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Barriers to Postsecondary Education in Maine:

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

by Colleen J. Quint

Lisa Plimpton



The question of why more high school students don't go on to college has been the focus of recent research at the Mitchell Institute. Quint and Plimpton summarize this research, which involved more than 2,500 Maine students, educators and parents. They find that financial barriers are only one piece of a complicated puzzle. Other barriers include parental attitudes, whether any family members have attended college, the high school experience (i.e., what track the student is placed in), the quality of career planning in school and at home, and the level of active planning for college (while many students say they plan to go on to college, some do not take the specific steps necessary to actually do so). By sifting through the layers of what is happening in Maine's secondary schools and among students and parents, Quint and Plimpton generate a set of practical recommendations for policymakers and educators alike. 🐉

Maine faces a serious challenge in the coming years. While the state has one of the best high school graduation rates in the country, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, the percentage of the adult population holding a four-year college degree hovers at about 23%, ranking Maine twenty-eighth out of the 50 states in this category. And while the levels of educational attainment of Maine's workforce are a bit below national averages, they are significantly below regional averages (Colgan 2002; U.S. Census 2000).

This is critical for a number of reasons. First, as a companion article in this edition of *Maine Policy Review* notes, "national wage trends suggest an increase in demand for skilled labor" (Carnevale and Desrochers 2002). Maine's relatively low higher education attainment places the state at a disadvantage when competing regionally for new employers. This fact is borne out by recent statewide business surveys. Forty-two percent of Maine businesses cite an educated workforce as the number-one issue for long-run economic growth in the state, and an additional 28% ranked it as number two (Maine Development Foundation 2001).

Second, the manufacturing industries that have for so long sustained the state's economy are in flux. Gone are the days when an 18-year-old could head to the local mills right after graduation, confident in the knowledge that he or she would have a good job offering financial security and solid benefits until retirement. "Factory jobs, once the stronghold of the Maine economy, are shrinking both proportionally and in absolute numbers" (Carnevale and Desrochers 2002). Moreover, those who once enjoyed the independence and hard work characteristic of natural resource-based jobs are finding it harder to make ends meet. Throughout its history, Maine has rightly been proud of its heritage of hard work and self-determination. These traits, laudable and important as they are, simply are not enough to compete in the global economy of the twenty-first century.

Third, the economic impact of a more educated population is not limited to workforce and employer issues. The state's tax base could also benefit from a more educated populace. National statistics show that those with a four-year college degree earn nearly a million dollars more in their lifetime than someone

