

**“It’s Really About Me:” Perspectives Of High School  
Sophomores And Their Connection To The Benefits Of  
Higher Education**

Motivations for Higher Education of Central Montana High School Sophomores  
Focus Groups and Survey

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**Commissioned by Student Assistance Foundation  
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**Conducted by Nina C. Smith,  
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The team leader on the NCS Communications was Nina C. Smith, a social marketing strategist with over 25 years experience in the marketing arena. A most important member of the team was Bradley Elison, Ed.D., Adolescent Psychology Specialist, Department of Psychology, Carroll College whose professional counsel and expertise contributed significantly to the development and completion of this survey and the subsequent analysis of the data.

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The return rate of the survey was impressive due in part to the insight and generosity of the Student Assistance Foundation in their willingness to offer “valuable” incentives to the student participants. Each student who voluntarily participated in the survey had their name entered into a drawing for one of three Apple iPods. The winners of the drawing for the iPods included students from Shelby High School, Broadwater High School and Capital High School. Additionally, SAF contributed incentives to each student who participated in the focus group events. Each student received a \$10 gift card to Target Department Stores.

We hope that the findings from the focus groups and companion survey will help to it make possible for all high school students to pursue the dreams of their future.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	2
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	3
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	4
<b>I. Introduction</b> .....	5
<b>II. Purpose of the Study</b> .....	6
<b>III. Survey Development</b> .....	6
Question development and format.....	6
Research Questions .....	7
Survey instruction and piloting .....	7
<b>IV. Focus Group Development</b> .....	7
Question development and format.....	7
Research Questions .....	8
<b>V. Subjects</b> .....	8
Detailed description of sample .....	10
Procedure .....	11
<b>VI. Results</b> .....	11
Higher Education Motivations Survey Summary .....	11
High School Sophomores Believe Their Future Involves Higher Education.....	12
Uncertainty Key Issue in Higher Education Planning Process.....	12
Knowledge of Opportunities Lacking, but Not Educational Resources .....	12
Will Higher Education Pay Off? .....	13
Some Students Are Disconnected With The Dream Of Higher Education.....	15
Correlations of Ethnicity, Gender and Parents Education Level .....	16
Higher Education Motivations Focus Groups Summary.....	17
Students Recognize Higher Education Offers Benefits .....	17
Information Is Needed, But Not Too Much Too Soon.....	18
Support of Self Strongly Embraced.....	18
Words Describing Higher Education Are Ambiguous .....	19
Messages Offering Optimism, Realism Are Appealing.....	19
<b>VII. Discussion</b> .....	20
Summary of findings.....	22
Recommendations .....	22
<b>VIII. Conclusion</b> .....	23

## Executive Summary

Higher education is crucial to a prosperous and healthy society and essential for the well-being of individual Americans<sup>1</sup>. There is a growing concern that too few Montana students are pursuing a post-secondary education<sup>2</sup>. If Montana is to strengthen its economic well being, increase the pool of skilled workers, and to provide a better paid work force, a better understanding of why more Montana students are not pursuing the possibilities available to them is needed. In the attempt bolster our understanding of how to increase the number of Montana students who actually complete post-secondary education, we must first learn more about the students and discover is important to them.

Considering that there are numerous barriers (real or perceived) to attaining a higher education after high school, this project sought to determine how these motivations are tied to student's assessments of the overall value of a higher education. By disclosing these perceptions and their impact on students' attitudes towards a higher education beyond high school, more effective messages can be created to influence high school students to act upon the dream of a higher education beyond high school.

The intention of this project was to collect data from high school students (specifically sophomores) by means of quantitative and qualitative research. Questions were designed to address a variety of attitudes high school students have toward higher education. A 50 question survey and a set of focus group events were conducted from December 12, 2005 through January 3, 2006.

The analysis revealed several important themes key to high school sophomores' beliefs about higher education, the planning process, and opportunities available to them post high school graduation.

High school sophomores believe their future involves higher education; uncertainty is a key issue in higher education planning process; students have doubts about higher education's pay off; some students are disconnected with the dream of higher education. Data also suggest the level of parent's education impacts the view students have towards the reasons for continuing their education beyond high school.

