

Life after High School

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Introduction

In recent years, Idaho has ranked at or near the bottom of all 50 states in terms of our “Go On” rate, that is, how many high school graduates go on for postsecondary education.^a In 2014, Idaho’s Go On rate for the fall after high school graduation was only 47%.^b

To understand Idaho’s low Go On rate, in September 2015 we surveyed 385 young adults who had graduated from an Idaho high school the previous spring. We asked them what they were doing and how they made their decision about life after high school. Based on our survey and research others have done, what have we learned?

- ◆ More females than males are enrolling in postsecondary education. This is true among our survey respondents, in Idaho generally, and in the U.S. as a whole. In Idaho in 2014, 53% of females went on, compared to only 38% of males.^c
- ◆ Males and females are motivated by different considerations. Among our respondents, a higher percentage of males than females said the most important thing in deciding about life after high school was “making money.” In contrast, more females than males cited “expanding my horizons” as their most important consideration.
- ◆ Not all young adults in Idaho believe postsecondary education pays off. In our survey, only two-thirds of respondents strongly agreed that more education would help them get a higher paying job. The rest had at least some doubt.
- ◆ Parents influence their children’s decisions about life after high school. In our survey, a significantly higher percentage of respondents whose parents had at least some postsecondary education went on after high school than those whose parents did not. And among respondents who went on, 75% said parents were the most influential people when it came to deciding what to do after high school.

Our survey respondents were similar to *all Idaho high school seniors* in terms of region of the state, size of school district, gender, and ethnicity. Readers will note, however, that the Go On rate among our respondents was about 20% higher than in Idaho as a whole. This is because young adults who planned to enroll in postsecondary education were more likely to respond to the survey. Despite the difference in Go On rates between all Idaho high school graduates and our respondents, the survey yielded valuable insights and previously unavailable data to help inform programs and policy.

Here we present our first, descriptive findings from the study. A second issue of *Idaho at a Glance* will explore factors related to life after high school in more detail.

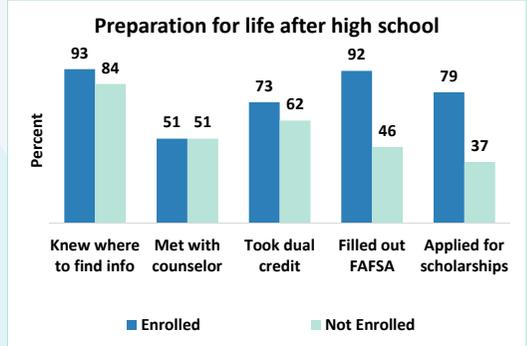
Planning and preparation

Spring plans compared to fall activities: When they were first contacted in spring 2015, respondents were asked about their plans for fall. Of those who planned to go on, 9-in-10 had enrolled in a postsecondary program by September. Unexpectedly, 1-in-5 who did not plan to go on were also enrolled by September.

Highest level of education planned: 9-in-10 of those who were enrolled in September planned to complete a 4-year degree, compared to about 66% of those who were not enrolled.

Information sources: Regardless of whether they went on for more education, a large majority of respondents said they knew where to find information about what to do after high school. Half said they met with a high school counselor when they were making their decision.

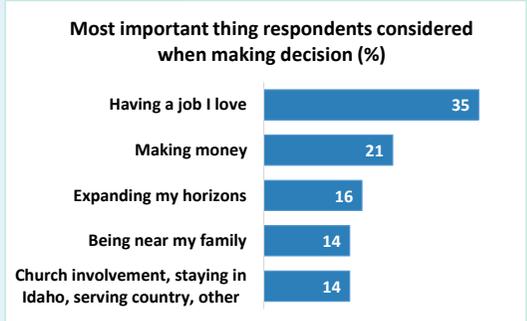
Dual credit: Well over half of respondents took at least one dual credit course in high school. About half of those who enrolled in dual credit took math, similar to the share who took science. The most common reason for not taking dual credit was that the program was not offered.



How decisions are made

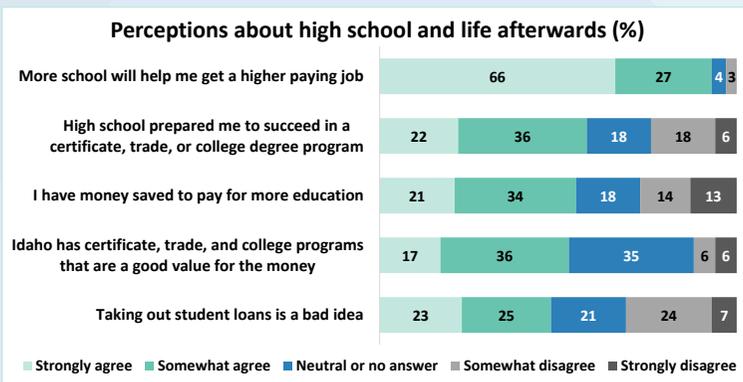
The most important consideration when thinking about life after high school:

Regardless of respondents' Go On decision, the two most important considerations were "having a job I love" and "making money." Thirty percent of male respondents, compared to 14% of female respondents, cited "making money" as their most important consideration.



