



The Influence of School Activities and Leadership Roles 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. We investigated their middle and high school experiences and examined whether there were relationships between the decision to attend, drop out, or graduate from college and school/non-school activities, leadership positions, and how they spent their time. Our results showed that young women involved in extracurricular and other activities were more likely to attend and graduate from college.

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%).

The participants listed all the activities they were involved with during middle and high school. The following table outlines these categories and the percentage of young women who participated in them (*significant findings):

Figure 1: High School Activities

Activities	% Young Women
Religious youth organizations*	60%
Music (e.g., choir, band, orchestra, lessons)	45%
High school athletics/sports*	40%
School clubs or associations*	39%
Volunteer Service*	38%
Club or community sports	38%
Honor society*	28%
Drill/cheer	20%
Drama/theater	19%
Student government*	12%
Literary or another magazine	9%
Newspaper	9%
Debate/speech	8%
Professional organizations/associations	5%
Political groups	3%

Although all these activities assisted in helping young women learn and develop, in this 2010 Utah sample, six specific activities were statistically linked to women who attended college longer and/or graduated:

- Being involved and active in a religious youth organization
- Participating in volunteer and community service opportunities
- Playing high school sports
- Belonging to student clubs or associations
- Being a member of an honor society
- Serving in student government

Crucial Findings

Researchers discovered several critical findings that have direct application to helping girls and women:

- The younger a female is when she decides to attend college, the more likely she will have leadership roles in middle and high school and a higher GPA.
- The more active a young woman is in her religion, the more likely she will pursue leadership opportunities in middle and high school, earn a higher high school GPA, and complete college preparation activities early (see Snapshot No. 6).
- Women who attend and graduate from college are more likely to develop good long-term health habits (i.e., eat healthy, exercise) and avoid unhealthy habits (i.e., smoking pot, taking other drugs, drinking alcohol) early in life.
- Overall positive middle and high school experiences are linked to commitment towards and attendance of/graduation from college.

High School Leadership

Here are some highlights from the findings associated with high school leadership:

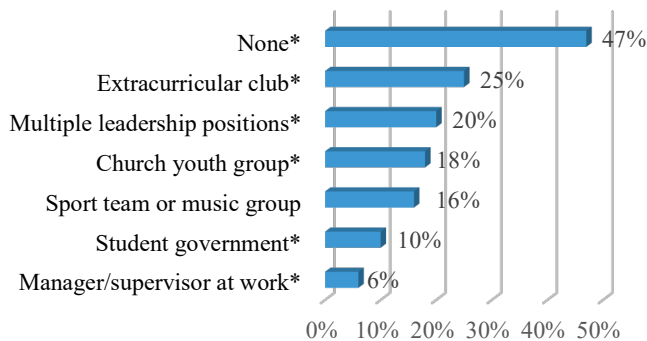
- Participants who had *no* leadership roles were significantly *less* likely to attend and graduate from college (see graph below).
- Participants who had at least one leadership position in church youth groups, extracurricular clubs, or

student government were *more* likely to attend and graduate from college. Those who had more than one leadership role in *any* area were *more* likely to attend and graduate.

- Participants who became managers or supervisors at work while in high school were *less* likely to attend and graduate from college.

More broadly, we asked the young women in our study what leadership roles they had during their high school years. The percentage of participants who mentioned having these leadership opportunities are listed below:

Figure 2: Leadership Opportunities During High School Years



(*significant findings associated with college attendance/graduation)

Key Takeaways

Researchers collected data on where participants spent their time during high school. There were positive connections with students who had a higher GPA or were involved in school clubs. Negative results were associated with young women who worked too many hours for pay during high school. Each of these is discussed in more depth below:

Young women with a higher GPA in this sample are linked to more time studying and doing homework, exercising or playing sports, participating in clubs, and/or volunteering in the community. A higher GPA is linked to less time partying, socializing face-to-face with friends, watching TV, and doing extensive levels of household or childcare duties for their families (e.g., having *primary* responsibility for care of siblings or meal preparation).

Young women who spent more time participating in school club events and activities also did the following: spent more time studying, talking to teachers, volunteering in their communities, and exercising or playing sports. They also spent less time watching TV and, although they had responsibilities at home, chores were not extensive. Those who spent more time in club activities were also more likely to get better grades, attend college, and graduate from college.

Young women who worked too many hours for pay during high school (30.8% of our sample) were also more likely to spend more time watching TV and/or socializing with friends. These young women were also less likely to attend and graduate from college. Importantly, participants who said they were employed but worked less hours/week did not appear to be negatively affected.

Taking an Active Role

There are many ways influencers can inspire young women to attend and graduate college:

- Influential individuals should encourage young women to participate in extracurricular and community-based activities, such as clubs, service opportunities, religious youth groups, sports, and student government.
- Young women should be encouraged to seek leadership opportunities in any positive setting. People who influence them should proactively provide leadership roles and experiences for them. All young women should have a minimum of one formal leadership role during their high school years.
- Parents and guardians should be cautious about encouraging outside paid employment. High school students should not work more than 20 hours a week.
- Efforts should be made to emphasize the importance of a strong GPA beyond the academic merits.
- Individuals should help girls develop healthy lifestyle habits while young (e.g., eating, exercising, and limiting TV and other sedentary activities).
- Efforts should be made by all to help young women enjoy their school experiences.

Conclusion

There are specific activities that were statistically linked to young women who attended college longer and/or graduated. For example, young women should be encouraged to seek leadership opportunities during their high school years. As influencers it is important to guide young women towards leadership roles, as this will help strengthen the positive impact of women in communities and in the state as a whole.

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