

Life Choices of High School Seniors

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Introduction

Year after year, Idaho has ranked at or near the bottom of all 50 states in terms of how many students pursue postsecondary education directly after high school.^a To better understand why Idaho's "go-on" rate is so low, we surveyed 385 young adults who had graduated from Idaho high schools in spring 2015. Our first report on the survey is available at www.uidaho.edu/IdahoataGlance. This second report offers a deeper look at the data.

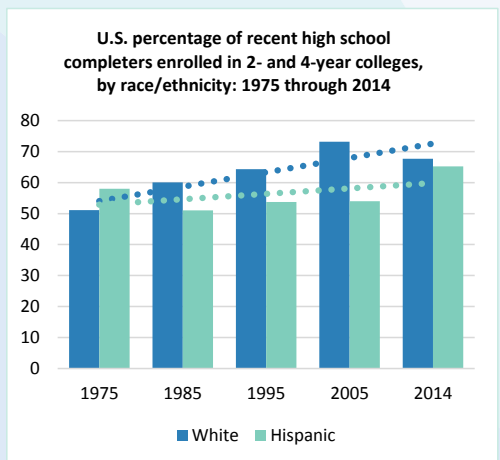
Idaho Postsecondary Participation Directly from High School Rank Among U.S. States						
Year	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002
Rank	42 nd	47 th	48 th	45 th	47 th	45 th
Year	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
Rank	44 th	50 th	47 th	50 th	48 th	48 th

SOURCE: NCHEMS 1992-2010; Idaho State Board of Education 2012-2014

For this report, we present only findings that are strongly supported by our statistical analysis. A "p" value is given throughout to indicate the strength of evidence for each finding (lowest values = strongest evidence).

Highlights

- ◆ Many respondents were family- and community-conscious. They prioritized service to others, finding work, and minimizing family financial burdens.
- ◆ New high school graduates who placed a high priority on either serving their country or being active in their church were much less likely to enroll in further education. These cultural values translated to high rates of military enlistment and service as religious missionaries.
- ◆ Males and females think differently about postsecondary education. Male respondents who placed a premium on having a job they love were less likely to go on than females with that same priority. Females who say being near family was their most important consideration tended not to go on at the same rate as males with that same priority.
- ◆ Financial readiness was a bigger concern for Hispanic students than for non-Hispanics. Having saved money to continue their education and beliefs about whether they qualified for scholarships were key factors for Hispanic students in their decision to go on. And, Hispanics were more skeptical than non-Hispanics that postsecondary education would help them get a better paying job.
- ◆ Parent education level had a greater influence on Hispanic students than on non-Hispanic students.



SOURCE: American College Testing Program

Why some students don't go on

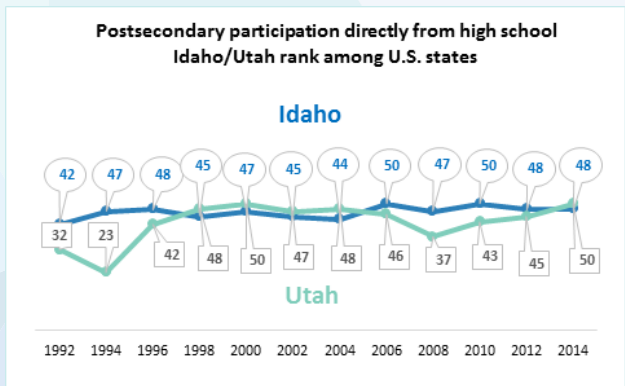
The median annual income for Idaho workers in diploma-only positions is \$30,900 (compared to \$38,900 for associate degree holders and \$45,800 for those who earn bachelor's degrees).^b Only two of Idaho's 20 "hot jobs" do not require post-high school education: first-line supervisors of construction trades; and extraction and industrial machinery mechanics.^c And yet, in 2014, just 38% of Idaho males and 53% of females went on for more education in the fall after high school.^d If they are not going to college, what are they doing?

Military and missions

Of all attitudes about life after high school addressed in our study, the two with the greatest influence against students enrolling in postsecondary education were whether a respondent placed a high priority on serving their country ($p=0.072$) or on being active in their church ($p=0.007$). Idaho has an unusually high share of young adults who enlist in the military or serve religious missions directly after high school.