Perceptions about high school and life afterwards: We asked all respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements.

- ◆ Only 66% strongly agreed that more school would help get a higher paying job.
- ◆ Only 22% strongly agreed that high school prepared them to succeed in postsecondary education.
- ◆ Only 23% strongly agreed that taking out student loans is a bad idea.



Parents' & guardians' education level

Among respondents whose parents or guardians had a high school degree or less, 67% were enrolled in the fall after high school graduation—significantly less than the share whose parents or guardians had at least some postsecondary education.

Respondent Characteristics		
	Enrolled (Percent)	Not Enrolled (Percent)
Parents' education level		
High school diploma or less	67	33
Postsecondary education	75	25

The relationship between parents' education levels and the Go On decision is even stronger when we look only at respondents who did not go on and were working, i.e. excluding respondents who went into the military or on a mission.

High school graduates who did not go on

Roughly one-third of respondents who did not go on were either in the military or preparing for a mission. We expect that some respondents who in May gave us contact information for the fall had already left for the military or a mission, so did not fill out a survey in the fall.

The other two-thirds of those who did not go on were working (mostly full-time). The most common occupations reported were sales or office support; food preparation or service; and entertainment.

- ◆ 62% of those who were working said they were *very or somewhat likely* to enroll in postsecondary education in the next 12 months (n=46). The most important reasons they postponed were “couldn't afford it” (37%, n=17) and “didn't have a plan” (34%, n=15). Less than 1% said they postponed because they did not know where to get help or find information.
- ◆ 38% of those who were working said they were *unlikely* to enroll in the next 12 months or did not know (n=28). Respondents could give more than one reason why they were unlikely to go on. Reasons included “I cannot afford it” (44%, n=12), “I don't need more education for the job I want” (36%, n=10), and “I don't need more education to make money” (26%, n=7).

High school graduates who did go on

Most respondents who went on for postsecondary education by September were enrolled in a 4-year institution.

- ◆ About 67% said “getting a good job” was the *most* important consideration when they were deciding whether to go on. 20% said it was “becoming a better person.”
- ◆ 75% said their parents or guardians were the most influential people when it came to deciding what to do after high school.
- ◆ 20% of respondents who went on for more education were also working while they were in school. About 80% of this group were working part-time.

Respondents Enrolled in Postsecondary Education (n=275)	
Enrolled in a certificate or trade program (%)	4
Enrolled in a 2-year institution (%)	26
Enrolled in a 4-year institution (%)	70
<i>Total (%)</i>	<i>100</i>

Policy implications

- ◆ In 2014, 53% of Idaho's female high school graduates went on for more education the fall after graduation, compared to only 38% of males. Idaho's gender gap has persisted over time and across regions of the state. And, the gap is higher in Idaho than it is nationwide.^c Our study suggests that more males than females are entering the labor force right out of high school. It also supports the need for public dialogue and further research on the gender gap in Go On rates.
- ◆ One-third of respondents were not fully convinced that more education would help them financially. Idaho's average wage per job is among the lowest in the nation. Over time, the average wage gap between Idaho and the rest of the nation is increasing.^d Thus, young adults in some parts of Idaho may have reason to doubt the value of more education. One possible solution is to involve businesses in encouraging students to go on, perhaps by sponsoring apprenticeships that combine classroom instruction with paid on-the-job training, thus strengthening the connection between more education and employment. Another possible approach is to raise the effective wage per job for postsecondary graduates, possibly using income tax credits as incentives after graduation.
- ◆ The share of respondents who enrolled in postsecondary education is significantly higher among those whose parents have more than a high school education. And, most of those who went on reported that their parents were the most influential people when it came to deciding what to do after high school. Thus, it is important to find ways to support parents in encouraging their children to go on. Focusing only on students may not be enough to bring about multigenerational change in attitudes towards postsecondary education.
- ◆ State agencies, schools, foundations, colleges and universities are experimenting with innovative strategies to encourage more postsecondary education. These include the State Board of Education's Direct Admission initiative, dual credit classes, the Treasure Valley Education Partnership, programs supported by Idaho's College Access Challenge Grant, and "near peer" mentor programs. It is critical that we take time to compile lessons learned and create a common base of knowledge from which to move forward. A good example of communicating lessons learned is the Albertson Foundation's report on its Go On and Continuous Enrollment programs.^e

Future research

The next step in our analysis is to explore more fully the relative importance of geography, affordability, college preparation, and other factors we can address with our Life after High School data. Some questions raised by our analysis will require additional studies:

- ◆ How much of Idaho's low Go On rate is due to young adults going on religious missions or joining the military? And, how likely are these young adults to enroll in postsecondary education when they return home?
- ◆ How much of the state's low Go On rate is due to the nature of Idaho's labor markets and low average wage rates?
- ◆ What explains the gap between male and female Go On rates?
- ◆ What strategies are effective in changing attitudes about the value of postsecondary education?