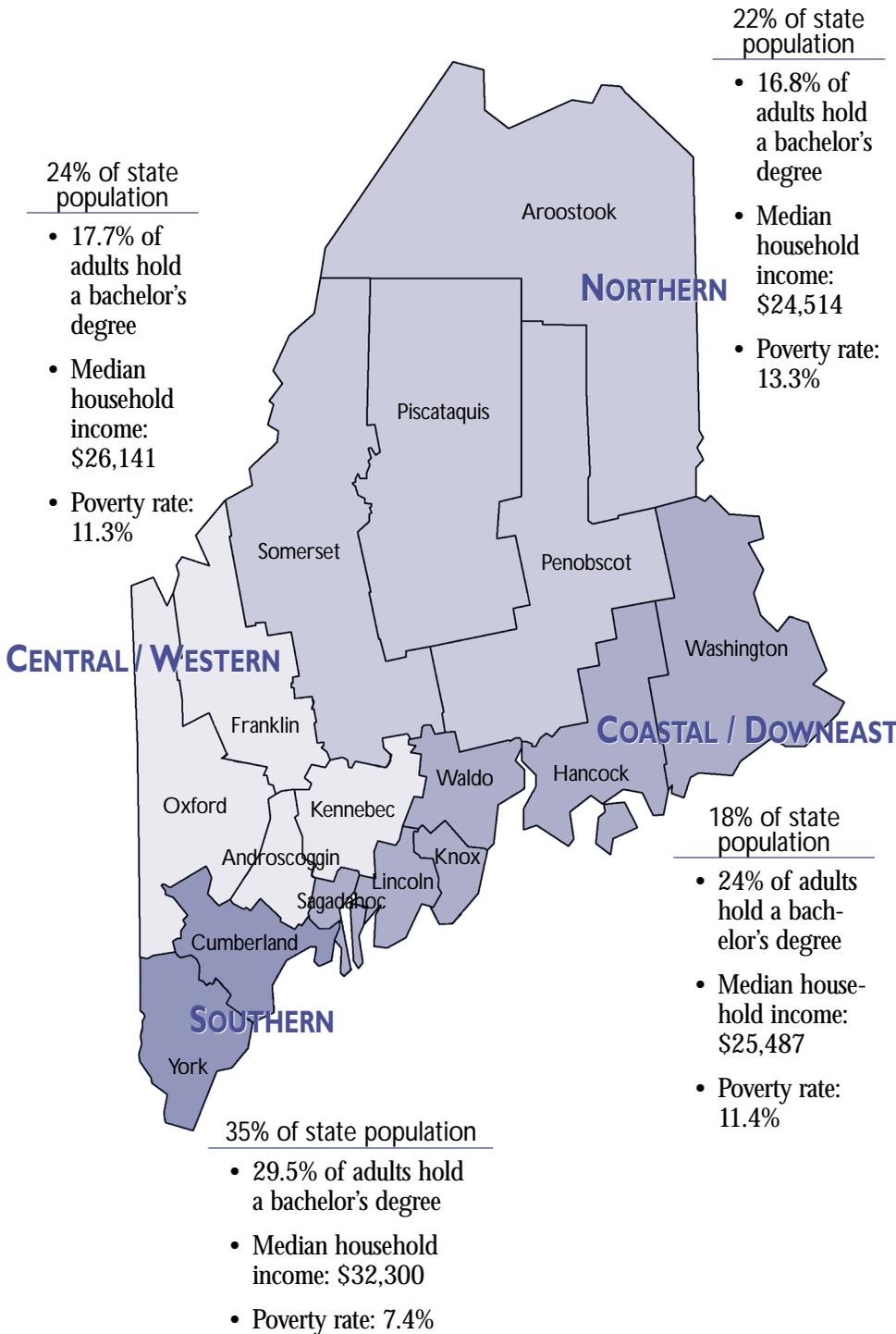
with a high school diploma (Cheeseman Day and Newberger 2002). Further, those with a two-year degree, unlike those with a high school diploma, are at least able to see their earning power stay even with inflation. This is true not just nationally, but also in Maine, where those with an associate degree earn 21% more than those with a high school diploma and those with a bachelor's degree earn 26% more (Trostel 2003). Thus, the brutal fiscal reality is that the state's economy needs a new generation of educated workers, and it needs that generation to stay and work in Maine.

Demographic trends are exacerbating Maine's problems. Census 2000 data demonstrate that the state of Maine is growing older as our birthrate declines in comparison to other states. Just as significantly, the outmigration of young people from Maine has grown at alarming rates over the past two decades (Heminway 2002). As more Mainers move toward retirement, an increasingly small workforce will be responsible for meeting the complex and expensive needs of an aging population.

At the Mitchell Institute, we have been studying this conundrum to determine what causes the gap between high school and college graduation outcomes. Certainly parts of this gap can be explained by migration patterns. Maine is a net exporter of students: we send more students out of state to go to college than come to Maine for postsecondary education (National Center for Education Statistics 2001). National trends indicate that students who leave their home state for college are more likely to live and work near where they attend college than where they attended high school, and that those with education beyond high school are more likely to migrate (Kodrzycki 2001).

...the brutal fiscal reality is that the state's economy needs a new generation of educated workers, and it needs that generation to stay and work in Maine.

Figure 1: Population and Selected Demographics in Maine Regions



This has long-term impact on the state, particularly if our young people not only leave our state to pursue their education, but then stay away to work and raise families. Another part of the gap has to do with adult population and adult workforce patterns. While a thorough examination of the educational needs and impacts of the incumbent workforce is outside the scope of our study, it is axiomatic that increasing the educational attainment of Maine's workforce will need to include strategies for boosting the educational attainment of nontraditional students and those already in the workforce.

Still, for us, the focus is on high school students and why more do not go on to college. Our study leads us to believe that the gap referred to above is heavily influenced by a combination of high school experience and family/community support for education.

For the past year, the Mitchell Institute has been working with Critical Insights, Inc., to conduct a study of Maine students, parents, educators and young adults on *Barriers to Postsecondary Education in Maine: Making College the Obvious and Attainable Next Step for More Maine Students*. This study, funded by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, involved more than 2,500 Mainers drawn proportionally from four regions in the state. We divided the state into four county-based regions based on geography and socioeconomic similarities (e.g., income, poverty

and educational attainment), as shown in Figure 1. We held discussion groups with juniors and seniors at 10 high schools, four in the northern region and two in each of the other three regions. A random sample of 1,500 high school teachers and guidance counselors was invited to participate in an e-mail survey, and 240 educators responded. Telephone surveys were conducted with 1,007 high school juniors and seniors, 607 parents with a child between the ages of 12 and 18, and 603 young adults (ages 18 to 25) who graduated from a Maine high school.¹

The remainder of this article summarizes key findings from the research and makes recommendations for improving the numbers of high school students going on to college.

