



## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

# Oregon Life After High School Study Results June 2018

Oregon ranks 49<sup>th</sup> in high school graduation rates in the country, and 32<sup>nd</sup> in postsecondary education attainment.<sup>1</sup> By 2020, 70% of all jobs in the state are expected to require some type of education or training after high school<sup>2</sup>, but only 37% of adults hold a postsecondary degree.<sup>3</sup> Rural Oregon, especially, faces a number of challenges—including declining local economies, geographic isolation, under-resourced schools, and high poverty—that can deeply affect children’s educational aspirations, pathways, opportunities, and success.

Seeking to better understand the experiences of rural students after they graduate from high school and what influences their post-high school plans and decisions, Oregon GEAR UP retained the services of Metis Associates to conduct a Life After High School study in nine rural communities. Inspired by a similar study conducted in Idaho by the University of Idaho,<sup>4</sup> we surveyed youth six months after they graduated from high school and conducted in-depth follow-up phone interviews with a sample of these students. The detailed methodology and limitations of the study are described at the end of this brief.

### What did we learn?

- ❖ The most important considerations when deciding what to do after high school were: having a career or job they love, making money, and expanding their horizons.
- ❖ Parents and teachers were the two most influential groups of people, when youth were deciding what to do after high school.

This Brief was prepared by Metis Associates on behalf of Oregon GEAR UP.

**Oregon GEAR UP’s** goal is to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary programs. Oregon GEAR UP works with select middle and high schools over seven years to create a college-going culture by providing funding and technical assistance, professional development for educators, and summer opportunities for students.

**Metis Associates**, a national research and consulting firm, brings 40 years of expertise in evaluation, information technology, and grant development to its work for organizations committed to making a meaningful difference in the lives of children, families, and communities.

Our mission is to support public and private organizations in achieving results for the children, adults, families, and communities they serve. We work closely with clients to strengthen capacity to achieve their missions, make data-informed decisions, and improve services.

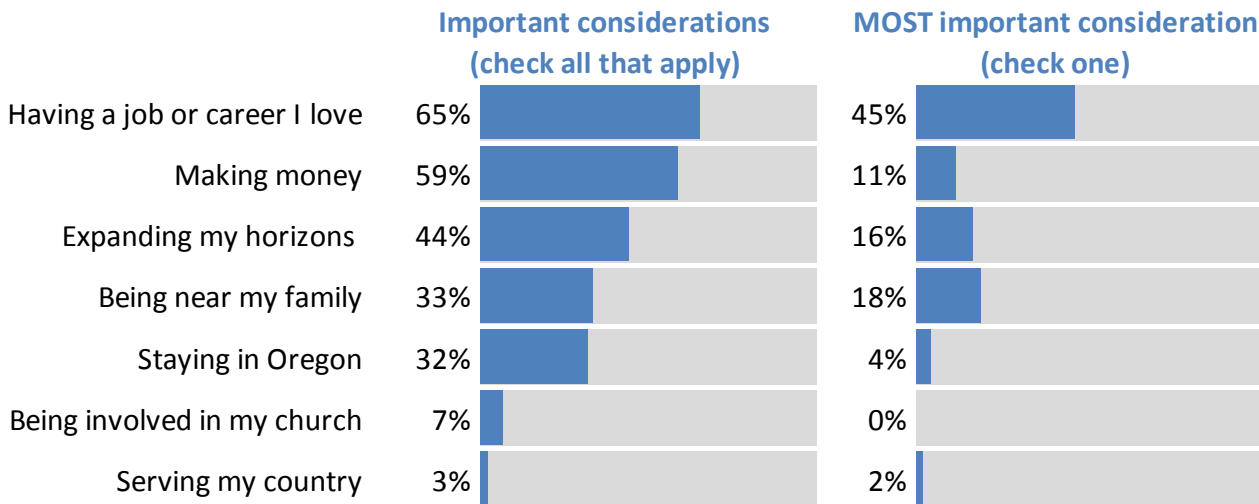
- ❖ Most of the high school graduates who did not continue on to postsecondary education either needed a break from school or thought they couldn't afford it. Yet, three-quarters of them reported they were likely to enroll in a postsecondary education program in the near future.
- ❖ Graduates who enrolled in postsecondary education did so because they wanted to get a better job, get prepared for a specific career, learn new things that interest them, or make more money.
- ❖ The top three challenges for students enrolled in postsecondary education are: managing multiple school-related deadlines, paying tuition or living expenses, and balancing academic and social life.
- ❖ Most graduates felt their high schools had been helpful in preparing for life after high school. Among students enrolled in college, the most helpful supports they received were: information about financial aid and scholarships, dual credit courses, and work readiness activities. Among those who did not go on, the most helpful supports were: work readiness activities, one-on-one support from school staff, and career awareness activities.
- ❖ Youth would have liked more classes or information on practical life skills, especially financial literacy skills such as budgeting, banking, and taxes. Students enrolled in college would have liked more dual credit courses, more college trips, and more information on what to expect in college.

All of these and other topics are explored in more detail in the following sections.

## YOUTH'S DECISIONS AROUND LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

### WHAT MOTIVATES YOUTH WHEN THINKING OF LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL?

**Having a job or career they love is the most prevalent motivator for youth when they think about what they want for their life after high school**, as noted by about two-thirds (65%) of youth completing the survey. Other important factors were: *making money* (59%), *expanding their horizons* (44%), *being near their family* (33%) and *staying in Oregon* (32%). Interestingly, when asking them to report the MOST important one, only 11% of youth selected making money.