Sound analysis of issues like these can inform pragmatic, bipartisan approaches to improving educational attainment among people in Idaho's future labor force.

How the study was conducted

We used a “stratified cluster sampling” technique, with public high schools each serving as a “cluster.” High schools were randomly selected from all public high schools in their region and district size group. Every public high school in Idaho had the same likelihood of being selected for the sample. Three small groups of public high schools were not included in the study: (a) virtual schools; (b) schools belonging to a one-school district; and (c) schools with fewer than seven students.

In March 2015 we invited each of 30 high schools in our original sample to participate in the study. If a school declined to participate, a replacement school with similar characteristics was included. Twenty-one schools accepted the invitation. Together, they enrolled roughly 3,000 of Idaho’s 17,000 seniors.

In Phase 1 (April 28—May 15, 2015), we invited all seniors at the participating schools to tell us what they planned to do in the fall and to give us their contact information for September, in return for a \$10 Amazon gift card. Each of the 21 high schools distributed information packets to their seniors and publicized the survey. The packets included an opt-out letter for parents, along with information about accessing an online survey to provide contact information for the fall and about the gift card. All responses were confidential with no respondent identifiers. Roughly 20% of the seniors at the 21 schools responded in Phase 1.

In Phase 2 (September 15—30, 2015), we followed up with our 600 Phase 1 respondents to ask what they were doing four months after graduation and about factors that influenced their decision. Respondents who answered online survey questions in September received a \$20 Amazon gift card. Sixty-three percent (or 385) of the newly graduated seniors responded in Phase 2.

Consistent with the stratified sample design, responses were weighted to adjust for region and district size, as well as for gender and ethnicity. For more detail on how the survey was conducted, please see www.uidaho.edu/mcclurecenter/LAHSMethod.

Who responded to the survey

Compared to the population of all recent high school graduates in Idaho, our survey respondents were disproportionately enrolled in postsecondary education. In other words, those who went on for more education were **more likely to respond** than those who did not go on. This means that we can report results for our respondents but cannot generalize from our sample to the population of all Idaho seniors.

Nevertheless, our study findings are consistent in many ways with previous research, as well as with data from the

Idaho State Board of Education (e.g., in terms of how many recent high school graduates enroll in community college vs. four-year programs). This consistency does not mitigate potential non-response error in our survey, but does suggest the patterns we see among our respondents could hold true in the larger population if our Go On rate had been closer to that among all Idaho high school seniors.

Respondent Characteristics		
	Enrolled (Percent)	Not Enrolled (Percent)
Gender		
Male	62	38
Female	82	18
Ethnicity		
Hispanic	72	28
Non-Hispanic	72	28

Respondent Activity, September 2015		
	Number	Percent
Not enrolled		
Working	74	19
Preparing for a religious mission	29	7
Preparing for or in the military	7	2
Enrolled in a postsecondary program		
Certificate, trade or 2-year program	83	22
4-year program	192	50
<i>Total</i>	<i>385</i>	<i>100</i>

Sources

- a—"College-Going Rates of High School Graduates—Directly from High School," National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, <http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/index.php?measure=32>
- b—Personal communication with Cathleen M. McHugh, Research and Statistics, Idaho State Board of Education, December 4, 2015.
- c—"Idaho's Gender Gap in Go-On Rates," Cathleen M. McHugh, Idaho State Board of Education, December 2015, https://boardofed.idaho.gov/research_stats/idaho-gender-gap-go-on-rates.pdf
- d—U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Regional Economic Accounts, Local Area Personal Income, <http://www.bea.gov/iTable/iTable.cfm?ReqID=70&step=1#reqid=70&step=1&isuri=1>
- e—"Esto Perpetua: How Idaho can perpetuate best practices to help students succeed," Albertson Family Foundation, Spring 2015, <http://www.jkaf.org/content/uploads/2015/07/esto-perpetua.pdf>

Additional reading

- "The Facts 2015," Idaho State Board of Education, https://boardofed.idaho.gov/communications_center/documents/publications/2015_Final_Fact_Book.pdf
- "Complete College Idaho: A Plan for Growing Talent to Fuel Innovation and Economic Growth in the Gem State," Complete College Idaho, June 2012, https://boardofed.idaho.gov/board_initiatives/cci/documents/cci_plan.pdf
- "Boosting Idaho Rural Students' College Prospects by Expanding Access to Great Teaching," Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho, Albertson Foundation, October 2015, <http://opportunityculture.org/boosting-idaho-rural-students-college-prospects-by-expanding-access-to-great-teaching/>

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University of Idaho's Social Science Research Unit (SSRU)

The McClure Center partnered with SSRU to conduct the Life after High School study. SSRU was established in 1989 to meet the growing demand for statistically rigorous survey approaches. Today, the SSRU has over 25 years of experience conducting public opinion surveys, agricultural surveys, consumer studies, economic impact analyses and project evaluations. SSRU uses scientifically assessed methodologies to design studies, collect and analyze data, and report results. Thanks to everyone at SSRU for their patience as we worked through this complex study.

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. The McClure Center is part of the College of Letters, Arts and Social Sciences.

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