



The Influence of College Preparation Activities 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 are not attending and graduating from college. We explored young women's intentions to attend college by asking questions about college preparation activities they completed in high school. The literature has shown that when high school students accomplish certain college preparation tasks /activities and take specific kinds of courses, they are more likely to attend and graduate from college. The results from our 2010 study of Utah females supported this finding and provided some interesting insights as well.

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%).

Previous researchers have found that women who successfully graduated from college tended to follow a pattern of behavior that began in the middle and high school years. We examined whether the females in our study participated in similar activities. This research involved analyzing both commitment to and actual attendance at a college or university, including graduating with a degree. We found that the following eight specific actions were linked to successful attendance and graduation (*strongest findings):

- Saved money for college*
- Visited a college campus*
- Took the ACT
- Requested information from a college
- Discussed financial aid with someone (i.e., scholarships, loans, grants)
- Applied to a college
- Was accepted or admitted to a college
- Received a scholarship or grant to attend*

The strongest predictors of *commitment* to both college attendance and college graduation were saving money for college, visiting college campuses, and/or receiving scholarships or grants. Those who had stronger *commitment* levels in high school attended and graduated from college at higher rates.

Participant Quotes

One young woman recalled, "I remember that we had a college career day where all the colleges from the state of Utah came to our high school. We were able to choose three, and we learned a lot about each of them. That experience really helped me think through details of college and see how I could prepare to go."

Another study participant stated, "I only knew about college when my family moved to southern Utah my senior year. We had a little college expo that all the seniors went to one day. That's when I learned about college."

A final respondent said, "We had assemblies all the time my senior year about various colleges and vocation colleges. They helped by making us more aware of the different opportunities we had."

Qualitative Results

Participants in this study also shared their views on the most influential college preparation events sponsored by their high schools. We tallied all of the responses, and they are listed below in order of influence:

1. College fairs and career fairs at the high school (individual conversations with college representatives were particularly influential)
2. Field trips to colleges and universities
3. Presentations about college in classrooms
4. Assemblies where educators discussed college and presented related information
5. Creation of Student Educational Occupational Plans (SEOPs)
6. Published information (e.g., brochures, pamphlets)
7. Career assessments

High School Courses

We asked the young women in our study what courses they completed in high school. We categorized their responses into the following eleven categories (*significant findings):

- Advanced placement (AP)*
- Fine arts

- Career and technical education
- Foreign languages
- Concurrent enrollment*
- High-level math courses*
- Core courses
- Science, math, and technology
- Difficult courses (mix)*
- Social sciences
- Electives (mix)

We analyzed the courses that were taken and compared them with the following three outcomes: 1) commitment to attend college, 2) commitment to graduate from college, and 3) actual attendance and graduation from college. Students who took AP, concurrent enrollment, high-level math, and other “serious” or “difficult” courses were significantly more likely to make a commitment to attend college early and then attend and graduate from college. When reflecting on their high school experiences, many participants stated that AP and concurrent enrollment courses that fulfilled specific college general education requirements were the most beneficial for them.

Key Takeaways

Researchers found critical factors that influence a young woman’s decision to attend and graduate college:

- The younger a female is when she decides to attend college, the more likely she is to 1) save money for college, 2) more actively prepare for college, 3) have a desire for a higher degree level, and 4) attend and graduate from college.
- Most participants remembered very little about middle school activities and experiences. Some, however, did remember being given an assessment to help them figure out a possible future career, but participants remembered little else in regard to discussions about college.

Statistically significant results in this study show that the following characteristics, activities, and aspirations appear to predict a greater likelihood that a young woman will participate in more college preparation activities during high school:

- Enjoyed being intellectually challenged at a young age.
- Had a father who encouraged and supported her.
- Had a good GPA.
- Had a mother who encouraged and supported her.
- Had friends who planned on attending college.
- Had one or more leadership roles during her high school years (e.g., high school, community, or church).
- Spent less time partying.
- Was active in her religion.

- Was young when her parents and others began discussing college with her.
- Was young (i.e., elementary school) when she decided she wanted to attend college.

Taking an Active Role

There are many ways parents, educators, and influencers can inspire young women to attend and graduate from college. Here are several ways you can influence young women:

- Parents need to encourage and assist their children, early in life, to save money for college.
- Influential individuals should provide opportunities for young women to visit college campuses throughout their high school years and even earlier.
- Young women should be encouraged to take concurrent enrollment, advanced placement (AP) and other college preparation courses during high school. The specific benefits for doing this should be clearly explained. Encourage enrollment in courses that will meet specific college general education requirements.
- Schools should strategically plan college-focused events that can actively engage young women in thinking about college (e.g., college and career fairs, field trips to campuses).
- Middle school administrators, counselors, and teachers can engage in college-focused discussions and experiences with female students.
- As early as possible, influential individuals should access the familial support system and assist in outlining a path for girls to get to college.

Conclusion

Various studies show that young women who successfully graduated from college tended to follow a pattern of behavior that began during their childhood. Parents, educators, and other influencers need to motivate young women to participate in preparatory activities. Doing this will help strengthen the positive impact of women in communities and in the state as a whole.

Acknowledgement: This snapshot is possible through the generous donations of Utah Valley University and many other generous donors.

Copyright © 2011 Utah Women & Leadership Project