FINDINGS

While many conversations about access to higher education focus—and rightfully so—on financial barriers, our research indicates that money is only one piece of a complicated puzzle. Other barriers our study identified include:

- attitudes and support of parents for pursuing college;
- having no other family members who have attended college;
- having no savings and/or active planning for how to pay for college;
- not being in the top academic track in high school;
- coming from a community with low educational expectations, unclear perceptions of the value of college, and/or negative assumptions about college affordability.

These, and several other key factors, emerged in our study as having significant influence on students’ experiences in high school and therefore on their plans for the future.

Parents are the Greatest Influence

Students whose parents are college graduates are more likely to go on to college themselves. Nationally, 82% of 1999 high school graduates whose parents completed college enrolled in college themselves, compared with 54% of those whose parents had completed only high school (Choy 2001). Chi-square Automatic Interaction Detection (CHAID) analysis conducted on the results of our student survey indicate that parental involvement in post-high school planning is an important predictor of a student’s likelihood of continuing their education past high school. This is consistent with national research. One study found that parental involvement is one of three key factors that most influence a student’s chance to become college qualified (the other two are early planning for college and experiencing risk factors such as low grades and a history of high school dropouts in the family) (Cabrera and LaNasa 2000).

The students we talked to also told us that their parents are supportive of their hopes of pursuing higher education, and that they see their parents as the most helpful resource for college planning (even more than teachers and guidance counselors). But for students whose parents did not go on to college, the challenge of serving as a resource for their children is greater, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Student Perceptions of Parental Helpfulness & Involvement in Planning

| Percent of students surveyed who: | Total | Parental education level | |
|---|-------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| | | High school diploma or less | Bachelor's degree or more |
| Rate parents “extremely helpful” in post-high school planning | 63% | 58%* | 65%* |
| “Agree strongly” that parents are very involved in helping plan for the future* | 50% | 42%* | 53%* |
| Have had a serious discussion with a parent about plans for after high school* | 89% | 79%* | 91%* |

*Differences by education level are statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence.

Interestingly, our findings suggest that having a sibling who has gone on to college also increases students' likelihood of pursuing postsecondary education, even if their parents do not have college experience. Students with a sibling who went to college are more likely to report that they are planning to attend a four-year college, and also give higher ratings of their parents' helpfulness in preparing for college. Even controlling for parents' education and academic track, these students are more likely to say they care a lot about getting into college and are less likely to agree that they don't need to go to college to get a good job. What is needed, perhaps, is someone to break the ice—and to learn the tools to help the next family member move through the process.

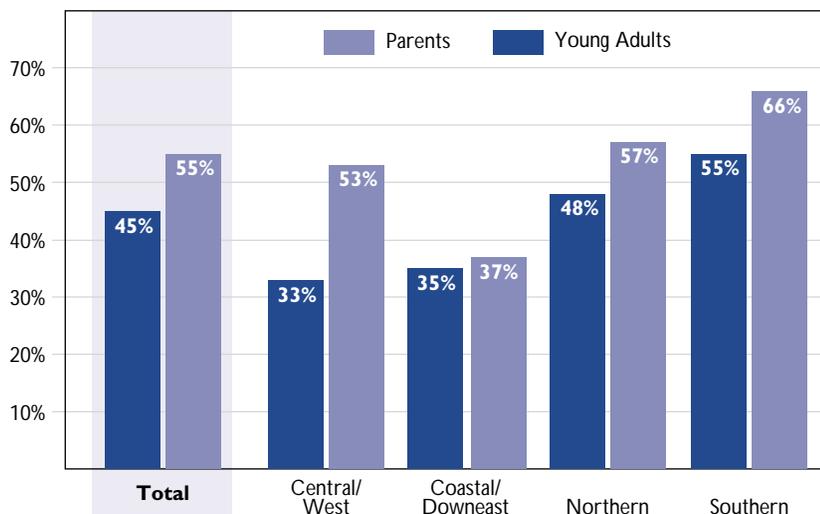
We also found that students and parents had somewhat different perceptions of the depth and frequency of discussions within their households about college planning. Virtually all parents report that they have had a serious family discussion about their child's plans for after high school, compared with 89% of current

students and only 78% of young adults surveyed. Nearly two-thirds of parents say they began having these discussions prior to high school, compared with only 38% of students. A survey of 600 Maine students and parents conducted by the Finance Authority of Maine (FAME) and Market Decisions, Inc. in 1999 found a similar contrast—82% of parents reported that discussions about future plans began prior to high school, compared with 55% of students (FAME 1999). While it is unclear whether parents overestimate their involvement or students underestimate it, the discrepancy in perceptions is clear.