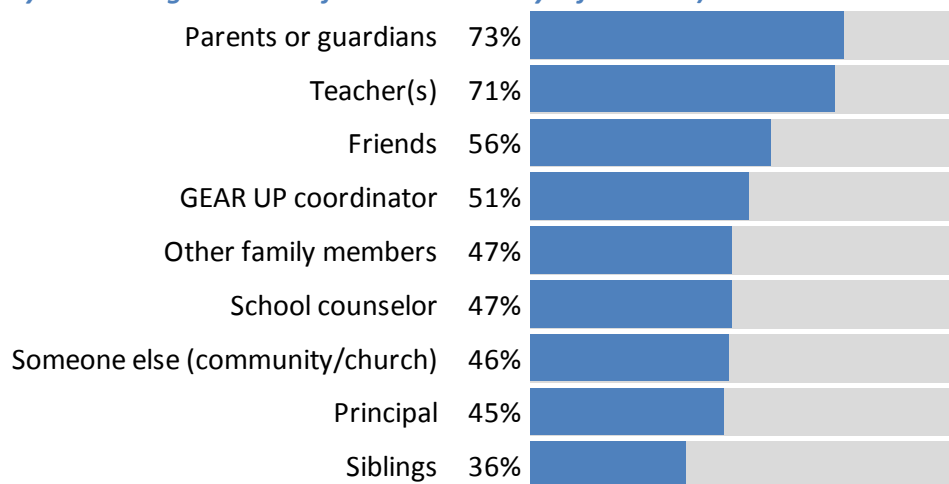
- ❖ **There were notable differences in graduates’ motivation by gender.** Female students, for example, were more motivated than male students by considerations such as: *being near family* (48% compared to 14%), *staying in Oregon* (41% compared to 21%) and *expanding their horizons* (48% compared to 39%), whereas male students were more likely to report that making money is important to them (68% compared to 52%).
- ❖ **Youth who went on to postsecondary education were motivated—in part—by different considerations than those who didn’t.** For example, youth who went on for more education were more likely to report that *expanding their horizons* (49% compared to 35%) and *staying in Oregon* (37% compared to 23%) was important to them. In contrast, students who did not go on were more likely to say that *making money* was important to them (65% compared to 55%).

## WHO IS MOST INFLUENTIAL?

According to surveyed youth, their parents or guardians—closely followed by teachers—were the most influential groups when deciding what to do after high school. This highlights the importance of engaging parents and teachers early on, as part of schools’ college and career readiness efforts.

### Most influential people

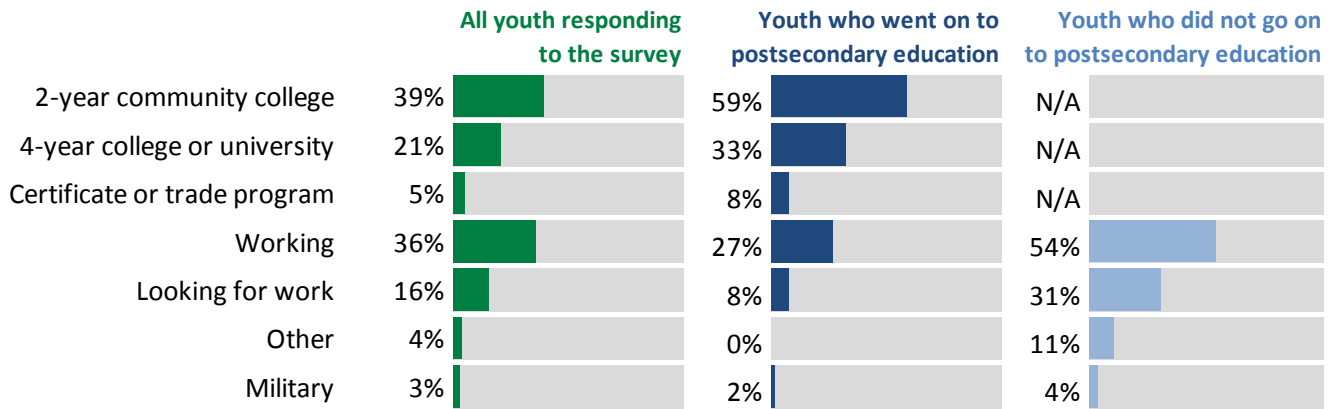
(% youth rating each as "influential" or "very influential")



## WHAT ARE YOUTH DOING SIX MONTHS AFTER GRADUATING?

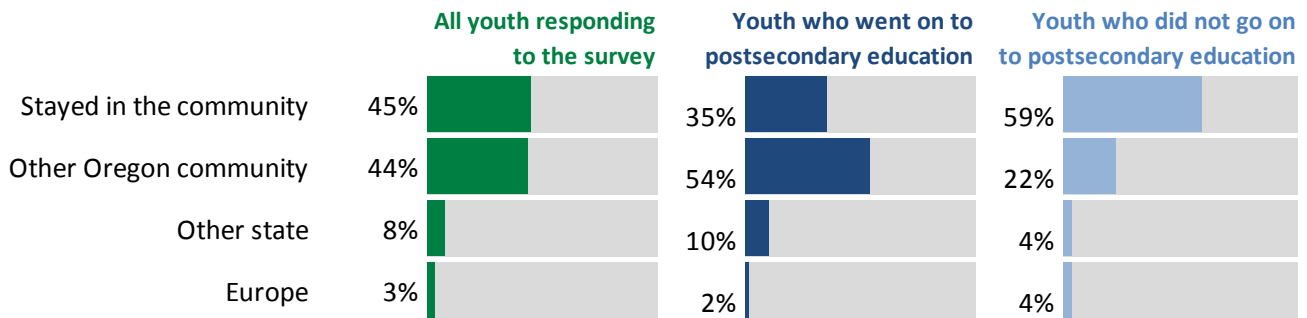
At the time they took the survey (about six months after graduating from high school), **most youth (65%) were enrolled in some form of postsecondary education**, including 2-year community colleges (39%), 4-year colleges or universities (21%), or certificate/trade programs (5%). Over half of the youth were also either working (36%) or looking for work (16%).

