

From High School to College: Removing Barriers for Maine Students – A Summary



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The goals of the Mitchell Institute's 2002 *Barriers* study were to explore the gap between Maine's strong high school completion rate and its below average college-going rate, and to identify strategies for making college more accessible to Maine students. Since then, intent to enroll in college among Maine high school graduates has steadily increased, but actual college enrollment has not. In 2006, the Mitchell Institute received grants from the **Nellie Mae Education Foundation** and **Bank of America** to study the growing gap between college intentions and enrollment. The *Barriers 2* research included:

- **Maine College Enrollment Data Set:** 81 Maine high schools (62%) provided electronic records for their recent graduates. These records were matched with college enrollment data through the National Student Clearinghouse, a nonprofit service that includes 92% of the nation's colleges and universities. We aggregated the enrollment and graduation reports to create statewide estimates.

- **Interviews:** Students at Bates and Bowdoin Colleges and the University of Maine conducted qualitative research with high school students and recent graduates all over Maine. Group interviews were held with juniors and seniors at 19 Maine high schools and students at one Maine college campus.
- **Surveys:** PanAtlantic SMS Group, a Portland-based market research firm, conducted surveys of 1,145 Maine high school educators; 67 college administrators; 900 parents of students in grades 7-12; 800 11th and 12th grade students; 390 young adults ages 18-25; and 67 college administrators.
- **Profiles:** We identified and interviewed schools, programs, and communities with promising practices for helping students to realize their college intentions.

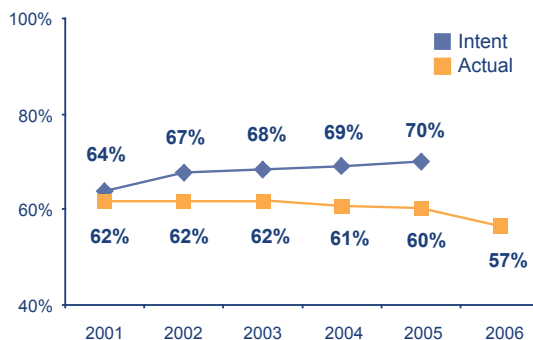
“The big thing that teachers emphasized which I never fully understood about college until now was it isn't all about hitting the books; it is about maturing and doing it in a place where there is a diverse array of opportunities, cultures, thoughts, and experiences that are all at your fingertips.” —a Maine college student

Key findings

- While college aspirations are high in Maine, our findings suggest that realizing these aspirations may be increasingly difficult. In 2001, 64% of Maine's high school graduating class reported intentions to enroll immediately in college, and 62%

actually enrolled within one year. By 2005, 70% of graduating seniors statewide intended to enroll in college, but only 60% enrolled within a year. The college-going rate dipped to a low of 57% for the class of 2006. Maine's college-going rate is lower than both the U.S. and New England averages.

College-Going among Maine High School Graduates



Source for intent data: Maine Department of Education at www.state.me.us/education/enroll/grads/gradspost.htm

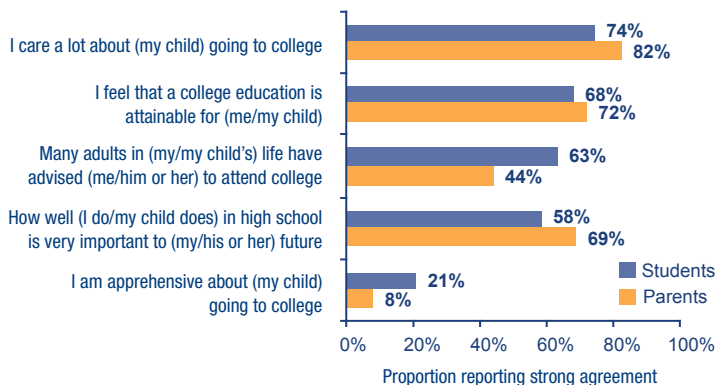
“If the student doesn't feel supported to do this, it's kind of a large burden to have on just one set of shoulders. It's kind of nice when that weight's distributed and they have that family support or that teacher support right behind them.” —a Maine high school student