Regional and Community Influences Do Exist

Our research indicates that where you live has an impact on your post-high school plans—and on your post-high school planning. Throughout the research with students, parents, educators and young adults, a pattern emerged that suggests students in southern Maine (which we define as Cumberland and York counties) have a different experience than students in other parts of the state. This echoes regional trends documented by the Maine Aspirations Benchmarking Initiative (1999). This is not in and of itself surprising, since that is also the part of the state with the highest proportion of college graduates, and higher incomes on average, and therefore parental, school and community expectations about attending college are more likely to be in alignment. In northern Maine (Aroostook, Penobscot, Piscataquis and Somerset counties), the community demographics are different from southern Maine but the support for and expectation of college attainment is not. Parents, young adults and educators in northern Maine all speak more highly of community support for education than do their peers in central/western and coastal Maine, as shown in Figure 2. We did find,

Figure 2: Percentage of Respondents Reporting Agreement that “My Community strives to encourage young people to consider attending college.”



Note: Regional differences are statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence.

Table 2: Selected College Planning Activities, by Region

| Percent of students reporting that: | Total | Region | | | |
|--|-------|------------------|----------------------|----------|----------|
| | | Central/ West | Coastal/ Downeast | Northern | Southern |
| Their school offers regularly scheduled meetings with guidance counselors | 73% | 68% | 72% | 74% | 78% |
| They have had a serious discussion about future plans with a guidance counselor or teacher | 75% | 71% | 77% | 78% | 74% |
| Guidance counselor meetings are the most helpful planning activity | 26% | 22%* | 19%* | 28% | 32%* |
| They spend their own time on post-high school planning weekly or more often | 35% | 27%* | 38% | 37% | 37% |

*Regional differences are statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence.

however, that educators in that region had a somewhat lower assessment of the financial accessibility of college—only 50% feel that college is financially accessible, compared with 68% in southern Maine.

The most significant regional challenges seem to lie in coastal/Downeast (Hancock, Knox, Lincoln, Sagadahoc, Waldo and Washington counties) and central/western (Androscoggin, Franklin, Kennebec and Oxford counties) Maine. In those counties, we found substantially lower perceptions of the value of higher education. For example, only 54% of parents in the coastal region agree that a college education is very valuable in their community, compared with a statewide average of 71%. Also in the coastal region, one-half of the young adults surveyed who did not go on to college cite “plans for life didn’t require further schooling” as a factor in their decision not to go on to college, far more than in any other region. Our surveys also found less concrete evidence of planning and preparation for college by both students and parents in central/western and coastal Maine (see Table 2).

An interesting dissertation study from several years ago explored more fully this issue of cultural impact on school experiences and postsecondary aspirations in Downeast Maine (Lawrence 1999). This study indicates that a complex combination of cultural factors—including valuing freedom over material comfort, fear of the world “beyond their horizon,” and a belief that a high school education is “good enough”—combined with difficulty transitioning to a large regional high school, concern about cost of college and an aversion to debt, have a substantial depressive effect on student aspirations for higher education.

These regional differences in experiences, actions and attitudes demonstrate that efforts to improve college-going rates among Maine high school students require a variety of approaches. One size will surely not fit all.

Tracking Makes a Difference (not always a good one)

While not every high school in Maine places its students into formal academic “tracks,” virtually every student, parent and young adult with whom we spoke was able to identify the track they were in. Similarly, the FAME study of student aspirations found that 80% of Maine students age 16 to 18 feel that they are tracked (FAME 1999). Our findings suggest that about 30% of Maine students are in an Advanced Placement (AP)/Honors track, about 50% are in a College Preparatory track, and the other 20% are in a General or Vocational Prep track. Educators themselves are somewhat divided on whether tracking “works”—some feel that it helps to divide students by perceived ability levels; others feel that it creates unrealistically high or inappropriately low expectations for students. And while most educators report that they feel that students were placed in the “correct” track, some have questions about that.