- ❖ Almost all students who went on to postsecondary education were enrolled in 2-year or 4-year institutions; over a fourth of them were working at the same time.
- ❖ Just over half of the youth who did not continue on to postsecondary education were working (54%), and almost a third (31%) of them were looking for work. A small number of youth were pursuing other plans, such as volunteering locally, participating in a student exchange overseas, or “taking a break.”



Six months after they graduated, almost half of the youth were still residing in their same small, rural towns (45%). A similar proportion had moved to another Oregon community, and small numbers had moved to another state (California, Washington, and Oklahoma) or Europe (Belgium and Germany).

- ❖ Those who went on to postsecondary education were more likely to have moved to other Oregon communities and other states than their peers.

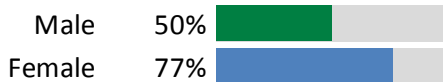


## WHO IS LIKELY TO PURSUE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION?

Female, white, and higher achieving survey respondents were more likely than their peers to enroll in postsecondary education. However, first-generation students enrolled at a similar rate than youth whose parents have a college degree (65% compared to 67%).

### Enrollment Rate in Postsecondary Education

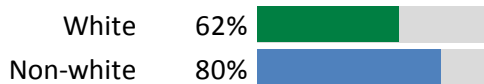
#### GENDER



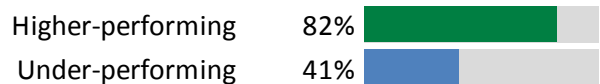
#### FIRST-GENERATION



#### RACE/ETHNICITY



#### ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE\*



\*Based on self-reported grades in high school. Higher-performing students reported "Mostly As," "As & Bs," "Mostly Bs"; lower-performing reported "Bs and Cs," "mostly Cs," or "Ds or lower."

## EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH WHO DID NOT CONTINUE ON TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

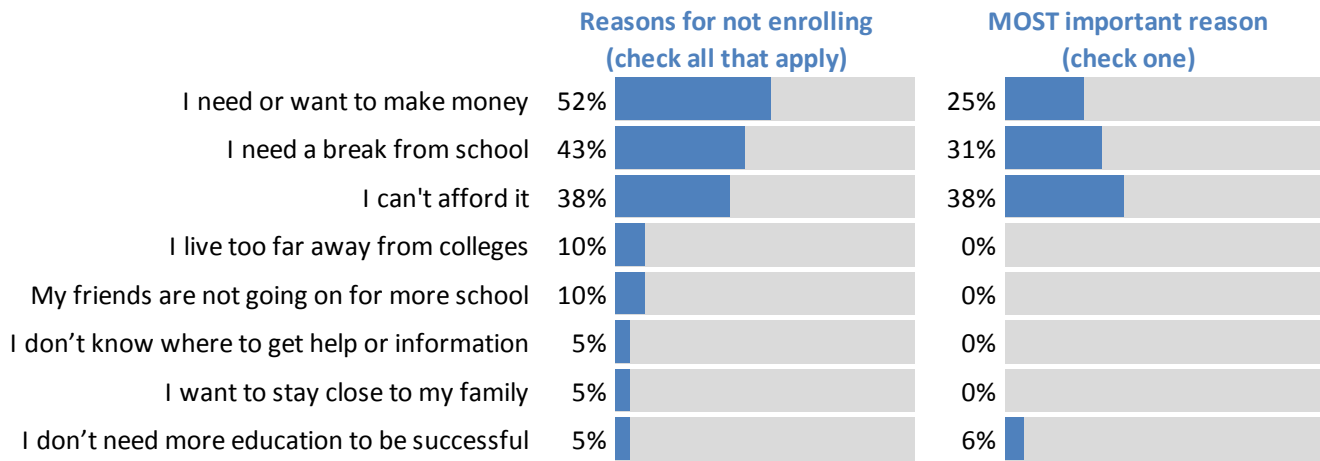
### WHAT ARE YOUTH DOING?

As noted earlier, 35% of youth completing the survey were not enrolled in postsecondary education at the time they took the survey.

- ❖ Just over half (54%) of these youth were working and almost a third (31%) were looking for work or in between jobs. Of those working, most (79%) were working 35 hours a week or more.
- ❖ Most youth were working in: construction or maintenance jobs (36%), food preparation or food service jobs (29%), or other service jobs (e.g., cleaning, landscaping, care giving, 14%).

