



# girlsBEST LONGITUDINAL FINDINGS

Building the Economic Power of Girls Works

Prepared for the Women's Foundation of Minnesota by

**KORWIN CONSULTING**

*Advancing Social Justice Solutions*

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## what is girlsBEST?

In 2001, the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota (Foundation) launched girlsBEST (girls Building Economic Success Together) to support programs that are driven and led by girls, ages 12 through 18, across Minnesota. The girlsBEST Fund supports girls who traditionally experience greater socioeconomic inequalities to reshape their future and unlock their potential.

Over the past 15 years, the Foundation has provided **\$3.7 million** to four cohorts of grantee partners who have planned and implemented 359 grants and impacted over **40,000 girls across the state.**

Grantee partners build the capacity of girls to achieve economic well-being and overcome barriers to independence, such as low wages, sexism, poor self-esteem, unintended pregnancies, and violence against girls. This report uses longitudinal survey data to tell the story of more than 400 alumnae between 2013 and 2017.

## how does it work?

The girlsBEST Fund strives to impact low-income girls, girls of color, girls in Greater Minnesota, and additional girls experiencing disparities in academic and professional outcomes. Grants are provided to grantee partners who implement girl-led programs designed to achieve the following outcome:

Individual girls ages 12 to 18 will increase readiness to achieve economic well-being.

The underlying theory of change suggests that girls can increase their readiness through increased awareness of systematic gender inequalities; a growing sense of being change agents, fostered through leadership development skills; and a

capacity for individual and collective activism as a result of participation in girlsBEST programs.



## theory of change

girlsBEST aims to **INCREASE READINESS TO ACHIEVE ECONOMIC WELL-BEING** through 3 stages:

**1**

**Awareness** by girls of systematic gender inequality that affects economic potential.

**2**

Realization by girls that they can be **agents of change** through leadership.

**3**

Capacity for individual and collective **activism and advocacy** for women's equality.

### 4 PROGRAM TRACKS



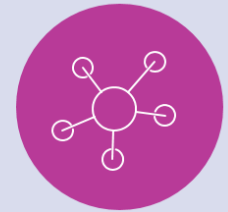
ACADEMIC



ENTREPRENEUR



CAREER



COMMUNITY

*integrating notable practices*

- MENTORING
- DIVERSITY
- LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
- CULTURAL & COMMUNITY AWARENESS
- COLLABORATION
- FINANCIAL LITERACY
- MULTIGENERATIONAL APPROACH

### LONGITUDINAL KEY FINDINGS

1. girlsBEST alumnae value education, with 94% either enrolled or planning to enroll in post-secondary education.
2. Participation in girlsBEST programs cultivates motivation and support systems needed to pursue academic and professional goals.
3. Even five years after high school graduation, alumnae are confident in their potential to lead healthy and successful personal and professional lives.

## how do we know?

This report summarizes findings from a longitudinal survey of girlsBEST alumnae from 2013 to 2017. A total of 417 young women responded to the survey in 2013, 2015, 2016, and 2017, with 67% completing the survey in two or more years (n=281). Additional information about data collection and analyses can be found in the methodology section.<sup>1</sup>

## what did we learn?

- girlsBEST alumnae are personally motivated to pursue post-secondary education and advanced degrees. Support from their family, participation in girlsBEST, access to school resources, and financial aid contributed to their pursuit of higher education.
- New alumnae are likely to attribute their pursuit of post-secondary education to their girlsBEST program, while those who are three to five years out of high school say it is due to their personal motivation. These findings suggest alumnae continue to cultivate awareness and a sense of agency that may manifest in internalized ambition.
- Many girlsBEST alumnae are first-generation college students who face social, financial, and logistical obstacles. However, young women surveyed reported being proud of their resilience and success thus far. Alumnae are confident in their abilities to accomplish their goals, finish school, and secure a high paying job.
- Most alumnae are working part-time while attending or applying to college, university, or a work training program. They work in a wide variety of industries, including schools, child care, health facilities, retail, restaurants, and manufacturing jobs.
- Recent graduates tend to be most optimistic about pursuing higher education. The longer women are out of school, the more likely they are to perceive social and financial barriers in the way of their education. Meanwhile, younger alumnae are more likely to perceive logistical barriers, like needing help with applications and filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

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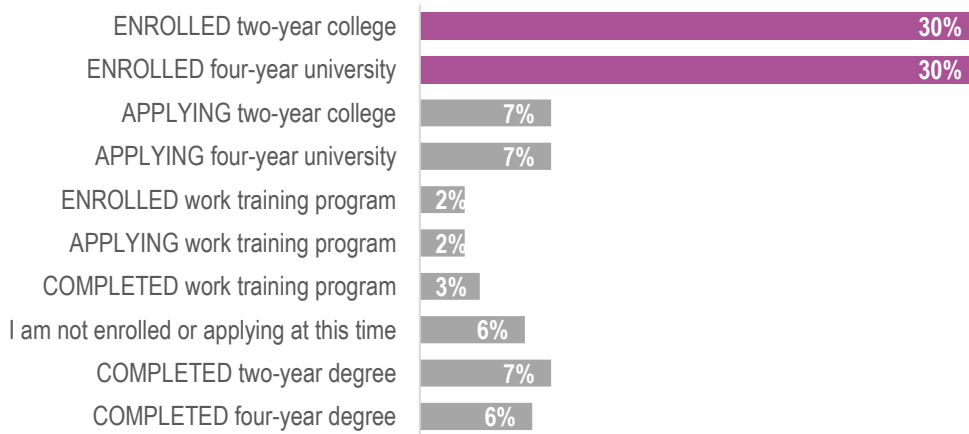
<sup>1</sup> Data from 2014 were unavailable and excluded from this report because they were analyzed separately by a different research group, Lily Pad Consulting. Findings from 2014 can be available upon request. This report only includes survey data from 2013, 2015, 2016, and, 2017.