Whether one comes down on the side of tracking as good or bad, it seems clear from our study that tracking is not indifferent. A student’s “track” has a significant impact on a his/her high school experience, ranging from peer/teacher/family expectations to time and effort put into post-high school planning to

Table 3: Attitudes about School and College, by Students' Academic Track

| Percent of students surveyed reporting that: | Total | Academic Track | | |
|--|-------|----------------|--------------|------------------|
| | | AP/Honors | College Prep | General/Voc Prep |
| They care a lot about getting into college | 93% | 98% | 94% | 84%* |
| Many adults in their life have advised them to attend college | 93% | 95% | 95% | 83%* |
| They are apprehensive about the prospect of going to college | 54% | 47% | 54%* | 66%* |
| Their peers and classmates are helpful in preparing for life after high school | 52% | 56%* | 51% | 44% |
| Their courses in high school are very or extremely challenging | 43% | 63%* | 35% | 23% |

*Differences by academic track are statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence

student perceptions about the degree to which his/her high school coursework is challenging and relevant. Academic track is strongly correlated with parental education level (e.g., most students with a parent who went to college are in an AP/Honors or College Prep track and very few students in a General/Vocational Prep track have a parent who went to college). We found significant correlations between academic track and many additional factors, even after controlling for parental education level, including:

- students' plans to take the SAT exam;
- the likelihood of having college planning incorporated into classwork;
- agreement by students that their teachers are challenging and encouraging;
- students' reports of contact between their parents and teachers;
- students' agreement that, as they were growing up, their parents often talked about college.

Students in different tracks receive very different signals from school, parents and community about whether a college education is seen as the next step for them (see Table 3). While educators estimate that, overall, roughly two-thirds of their students will go on to postsecondary education, they expect 90% of AP/Honors students to go on, compared with only

67% of College Prep and 31% of General/Vocational track students. They also report that their schools are more effective at helping AP/Honors track students to set and achieve post-high school goals than they are with College Prep or General/Vocational Prep track students.

Students and educators are not the only ones to feel or notice the impact of tracking. Parents, too, had different perceptions of their children's experiences that were strongly correlated to their child's track.

In particular, parents of students in College Prep and, especially, General/Vocational Prep tracks perceive a lower level of teacher encouragement and support than do those of AP/Honors track students.

Notably, and related to the data on student out-migration, we also found that students in the AP/Honors track were the most likely to say that they would have to leave Maine to be successful in their careers. Indeed, 33% of AP/Honors students agreed with the statement "in order to be successful I will have to leave Maine," compared with 29% of students in the College Prep track and 24% of students in the General/Vocational Prep track.

Impact of Planning (or lack thereof)

One thread that consistently wove its way through family, geography and academic track was that of post-high school planning. Students with parents who had college degrees, students in southern and northern Maine, and students in the AP/Honors track spent more of their personal time on planning for college, and had more of their school time made available for such planning. Students who started planning earlier and were more proactive in their planning cite a higher degree of confidence that they will qualify for scholarships and grants. Conversely, students who waited longer, met less frequently with guidance counselors, and/or had parents who had not actively investigated financing options, generally were more reactive in their

Table 4: Educators’ Assessment of Guidance Department Effectiveness, by Structure of Department

| Percent of educators who agree that their school's guidance department: | Total | Separate responsibility for post-high school planning | No separation of responsibility |
|--|-------|---|---------------------------------|
| Focuses equally on students of all ability levels with regard to post-high school planning | 52% | 60% | 46% |
| Is proactive in accessing and working with students | 69% | 78% | 67% |

approach to planning and were likely to cite concerns about their ability to get into and pay for college.

More than two-thirds of educators report that postsecondary education planning should begin in ninth grade, if not earlier. However, less than one-third (31%) of students and one-quarter (23%) of young adults report starting their planning before tenth grade. While nearly two-thirds of young adults (64%) say they think they started planning early enough, the young adults we surveyed who did not continue their education after high school were more likely to say they don't think they started planning early enough.

The environment created by the combined effects of family, community and school expectations seems to have a significant impact on a student's self-perception and self-motivation to do active planning for life after high school. Furthermore, educators noted that the structure of a school's guidance office has an impact on students' experiences and on educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of their efforts to prepare students for college. Those working in schools that separate out post-high school planning responsibilities from other work of the guidance office express a higher degree of confidence that their programs are effective (see Table 4).

Peeling Back the Layer Between Attitudes and Actions

Planning, we discovered, is a multilayered process. When students were asked whether they planned to go to college, 90% said “yes” (see Table 5). This is consistent with findings from the previously cited FAME study and with other work that has documented very high aspirations among Maine students (Maine Aspirations Benchmarking Initiative 1999). But when the onion was peeled back another layer or two, we found that substantially

smaller proportions of students report taking many of the active steps to move them along the path to college. This was particularly true of students in General/Vocational tracks and, to some extent, College Prep tracks. While the vast majority of students (89%) report spending personal time on post-high school planning, only about one-third (35%) say they do this on a weekly basis. Fewer than two-in-five students report that they are actively saving for college. Advanced Placement/Honors track students are much more likely to report that they work on college planning during class time, while College Prep and General/Vocational Prep students are more likely to agree that it is difficult to get started thinking about and planning for college.

