

The Influence of Aspirations on a Young Woman's College Decision



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. A critical element of our research was to understand the aspirations of young women in Utah. Across the nation females now have higher aspirations for college graduation than males; from our findings, however, we believe this is not the case in Utah.

Participants in this study had aspirations to *attend* college but not necessarily to *graduate*. We also found a significant disconnect between related quantitative and qualitative responses. When asked if they wanted to earn a college degree sometime in life, 89.8% said “yes.” And, when asked which level of degree they would like to obtain, the responses were just as impressive: doctorate (7.9%), master’s (21.2%), bachelor’s (39.2%), associate’s (17.6%), certificate (4.5%), and none (10.2%). Yet, when they provided detail in open-ended questions about future expectations, life goals, and perceived future opportunities, only 50% discussed or even mentioned obtaining an associate’s degree or higher in their plans. Many may have indicated initially that they wanted to go to college because they know higher education is important, however, it was clearly either not a priority or they had never thought about how to realistically attend college sometime in the future. The following table introduces the most important (rank order) future lifestyle and career aspirations of the participants.

FUTURE LIFESTYLE AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS

1=not important; 2=somewhat important; 3=very important; 4=essential
(*significant findings)

1. Raise a family (3.63)
2. Have a secure and stable future (3.61)
3. Schedule work with time for other activities (3.29)
4. Leave the world a better place* (3.23)
5. Help others in difficulty* (3.10)
6. Be well-off financially (3.10)
7. Be stimulated intellectually* (3.09)
8. Encounter a variety of work experiences and challenges* (2.86)
9. Have freedom to schedule own day (2.82)
10. Do creative or expressive work (2.79)
11. Work closely with other people* (2.74)
12. Encounter a variety of people* (2.63)
13. Own a successful business (2.51)
14. Work for social change* (2.41)
15. Be recognized by others in same field (2.26)
16. Have administrative responsibility* (2.25)
17. Influence significant political decisions* (1.94)

Commitment Findings

Results of this study suggest the following:

- Married women have the lowest commitment to attend and graduate from college.
- Commitment levels drop as women get older.
- Women with no children have the highest commitment to college attendance and graduation. Commitment drops dramatically with the birth of the first child, but it begins to increase after three or four children. This includes a notable increase for women who become separated and/or divorced.
- Participants who rate themselves as highly active in their religions are those who are most committed to attending and graduating from 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.

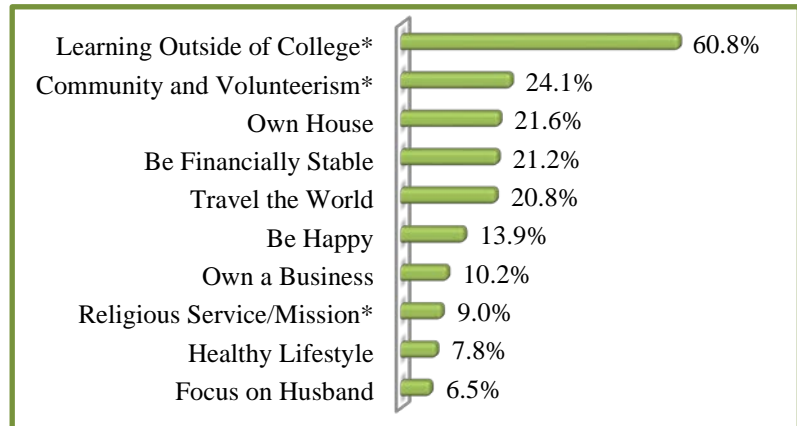


Taking an Active Role

- Talk to young women about their aspirations and help them work through contingencies (e.g., marriage, birth of child) to make sure their goals can be realized.
- Help young women understand that integrating career and familial aspirations is realistic and possible.
- Talk to young women about the importance of attending college soon after high school and continuing until completion.
- Encourage young women to participate in all types of learning experiences, as well as community and religious service.
- Talk to girls and young women (the younger the better) about college plans and choices, and use wording like “when you go to college...,” “what will you study,” and “where would you like to graduate from college.”

Overall Aspirations

We asked the young women in our study to describe their non-college-related aspirations for the future. Below are the results (*significant findings with college attendance and graduation):



HIGHLIGHTS

- Participants who had aspirations for continuous learning outside of college, community activity/volunteerism, and religious service/missions are those who have attended and graduated from college. It is not clear whether college helps facilitate these aspirations or vice versa.
- Women who made the decision early in life (e.g., elementary school) to attend college have significantly higher aspirations to attend college. These participants were also more likely to have saved money for college, actively prepared for college, and also desired a higher degree level.
- 82.4% discussed family-related future aspirations (i.e., being married with children), 51.4% mentioned having a “professional career” at some point, 28.1% said they would have a “job,” and 20.8% would be full-time stay-at-home mothers.

SAMPLE QUOTES

“I want to be teaching in a high school and eventually get into administration or the school board. I would like to be involved in making education in Utah better.”

“The future is something I dread when I look forward because of the choices I have made.”

“Unlike me, I want my children to graduate from college so that they all can be a strong financial backbone to their family.”

“I would like to be able to be a stay-at-home mother. My mother stayed at home to raise us, and I think it made a big difference.”

“I will be certified as a medical transcriptionist, so I plan to work at home with that while I can still be with the kids.”

“My parents are financially stable, but neither of them finished college. It makes me want to be better and provide a bright future for my family.”

By Susan R. Madsen (madsensu@uvu.edu; 801.863.6176), Cheryl Hanewicz, and Nicolle Johnson. Funding for this research was provided by Utah Valley University and many other generous donors (see website for full list). For more information visit www.uvu.edu/wep. Copyright © 2011 Utah Women and Education Project