# findings

## education is a top priority

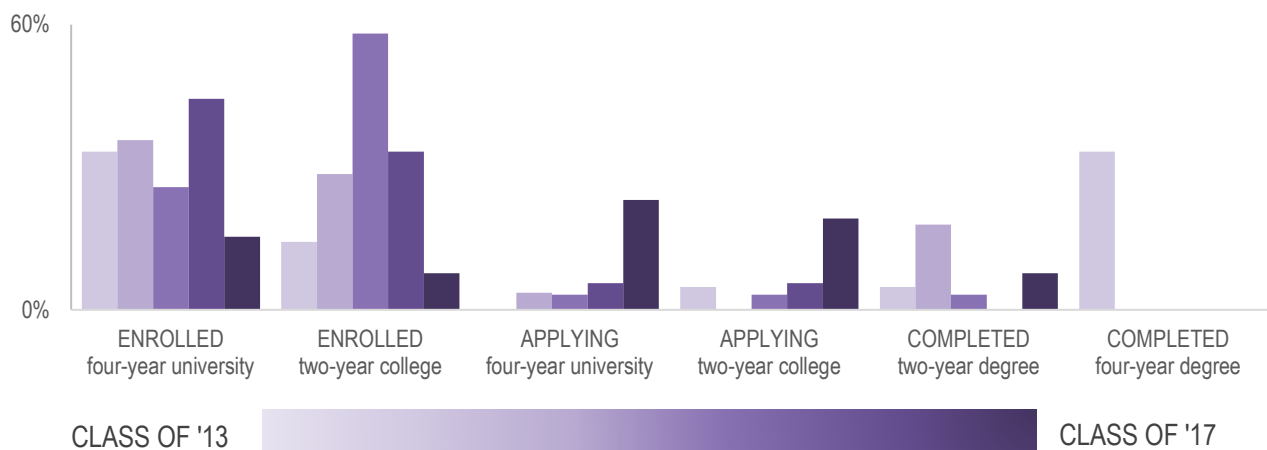
By 2017, 60% of alumnae were either enrolled in a four-year university (30%) or a two-year community or technical college (30%).

The majority of respondents were enrolled at a **college or university** in 2017.



Alumnae are not only enrolling in post-secondary education, but they are remaining in school and advancing their education over time. However, older alumnae more likely to be enrolled in higher education than younger alumnae.

**Class of 2017** are most likely to be applying to university or college;  
**Class of 2016** are most likely to be enrolled in a four-year university;  
**Class of 2015** are most likely to be enrolled in a two-year college;  
**Class of 2014** are most likely to have completed a two-year degree;  
**Class of 2013** are most likely to have completed a four-year degree.



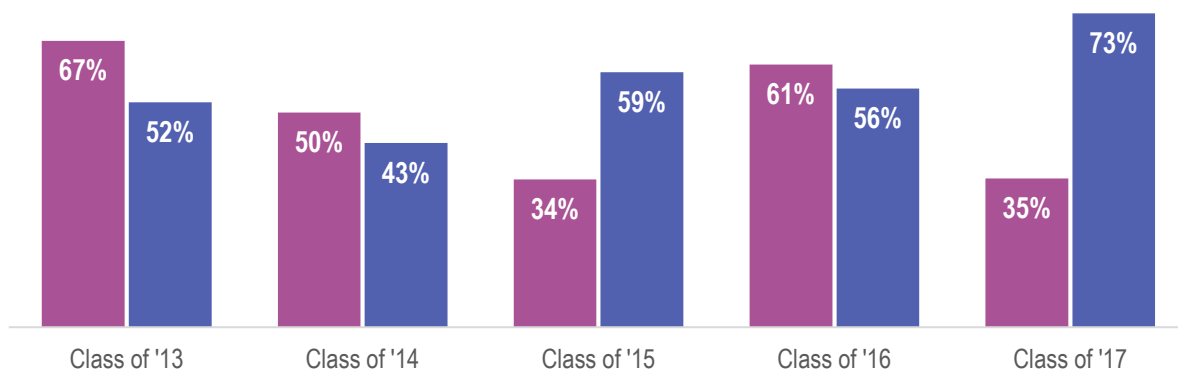
## alumnae pursue higher education

From 2015 to 2017, **nearly half of the alumnae surveyed mentioned personal ambition and goals (48%) and their girlsBEST program as having helped them to pursue and/or complete post-secondary education (46%)**. They report receiving support from school resources, such as their counselor (31%) and college prep programs (28%). In open-ended responses, many also mentioned that their family’s support helps them to continue their education after high school.

“If... not [for] my friend and family I wouldn't attend college. After graduating from high school, I didn't attend the college because I don't have self-confidence and my English is not good enough. But because of they encourage me I attend the college. They say you should have a good education so that you can make your life better. And I'm the first family to attend the college.”

