



The Influence of Teachers on a Young Woman's College Decision

Setting the Stage

Utah Women and Education Project researchers conducted in-depth research in 2010 to discover why more young women around the state were not attending and graduating from college. One consideration is the level of academic encouragement and support that students received from their teachers while in middle and high school. This is often an important precursor to successfully attending college. Not surprisingly, almost 90% of the young women participating in our survey believed that they received at least some level of support from their teachers in their high school scholastic efforts. A small minority (6%) felt they did not receive any support at all.

The participants also provided in-depth responses (insights and examples) regarding the influence of teachers specifically on their college decisions. Surprisingly, approximately 35% of the women in this study said their teachers had no influence on them, and many participants said they did not remember having even one middle or high school teacher talk to them personally about college or even mention it to a class of students. Slightly over 11% stated that teachers had "some" influence on their decision because they talked about college occasionally in class although not to them personally. Those who described "moderate" or "adequate" influence (14%) heard information in class from time to time and also had a teacher or two talk to them briefly (one-on-one) about college. Approximately 36% said their teachers were "strong" and "very strong" influences on them. These teachers had a profound impact, and participants who had these teachers were more likely to attend and graduate from college.

Participant Quotes

One participant in our study stated, "I did have one teacher when I was in the tenth grade who told me that I was a good writer and that I should go to college to pursue it. I would have to say out of any of the high school teachers I met, he was the only one that ever gave me hope that I could do what I wanted with my life."

Another young woman recalled, "The most influential person at school for me was a teacher I had. He told me that I

could go to any college I wanted, and they would be lucky to have me. He really motivated me to do well in school and reach for my potential."

One more participant said, "I didn't really have anyone talk to me about college except one teacher."

A final responded, "The worst part of high school was when I had more than one teacher tell me that I would never

go anywhere in life, never amount to anything and never succeed. I know they say "sticks and stones will break your bones, but words will never hurt you"; well, they do, and they totally hurt me. It took a while to shake off those hurtful things that were said to me, but I powered through everything and then ended up getting super good

grades my junior and senior year."

A Teacher's Influence

According to our data, a teacher can play a significant role in the educational choices of young women. Here are a few examples of a teacher's influence:

- Young women who had influential teachers were significantly more likely to attend and graduate from college.
- Participants stated that teachers who took the time to interact with them increased their confidence and motivation to do well in school.
- Participants who did not attend college often felt they were labeled early in school as not being on the "college-track." Some mentioned they heard teachers talking to others about college but felt teachers did not talk to them because of this label. Many now wish teachers would have encouraged them.

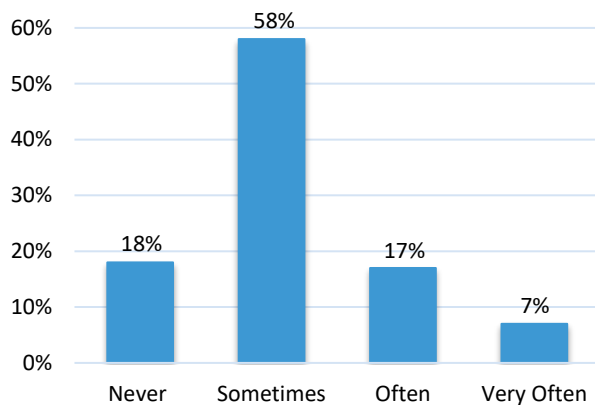
Conversations with Students

We asked the young women in our study how much time they spent talking with their teachers outside of the classroom. We discovered this activity was significantly correlated with students actively preparing for college. In addition, they were much more likely to be influenced

Study participants included 245 women between 18-32 years of age. They were White (89.9%), LDS (80.4%) married (44.1%), and from 16 different counties (Salt Lake/Utah, 56.2%).

positively by their teachers. The following graph represents the frequency young women talked with their teacher outside of class.

Figure 1: Frequency of Talking with High School Teacher Outside of Class



Key Takeaways

Researchers found a number of important strategies educators could use to influence a young woman's decision to attend and graduate college. For example:

- Many young women who believed that educators had a positive influence on their lives identified a single teacher as helping them alter their self-perceptions or constructively change their school experiences and future educational plans.
- An influential teacher can be from any discipline, including band and music, or work in an extracurricular role, such as a coach.
- Letters of recommendation changed some young women's lives, since they did not realize the strengths they had or the admiration and respect their teachers felt for them.

One young woman stated, "I had one teacher who was really influential about college. She wanted us to go and learn so much. I felt like it was her passion to teach us and let us know what we could have. I loved her because she cared so much for us."

Another study participant explained, "The only teacher I ever had who expected me to do more with my life than simply graduate high school was my band director. He always taught us that it was essential to leave the world a better place than you found it."

One more respondent had the following experience, "I was a statistician for the wrestling coach who was also my English teacher. He was another great influence on me. During my MATC schooling my senior year we had to prepare a career packet which consisted of a resume and a referral letter from an adult. He was obliged to provide the letter for

me and after reading it, I realized how much confidence he had in my abilities to learn and be a wonderful contributor to society. This one letter provided me with the confidence and self-worth I had been struggling to find for years."

A final participant said, "The main influence would be my music instructor. She always asked me questions and gave me advice about schools and how to work the system. I still talk with her frequently today (two years later) about questions I have concerning college."

Taking an Active Role

There are many ways educators can inspire young women to attend and graduate from college. Here are a few strategies that teachers can utilize:

- Be aware of the powerful influence you can have on the college decisions of young women.
- Ask young women questions about their college plans. Offer your help in preparing them for college or direct them to someone within the school who can.
- Discuss the broad benefits of higher education with young women and talk to them about graduating from college.
- Write letters of recommendation to help young women understand their strengths. Use the letters as an assignment in one of your classes.
- Become familiar with websites that offer information on applying to colleges and obtaining financial assistance. Share these sites with your students and encourage them to explore educational opportunities.
- Talk to students outside of the classroom about college choices.
- Don't assume that your female students are planning on attending college or that someone else has discussed it with them. It doesn't take much time to start the conversation about college and set them in the right direction.

Conclusion

Educators are uniquely positioned to influence several key areas of their students' lives. It is imperative that educators take advantage of the opportunity to be a powerful force in ensuring the increased success of Utah young women, in their educational pursuits.

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