Tangible actions by parents also appear to be limited, particularly in contrast with the high aspirations they express for their children. The concrete steps that have been taken correlate strongly with parental educational attainment. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of students with a college-educated parent report that a

Table 5: High Student Aspirations

| Percent of students: | Total | Academic Track | | |
|---|-------|----------------|--------------|------------------|
| | | AP/Honors | College Prep | General/Voc Prep |
| Planning to pursue postsecondary education: | 90% | 96% | 89% | 76% |
| • Planning to go on to four-year college* | 80% | 94% | 83% | 31% |
| • Planning to go on to two-year college, technical college or trade school* | 10% | 2% | 6% | 45% |
| Reporting agreement that, “I always assumed I would someday attend college.”* | 92% | 98% | 91% | 75% |

*Academic track differences are statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence.

parent has taken them to visit a college campus, compared with only 38% of students whose parents did not go beyond high school. Almost three-quarters (72%) of parents with a bachelor’s degree tell us that they are actively saving for their child’s college education, compared with 45% of parents who have only a high school diploma.

Money is a Real Issue

When students, parents and young adults are asked whether they think money will be the deciding factor in whether they or their child will go to college, the vast majority say “no.” But when more specific questions are asked—not just about active steps taken, but also about affordability and value—the responses indicate considerably more concern. Nearly one-half of the young adults surveyed who did not go on to college cited the need to save for tuition as the principal reason they went to work rather than school after they got their diploma. Yet very few of those who started work had actually enrolled in college by the time they were surveyed. The students, particularly those in middle and lower tracks in high school, cite their concern that scholarship dollars would not be available for them. Parents, particularly those who did not go to college themselves, shared concern about the rising cost of college and were less willing to take on debt than their children. Quite notably, many parents, particularly

those with a college education, indicated their perception they would be penalized by a lower level of financial aid if they did save for their children’s education (see Table 6).

IMPLICATIONS

Some of the conclusions we drew from this study relate directly to the key findings described above; others derive from the broader set of research studies that have looked at this issue recently; still others have been formed by our ongoing interactions with Maine students and families in administering the Mitchell scholarship program. Perhaps the single, clearest leitmotif to emerge from the research is that students who are proactive in their college planning (and parents who are proactive in determining how to pay for college) fare better than those who are reactive. The challenge is that most take the reactive approach. What follows are suggestions of three broad areas for action.

Strengthen the High School Experience

While this is certainly easier said than done—and is not intended to imply that it is the high schools themselves that need to change (students and parents are also part of the solution)—one clear implication from our research is that some structural changes are needed in how planning happens, and in how life after high school is conceptualized and presented. Such changes could have a significant impact in making college a more obvious and attainable next step for more Maine students. The specific suggestions that derive from our research are:

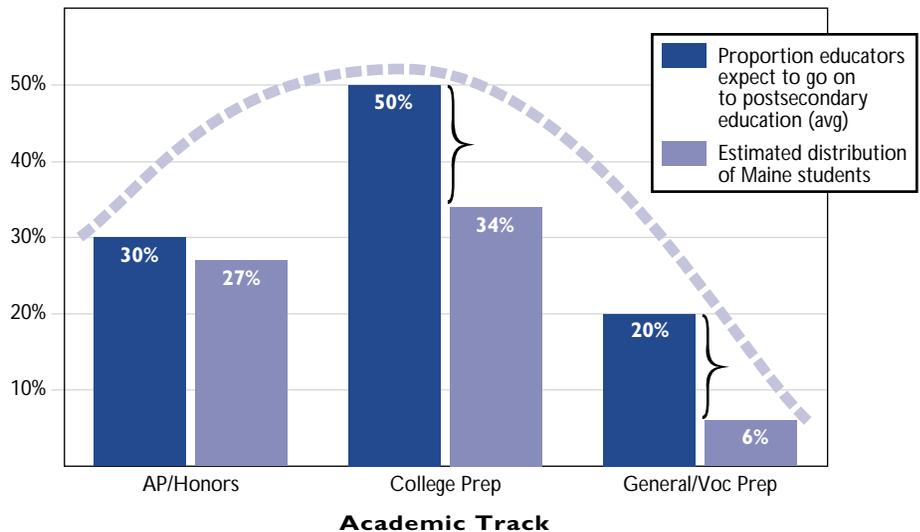
- **Broaden the notion of what it means to go on to college (and who goes).** First, it is not an all-or-nothing/four-year-degree scenario: raise awareness of two-year and technical college programs. This could address the

