

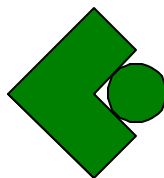
Mitchell Institute

SENATOR GEORGE J. MITCHELL
SCHOLARSHIP RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Barriers to Postsecondary Education in Maine

**Making College the Obvious and Attainable
Next Step for More Maine Students**

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CRITICAL INSIGHTS
Strategic Market Research



Nellie Mae
Education
Foundation

Opening Doors to Tomorrow

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INTRODUCTION

Maine has one of the best high school graduation rates in the nation, yet only 23% of adults in our state hold college degrees (placing Maine 28th of the 50 states). The Senator George J. Mitchell Scholarship Research Institute is committed to improving access to postsecondary education for Maine students. Each year we award 160 scholarships to Maine students entering two-year or four-year college degree programs. The Mitchell Scholarship provides \$1,000 for each year of college plus access to support programs. The Mitchell Institute's research program is designed to improve the effectiveness of our scholarship program, as well as to broaden our understanding of how more Maine students can gain access to postsecondary education.

In 2001, the Mitchell Institute initiated a study of barriers to college faced by high school students in Maine, funded by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. Data collection was conducted by Critical Insights in the summer and fall of 2001 and early 2002 and included:

- Exploratory discussion groups with juniors and seniors at ten high schools across the state;
- An online survey of 240 high school teachers and guidance counselors;
- Telephone surveys of 1000 high school juniors and seniors, 600 young adults ages 18 to 25, and 600 parents of children age 12 or older.

This document presents an analysis of the findings from all phases of the research and discusses its implications. The full report from the study, available separately from the Mitchell Institute and online at www.mitchellinstitute.org, includes a longer summary of observations from each of the surveys as well as section-by-section analysis of survey responses and the student discussion groups.

The survey population samples were selected at random to ensure that the study results would reflect the attitudes and experiences in Maine's population as a whole. All geographic areas of the state were included in the study, and survey respondents were sampled proportionally according to the population distribution of appropriately aged residents in order to prevent any regional bias in the findings. Based on socioeconomic similarities and geographic proximity, we identified four regions of the state:

- Central/Western (Androscoggin, Franklin, Kennebec and Oxford counties),
- Coastal/Down East (Hancock, Knox, Lincoln, Sagadahoc, Washington and Waldo counties),
- Northern (Aroostook, Penobscot, Piscataquis and Somerset counties), and
- Southern (Cumberland and York counties).

FINDINGS IN BRIEF

An array of family, school and community characteristics clearly work together in shaping students' access to postsecondary education. Our research identified a number of factors, many of them interrelated, that act as barriers to students continuing their education after high school.

These factors include:

- Being from a family in which neither parents nor siblings have gone to college;
- Having parents who are not actively involved in school and in post-high school planning;
- Being from a community with low educational expectations, a community where a college education is not perceived as being particularly valuable, or a community where college is not perceived as being affordable;
- Not being in the top academic track in high school; and
- Not saving for college, not planning ahead about how to finance postsecondary education, and/or coming from a family with limited resources for college.

The Influence of Parents and Family

Undeniably, parents play a key role in shaping students' attitudes toward college. They have the potential to be the greatest resource in helping their children prepare for postsecondary education, but if they fail to be actively involved, parents can instead create a barrier to college.

- In families where a parent completed college, college attendance is much more likely to be expected for the children. Not surprisingly, parents who completed college themselves report much higher comfort levels with assisting their child in college planning and financing than parents who do not have college experience.
- Students rate their parents as the most helpful resource in post-high school planning, above teachers and guidance counselors.
- The extent to which parents have investigated financing options for college emerged as a key factor in students' college aspirations. Students with high aspirations are much more likely to report that their parents have taken tangible steps toward planning to pay for college than are students with moderate or low aspirations.
- Educators name low student aspirations as the number one barrier to college. The next three factors educators see as key barriers to college for their students involve parents: parents' lack of a college education, parents' lack of involvement in planning, and parents' perception that college is unattainable.
- Students who have a sibling in college have more positive attitudes toward college and tend to get an earlier start with college planning.