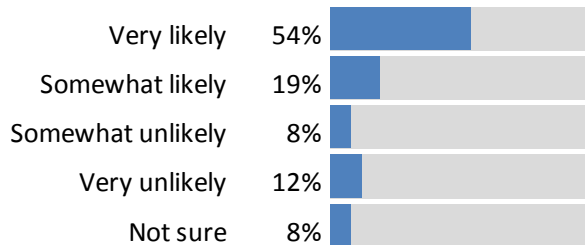
### WHY DID YOUTH DECIDE TO NOT ENROLL IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION?

Students decided to postpone or not enroll in postsecondary education because they couldn't afford it (38%), they needed a break from school (31%), or they needed/wanted to make money (25%).

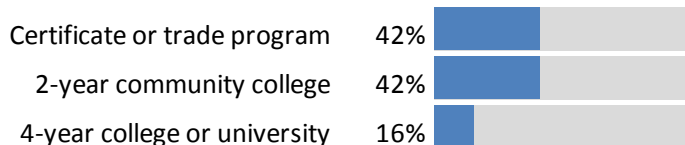


Yet, most youth reported they were *somewhat likely* (19%) or *very likely* (54%) to enroll in the future, most probably in certificate/trade programs (42%) or 2-year community colleges (16%).

#### How likely are you to enroll in postsecondary education in the future?

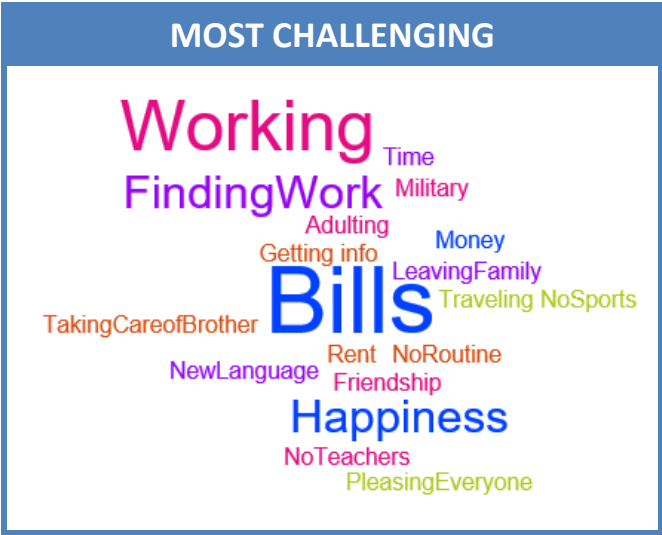


#### Which are you more likely to enroll in?



**WHAT IS MOST REWARDING/CHALLENGING ABOUT LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL?**

Youth who did not continue on to postsecondary education were asked to describe in one or two words the most rewarding and the most challenging aspects of their life after high school. As shown below, the most rewarding aspects were working, making money, and freedom. Youth reported to struggle most with bills and working or finding work.



**SHARON’S STORY**

During her time in high school, Sharon struggled with health and other issues and transferred schools multiple times. Sharon was behind almost 30 credits when she started at a GEAR UP high school, where she received invaluable help and support from her principal, who she described as *“the best principal I had ever had, because he actually put the time into the students, to help them.”* Sharon was able to recover all her credits and graduated on time.

Sharon is now working at a hospital and plans to enroll in a postsecondary program soon as she is interested in becoming a registered nurse or an ultrasound technician. Her high school experiences and GEAR UP were influential in helping her decide her career path. She recalled one of the GEAR UP-sponsored visits at the local community college as the most impactful. During the visit, she was able to tour the college, sit in on classes, and ask questions of the students and professors. *“That was really helpful, because you’re actually getting a taste of what you’re going to have to do.”*

But this same experience also influenced her decision to postpone enrolling in postsecondary education. Sharon explained that she got engaged after high school and knew that she and her fiancé wanted to start saving to buy a house, and therefore she knew she needed to work. Although she considered working while in school, during the college visit, she learned of how demanding the nursing program is, and recalled being advised by a professor in the program that those who try to work while completing their degrees end up *“not going through the program correctly.”* She decided to start working and is really enjoying her job now.

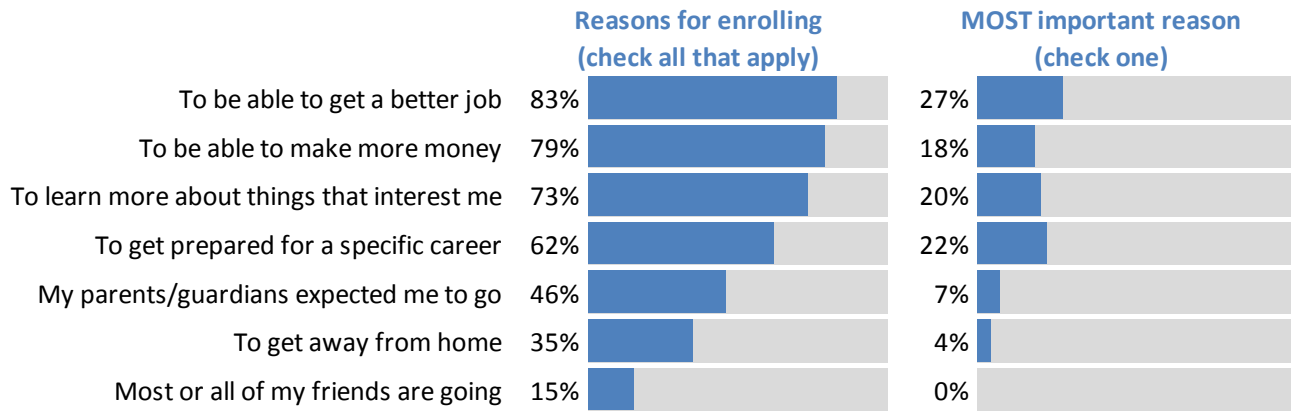
As Sharon looks ahead to applying to a postsecondary program, she feels like she will have the support she needs to go through that process because she had a mentor during her senior year: *“...she helped me a lot. So if I had any questions on [the application process now], that’s who I would go to.”*

## EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH WHO WENT ON TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Almost two-thirds of youth completing the survey were enrolled in some form of postsecondary education, including 2-year community colleges (59%), 4-year colleges or universities (33%), and trade/certificate/technical programs (8%).