In the most recent survey, alumnae who have been out of high school longer (i.e., Class of 2013 and Class of 2014) were most likely to attribute their pursuit of post-secondary education to their personal ambition and goals. Meanwhile, majorities of those who graduated in the past three years (i.e. Classes of 2015, 2016, and 2017) said their girlsBEST program helped them pursue higher education. Those in the Class of 2016 mentioned both their girlsBEST program *and* their personal ambition. These data reflect the assertion in the girlsBEST’s theory of change that increased readiness to achieve economic well-being occurs over time. Participation in girlsBEST initiatives cultivates awareness, agency, and self-advocacy, which may manifest in personal ambition and goals.

Alumnae who have been out of school longer were more likely to say their **personal ambition** has helped them pursue higher education, while newer graduates were more likely to mention their **girlsBEST program**.



## women need goals, balance, and support

Many alumnae report being personally motivated by the ultimate reward of a higher education, recognizing that a college degree will open the door to job opportunities, economic well-being, and a chance to make a difference in the world.

“I believe having an education is just like having money. The more money you have, the more people you can help. Similarly, the more education you have, the more people you can help and make a difference in their lives.”

### personal motivation

Many mentioned that they are personally motivated to acquire post-secondary education because it will help them obtain a good job and have a better life. When asked to elaborate on the things that have helped them pursue and complete a college degree, alumnae mentioned having a good attitude and being confident, persistent, and dedicated. They said that cultivating focus, hard work, and good study habits are helpful to pursuing higher education. One young woman explained she is **“striving to become something more”** to help her country.

### time management

Alumnae acknowledged the need to **balance their time and priorities**, recognizing that a stable home life will create an environment that better supports their educational pursuits. One young woman mentioned she is working on “finding employment and having family life be less hectic, thus giving room for my own life, educationally and financially.” Another said, “If I had help organizing my priorities, it would be easier to pursue post-secondary education.” Others mentioned the need for childcare to help them focus on schooling.

### support system

Alumnae reported the **need for a strong personal support system** of family, colleagues, friends, and mentors to help them through their college career. Some noted the importance of working with peer “study buddies” and having support from friends to get through daily struggles and pressures. Several women noted that surrounding themselves with successful people is essential to achieving their educational goals.

### financial support

Many stated that **financial support** has been helpful to pursue and complete post-secondary education. Several women also said they would appreciate more help in applying for financial aid and understanding loans. In addition to monetary assistance in the form of scholarships, loans, and grants, alumnae said they would appreciate opportunities to build financial stability and independence, such as internships and part-time jobs.



## alumnae consider advanced degrees

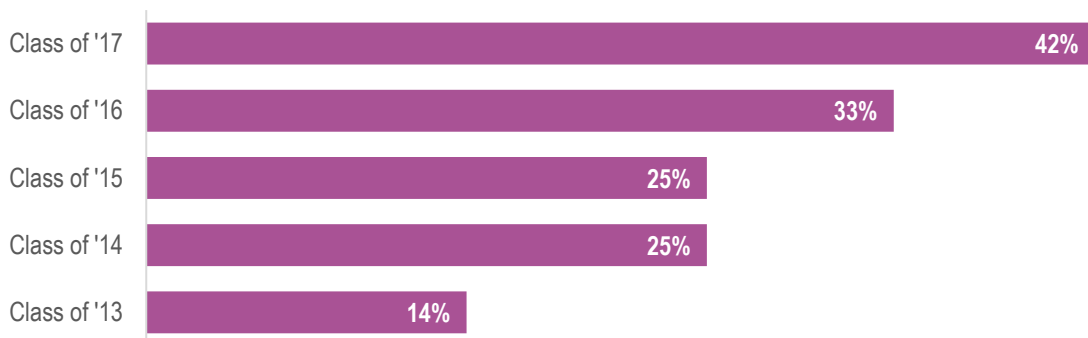


When thinking ahead about graduate-level education, alumnae reported that adult mentors (47%) and their personal ambition and goals (37%) have guided them when considering an advanced degree, such as a master’s or doctorate. Alumnae also cited girlsBEST (27%), understanding the application process (19%), their family (18%), college prep programs (16%), and their school counselor (15%) as sources of inspiration.<sup>2</sup>

“The most important thing that will help me pursue an advanced degree is the support and encouragement from the community and my family.”

Although older alumnae are more likely to believe their ambition and goals will help them pursue *post-secondary education* (i.e. two-year college or four-year university), they are less likely than younger alumnae to believe they can pursue an *advanced degree* (i.e. master’s or doctorate degree). For instance, when surveyed in 2017, 42% from the Class of 2017 — the youngest survey participants — mentioned their ambition and goals will help them consider an advanced degree, compared to only 14% from the Class of 2013.

More recent alumnae are much more likely to believe their **ambition and goals** will help them to consider an advanced degree.