Community and Regional Trends

Where a student lives has an impact on several key college-related attitudes. In particular, the experience in Southern Maine, where more residents are college graduates, appears to be significantly different than in other parts of the state. Southern Maine students and their parents consistently express more optimistic attitudes about college than do respondents in other parts of the state. While support for postsecondary education is high in Northern Maine, college is perceived as being less affordable for families there. Coastal Maine residents appear to be the most concerned about both the value and the cost of college. And in Central/Western Maine, residents appear to face particular deficits with regard to planning for postsecondary education.

- Students and young adults in Southern Maine are much more likely than those from other regions to have a parent that has completed college, and also report that more of their relatives are college graduates.
- Students and parents in Southern Maine are the most confident that finances will not be the determining factor in whether they (or their children) attend college, while those in Coastal Maine are the least confident.
- Educators, parents and young adults in the Northern and Southern regions rate community support for higher education more positively than do those in the Central/Western and Coastal/Down East regions.
- Coastal Maine residents agree less strongly than those in the other regions that a college education is very valuable in their community.
- College is perceived as being less affordable for families in Northern Maine than in other regions.
- Students and parents in Central/Western Maine have less contact with guidance counselors and report that they spend less time on future planning than do those in the other regions.

The Influence of Academic Tracks

Survey respondents were asked which of three main academic tracks they (or their children) were placed in: Advanced Placement/Honors (about 30% of students), College Prep (about 50%), or General/Vocational Prep (about 20%). While some Maine educators reported that their high schools do not explicitly track students, virtually all students and parents were able to identify their (or their child's) academic track.

This study found dramatic differences in students' aspirations, post-high school planning approaches, level of parental involvement and overall school experience based on their academic track.

- Parents of students in the College Prep and, particularly, the AP/Honors tracks are stronger advocates for college attendance, more proactive and helpful in planning for the future, and are more likely to have gone to college themselves.
- College-educated parents surveyed were roughly three times more likely to report that their child is in an AP/Honors academic track than were parents who have only a high school diploma. Almost no families in which both parents hold a college degree reported that their child is in a General/Voc Prep academic track.
- College Prep track students and their parents are significantly less proactive than those in the AP/Honors track about taking concrete steps for college planning and financing.
- AP/Honors students are more likely than others to report that some class time at school is devoted to college planning and that their peers are helpful in the planning process.
- General/Voc Prep track students report being less challenged by their schoolwork; they are twice as likely as AP/Honors students to say school is no more than somewhat challenging. Parents of these students report that their children receive lower levels of support and encouragement from teachers.
- Educators and students agree that schools do a better job preparing AP/Honors and College Prep students than General/Voc Prep students for success in the future.
- General/Voc Prep students report more difficulty getting their post-high school planning started and finding information about college planning than do students in the other two

tracks. They are more likely to report that they wish their parents had more time to help with post-high school planning. Their parents are less likely to feel that they are receiving good planning information than are parents of students in the other two tracks.

- College Prep and General/Vocational Prep track students who have high aspirations report higher levels of support and help with planning at school (e.g., regular guidance counselor meetings, class time spent on planning, college campus visits through their school) than do those with moderate or low aspirations.

The Disparity between Attitudes and Actions

Educators see low student aspirations as the number one barrier to college, while students themselves, as well as their parents, report very high aspirations and very positive attitudes about college. Our research suggests that this can be explained in part by the distance between attitudes and actions. While students and their parents feel very positive about their futures and their chances of going to college, they are not always taking the concrete steps needed to make this dream a reality.

- 85% of students acknowledge that they hold primary responsibility for their future planning. Some students, however, particularly those in the College Prep and General/Voc Prep academic tracks, feel that it is difficult to get started thinking about and planning for college.
- Student discussions suggest that a “push” from schools to get started with planning early would be helpful, particularly for those students with low to moderate aspirations.
- Educators report that students (particularly those in a General/Voc Prep track, but also those in College Prep tracks) are not proactive in taking advantage of the planning resources that schools offer.
- Students generally perceive their parents as being quite involved and helpful with future planning. But when presented with a list of specific planning activities, they report participation by parents that is somewhat limited.
- Parents may also overestimate their level of involvement in planning for their children’s futures. More parents report having had serious family discussions about future plans than do students or young adults. Students also report having these discussions less frequently and starting them later in high school, on average, than do parents.
- Educators are less positive in rating parents’ awareness of different college financing options and the degree to which they have begun college financial planning than are parents themselves.