- Maine has made important progress in the last five years. Community encouragement for college has improved, many Maine high schools have changed academic tracking practices (potentially allowing more students access to a rigorous curriculum), more high school students are getting exposure to college, parents are getting more involved with helping students plan for the future, and more schools are embedding career and college planning activities into their day-to-day work.
- College aspirations are high. 85% of high school juniors and seniors surveyed expect to go to a two- or four-year college right after high school. Three-quarters (77%) of parents expect their child to attend a two-year or four-year college directly after high school.
- Academic track matters a great deal. The data clearly show that students in a General/Vocational track are less challenged in the classroom, receive less encouragement about college, and do not feel as well-prepared for life after high school. They are less likely to aspire to college or to believe that their parents ex-

pect them to attend college, and the strength of their convictions that college is attainable and affordable is significantly lower.

- On average, about three in five educators (59%) rate their school as at least somewhat effective at preparing students for success in college and the workplace. Educators are twice as likely to rate their school very or somewhat effective at preparing Honors/Advanced Placement (AP) track students as General/Vocational track students.

Beliefs about College

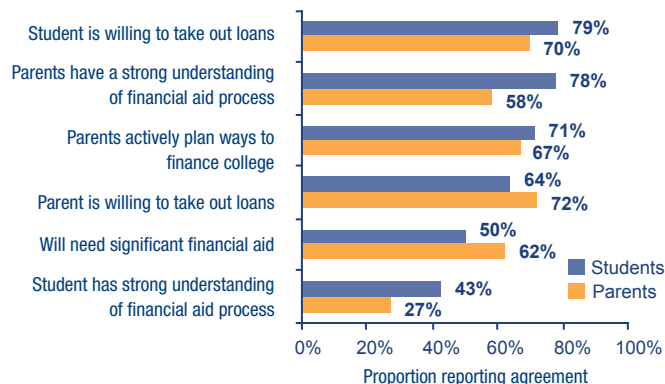


- Parental educational attainment has a critical influence on student experience. There is a strong correlation between a student's academic track and his parents' level of educational attainment. Parental education level has an even stronger influence on parents' beliefs about the financial feasibility of college for their children than does household income.
- Geographic differences persist. Northern Maine supports and values education and has made significant strides in early college opportunities. Southern Maine still experiences the benefits of a more highly-educated population, such as widespread expectations that college is the next step after high school and a high degree of parental involvement. Coastal Maine tends to value college less highly than do the other regions, parents tend to be less involved in planning for the future, and students have more experience handling responsibilities than in the other regions. In Central/Western Maine, the strength of convictions regarding the attainability and importance of college are lower, and this region often lags when it comes to taking timely, concrete steps to plan for students' futures.
- Gender differences are clear. Male students have less confidence about their future plans than female students do. Some educators say that practices in their schools as well as community and personal characteristics make the academic program at their high school less effective for male than for female students.
- Maine families do not know enough about how to pay for education. Far fewer students complete financial aid applica-

tions than are eligible to receive aid. Educators acknowledge that schools are not as effective at helping families understand college finances as they are at informing them about college options. About three in ten parents (29%) say that finances are likely to be the determining factor in whether their child attends college, as do 30% of students. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of parents say that finances are likely to be the determining factor in which college their child attends, compared with about half (49%) of students.

