



The Path Least Taken

A quest to learn more about high school graduates who don't go on to college

Jim Hull

In recent years, there's been a focus among states to establish standards that prepare students for college and careers. All too often, however, the discussion surrounding these standards largely focuses on college, and even more narrowly, four-year institutions. As a result, many have called for resources to be redirected to those high school students who have no intention of continuing their studies at college, let alone a four-year university. Thus, the thinking goes, high schools that are single-minded in preparing students for college, potentially alienate a swath of students who have no desire for post-secondary education in their future. But is such conventional wisdom accurate? Is college a distant thought for many high school graduates? Is a high school diploma the last educational milestone for a large number of graduating seniors?

Not quite.

A Startling Discovery

In our analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Education Longitudinal Study (ELS, 2002), we found that only one in five students drawn from this nationally representative sample of 15,000 did not enroll in college immediately upon graduating from high school.

Put another way, eight of out of every 10 students in the Class of 2004 made a beeline for college after receiving their diploma — a rate that rose as more time, and perhaps job opportunities, passed. Eight years after graduating from high school, a mere

12 percent of the graduates from the Class of 2004 had not gone on to either a two- or four-year college.

By drilling down into this small subset of the Class of 2004, we hope to gain major insight into the background, goals and preparation of non-college enrollees and how they compare to those graduates who did go onto college.

Policymakers, school leaders and educators need a clearer understanding of the paths graduates pursue in the years following high school in order to make more informed decisions about how to prepare students for success, whichever path they choose.

The 12% and How They Compare to Their College-Going Peers

As we discovered, a remarkably small percentage of Class of 2004 students had not advanced to college by 2012, when most of them would be 26 years old. What else did we discover about this small population, especially in relation to their college-going peers? Many things. Among the most intriguing:

- Two-thirds of non-college enrollees began high school believing they would go on to college.
- Approximately 57 percent of non-college enrollees are male and 43 percent are female.
- About half (46 percent) of non-college enrollees have parents whose highest level of education was a high school diploma.
- Non-college enrollees took fewer

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academic courses while in high school than their college-going peers.

- Non-college enrollees spent less time on homework than their college-going peers. They spent less than one hour per week on homework while college enrollees spent at seven hours on homework per week in high school.

In addition, 23 percent of graduates who never enrolled in college actually got accepted to college while in high school. The most often cited reason for not continuing their education was “Can’t afford to go to college.” Although the most common explanation, it was far from being the primary reason most non-college enrollees did not attend.

Interestingly, eight years after graduation, 27 percent of non-college enrollees reported that they still expected to begin and complete at least a two-year degree. This means at age 26, only seven percent of the graduates from the Class of 2004 had neither attended nor expected to attend college. This equates to approximately seven graduates for each of the nearly 26,000 high schools in 2004.

■ What's the Big Takeaway?

It's important for public schools to prepare all students to be life-long learners, regardless of whether or not they go on to college. Such preparation includes rigorous courses and more student support, especially in bridging the gulf between aspiration and attainment.

There is a clear disconnect between what high school students say about their post-secondary plans and what actually happens. When looking back at the history of non-college enrollees at age 26, we

found that the large majority of them fully expected to enroll in a two- or four-year college while in high school, and many of them still aspired to college as adults. We also see, however, that most of them did not take the steps needed to enroll. Some of this could be explained by adolescent uncertainty. But there may be a role for schools, too, especially in helping students clarify their goals and bridge the gulf between aspiration and attainment.

School leaders can begin by asking some of the following questions:

- How many students expect to go onto college when they enter high school?
- How many high school graduates don't ever enroll in college?
- How many high school graduates don't go onto college but wanted to?

- What prevented them from going to college?
- How does the high school preparation differ between those students who go on to college and those who don't?
- Do we have enough trained guidance counselors who are knowledgeable in postsecondary options and their entry requirements?
- Do we provide opportunities for internships and college visits?
- Do we encourage all students to take rigorous courses in high school, regardless of their plans for after graduation? ■

Jim Hull is the Senior Policy Analyst for the Center for Public Education. Research support provided by former CPE interns, Jordan Belton and Patricia Campbell.

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