### WHY DID YOUTH ENROLL IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION?

In addition to asking students about what motivates them when thinking of life after high school, youth who enrolled in postsecondary education were asked to identify the most important reasons for enrolling. These were *being able to get a better job*, *getting prepared for a specific career*, *learning more about things that interest them*, and *being able to make more money*. Interestingly, although 79% said one of the reasons they enrolled was to make more money, only 18% thought making money was the most important reason.



- ❖ **There were notable differences by gender in students’ stated reasons for pursuing postsecondary education.** Females were more likely than males to be motivated by *being able to get a better job* (88% compared to 79%), *learning more about things that interest them* (79% compared to 57%) and *getting prepared for a specific career* (70% compared to 55%), whereas males were more likely to be motivated by *money* (86% compared to 79%) or *to get away from home* (43% compared to 33%).
- ❖ **There were also notable differences by first-generation status.** First-generation students were more likely than their peers to be motivated by the possibility of *learning more about things that interest them* (80% compared to 61%) or because *most or all of their friends were going* (20% compared to 6%); less motivated because their *parents/guardians expected them to go* (37% compared to 61% of their peers) or *to make money* (73% compared to 89%).

### HOW ARE YOUTH DOING COLLEGE?

Among youth who had gone on to postsecondary programs, almost all (91%) were enrolled full-time at the time they took the survey. When asked about their grades in college, most students reported earning “mostly As” (41%) or “As and Bs” (20%). Smaller percentages reported earning “mostly Bs” (11%), “Bs and Cs” (15%) or “mostly Cs” and below (8%). Although most students were doing well academically, most students were taking or needed to take remedial courses in math (69%) and in writing (64%) at the time they took the survey. Almost all students (98%) indicated they were planning to re-enroll for the following semester.

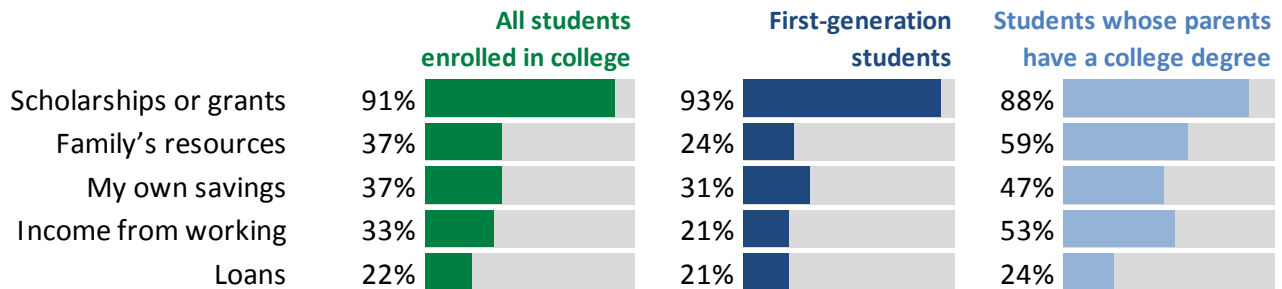
## HOW ARE YOUTH PAYING FOR COLLEGE?

The large majority (92%) of enrolled youth—both first-generation and students whose parents have a college degree—completed the FAFSA or ORSAA while in high school.

When asked about the resources they use to pay for college, most youth said they were paying through scholarships or grants. To a much lesser extent students also reported using their family’s resources, their own savings, income from working, and loans.

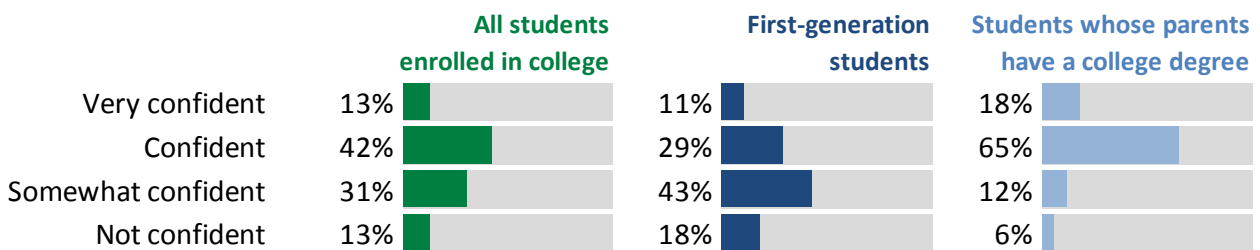
- ❖ **There were notable differences between first-generation students and their peers on how they are paying for college.** First-generation students were more likely to have received scholarships or grants (93% compared to 88%), but were significantly less likely to use family resources (24% compared to 59%), their own savings (31% compared to 47%) and income from working (21% compared to 53%).