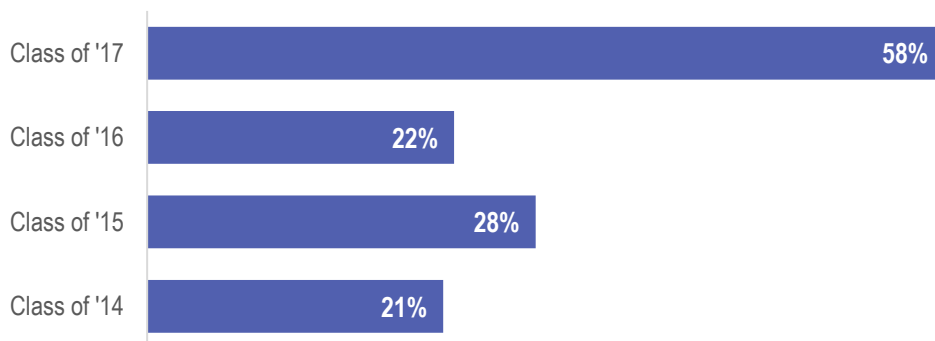


<sup>2</sup> “Do you have plans to pursue an advanced degree?” was asked in 2013, 2015, and 2016. Questions about factors that have helped them pursue advanced degrees were asked in 2015, 2016, and 2017.

The difference in confidence between groups of alumnae may be due to social and economic barriers young women encounter more intensely in the years following graduation. Alumnae mentioned the following obstacles in the way of advanced degrees: being the first in their family to choose to attend college (18%), a lack of understanding of how to apply to a post-secondary institution (15%), financial constraints (14%), a lack of adult mentors (14%), an undecided career path (11%), and challenges in completing the FAFSA (11%).

The majority of alumnae from the Class of 2017 believe their participation in girlsBEST will help them to pursue an advanced degree when the time comes, compared to about one-fourth (21-28%) of those in previous classes.

Those who graduated in 2017 were more than twice as likely to say **their participation in their girlsBEST program** will help pursue a master's or doctorate degree.



## social, financial, and logistical barriers exist

Although education is a top priority for girlsBEST alumnae, women surveyed reported social, financial, and logistical challenges that prevent them from pursuing advanced degrees. Many alumnae are first-generation college students who had little guidance in applying to colleges. As one respondent noted, “sometimes being the first child of the family to move on to a school far away from home is difficult, being that finances come into play,” explaining that she did not know how to apply for financial aid, grants, or loans.

“Being a first-generation student, I had no clue what the steps were on how to enroll in college.”

First-generation students tend to be less aware of university resources or career opportunities. Another respondent explained, “As far as financial constraints, I knew college was

expensive, but didn't know how expensive it was. I did work my entire high school experience, but coming from a Latino family, helping my single mom was always my priority, so I was never really able to save quite enough to pay for my first semester out of pocket."

Oftentimes, English is first-generation students' second language, which adds another obstacle when applying for schools. Several young women mentioned the struggle to figure out finances. They said that navigating the college application process was a lonely process, and they often had little guidance or support at home. However, those who applied felt proud of themselves for overcoming adversity.

"I'm very proud of myself, being the first older sister to go to college, and I want all my younger brothers and sisters to attend college like me."

Many alumnae say [cost is a major barrier to pursuing an advanced degree](#). One young woman stated,

**"Being an immigrant, I believe I can speak for many when I say that financing college can be one of the most daunting things about an education in the U.S. Financial aid does relieve that burden a bit, thankfully."**

However, another respondent warned that financial aid does not cover all costs, stating, "Because I am attending a very expensive school, and FAFSA does not cover my whole tuition, room, and board, I have to pay out of pocket each month in order to attend my school. I have to work at least

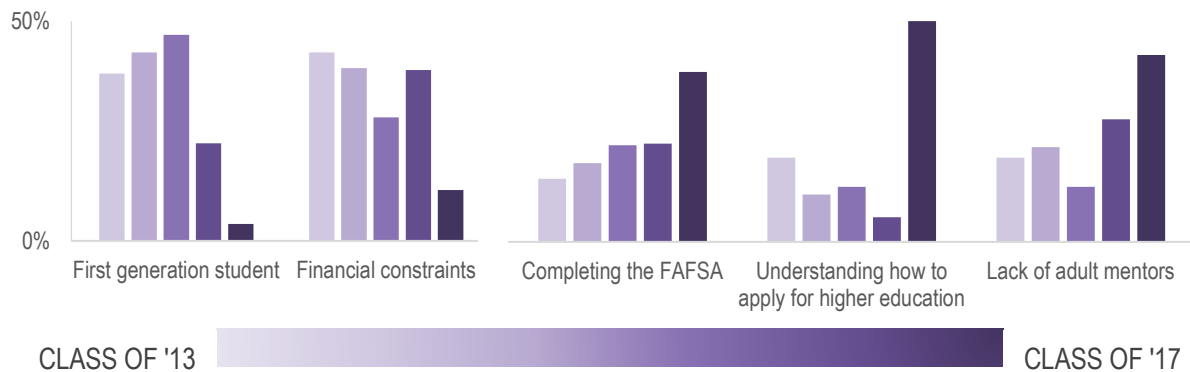


30 hours a week when school starts in order to pay for school and other needs."

According to 2017 survey results, alumnae's perceptions of the challenges they face change over time. Those who graduated four to five years ago (i.e., Class of 2013 and Class of 2014) were most likely to say that financial constraints and being a first-generation student are hindering them from pursuing or completing post-secondary education. However, those who graduated more recently were more likely to

mention not understanding how to apply for higher education, lack of adult mentors, and difficulty completing the FAFSA application as barriers to attending college or university.

Perceptions of barriers to higher education change for women over time. Recent grads are more concerned about logistics than financial and social constraints.