Different Approaches to Post-High School Planning

The study revealed a number of important issues related to planning for postsecondary education. The amount of time and effort students and parents put into planning, and how early they get started, are important factors in achieving access to postsecondary education. Schools play a key role in making planning resources, information and opportunities available and accessible.

- Educators believe that students should start post-high school planning in ninth grade or even earlier, but relatively few students report starting earlier than 10th grade.
- Young adults who did not continue their education after high school were more likely than others to say they wished they had started planning earlier, and were also more

likely to report that they would do something different if they could start over again. Most reported that they would go to college.

- Among the most helpful approaches that schools take in preparing students for postsecondary education, educators list: spending class time on college and career planning; consistent, ongoing individual attention or advising; goal-oriented personal learning plans; and college fairs or parent information nights.
- Educators working in schools that separate the responsibility for postsecondary education planning from other tasks within the guidance office gave more positive assessments of their schools' ability to provide post-high school planning assistance for students of all ability levels.
- From a list of planning activities, students and young adults rate guidance counselor meetings as the most helpful (although they rate parents and teachers as more helpful with planning overall). Parents rate college campus visits, closely followed by meetings with guidance counselors, as the most helpful activity.
- Meeting with their child's guidance counselor is the only planning activity that parents of General/Voc Prep students are as likely as other parents to have done.
- While virtually all current students report having regularly scheduled meetings with guidance counselors, only 75% report having had a serious discussion with a guidance counselor or teacher about their plans for the future. Only two-thirds of the young adults surveyed reported that their high school offered regularly scheduled guidance counselor meetings.

The Money Issue

Discussions about access to higher education often focus on financial considerations, and many of those surveyed for this study expressed concern about college affordability and financial aid.

- Nearly three-quarters of parents surveyed say they are discouraged by the rising costs of college, but very few (only 6%) say their child won't be able to attend because of costs.
- Roughly one-third of students and parents say that it is likely that money will be the determining factor in whether or not they (or their children) go to college. About one-half of students and fully 70% of parents say that money will determine which college they (or their children) choose.
- Three in ten young adults report that money was a very significant factor in determining what they did directly after high school, regardless of where in Maine they live. Students who went on to a two-year college, technical or trade school were roughly twice as likely as those who went to four-year college to say that money was a very significant factor.
- Most students (79%) express a willingness to take on loans in order to pay for college. While most parents (73%) support the idea of their children incurring debt to finance college, fewer (60%) are willing themselves to take on education loans for their children.
- Although most students and parents report that they will need significant financial aid to pay for college, some do not believe that they will qualify for scholarships or grants to help pay for college.
- More than one-half of parents (53%) believe that saving for their child's college education will reduce the amount of financial aid for which the family is eligible.

IMPLICATIONS

A key theme that resonates throughout this study’s findings is that students who are proactive in college planning and those who have parents who are actively involved are at a distinct advantage in terms of fulfilling their postsecondary education goals. Many students and parents, however, appear to be approaching the post-high school planning process passively, waiting for schools or others to prompt their planning efforts and for information to come to them. Another key implication of these findings is that first-generation college families are in need of particular attention and resources. Students without a parent or sibling who has gone to college face great challenges in forming college aspirations and in navigating the college planning process. Every first-generation student who successfully moves on to college represents a family no longer facing this barrier in the future, so resources invested in this area are likely to reap great rewards. Our research points to three broad efforts that could help families overcome barriers to postsecondary education.

Strengthen the High School Experience

Some students appear to have experiences in high school that are very encouraging and supportive of their postsecondary education goals. These experiences combine a high level of proactive involvement in both school and planning by the students themselves and their parents with effective programs and resources provided by the school.

- Broaden the notion of “college” and promote the idea that college is for everyone, not just a select few. College planning activities at school should include all the postsecondary education options in order to improve educators’, students’ and parents’ knowledge of and access to information about two-year colleges and technical college programs.
- Where feasible, separate the responsibility for postsecondary education planning from other functions in high school guidance offices to help them better assist students at all levels with post-high school planning.
- Provide more structure and more options for post-high school planning: incorporate planning into class time, assign students to a teacher who acts as an advisor throughout high school and schedule regular meetings, and make some planning activities mandatory.
- Improve post-high school planning and expectations for all students, particularly those in the College Prep and General/Voc Prep academic tracks: start planning earlier—no later than ninth grade, individualize planning activities, and include parents in the process.
- Help parents and students to understand the importance of being proactively involved and to identify the concrete steps they can take to stay on course.