The military: Idaho consistently ranks in the top one-fifth of states in terms of the share of young adult residents who enlist in the military. In addition, a high percentage of these enlistees are ranked "high quality" based on military test scores. In 2013, Idaho was first in the nation for sending a high proportion of high quality new enlistees to the military and has ranked in the top ten since 2011.^e National research on those who choose direct-from-high-school military enlistment suggests that males with average grades from lower to middle income homes are most likely to enlist. Those who say they would enjoy military work and who respect and expect supervision are attracted to the service.^f Research also cites a desire for stable and positive interactions with a relatively small group of people as a reason new high school graduates enlist.^g

Being involved in church: Utah and Idaho are the only states with double digit portions of their population who are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS).^h In both states, the behavior of this population has a substantial impact on postsecondary enrollment rates. In eastern Idaho, where 60 percent of the population are LDS, less than 40 percent of students enroll in postsecondary education directly from high school.ⁱ Since 2012, when the missionary eligibility age was lowered, postsecondary participation in areas heavily populated by LDS has fallen sharply. In Utah, this cohort of missionaries is returning and the state has begun to see an upward tick in postsecondary enrollment. The same may be happening in Idaho.^j Some national evidence suggests that returned missionaries do well academically once they enroll, perhaps because of increased maturity.^k



SOURCE: NCHEMS 1992-2010; Idaho State Board of Education 2012-2014

Attitudes and values

Finding a job they love: One attitude that works against postsecondary education (among males more so than females) has to do with thinking that satisfying, rewarding jobs can be had with only a high school diploma. Male respondents who said "having a job I love" was most important when deciding about life after high school were significantly less likely to enroll in postsecondary education ($p=0.08$) than females with similar values. There is no evidence that diploma-only jobs will commonly pay well in the future, though this was true in the past and is sometimes still the case.^l

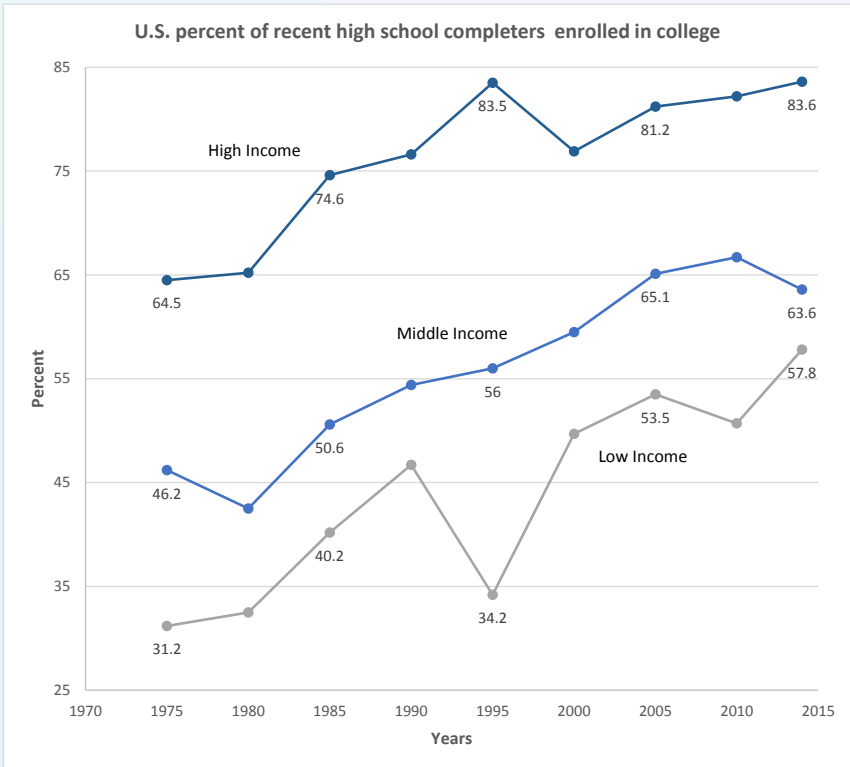
Being near family: A closely held value that discourages postsecondary education (among females more so than males) pertains to family. Female respondents who said "being near their family" was most important when deciding about life after high school were less likely to go on ($p=0.05$) than males who also highly prized nearness to family.