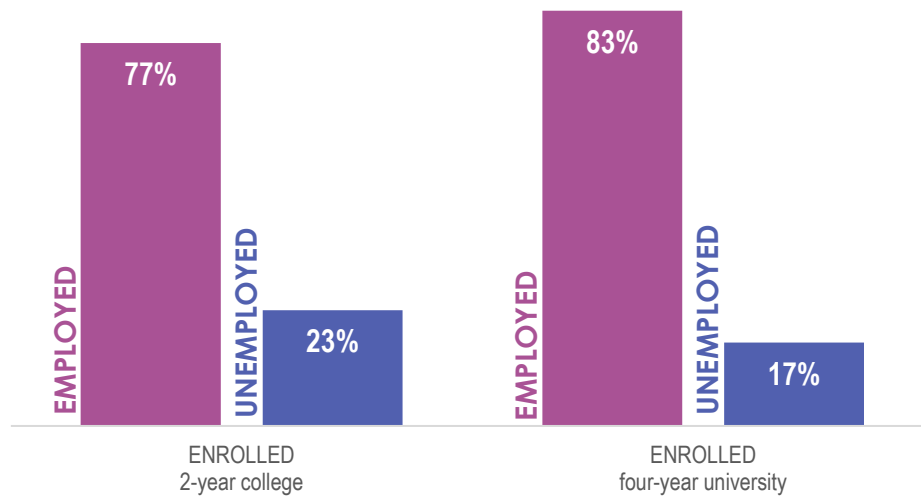
This may suggest that girlsBEST programs are effective in developing expectations of economic stability in the early years out of high school. When women graduate from high school, [it would be advantageous to provide extra guidance about how to pursue higher education](#), such as finding the right programs, completing applications, and securing financial aid.

Overall, about one in five alumnae also mentioned that being undecided about their career prevents them from pursuing or completing post-secondary school. One respondent explained, “Not knowing what I wanted to pursue was a huge barrier. I couldn’t afford to just ‘go’ to school and spend time, money, and energy.” In addition to logistical resources, alumnae would benefit from career counseling (or additional career counseling) to learn about job opportunities and potential academic trajectories.

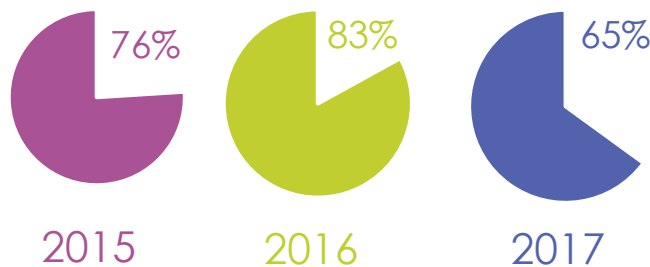
## majority of alumnae are employed

Alumnae recognized the importance of education in finding a stable and fulfilling career. One young woman noted, “[Post-secondary education] would help me to gain more choices and more opportunities to help people in the community.” Not only do girlsBEST alumnae believe a degree will open doors to career opportunities, but many are already working part-time while enrolled in school. The majority of young women who were enrolled in a two-year college or four-year university said they were working while attending school.

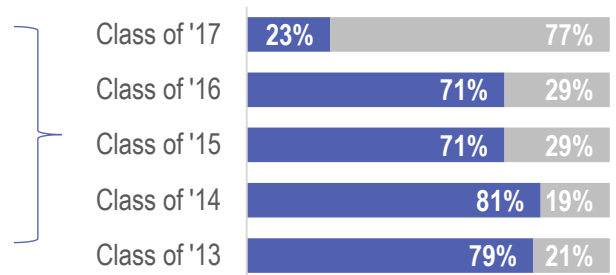
The majority of students are working while attending school.



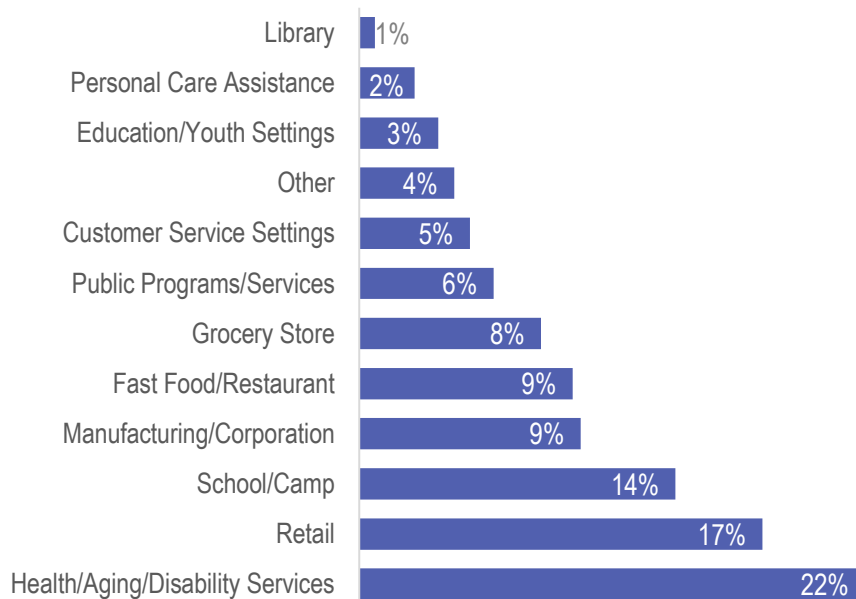
Overall, the majority of alumnae surveyed in 2015 to 2017 were employed.