Foster Communities to Support Postsecondary Education

Creating an environment of support for postsecondary education throughout Maine is critical. Schools, families, community members, and employers can all play important roles.

- Schools and families can send and reinforce the message that college is for everyone.
- Community members and businesses can serve as mentors, open their doors to interns, and help to coordinate service-learning projects.

- Employers can provide information and resources for college and financial planning, and provide employees with time off to attend guidance counselor meetings and visit college campuses.
- Maine colleges and universities can expand outreach in their local communities and invite students and parents to campus—to provide as a hands-on introduction to college rather than as a recruiting tool.

Address the Money Issue

Finally, better information and resources are needed to effectively address families' concerns about the cost and affordability of college. Our analysis points to three specific steps that could make a positive difference.

- Demystify the system of college financial aid and correct some parents' misperceptions. In particular, most parents expressed the belief that saving for college limits a family's eligibility for financial aid. The government and colleges should make the rules they use to determine financial aid eligibility more transparent.
- Improve knowledge about student loan programs and borrowing options for parents. Families may not be sufficiently aware of available loan subsidies, and may need advice about "safe" borrowing levels for students.
- Make more need-based scholarships and financial aid available. We heard concern from students, particularly those in College Prep and General/Voc Prep tracks, that they will not qualify for scholarships or other financial aid. Only a very small proportion of students can be at the top of any given class. Broadening the availability of scholarships will provide a practical resource to more students who need financial help while reinforcing the critical message that college is attainable and appropriate for them.

ACTION STEPS: TEN THINGS THAT WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Maine needs an educated workforce—and an educated and informed citizenry—to be competitive in the global economy of the 21st century. Given that a person with a college degree earns over \$1 million more in his or her lifetime than a person with a high school diploma, the economic benefits to the state of improving the college-going rate are tangible. Investing in education is a critical component of economic development.

Maine needs to have more of its high school students go on to college, plain and simple. While boosting the proportion of Maine adults with college degrees will also require improving college retention and promoting continuing education for the adult workforce, there are several concrete steps that can be taken with Maine's high school population that will move us toward a better college-going rate.

Students and parents readily acknowledge their responsibility for planning, but many—particularly those who are the first in their family to attend college—do not appear prepared to do this on their own. Here, then, are our suggestions for ten action steps that will make going to college the obvious and attainable next step for more Maine students:

- Capitalize on the key role guidance counselors play in postsecondary education planning. Where feasible, separate post-high school planning from other responsibilities in high school guidance offices.
- To create more opportunities for parental involvement in planning, develop alternate schedules that would include evening office hours for some guidance counselors.
- Expand post-high school planning efforts to include high school faculty, not just the guidance office. More individual attention and more time devoted to planning is part of the consistent oversight and input that students say that they want and acknowledge that they need.
- Start post-high school planning at school and at home earlier—before high school, even. The Career Preparation element of the Learning Results will clearly make a difference here.
- Encourage parents' employers to participate. Ask them to find ways to give parents time off when needed for college planning activities like meetings with their child's guidance counselor or visiting college campuses.
- Enlist the support of local businesses. Businesses can give students much-needed opportunities to conduct career exploration (e.g., job shadowing, internships, coordinating service learning projects).
- Encourage community members who can provide resources – whether it's sharing their experiences with college preparation, providing financial planning expertise, or offering to serve as mentors – to contact local high schools to offer that help.
- Get local colleges involved. They could expand programs that bring area high school and middle school students (and their parents) onto campus. These experiences provide students with a more tangible sense of what college is like and an opportunity to see themselves as college students.
- Those with resources to provide or support scholarships — individuals, corporations and foundations – should consider focusing those resources on need-based aid, or adding financial need to the criteria for their scholarships.
- Colleges and governmental agencies should continue efforts to clarify and publicize financial aid eligibility criteria as well as information about student and parental education loans. High schools and community/business resources can help provide the kind of individual attention that is needed by students and parents in navigating the world of financial aid. This kind of support is particularly critical for first-generation college students.