Furthermore, many students remain unconvinced that higher education may play an important role in their own lives. In order for the higher education data to be meaningful these students need to know that higher education is linked to their own, very personal, set of needs and abilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Questions that Matter: Setting the research agenda on access and success in postsecondary education. A Report of the Social Science Research Council project *Transitions to College: From Theory to Practice*, <http://edtransitions.ssrc.org/home.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> E. Rocha, A. Sharkey, *Education: The State We're In*. An Education Report Card for the State of Montana, August 2005, Center for American Progress

**The price of anything is the amount of life you exchange for it.  
Henry David Thoreau**

## **I. Introduction**

The importance of a higher education in achieving career satisfaction and success has been the topic of much research over the past decade. The results of those research efforts suggest that while the vast majority of high school students indicate that they are planning to pursue a higher education and are best aided through programs to assist them in the planning process, many students remain unconvinced that higher education may play an important role in their own lives. Additionally, an important minority of students seem to feel a sense of alienation from the education establishment that prevents them from even considering the potential benefits of higher education. Lastly, it appears that financial concerns regarding higher educational opportunities continue to be an extremely important consideration.

A review of the research clearly indicates that there is more to the issue of higher education than a simple analysis of what planning tools are accessed and how that planning process can prepare students to make appropriate decisions regarding their educational priorities.<sup>3</sup> In order for students to take advantage of financial and educational possibilities in their future they need to not only be informed of the general benefits of a higher education but also be able to connect the benefits of a higher education to their own values and circumstances. In other words, it is not enough for students to know that a higher education correlates with higher earnings and higher ratings of job satisfaction. In order for the higher education data to be meaningful these students need to know that higher education is linked to their own, very personal, set of needs and abilities.

Unfortunately, there is very little extant research that attempts to dig into the broader motives underlying the decision-making process high school students are confronted with as they explore the possibilities of higher education. What do students value in life? What makes them feel good? Bad? How are these motivations linked to the planning process for the future? How are these motivations tied to students assessments of the overall value of a higher education? These are the questions the current research was designed to address.

With a better understanding of the basic interests and motivations of high-school-age students the process of linking those motivations to specific attitudes and behaviors regarding higher education can begin. As those connections become evident, perhaps assistance can be provided such that the value of higher education can be envisioned by even the most alienated student.

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<sup>3</sup> *Looking Ahead to the Future: A Glimpse into Post-secondary Planning in Montana*, J. Clinard, Ed.D., G. W. Ferro, M.B.A., May 2002.

## II. Purpose of the Study

Previous studies of high school students have been designed to learn more about how people prepare, plan and dream about their futures after high school. Attentions were focused on student and parent needs and wants in relation to the process of planning for higher education with the goal of raising awareness of how to properly plan for higher education, whereby more parents and teachers could effectively help students with their journeys into post-secondary education<sup>4</sup>.

It has been recognized that the cost of college/higher education often plays a major role in students' decisions whether to enroll and also influences whether they are able to complete a degree.<sup>5</sup> These concerns have often been cited as barriers to pursuing a higher education; this study will also examine what role financial perceptions play in the higher education motivations of high school students.

Considering that there are numerous barriers (real or perceived) to attaining a higher education after high school, this study seeks to expand upon and go beyond the previous studies by looking more closely into the attitudes, perceptions and motivations involved in the decision-making process among high school students as they begin the transition from high school to a post-secondary education.

By disclosing these perceptions and their impact on students' attitudes towards a higher education beyond high school, more effective messages can be created to influence high school students to act upon the dream of a higher education beyond high school.

## III. Survey Development

### Question development and format

Since the primary objective of the current study was to expose attitudes and motivations, the survey was specifically designed to include a number of open-ended questions in addition to the demographic and rating scale type questions typical of most high school student surveys.

In addition, questions were designed to be supplemented by data collected in small focus groups that allowed for even more open ended discussion of research related questions. Careful consideration was given to the phrasing of "higher education beyond high school" so as not to unnecessarily limit subject responses. The words college, university and post secondary education were not used to describe education or training beyond high school.