The most recent graduates were least likely to be employed when surveyed.



Of those who were employed in 2015-2017, alumnae mentioned working at the following places:



Women who responded with “other” open-ended responses mentioned occupations and sectors such as: interpretation, internship, research, farming, insurance, newspapers, technology, and consulting.

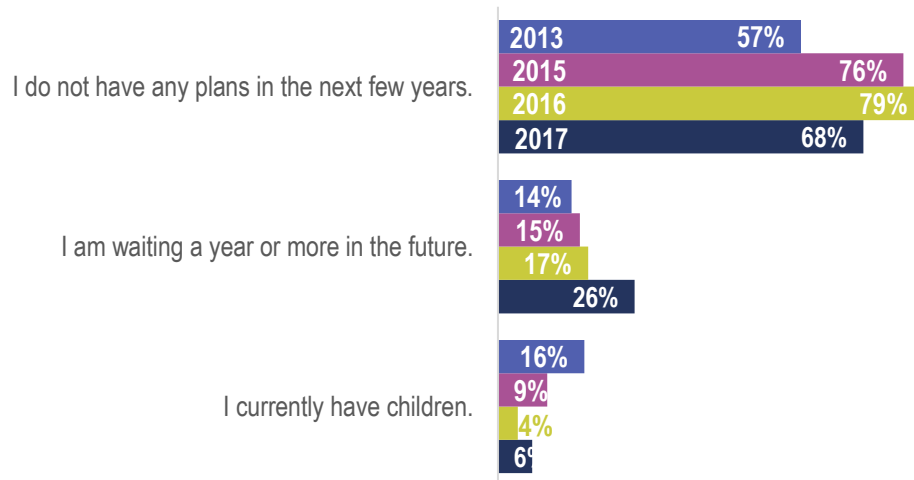
“After working minimum wage jobs for two years after graduating high school, I had a deeper motivation to pursue a career that I would be interested in.”

Most alumnae are working part-time jobs to help them finance school. However, several have pursued jobs that are beneficial for their long-term career. For instance, one young woman noted, *“I love the field I am going into. Being a heavy equipment operator fits all of my needs perfectly.”*

## most do not plan to start a family soon

Young women need support and access to education, economic opportunity, and information and services that support them to live healthy lives and to choose whether and when to have children. One indicator that the girlsBEST participants received this array of support and access through the program is their comparatively low pregnancy rates. In fact, girlsBEST research from 2016 found that the teen pregnancy rate of girlsBEST participants was only three per 1,000 — significantly lower than the statewide rate of 42 per 1,000.<sup>3</sup> As a possible sign of their plans to focus on education and career in the short-term, since 2013, the majority of girlsBEST alumnae said they do not have any plans to have children in the next few years.

Each year, most alumnae responded that they did not have plans to have children in the near future.



As expected, the percentage of alumnae who have children increases the longer women are out of high school. When asked in 2017, one in four women who graduated in 2013 (24%) and 2014 (25%) said they have children.

<sup>3</sup> girlsBEST Summary Evaluation Report, 2016

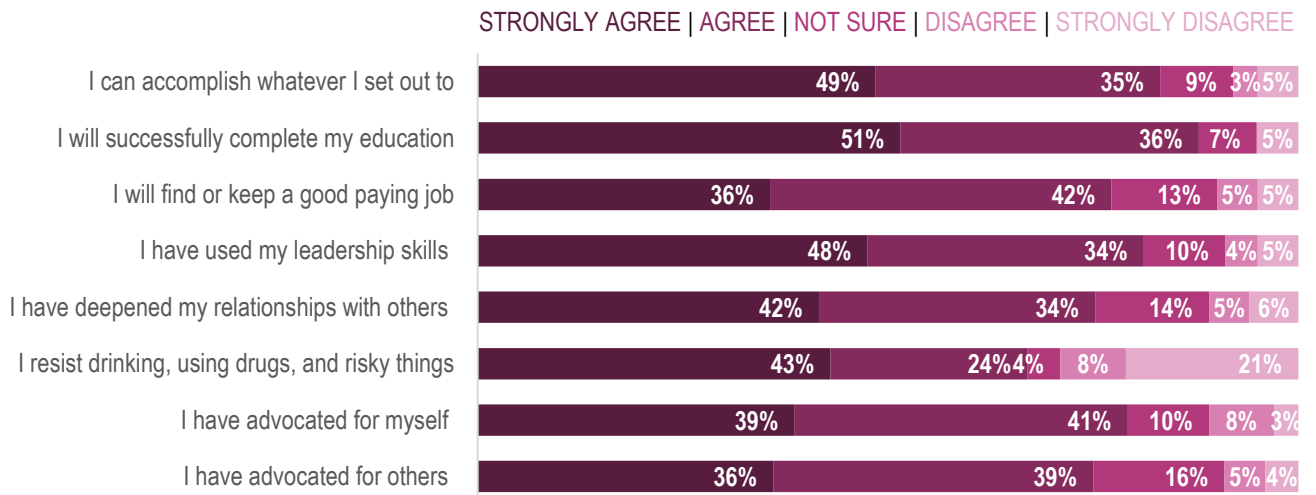
Older alumnae are more likely to have children. The most recent alumni are least likely to say they do not plan on having children.