Ability to afford more school

Though Idaho's unemployment rate is now among the lowest in the nation, the state ranks low on many measures of financial well-being. It has the 49th lowest average wage per job; the 40th lowest median household income; and the 9th highest share of persons with income less than twice the poverty rate.^m

Thus, it is not unexpected that financial concerns influenced respondents' decisions about life after high school. Our quantitative analysis yielded evidence of these issues: Coming from a low-income community (which we measured using the child poverty rate) worked against enrolling in postsecondary education ($p=0.03$) as did having a family depending on the respondent to help pay bills ($p=0.09$).

Answers to open-ended questions reinforced the quantitative findings. As one respondent said, "I don't have much money because my family and I are struggling with keeping a roof over our heads and food in our tummies." Another respondent offered this advice to new high school graduates: "learn a good work ethic because everything in life is work."



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey

"Life is hard. I am going right into work but without scholarships or any form of transportation I'm stuck in the rut of my life working to survive, saving lil' by lil' hoping to get an education and reach my dreams."

Life After High School survey respondent

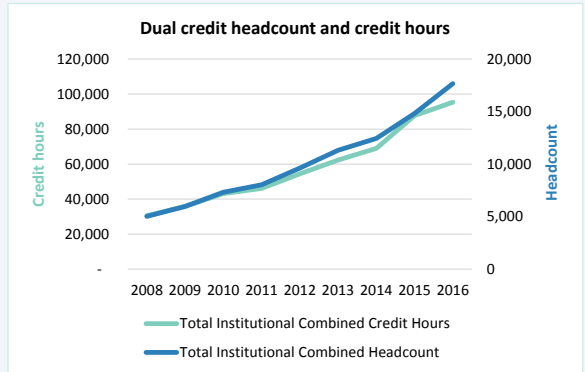
Being Hispanic

Hispanic and non-Hispanic students tend to think about postsecondary decisions differently. Hispanics who had saved money to continue their educations were very likely to enroll in postsecondary education ($p=0.04$), though this was not a significant factor for non-Hispanic students. Hispanics who thought they did not qualify for scholarships or grants were very unlikely to go on ($p=0.06$), though again, this did not deter non-Hispanics. On the other hand, non-Hispanics were more likely to expect a bigger financial payoff from continued schooling, believing that postsecondary education would help them get a higher paying job ($p=0.04$). Surprisingly, when holding student attitudes, values, and child poverty rates constant, higher parent education levels had a strong impact ($p=0.001$) on Hispanic students' decisions to continue their education, but not on decisions by non-Hispanics.

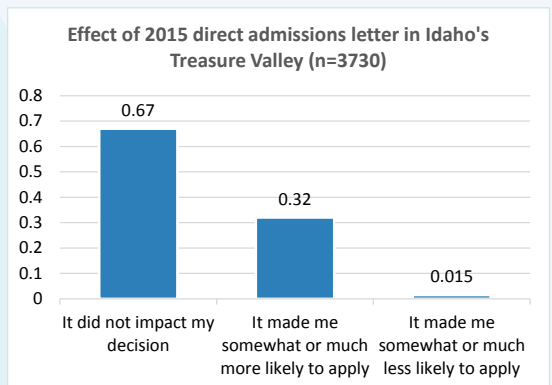
Policy implications

Idaho's State Board of Education and the state legislature have launched several initiatives to improve the rate at which young adults enroll in postsecondary education. None is mature enough to evaluate thoroughly, although several are promising.

- ◆ The number of students introduced to college-level academic coursework in high school has skyrocketed under the **dual credit** program.
- ◆ Students seem to be responding positively to a new Idaho policy proactively admitting them to the state's colleges and universities based on their academic record. In an exit survey completed by 5,433 graduating seniors in the Treasure Valley, more than 30% said the **direct admit** letter they received made them more likely to enroll in a postsecondary program.ⁿ
- ◆ Several school districts and district-sponsored charter schools are deploying a \$5 million legislative appropriation to increase middle and high school student access to high quality career and academic counseling.
- ◆ Idaho's **Next Steps** website (<https://nextsteps.idaho.gov/>) helps students better understand the multi-year process of planning and preparing for life after high school.