Other considerations in survey design included:

- An effort to limit the length of the survey to less than 30 minutes to facilitate ease of administration and completion,
- An effort to ask critical questions in both positive and negative formats to ensure accurate data, and

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<sup>4</sup> *Looking Ahead to the Future: A Glimpse into Post-secondary Planning in Montana*, J. Clinard, Ed.D., G. W. Ferro, M.B.A., May 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Rocha, A. Sharkey, *Education: The State We're In*. An Education Report Card for the State of Montana, August 2005, Center for American Progress

- An effort to keep the reading level of the survey at about an 8<sup>th</sup> grade level, and language usage appropriate to the target group.

### **Research Questions**

The survey designed for the current study addressed a variety of questions related to the attitudes of high school students toward higher education. Specifically, the survey was designed to address the following questions:

1. What are the important beliefs and values expressed by high school students?
2. How do the beliefs and values held by high school students impact their decisions to seek additional post high school education?
3. How do the beliefs and values expressed by high school students relate specifically to their attitudes about the value of a higher education?
4. How do the beliefs and values impact high school student's attitudes toward various options for funding a higher education?
5. Are there students whose attitudes toward higher education may be preventing them from achieving at levels they desire?
6. What variables are associated with negative attitudes toward higher education?

Toward the above ends, the survey collected data in the following areas:

- Importance of higher education in subject's post high school planning,
- Current post high school plans,
- Subject's attitudes toward the financial demands of higher education,
- Subject's beliefs about their own preparedness for higher education,
- Subject's reasons for considering or not considering higher education in their plans for the future,
- Subject's reports of their own levels of satisfaction when engaged in various activities and events,
- Demographic information, and
- Subject's report of parents' level of education.

### **Survey instruction and piloting**

The final survey consisted of 50 questions and was piloted to verify readability, clarity and actual time requirements. The survey instrument is included as an attachment in Appendix A.

## **IV. Focus Group Development**

### **Question development and format**

The goal of the focus group was designed to promote self disclosure among participants. Through discussions in an informal conversation, information gathered from high schools students would reflect what is important to them regarding their attitudes, perceptions and motivations towards education / training beyond high school. This type of research offers a richness and depth that cannot be obtained through quantitative data collection.

Given the abridged timeline, only focus group activities with high school students were conducted. However, additional focus groups with parents, teachers, and school counselors

could yield some valuable insights regarding their relationships to the students' decision making process.

Each focus group would consist of a small group of no more than six to eight students and would last for a period of 60 – 90 minutes. Other considerations included:

- An effort to limit the length of the event to the time available during the school day,
- An effort to include a diverse group based upon demographics, and
- An effort to work with minimal administrative supervision.

## Research Questions

The conversational manner of the focus group allows for key themes to be discussed openly among the group and for the dynamics of group participation to generate additional input from participants. The focus group questions were formulated to answer the following questions:

1. Whether subjects have thought about education/training beyond high school?
2. What's involved in their decision making process to either pursue or not to pursue higher education after high school?
3. What's their opinion as to the importance of continuing their education/training after higher education?
4. Who would approve or support the choice of additional education/training after high school?
5. What's their understanding of the context of the language used to describe education/training beyond high school (college, university, vocational, community college and apprenticeship)
6. What messages have appeal regarding higher education?

## V. Subjects

Driven by previous research data, it was decided that the most interesting and potentially insightful data would be best collected from subjects who are in the midst of their high school career. By the ninth grade most students have some post-high school educational plans.<sup>6</sup> However, it is during 10<sup>th</sup> through 12 grades when students are in the search phase, which involves gathering the information necessary for them to develop their short list of potential options including colleges<sup>7</sup>.

The selection of high school sophomores as the subject of this study included the following factors: sophomores have been in the high school environment for at least one school year at the time of the study, long enough to understand the school culture and the importance placed on getting a higher education; many students have not yet begun feeling the pressures of post secondary educational planning; sophomores would all too soon become concerned about their future post high school options, yet still had time to plan, explore and question their options.