"Nothing will prevent me from going to college, except money." —a Maine high school student

Beliefs about Financial Aid



"I think that high schools are getting much better at helping kids with the college search process, but they are lacking on the financial aid search. Sure, they list some scholarship opportunities... but they don't really start talking finances until late junior year. High schools need to start this process freshman year." —a Maine college student

Promising Practices

- **Early College:** An education strategy that cuts across track, family background, income, gender, and geography, dual credit early college programs give high school students a taste of college-level work, exposure to a college campus, and a chance to earn credit toward a college degree.
- **Strategic Structures in Schools:** Embedding career and college planning into classroom and advising systems, creating career and college centers at school, including PSAT and SAT prep as part of regular classroom instruction, and teaming of teachers to provide transitional support to students are examples of school practices that have a positive impact.
- **Hands-on, Concrete, Kid-and-Family-Focused Programs:** On-the-ground help such as facilitating college visits, mentoring programs, College Goal Sunday, and summer programs for

students who have just graduated all have promise for ensuring that more students make successful transitions from high school to college.

Implications and Recommendations

As we found in the first *Barriers* report, the vast majority of high school students and their parents have college aspirations. College-going among Maine high school graduates is not growing, however, and too many students who enroll in college do not persist to graduation. This research offers evidence about why college enrollment is not growing along with aspirations, and how Maine can help more students realize their aspirations.

- Most educators do not believe that all students are capable of graduating from high school ready for college. While this is partially due to factors like student maturity and motivation, some educators still have a limited view of college as a four-year degree program in the liberal arts and sciences.
- There is a lack of awareness, particularly among parents and students, that similar math, reading, and writing skills are needed for success both at college and in the workplace.
- While educators and current college students believe that planning for life after high school should begin early, many students are not getting started until their junior year.
- There is work to be done improving academic readiness for college, particularly for students not in an Honors/AP academic track.
- There is not enough awareness of the financial aid process or support for families navigating it. Students' confidence about the financial feasibility of going to college is significantly lower than college aspirations.
- Parental involvement is critical. Students say that their parents are the most helpful resource in their planning for after high school, and we find that parental involvement is a key factor in predicting college enrollment.

Eight Ways to Make a Difference

- 1) Continue to broaden the notion of college.
- 2) Expose students to college, starting at a young age.
- 3) Start career exploration early.
- 4) Ensure that all students have rigorous educational experiences.
- 5) Enlist Maine colleges (faculty, staff, and students).
- 6) Get businesses involved.
- 7) Start financial planning and saving for college early.
- 8) Make sure all families complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

Colleges can:

- Proactively improve awareness among K-12 educators about the full array of programs and majors—both two-year and four-year—that they offer.
- Open their doors to younger students. Invite participants in vacation or summer recreation programs to use the gym or pool, have lunch in the cafeteria, and meet some college students. Sports teams can host local youth groups for occasional clinics.
- Build and expand early college partnerships, providing opportunities for more high school students to enroll in college courses.
- Reinforce the need for better preparation for all students by informing Maine citizens—educators, parents, and students—about the skills needed for success at college.
- Invite high school teachers to visit college courses in their discipline. Bring college administrators and high school guidance staff together to share knowledge about placement tests, admissions, and financial aid.
- Create ways for college students to engage in community service by visiting local high schools (and their home high schools) regularly to serve as mentors or to share their experiences with the college application process and the realities of college life.

“University and high school faculties need to partner in the areas of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to shrink the disconnect...provide tutorial help at the high schools, administer college placement tests to high school juniors and first semester seniors, and provide tutors to help students meet cut off scores and realize the rigor of college work.” —a Maine college administrator

High schools can:

- Provide challenging, rigorous courses to all students.
- Build and expand early college partnerships with colleges to provide more opportunities for students to enroll in college courses.
- Arrange college campus visits, both informal (such as attending campus arts or sporting events) and formal (such as official tours and more extensive visits).
- Develop programs for students in each grade that explicitly lead them to connect interests with possible careers and to find out what education is required. Some schools have successfully built this into their advisory programs and into career/college centers at school.
- Explain the necessary steps and the appropriate timing for

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completing the FAFSA as part of career and college counseling for all students.