Table 6: Parents’ Attitudes about College Financing

| | Total | Parental education level | |
|--|-------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| | | High school diploma or less | Bachelor’s degree or more |
| Percent of parents surveyed reporting that they: | | | |
| Are extremely discouraged by the rising cost of college* | 74% | 82% | 65% |
| Will be able to find a way to afford college if their child wants to attend* | 77% | 70% | 89% |
| Are willing to take out loans for their child’s college education* | 60% | 54% | 71% |
| Will not be eligible for as much financial aid if they save for their child’s education* | 53% | 44% | 60% |

*Differences by education level are statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence.

Figure 3: Maine Educators' Expectations for their Students, by Academic Track



greater apprehension expressed by students outside the top academic track.

Second, make sure that students in the General/Vocational track get support for their post-high school plans, and provide additional support and encouragement for students in the College Prep track, particularly since many of the students we talked to did not feel confident of their readiness for college and were not taking concrete steps needed to get themselves ready. Look at the curve in Figure 3. While educators expect 90% of students in the AP/Honors track to go on to college, only two-thirds of those in the College Prep track and less than one-third of students in the General/Vocational track are expected to go on. These “gaps” are precisely the leverage points on which efforts should be focused.

- Do more individual planning with students, and with parents.** While students and parents all acknowledge that planning is primarily their responsibility and not the schools', students in discussion groups consistently told us that they would benefit greatly from having the schools provide more individualized planning. Particularly for families who are navigating the tricky waters of college admission and financial aid for the first time, schools can be tremendously helpful in translating the information and raising comfort levels. But the “mass-indoctrination” approach that most schools take (newsletters, assemblies, and so on) are overwhelming for many students and families. Even educators tended to list them as the least-helpful strategies.

- Provide more structure (and more options) for planning in high school.** Many high school students—particularly those in the College Prep track—told us in discussion groups that it would help them to have more structure to the college planning process, including mandatory meetings. They know they have a lot to do, but they have a hard time getting started on their own. They say that more regular meetings would help, as would class time and teacher support for college planning. Students in the AP/Honors track report they already have this type of structure, but the rest of the students do not. Educators clearly agree that an early start to planning is essential—yet most students report they don't begin until late in their high school careers.
- Where feasible, separate out planning from counseling responsibilities of the guidance office.** Educators at schools where these roles are handled separately reported higher confidence that their students were being adequately prepared for college. While

...the reality is that the students who are not academic or athletic superstars need money too. In fact, we could argue that they need it more.

schools may not have resources to hire additional staff, there are models that involve restructuring the guidance office and models that involve having teachers be more involved in an advising/planning capacity that should be explored.

Develop an Environment of Family, Community and Business Support for Postsecondary Education

As with the suggestion to change the high school experience, creating an environment of broad support for postsecondary education is easier said than done. Schools and families can give students—especially those whose parents did not go

to college—the message that college is for them. Just as importantly, community members and businesses have tremendous resources to offer, such as serving as mentors, opening their doors to interns, and helping to coordinate service-learning projects. Employers can make a very real difference by providing employees with information, resources and time off to meet with guidance counselors, visit college campuses and to attend planning meetings on financing their child's education. We found that most parents who did not go on to college had not taken their child to visit a college campus. There also is an important role for colleges and universities in Maine to play by developing relationships with area high schools and middle schools, and by instituting programs designed to get students on campus so they can experience firsthand a college environment.

- **Address the money issue.** Paying for college is a daunting responsibility. In addi-

tion, the vast majority of parents express frustration with the rising costs of college. For families with limited financial resources, saving is a real challenge. For families with limited financial experience, negotiating the world of subsidized and unsubsidized loans can be confusing and intimidating. More needs to be done to demystify the financial aid process for families, particularly those with no prior college experience. The more individualized approach to planning suggested above, along with community and business resources identified here, may go a long way to help families navigate these murky waters.

Even with this support, students will find that the very real issue of paying the tuition bill is a challenge. Simply put, more need-based financial aid is needed. While there is much support for—and much to commend—merit-based awards, the reality is that the students who are not academic or athletic superstars need money too. In fact, we could argue that they need it more. The assumption that college is for them is not reinforced to anything like the degree it is reinforced for AP/Honors students, and that assumption/expectation appears to be a key driver in how proactive a student is about preparing for college. Of course, the University of Maine has found great success and done many students a great service with its Top Scholars program—an approach that is particularly effective for encouraging many of Maine's best students to stay in-state. Scholarship programs such as our own at the Mitchell Institute often find success with a blended approach—looking for students with certain characteristics (in our case, academic potential and service to community) who also have demonstrated financial need. If students who are unsure about the availability of scholarships know that they are still considered worthy scholarship candidates, even though they are not at the top of their class academi-

cally or don't hold the state title in a track event, it may very well encourage them to step in and become more proactive.