## alumnae are hopeful for the future

Despite social, cultural, financial, and even emotional challenges associated with being a young woman after high school, alumnae demonstrate resilience and confidence that they will achieve a stable and successful future. These sentiments are consistent for all alumnae, regardless of how long they have graduated from girlsBEST and high school.

Alumnae are confident in their potential to lead healthy personal and professional lives.





## conclusion

For over 15 years, girlsBEST has supported girl-led and girl-driven programming focused on academics, career development, business, and advocacy. These programs support girls ages 12 to 18 to take charge of their future and economic well-being. While previous evaluations found the programs to be effective in increasing awareness, self-agency, and activism among participants during their time in the program, this longitudinal study has focused on the years following involvement in girlsBEST.

Our research has found that alumnae are motivated to pursue post-secondary education and obtain a lucrative and fulfilling job. The young women surveyed recognize the importance of education — whether a two-year community college, four-year university, technical school, or work training program — in opening doors to career opportunities. Many of these women are first-generation college students who face a number of social, financial, and logistical barriers. Additional support within and outside of girlsBEST is needed to help young women who are the first in their family to pursue higher education.

Despite obstacles, alumnae are pursuing academic, professional, and personal goals with the help of a support system of family and friends, mentors, financial aid, and programs like girlsBEST. Even up to five years after high school graduation, the young women surveyed say they are confident in their abilities to accomplish their goals, successfully complete their education, and find or keep a well-paying job. They reported using their leadership skills, deepening relationships with others, and resisting risky behavior, such as drinking or using drugs. Perhaps most importantly, the vast majority of girlsBEST alumnae say they are advocates for themselves and others to achieve economic equality and well-being for women.

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*"By investing in girls now, communities benefit from the intellectual and social capital brought by these young women in the future. These girls will be the entrepreneurs, job creators, mentors, and social change agents that communities need to thrive. Young women, given equal opportunity to succeed, become highly-motivated to give back to their community to ensure that other girls have this same chance. Girls' education, training, and voices are valued in their community, and thus, communities grow economically, socially and politically."*

*—Women's Foundation of Minnesota*

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## methodology

This report summarizes key findings from a longitudinal survey of girlsBEST alumni from 2013 to 2017. Surveys were administered online via e-mail by the Women's Foundation of Minnesota. The women received a \$50 gift card upon completing the survey. The survey included closed and open-ended questions about educational attainment, academic goals, supports and barriers to pursuing education, employment, and future planning. A total of 488 participants responded to the survey from 2013–2017; however, portions of the survey data from 2014 — representing 71 participants — were excluded from these analyses due to technical difficulties obtaining the raw data. Aggregated 2014 results can be provided upon request.



Korwin Consulting, an evaluation and planning firm, advances social justice solutions by identifying community strengths, building organizational capacity, and evaluating impact. More information on Korwin Consulting is available at [www.korwinconsulting.com](http://www.korwinconsulting.com).

Lisa Korwin, Principal  
Robin Horner, Evaluation Manager  
Nina Sabarre, Evaluation Associate  
Sophie Punkar, Evaluation Assistant

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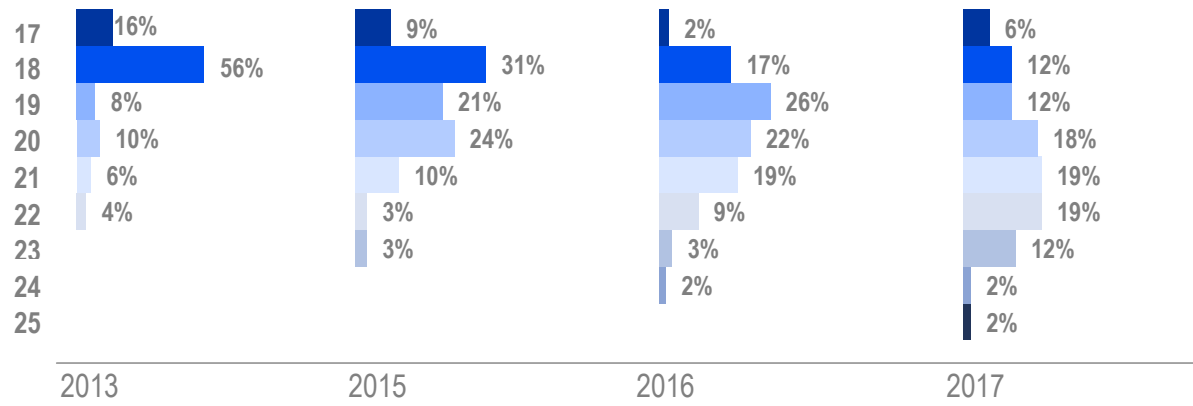
We deeply appreciate staff at the Women's Foundation of Minnesota for their partnership in shaping this evaluation and in providing access to materials and data to inform the study.

