



The Influence of Other Significant People on a Young Woman's College Decision

Setting the Stage

Utah Women and Education Project researchers conducted in-depth research in 2010 to discover why more young women around the state were not attending and graduating from college. Findings show that *people* are the most important influence on a young woman's college decision. Previous snapshots presented findings related to the influence of fathers (No. 2), mothers, (No. 3), school counselors and administrators (No. 4), teachers (No. 5), and religious leaders (No. 10). However, researchers discovered that other individuals can be powerful influences as well. Hence, the purpose of this snapshot is to highlight the influence of other significant people on a young woman's college decision and present the level of influence of these particular stakeholders.

Data were gathered concerning the influence of siblings on the decision of young women to drop out of, graduate from, or not attend college. There was no statistically significant difference when we compared the participant's college choice with birth order or number of brothers and sisters. This means that, in this sample, the college decision was not linked to the number of siblings in a family or if the participant was born as a first, middle, or last child. These women, however, were more likely to attend if they had sisters and/or brothers who had or were attending college. Conversations about college with siblings focused on the importance of college, expenses, positive and negative experiences, and fun times. Interestingly, the most important link to college attendance and graduation is when siblings reminded them that they needed to be a good example to others by attending college.

Participant Quotes

One young woman stated: "I learned a lot from my older sister about college; she taught me a lot about determination and goals. She loved college and was going to graduate with her degree regardless of how her life changed. She was

married and 8 months pregnant when she was able to graduate and get that diploma!"

Another study participant said: "My biggest example is my grandma; when she was 70, she wanted to learn a new language so she took Spanish at the local college until she could speak it fluently."

A third respondent commented: "My aunt was 40 when she went back to college, and she proved to me that it is never too late to get your education."

A fourth woman recalled: "They [my friends] never really encouraged me to go. It was more like only the really, really smart kids were going to college."

A final participant made this comment: "My girlfriends all wanted to marry someone that went to college, but it wasn't as big of a deal to attend ourselves."

Study participants included 245 women between 18-32 years of age. They were White (89.9%), LDS (80.4%) married (44.1%), and from 16 different counties (Salt Lake/Utah, 56.2%).

The Influence of Friends and Relatives

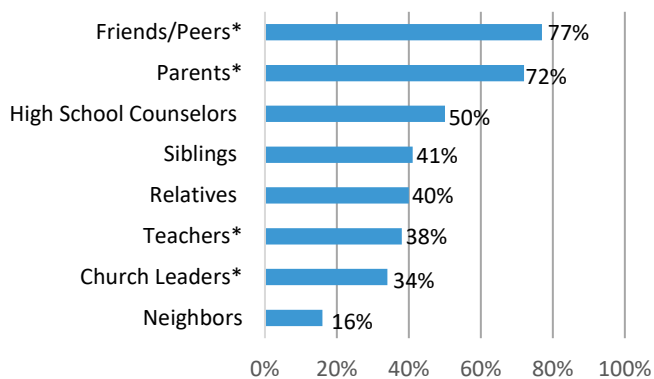
Researchers found that there are various individuals who can influence a young woman's college decision:

- For a young woman, having many friends who encouraged her to go to college made it more likely that she would attend and graduate.
- Having friends who planned to attend or were already going to college improved the likelihood that a young woman would proactively prepare for, attend, and graduate from college.
- The most important conversational points that peers made about college included the benefits of independence and the fun/social experiences they had in college.
- Relatives were powerful influences on young women's college decisions. The most influential relatives were those who had attended college, discussed it with them, and specifically encouraged them to attend.
- Young women with involved relatives (i.e., grandparents, uncles/aunts, and cousins) were significantly more likely to attend and graduate from college.

Questions About College

We provided a list of people in our survey and asked the young women to whom they talked to when they had questions about college. We found that friends/peers (77%), parents (72%), and counselors (50%) were the top three. Below is a graph showing these findings:

**Figure 1: Questions About College:
Who Do They Ask?**



(*significant findings with college attendance and graduation)

Further analysis showed the following connections:

- Young women who said they asked questions to parents and church leaders were more likely (in predictive statistics) to attend and graduate from college.
- Participants who answered that they went to 1) parents, 2) church leaders, 3) friends/peers, 4) teachers, and 5) relatives were more likely to complete college preparation activities (see Snapshot No. 6) before high school graduation.
- Although asking questions of counselors, siblings, relatives, and neighbors did not link statistically to college attendance and graduation, other findings did confirm their influence to be important.

Key Takeaways

Researchers found the following factors influenced a young woman's decision to attend and graduate college:

- Participants who said that they had **no** influence from others beyond the initial people studied (e.g., parents, siblings, relatives, local church leaders, school counselors, and teachers) were significantly less likely to attend college and graduate. It seems that in addition to positive influences from the core support system, young women also benefit from conversations and encouragement from employers, neighbors, church and community members, family friends, and others.
- Influence from employers, neighbors, church/community members, and family friends is significantly linked to involvement of a young woman in college

preparation activities as well as attendance in and graduation from college.

- The five strongest predictors of young women *doing college preparation activities* include receiving assistance and/or encouragement from mothers, fathers, school counselors, friends, and local church leaders.
- The four strongest predictors of young women *getting to college and graduating* include receiving assistance and/or encouragement from local church leaders, teachers, friends, and parents.

Taking an Active Role

There are many ways community members can actively influence young women. Here are a few strategies:

- Help all young women in your social network get to and stay in college by discussing it with them, encouraging them, and/or acting as a mentor.
- Realize that many people should be involved in creating a support system for young women. As the saying goes: "It takes a village to raise a child."
- Help friends and family members be more aware of the powerful influence they can have on the college decisions of young women.
- Take time to ask young women questions about their college plans. Share your positive college experiences, talk about the challenges and how you dealt with them, and openly discuss ideas for funding (e.g., saving money before college, financial aid, scholarships).
- Do not assume that parents are having discussions about college with their daughters. Step forward and make a difference; even short encouraging conversations will help. Talk to your sisters, nieces, granddaughters, and family friends about how to integrate college and family.
- Talk to young women about their aspirations and discuss with them the importance of graduating from college to achieve their goals.

Conclusion

Parents, family members, friends, educators, and church leaders play a significant role in influencing young women's college decisions. Expanding the circle of influencers to include employers, neighbors, and other community members will positively impact women in communities and in the state as a whole.

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