

The College Attendance Decisions of Young Women in Utah



Utah Women and Education Project researchers conducted in-depth research in 2010 to discover why more young women around the state are not attending and graduating from college. Young women in Utah make one of the following four decisions about college attendance: 1) not to attend, 2) to attend but then drop out, 3) to drop out and return, or 4) to graduate with a postsecondary degree (e.g., certificate, associate, or bachelor). We found that there were a variety of reasons why our participants made the college attendance decisions they did.

A majority of the participants who had never attended college had once aspired to go. Some still see it as part of their future although existing data show that only a small percentage will actually follow through later in life. Participants who never aspired to get a college degree were a minority in this population. The primary challenge for educators and parents, therefore, is to help young women who want to go to college obtain the tools they need to be successful.

What kept so many of these young women from following their dreams?

Economic Reasons	53.7%
Family Issues*	40.9%
Lack of Direction or Goals	26.8%
Negative School/College Experiences	21.5%
Health Issues	16.1%
Time/Balance	11.4%

*Participants who said they could not attend college due to family issues were significantly more likely to not attend or graduate from college.

SAMPLE PARTICIPANT QUOTES

“When I began seriously dating a really special guy (he was ‘the one’) during a spring semester, he and I decided that it would be nice if I had more time to spend with him. So, I dropped almost half of my full-time credits to have more time to date. After that we were so busy working full-time and part-time jobs to save up for marriage, an apartment, a car, etc., that I never went back.”

“I attended college for about two weeks but was no longer able to go because my dad never filed his taxes, and I could not apply for financial aid on my own because I was too young nor could I afford it.”

“I got pregnant and had a baby right away. Then we decided our baby needed a sibling a year later, and I’ve just been up to my eyeballs in housework ever since.”

“My changing work schedule made it difficult to attend classes, because my employers would move my shift, and I would drop classes and not be able to register for more.”

Reasons to Attend College

The reasons young women decided to attend college were separated into five categories. Categories two and three were statistically linked to graduating.*

1. *To be educated (46%):* Respondents described having clear goals for their education and the reasons why it was important. They also loved learning.
2. *Due to influence from family and friends* (45.5%):* These women identified family and friends as influencing their decision to pursue education.
3. *To create a new future* (31.3%):* These college students wanted to make a better life for themselves and their families.
4. *For better money and job (29%):* These individuals were motivated to attend college to earn more money and/or obtain advancement in their careers.
5. *Due to past schooling experiences (10.8%):* This group identified positive experiences in the K-12 public school system as being one important reason they decided to attend college.

Participant Demographics

- 245 females; 18-32 year-olds
- 89.9% White; 80.4% LDS
- 44.1% married
- 16 counties, 56.2% from Salt Lake and Utah counties

Visit www.uvu.edu/wep for additional information about the research study.

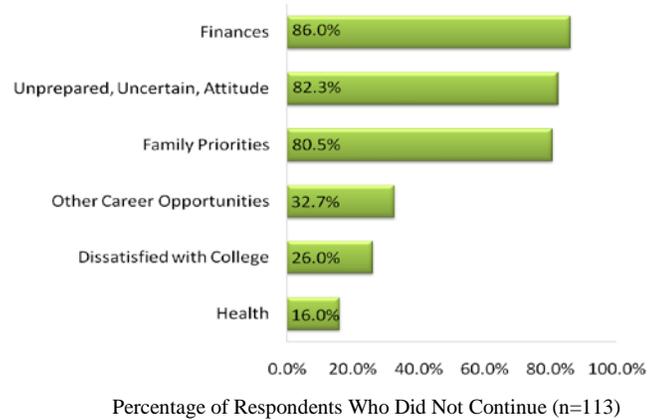


Taking an Active Role

- Talk to young women, starting early in their lives, about how to pay for college (see Research Snapshot No. 8 for details).
- Ask young women who are attending college if they are struggling in any way. If so, become a mentor yourself, or encourage them to see their advisor or visit the student success and retention office.
- Don't assume that the only support young women need is financial. Addressing social, emotional, and health issues can help a woman decide to remain in college.
- Talk to women about the broad value of education, including a healthier lifestyle, better parenting abilities, increased lifelong learning skills, enhanced quality of life, and yes, a bigger paycheck.
- Encourage women to visit a financial aid officer at the college(s) they would like to attend.
- Remind parents that they need to play a strong role in obtaining financial aid assistance for their daughters. This can be a time-consuming activity, and they need to start early.
- Help women set goals and learn to balance competing priorities.

Other Findings

We asked participants who had attended college and subsequently dropped out why they did not continue. Their answers are listed in the following graph. The first four items are statistically linked to dropping out of college and having lower commitment levels for postsecondary education.



INFLUENCES TO RETURN TO COLLEGE

From a provided list, participants selected those reasons that might influence their decision to attend or return to college at some point in the future:

To develop skills	83.8%
To get a better job	75.1%
To make more money	71.0%
To become a better person	68.9%
To gain a general education	57.3%
To become a more cultured person	46.1%
To improve study skills	46.1%
Because of my spouse/partner	44.4%
Couldn't find a job	36.9%
Encouragement from role model	30.3%
Parents wanted me to go	22.8%
To be with my friends	18.7%
To get away from home	13.3%
To find a husband	9.1%

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

In an open-ended question about what would influence them to return to school, participants listed the following reasons: opinion about education changed (38.8%), need more money (28.2%), concern for future/backup plan (28.2%), kids are raised (15.3%), life settles down (15.3%), and convenient courses (e.g., online, night) (5.9%).

“I am a single mother with a full-time job. I would need to find night classes that would not interrupt my employment schedule.”

“I do want to attend college in the future. I think the only thing that will influence that decision is whether or not we have kids when I am able to go back and if I will be able to go to school and take care of my family.”

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