*Which of the following are you using to help you pay for college?*



Just over a half of the students reported feeling *confident* or *very confident* they can continue to afford college. First-generation students were much less confident they will be able to continue paying for college (only 40% said they were *confident* or *very confident*, compared to 83% of their peers).

*How confident are you that you can continue to afford college?*



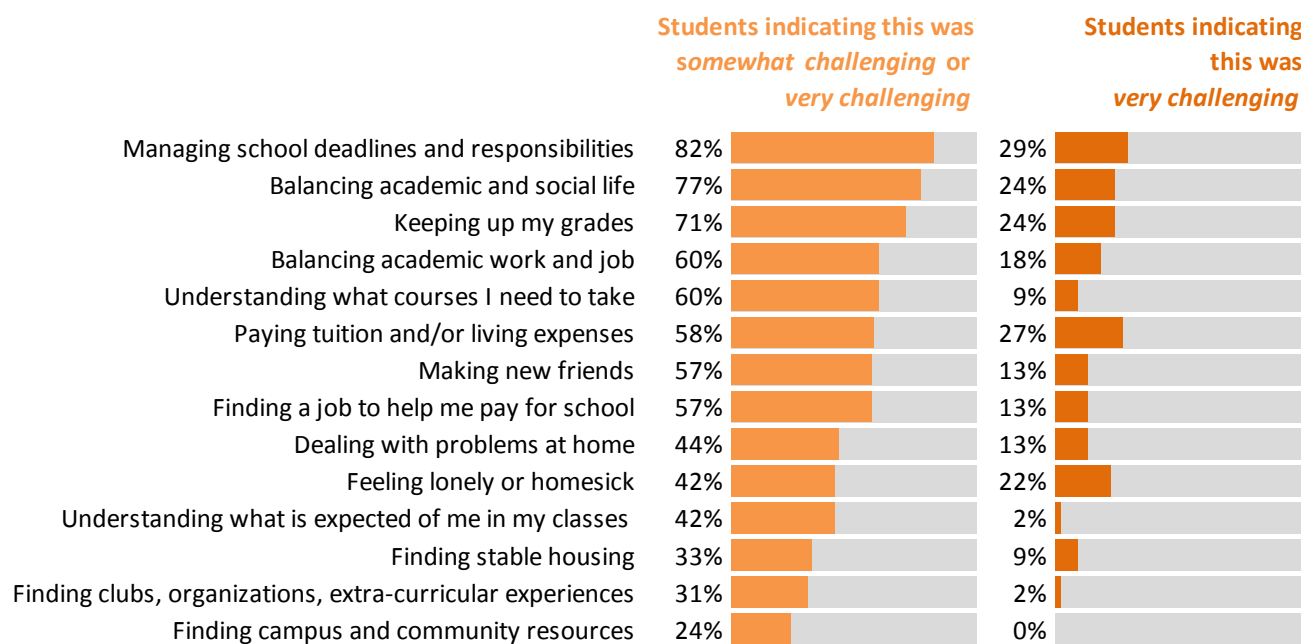
## WHAT ARE FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS STRUGGLING WITH?

College-enrolled youth were asked to identify the extent to which they felt that some challenges common to first-year students applied to them.

- ❖ The most common challenges (that most students identified as being *very* or *somewhat challenging*) were: managing multiple school-related deadlines and responsibilities, balancing academic and social life, keeping up their grades, understanding what courses they need to take, paying tuition and/or living expenses, making new friends, and finding a job to help them pay for school.



- ❖ The **most challenging aspects** (described by students as *very challenging*) were: managing school deadlines and responsibilities, paying tuition and/or living expenses, balancing academic and social life, keeping up their grades, and feeling lonely or homesick.



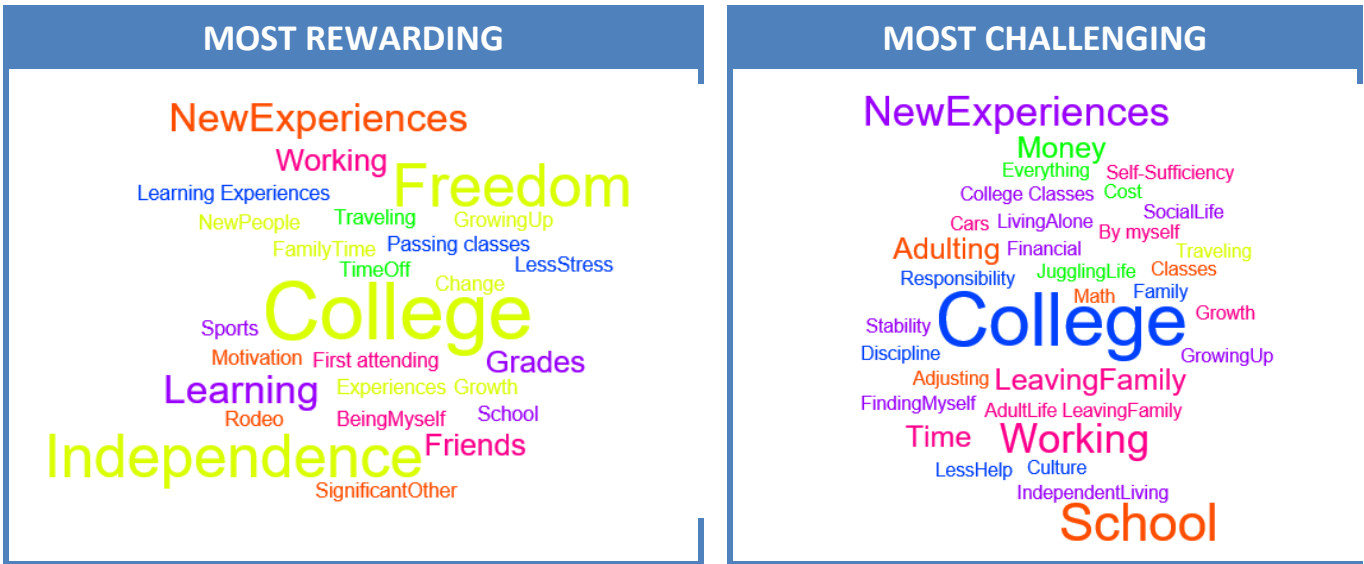
- ❖ **First-generation students are struggling with a somewhat different host of issues than their peers.** For example, first-generation students were more likely than their peers to report that the following were at least *somewhat challenging*: understanding what courses they need to take (68% compared to 47%), understanding what is expected of them in the classes they take (50% compared to 29%), making new friends (64% compared to 47%), balancing academic work and job (64% compared to 53%), and managing multiple school-related deadlines and responsibilities (86% compared to 76%). In contrast, students whose parents have college degrees were more likely to report that the following were at least *somewhat challenging*: feeling lonely or homesick (53% compared to 36%) and balancing academic and social life (88% compared to 71%).
- ❖ When asked about the **additional supports they need** in order to be successful in college, the most common responses were: financial (e.g., more financial support, good paying job, information on scholarships), more friends, information on extra-curricular activities, tutoring, advisement, closer relationships with college professors, and mental and emotional supports.