- **Focus additional attention on first-generation college students.** There is a particular population in Maine that is crying out for additional attention and resources: first-generation college students. Whatever efforts are put into strengthening the high school experience, developing an environment that supports postsecondary education, and addressing the money issue, we hope there is a clear focus on students who are the first in their family to go to college. A national study found that taking a rigorous academic course-load in high school goes a long way in mitigating the disadvantage of being from a first-generation college family (Choy 2001). Our state needs to ensure that academic tracking is not keeping a rigorous academic curriculum out of reach for students whose parents are themselves not college educated.

Our research shows that having a parent or sibling who has attended college is perhaps the single greatest determinant of who goes on to college. For every single first-generation student who goes on to college—supported by the array of resources described here—an entire family of current and future generations has now increased their chance of going to college. That's just the kind of return on investment that Maine needs.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN NEXT?

From a public policy perspective, our report suggests any number of different initiatives that might be considered. These include:

- **Supporting and accelerating implementation of Learning Results (e.g., career prep) and/or findings from the *Promising Futures* report.**² Our research suggests that

efforts from both of these initiatives to make secondary education relevant and personalized for all students, including those areas in Figure 3 of students not expected to go on to postsecondary education, are on the right track.

- **Further exploration of developing a community college system for the state of Maine.** Current efforts of the Maine Technical College System (MTCS) to offer more associate degrees in liberal arts and the work of the University of Maine System to develop articulation agreements with MTCS are both steps in the direction of improving access. A full-fledged community college system (and the lower per-credit cost it brings to students) has the potential to remove additional barriers, especially since it is a traditional point of access to higher education for first-generation students. If such a system were developed, it has the potential to provide not only a broader array of postsecondary options, but also to create a deeper understanding in high schools—and elsewhere—that there genuinely is a place for all learners in higher education.
- **Increase the amounts available to high school students through the Maine State Grant program or other need-based scholarship programs.** Even as Maine families work to learn more about how to finance a college education, the reality is that the cost will still feel out of reach for many.
- **Consider developing a system that streamlines the process of completing and processing private scholarships.** Students may balk at the notion of filling out a separate application form for each scholarship. Perhaps a “common application” could be developed, as has already been done in the college admission field, to make it easier for students to get their information to scholarship providers.

- **Get the Higher Education Attainment Council (HEAC) off the ground.** This group, which was created to be similar to the Economic Growth Council, has as its principal mission to develop a vision for higher education in Maine and to articulate benchmarks for achieving progress in getting more Maine citizens a college education. If the HEAC has the resources to play the role of champion of higher education—getting out the message about the value of a college education, addressing barriers related to access (both perceptual and real), and focusing efforts and actions by both public and private sectors to address those barriers—it will keep the notion of improving higher education attainment high on everyone’s radar screen.

Since the focus of our inquiry was on the practical barriers to college, however, there is also much in our report that lends itself to smaller, more manageable and more immediate steps. Many of these can be taken

selors have to play a key role 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 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 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) on to campus. These experiences provide students with a more tangible sense of what

Our research shows that having a parent or sibling who has attended college is perhaps the single greatest determinant of who goes on to college.

on a local level (by schools, individuals, communities) and do not require the same kinds of complex systems and influx of resources that broader initiatives require.

At the conclusion of our report, we broke down the findings and implications to develop a list of action steps—10 kinds of changes that could make a difference:

- Capitalize on the potential guidance coun-

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 to 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.

These are, of course, only 10 suggestions of the dozens that could be made. Still, it is a starting point. The earlier assertion made in this article that “one size will surely not fit all” means that regional and even local strategies will need to be developed to address the particular barriers faced by students in different communities, and then key leverage points identified for addressing those barriers.

Our hope is that by combining public policy initiatives with local initiatives—that is, by creating top-down and bottom-up approaches simultaneously—we will encourage all Mainers to find a role to play in supporting more of our young people to go on to college. There is a lot at stake here, not just for individual students but also for the state’s economic future. By working together, we surely can make a difference. 🐟



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ENDNOTES

1. Readers interested in the details of this research project may access the full report on our Web site (www.mitchellinstitute.org).
2. This report was published by the Maine Commission on Secondary Education of the Maine Department of Education (1998).

Please turn the page for references.

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