Elementary and middle schools can:

- Provide challenging, rigorous courses to all students.
- Build career exploration into curricula at all levels.
- Arrange field trips to colleges, such as attending campus arts or sporting events.

“Too often, we take for granted that everyone knows about jobs and college, but it’s just not the case for everyone. Many kids aren’t ready to start thinking about their future in 8th grade. But if you at least introduce them to it, it might help them to take course-selection in high school a little more seriously.” —a Maine college student

Businesses can:

- Reinforce the need for better preparation for all students by informing Maine citizens—educators, parents, and students—about the skills needed for success in the workplace.
- Host students for site visits and job shadows, encourage employees to serve as mentors, and sponsor visits to college programs related to their industry.
- Think of employees as the parents of the next generation’s workforce, and provide them with information and services to ensure that they can effectively help their children prepare for success.
- Invite educators to visit work sites to show them the job skills that are in demand, and describe the expectations of employees in terms of reading, writing, and math proficiency.
- Specifically for employees with a child in high school, give one additional day off each year for college campus visits; host college and financial aid information sessions on-site; and provide employees with hands-on help with completing the FAFSA, either by bringing in financial aid experts or by linking employees who have been through the process with those facing it for the first time.

Parents can:

- Share their own experiences with their children, and the children of relatives and friends, so that more students learn about different paths to success.
- Get involved in their child’s course selection beginning in middle school. They should ensure that their child chooses the most rigorous courses they can, advocate for the resources needed to support successful experiences, and support students to stick with it.
- Save for college starting when their children are born. By the same token, it is never too late to start saving for college.
- Complete their federal tax returns in January of their child’s senior year so that the information needed for the FAFSA is accurate and available on time. This will put the student in the best position to receive state and federal financial aid, as well as aid from their college.

“The biggest challenge is getting students and families to prepare and save for several years prior to starting college. It is not the amount that is saved that is so important...it is more for students and families to feel vested in the process. If families spend time saving for college, then chances are quite good that other areas of the student’s preparation are being scrutinized and planned for (such as rigorous math, science, and college-level high school classes).” —a Maine college administrator

Students can:

- Seek opportunities, and say yes when offered opportunities, to visit colleges.
- Take Algebra 1 in 8th or 9th grade (which means getting adequate math preparation in the earlier grades), and continue to take a rigorous course of study, including a math course, every year of high school. Senior year is not a time to coast. Learning to think and write takes hard work—push yourself!
- Work and save a portion of their earnings for college.



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About the Mitchell Institute

The core mission of the Mitchell Institute is to increase the likelihood that young people from every community in Maine will aspire to, pursue, and achieve a college education. Each year, the Mitchell Institute awards a \$5,000 scholarship to a graduating senior from every public high school in Maine. Selection is based on academic promise, financial need, and a history of community service. The Mitchell Scholarship Program has awarded more than \$5.7 million in financial assistance to nearly 1,400 Maine students since 1995. Mitchell Institute support programs create ongoing Scholar and Alumni involvement in leadership and professional development, as well as community service and mentoring activities. The Mitchell Institute strengthens the involvement of a new generation of civic-minded and committed citizens while creating educational opportunity for Maine's young people.



Through a longitudinal study of the Mitchell Scholars and broader statewide research, the Mitchell Institute contributes to the body of knowledge about postsecondary education in Maine. Our goals are to ensure that our scholarship and support program resources are used effectively, to measure the impacts of being a Mitchell Scholar, and to learn about practical barriers to postsecondary education in Maine and how to make college more accessible to Maine high school students.

The Great Schools Partnership, a supporting organization of the Mitchell Institute, is committed to strengthening and redesigning Maine's system of public secondary education to improve the quality of learning for every high school student in the state. In collaboration with organizations and educators across Maine and the nation, the Great Schools Partnership is working to raise educational aspirations and achievement by creating equitable, rigorous, and personalized academic programs that prepare all students for college, work, and citizenship in the 21st century.