#### EMILY'S STORY

Having been “*bullied and harassed from elementary school all the way to high school,*” Emily knew early on that she wanted to become a teacher “*to be a beacon of hope for the next generation.*” Emily is currently pursuing a transfer degree in early childhood education and plans to enroll in a 4-year university afterwards. In order to pay for college, Emily received financial aid but also had to take a loan and a part-time job. According to Emily, financial stress is the one major obstacle that may keep her from reaching her educational and career goals, noting that “*Money would probably keep me from doing everything [I hope for], because I grew up in poverty and I can’t really afford much.*” However, Emily remains committed to her studies and is looking for a second part-time job to support herself, noting that “*I can barely afford college now but if I don’t start now, I’m never going to.*”

WHAT IS MOST REWARDING/CHALLENGING ABOUT LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL?

Enrolled youth were also asked to describe in one or two words the most rewarding and the most challenging aspects of their life after high school. As shown below, college was singled out as both the most rewarding and the most challenging aspect of life after high school. Other rewarding aspects included: freedom, independence, and learning. Other challenges included: working, adulting, money, time, and leaving their families. New experiences were equally viewed as most rewarding and most challenging.



ERIC'S STORY

Eric grew up moving back and forth between Oregon and California, but finished his last year and a half of high school back in Oregon at [name] High School. Even though he felt his school was under-resourced, Eric valued how much his teachers there cared, *“they got to know the students on an individual basis, so they tended to care more about their students [than teachers in his previous schools].”*

Although they never attended college, his parents saw the value in getting a college degree and encouraged him to continue his education after high school, emphasizing how it would eventually pay off for him. With their influence, and with guidance from his high school drama teacher, Eric enrolled in the fall in Southwestern Oregon Community College in Coos Bay. After his first semester, he declared as an art major and plans to transfer to a 4-year school upon completing his Associate’s degree. He told us, *“I figured that if I was going to get an education—because education is important in this day and age in order to get jobs and the like—I figured I’d get as much education as I could right now.”*

As the first in his family to go to college, Eric was happy to find out that college so far hasn’t been too different from his other educational experiences. Although, he said that paying for college was a challenge” but he added, *“then it’s kind of a thing of pride, where you are showing your younger siblings that you can do it.”*

So far, Eric has enjoyed the quality of his professors the most: *“I have a lot of interesting lecturers. And the professors are great and they’re very passionate about what they want to teach.”* As he continues to figure things out for himself, he also knows a cardinal rule of college success: *“definitely speak to your advisor. I know a lot of people don’t. But it can be as simple as just emailing them.”*

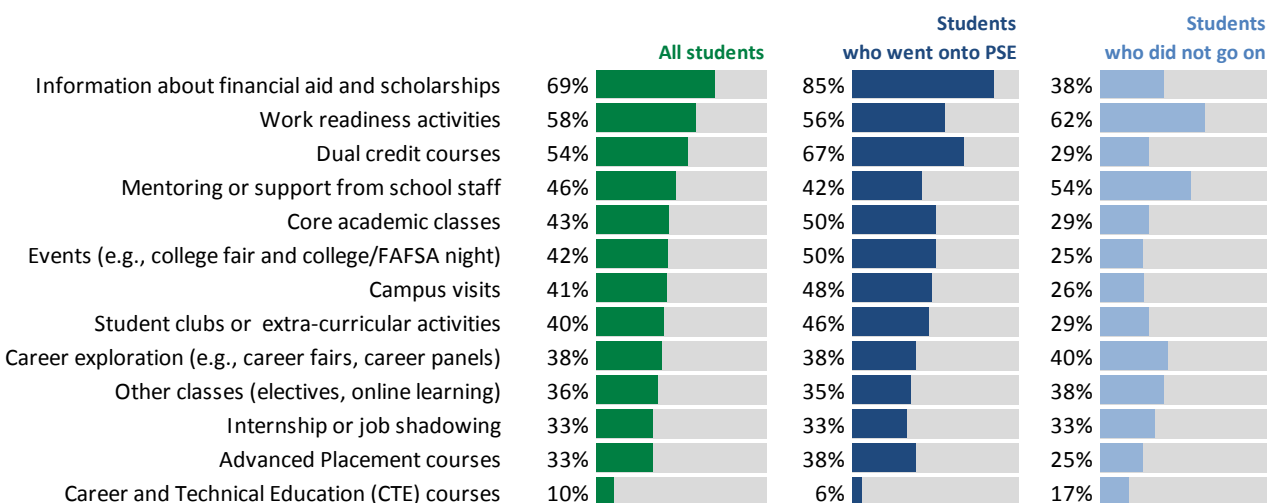
## FEEDBACK ON YOUTH'S HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