SOURCE: Idaho State Board of Education



SOURCE: Treasure Valley Education Partnership

- ◆ A renewable **Opportunity Scholarship** is available to award eligible Idaho students \$3,000 annually for four years of postsecondary enrollment.
- ◆ Idaho is applying additional resources to increasing the pool of career and technical education teachers and a new community college is under consideration for the Upper Snake River Valley.

Findings presented here and in our first report suggest these initiatives are on target, especially as they help to:

- ◆ reduce financial barriers;
- ◆ increase students' understanding of the payoff to postsecondary education;
- ◆ target communities where the go-on rates are particularly low because of low-income or remoteness; and
- ◆ support options other than traditional four-year college degree programs, particularly for males who think getting a job they love does not involve additional classroom time.

What I would want from people advising me?

"More facts about what I was looking at doing instead of what they wanted me to do."

Life After High School survey respondent

Our findings also support initiatives that honor multiple paths. In open-ended responses, several respondents said they did not seek help understanding the process of enrolling in postsecondary education because they didn't need the help or were hesitant to have someone tell them to do something they weren't sure they wanted to. Natural partners to help serve students on multiple paths after high school include the Idaho Division of Veterans Affairs, postsecondary veteran advisors, Idaho Department of Labor, Idaho Division of Career-Technical Education, and the LDS Church. Expansion of deferred admission policies may be worth considering.

Finally, Idaho law dictates that by the end of the 8th grade each student is required to develop a learning plan for their lives in school and beyond. Implementation of a uniform approach to regularly reviewing learning plans may increase its usefulness as a tool for helping students envision and enact plans for their lives after high school.

Future research

This study addressed several issues raised by our first survey report. We now know more about the impact of military enlistment and active religious participation on the go-on rate and about the role of finances in student decision making. We have a better idea what motivates males and females to choose or reject further schooling. This study raised new questions, each with their own policy implications.

- ◆ Differences between rural and urban student go-on rates are not reported here because they were inconclusive and warrant further study. We did not see the across-the-board lower go-on rates among rural students that researchers typically report.^o
- ◆ Whether parent education level is most closely associated with economic, cultural, and/or other factors is worth untangling.
- ◆ Knowing more about what young adults mean by “having a job they love” is an important next step for guiding policy makers and educators.

About the study

To conduct the survey, we used a stratified cluster sampling design, in which individual high schools were “clusters.” In the 2015 spring semester, we invited seniors at 21 participating schools to give us their contact information, in return for a \$10 gift card. In the fall of 2015, we followed up with our 600 Phase 1 respondents to ask what they were doing four months after graduation and why, in return for a \$20 gift card. All responses were weighted to adjust for region and district size. (For more information, see www.uidaho.edu/mcclurecenter/LAHSmethd.) Note that over-representation of students who enrolled in postsecondary education is a limitation of the study.

For the statistical analysis reported here, we used a logit model to determine the effects of individual, school, and community-level demographic variables and student attitudes and beliefs on the probability that the student would enroll the fall after high school graduation. A student was counted as enrolling if they enrolled in a certificate program, in a two-year program, or in a four-year program. The logit allowed us to determine the effects of each variable holding all the other variables constant.

Only quantitative data that met a high standard of statistical significance are presented here. The level of significance is represented as a p-value which tells us the probability that we would have observed our estimated effect if there was no true effect. The p-value is displayed as a number between 0 and 1 and interpreted in the following way: A small p-value (typically ≤ 0.05) indicates strong evidence that the result is real.

For the qualitative analysis, six coders, working separately, analyzed all open response data using a reflexive, analytical, and inductive process.^p We examined the content of the qualitative data to understand the respondent’s behavior, and the reasons behind that behavior and conducted an inter-rater reliability test to ensure that a high level of agreement had been reached across all coders.

Idaho State Board of Education Research and Statistics

The Idaho State Board of Education Research Team provides data analysis and research to the Idaho State Board of Education in order to inform their decisions on education policy. They also compute various metrics in order to track progress on the State Board’s strategic plan.

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About the McClure Center

The University of Idaho's *James A. and Louise McClure Center for Public Policy Research* conducts nonpartisan research, informs public dialogue, and engages UI students in learning about public policy making. Our current focus areas are education, natural resources, and agriculture. Our approach to addressing society's complex issues sustains Senator McClure's legacy of thoughtfully pursuing bipartisan collaboration and sound public policy.

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