranged from 34 to 40 percent.



As one student who did not choose an in-state school put it, “While the Maryland Distinguished Scholar award is certainly an honor and of weight, it is not of a significant amount as to make Maryland schools more attractive. Academically talented students receive offers from out of state schools that meet and often exceed the Maryland award.”

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## **APPENDIX: THE QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Maryland  
Higher Education Commission  
839 Bestgate Road, Suite 400  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401-3013**

**Survey of  
Academically Talented High School Seniors**

**Please fill in blanks or circle the number next to the most appropriate responses.**

1. Do you plan to attend college next fall?  
 1- Yes ⇒ If **Yes** continue with question 2  
 2- No ⇒ If **No**, please explain why below  
 3- Undecided ⇒ Please explain why below

If you do not plan to attend college next fall or are undecided, you should stop here. The rest of the questionnaire does not apply to you. Please return the questionnaire in the postage-paid envelope.

We thank you for your help and time.

2. Have you decided which college you will attend next fall?  
 1- Yes  
 2- No ⇒ If **No**, skip to question 7.

In responding to questions 3 and 4, be specific about the name of your college. For example, instead of writing "University of Maryland" you should write "Univ. of Md.-College Park" or "Univ. of Md.-Balto Co."

3. Which college or university do you plan to attend next fall?  
 \_\_\_\_\_

4. To which other colleges or universities did you actually apply?  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

5. Approximately what proportion of your first year college costs (tuition and fees, room and board) will be covered by the financial aid package you have been offered at the college you plan to attend next fall?  
 1- 0-25%                      4- 76-99%  
 2- 26-50%                    5- 100%  
 3- 51-75%

6. Please rate how important was each of the factors listed below in your choice of a college or university. Using the following scale, write the appropriate rating in the blank next to each factor:

- 1- Very Important  
 2- Somewhat important  
 3- Not important

- a. Overall reputation of the college \_\_\_\_\_  
 b. Had a superior program in your intended major \_\_\_\_\_  
 c. Better financial assistance offered \_\_\_\_\_  
 d. Wanted to live away from home \_\_\_\_\_  
 e. Attracted by the quality of the student body \_\_\_\_\_  
 f. Parent (s) felt it was the best choice \_\_\_\_\_  
 g. Wanted to attend college close to home \_\_\_\_\_  
 h. Attracted by the diversity of the student body \_\_\_\_\_  
 i. Tuition costs are less \_\_\_\_\_  
 j. Teacher or counselor recommended it \_\_\_\_\_  
 k. Knew more about it than other colleges \_\_\_\_\_  
 l. Wanted to go to school in the areas in which the school is located \_\_\_\_\_  
 m. Friends recommended it \_\_\_\_\_  
 n. Special programs for academically talented students \_\_\_\_\_  
 o. The size of the student body not too large \_\_\_\_\_  
 p. Contacts by the school made a good impression \_\_\_\_\_  
 q. Had a good graduate program in your intended major \_\_\_\_\_  
 r. Good campus athletics or sports program \_\_\_\_\_  
 s. Impressed by the appearance or atmosphere of the campus \_\_\_\_\_  
 t. Graduates have reputation for success in finding a job or getting into graduate/professional school \_\_\_\_\_  
 u. Social life at the college \_\_\_\_\_  
 v. Good faculty/student ratio \_\_\_\_\_  
 w. Faculty commitment to good teaching \_\_\_\_\_  
 x. Religious or ethnic considerations \_\_\_\_\_  
 y. Other reason(s): \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

7. a. Have you decided what undergraduate program or major you will pursue?  
 1- Yes  
 2- No  
 b. If **Yes**, what is this major?  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**over ⇒**

8. Have you been offered a Maryland Distinguished Scholar Award and, if so, how important was it to your college choice?
- 1- No
  - 2- Yes, very important
  - 3- Yes, somewhat important
  - 4- Yes, not important
9. a. Have you been actively recruited by any public colleges or universities in Maryland?
- 1- Yes, I have been sent unsolicited literature about a college
  - 2- Yes, I have been contacted personally by a representative from a college
  - 3- Yes, both of the above
  - 4- No, I have not been actively recruited
- b. If yes, which colleges or universities?

13. a. If you plan to attend a public college or university in Maryland, please share with us your overall reasoning for making that decision, especially why you chose a public Maryland institution over other colleges and universities.
- b. If you plan to attend an out-of-state institution or a private institution in Maryland, please suggest changes or improvements that you think would make Maryland's public colleges and universities more attractive to academically talented students like yourself.

10. What is your gender?

- 1- Female
- 2- Male

11. What is your race/ethnic origin?

- 1- Asian
- 2- African-American
- 3- Hispanic
- 4- White
- 5- Other

12. In what county do you live? \_\_\_\_\_  
(Please use number corresponding to county.)

- |                            |                           |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1- Allegany                | 14- Kent                  |
| 2- Anne Arundel            | 15- Montgomery            |
| 3- Baltimore <b>County</b> | 16- Prince George's       |
| 4- Calvert                 | 17- Queen Anne's          |
| 5- Caroline                | 18- St. Mary's            |
| 6- Carroll                 | 19- Somerset              |
| 7- Cecil                   | 20- Talbot                |
| 8- Charles                 | 21- Washington            |
| 9- Dorchester              | 22- Wicomico              |
| 10- Frederick              | 23- Worcester             |
| 11- Garrett                | 24- Baltimore <b>City</b> |
| 12- Harford                | 25- Out-of-state          |
| 13- Howard                 |                           |

Thank you very much for your help and time. If you would like to receive a copy of the survey report when it is completed, please fill in your name and home address below:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

**Please mail this survey in the enclosed postage-paid envelope.**