### WHAT HIGH SCHOOL SUPPORTS WERE MOST HELPFUL?

The most important supports youth received while in high school were: information about financial aid and scholarships, work readiness activities, and dual credit courses.

- ❖ The top five high school supports for **students who enrolled in postsecondary education** were: information about financial aid and scholarships, dual credit courses, work readiness activities, core academic classes, and events such as college fairs and college/FAFSA nights.
- ❖ For **students who did not pursue postsecondary education**, the following were the top five important supports: work readiness activities, mentoring or support from school staff, career exploration, other classes (electives, online learning), and information about financial aid and scholarships.

*Which of the following high school supports were most important to you?  
(% respondents saying very important)*



### WHAT ELSE COULD HIGH SCHOOLS DO TO SUPPORT STUDENTS?

Youth were asked to reflect on additional supports they would have liked in high school to help them prepare for life after high school.

- ❖ The most common suggestions among students who were enrolled in postsecondary education were:
  - Provide more dual credit courses
  - Start with scholarships and financial aid earlier
  - Offer more college trips and college classes
  - Give more positive encouragement and reinforcement
  - Better explain what to expect in college and give college success tips.
- ❖ Among youth who were not enrolled in postsecondary education, the most common suggestions were:
  - Provide more classes in budgeting, taxes, money management, banking, and other life skills
  - Provide more information on trade schools
  - “Nothing” / “It was great”

### TANYA'S STORY

Growing up in a small community, and going to small high school with small classes significantly shaped what Tanya was looking for in a postsecondary program. Tanya really valued all these things about her community and school, and she benefited from them: *“you really knew everybody, and that was really nice. Especially when it came to applying to colleges, there was huge help from the school.”*

Tanya had a few influences in helping her decide what to do when she graduated high school. For one, Tanya is a first-generation college student, and learned a lot from her two older siblings who went off to postsecondary programs before her. She learned that she would prefer to not take out loans like her brother who went to a private college, but still wanted a four-year experience unlike her sister at community college, so she landed on the *“state college route.”*

But the most influential person for Tanya was her high school librarian who was also the school's GEAR UP Coordinator. Most notably, she helped Tanya learn about and apply for scholarships that she would have missed out on. Tanya described one such time when the coordinator forwarded her a link to a scholarship application, saying, *“It's due this Sunday, but I really think you should do it, because you sound like a great applicant.” And so like I went and did the application, and I ended up getting a scholarship, and it was for \$20,000. I would have never ever done it if it wasn't for [the GEAR UP coordinator] giving me the application.”*

In addition, Tanya was encouraged at her high school to take dual credit classes, and ended up graduating with 25 college credits, allowing her to take fewer credits each semester, balance her academics with an on-campus job and an off-campus job, and with participating on intramural basketball and volleyball teams. She said the advice to take college courses in high school was invaluable.

## METHODOLOGY

The goal of the Life After High School study was to better understand the life choices of high school graduates attending small rural schools in Oregon and gather their feedback on their high school experiences. In July 2017, nine of the ten GEAR UP high schools that were completing a six-year college and career readiness initiative funded by the Ford Family Foundation agreed to participate in the study and provided Metis with the names of the high school graduates and their parents' contact information. A study recruitment letter was mailed to each household to explain the study and request permission from parents for Metis to contact their students. Letters were sent to 204 households; 25 letters were returned because of incorrect or invalid addresses. Four rounds of follow-up calls were made with non-respondents; 24 phone numbers were disconnected and 11 parents refused participation.

Of the total of 164 students who were “eligible” for the study (i.e., excludes students whose parents refused participation and those who had both incorrect mailing addresses and disconnected phone numbers), 75 completed the survey (46% response rate). Given this response rate, results may not be representative of the entire student population. Students completing the survey received a \$30 gift certificate.

Metis researchers also conducted follow-up calls with 8 students who had completed the survey to gather more in-depth information about the topics covered in the survey. These students received a \$30 gift certificate for their participation.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Odum, J., West, R. (2016). *Poverty and Opportunity in the States: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. State of the States Report 2015. Center for American Progress.

<sup>2</sup> Carnevale (2013). *Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce

<sup>3</sup> American Community Survey (2014). Retrieved from:  
[http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml](http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml)

<sup>4</sup> *Idaho's Life Choices of High School Seniors*. Prepared by the University of Idaho. The report can be accessed at: <https://www.uidaho.edu/president/direct-reports/mcclure-center/publications/life-after-high-school>