**A special thank you to Erika Idrovo-Cuesta, Wenda Weekes Moore Intern, for her leadership in this work.**

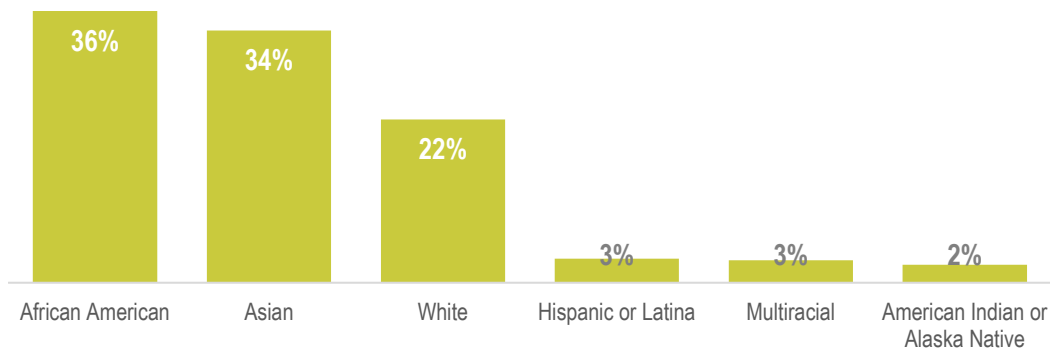
We are also grateful to the girlsBEST grantee partners in encouraging their program participants to complete the survey and to the young women that participated in this longitudinal survey over time.

## key demographics

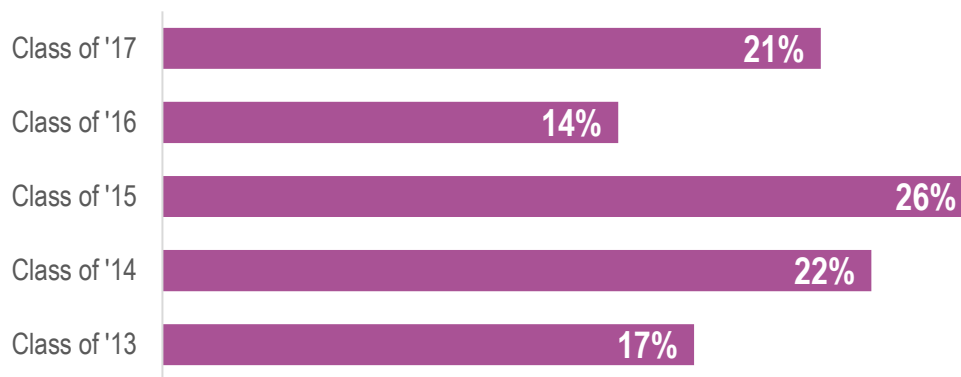
Ages ranged from 17 to 25; with the sample getting older each survey.



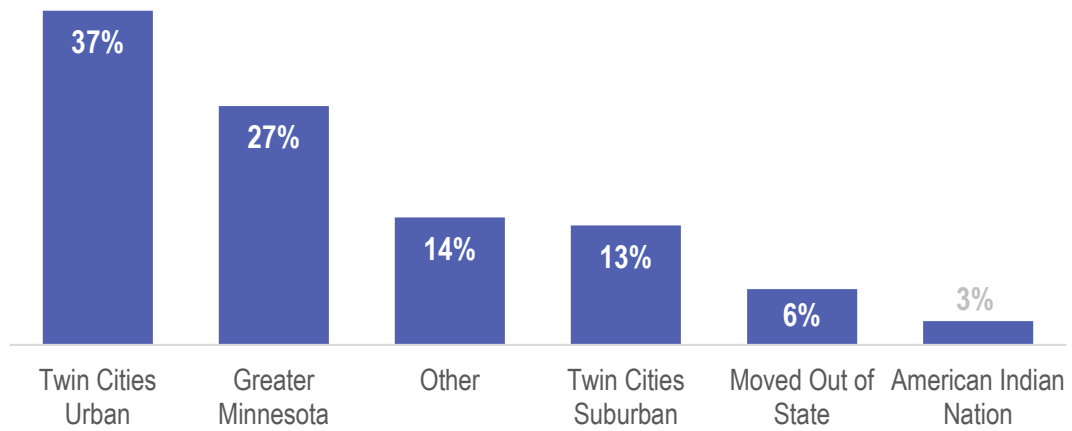
Across all years, respondents were mostly African American or Asian.



Survey respondents graduated from high school over the past five years.



Most respondents were from the Twin Cities or Greater Minnesota.



Personal characteristics in 2017:



15% were **immigrants or refugees**;  
 12% were **low income**;  
 2% identified as **LGBTQIA\***;  
 1% were **disabled**.

\*Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual

## grantee partner groups

Grantee group	# Respondents <sup>4</sup>
Women’s Initiative for Self-Empowerment	79
Minnesota African Women’s Association	57
Girls Lead	56
Girl Scouts of MN & River Valleys	31
The Sisterhood of the Traveling Scarf	20
Men as Peacemakers-Girls Restorative Program	19
SURGE!	17
Western Community Action	13
Augsburg – MN Urban Debate League	8
MIGIZI	6
Planned Parenthood of Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota	6
Project FINE	6
Dakota Wicohan	4
Casa de Esperanza	4
YWCA of Minneapolis	3
Bagosendaan	3
Dakota Wicohan	3
New Horizons Crises Center-Girls Relationship Series	3
We Win Institute	2
Life-Work Planning Center	2
YouthCARE	2
Justice and Opportunity for Youth (J.O.Y.)	1
The Minneapolis-St. Paul Chapter of The Links, Inc.	1
Lake Superior High School girlsBEST	1
I don't remember	70
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>417</b>

<sup>4</sup> The 71 participants in the 2014 survey are excluded from this list.