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6 Stage, F.& D. Hosler. (1989). Differences in family influences on college attendance plans for male and female ninth graders. *Research in Higher Education* 30(3):301-315

7 Cabrera, A.F. & S.M. La Nasa (ed.) (2000). *Understanding the college choice of disadvantaged students: New directions for institutional research*. Number 107. San Francisco: Joey-Bass Publishers.

In order to establish broad representation among Montana high school students while maintaining a workable survey population it was decided that the subjects would be drawn from public high schools in the central region of Montana. The geographic boundaries were identified as the Continental Divide to the west and within 60 miles of Billings to the east.

In order to capture the most representative sample possible, schools in the central Montana region were selected for inclusion in the study using a stratified sampling technique based on size of the high school. In addition, special effort was made to include schools which, based upon the geographical location, were likely to include Native American students.

Within the geographic boundaries of central Montana, there were 25 prospective schools which fit the initial selection criteria. Those criteria included the size of school (including classifications A through C); ethnic distribution similar to the average within the counties of Central Montana; drop out rate; and an existing relationship with Student Assistance Foundation. Another factor considered was the schools participation in some type of career preparation program (Career Pathways, TRIO, GEAR UP, and Business Challenge); and finally, the inclusion of alternative high school programs.

Of the initial 25 prospective schools, 16 schools participated in the study. Since the study included both a survey instrument and focus group events, all schools were asked to participate at a level they were most comfortable. Seven schools chose to participate in both the focus groups and survey; nine schools were survey-only schools; a total of 53 students from the above schools participated in the focus group events. A total of 885 surveys were distributed to the 16 schools.

The schools enrollments, number of survey and focus group participants are listed in the following table.

County	School	Total Enrollment	Survey Returned	Focus Group Participants
Lewis & Clark	Project Alternative Learning H.S.	74	55	8
Park	Park H.S.	570	41	8
Gallatin	Bozeman H.S.	1957	32	7
Gallatin	Belgrade H.S.	781	6	6
Stillwater	Park City H.S.	94	8	8
Big Horn	Hardin H.S.	521	8	8
Yellowstone	Skyview H.S.	1588	8	8
Cascade	*CM Russell H.S.	1664	129	
Lewis & Clark	*Capital H.S.	1432	96	
Phillips	*Malta k-12	195	46	
Musselshell	*Roundup H.S.	171	35	
Stillwater	*Columbus H.S.	195	42	
Toole	*Shelby H.S.	193	38	
Fergus	*Fergus H.S.	455	107	
Broadwater	*Broadwater H.S.	232	53	
Gallatin	*Bridger Alternative H.S.	107	14	
<b>Totals</b>			<b>718</b>	<b>53</b>

(\* Survey only schools)

### Detailed description of sample

The ethnic distribution of this sample aligns very closely with the averages of ethnicity distribution in the high schools across the counties in Central Montana.<sup>8</sup> The ethnic composition of the survey as it compare to Central Montana is as follows:

Ethnicity in Study	#	%	Central MT%
Alaska native	2	0.3%	n/a
American Indian	52	7.2%	9.58%
Asian	10	1.4%	1.12%
Black/African American	14	1.9%	0.74%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	6	0.8%	0.11%
Hispanic	18	2.5%	2.49%
White/Caucasian	580	80.8%	86.0%

<sup>8</sup> Compilation of data obtained from the Office of Public Instruction, FY 2005 Enrollment Data tables, and tables did not include Alaska Natives.

While it was the goal of this survey to sample primarily high school sophomores, the actual distribution and administration of the surveys was left to the discretion of the counselor / contact at each school as to when the survey would be given. Since all sophomores are required to take English, it was suggested that the survey should be given during an English class. Many English classes included a mixture of students from across all high school grades. Small minorities of freshman, juniors and seniors were included in the sample; however, a significant majority of subjects were sophomores.

The age, grade and gender distribution of the survey subjects was as follows:

Age	#	%	Year in School	#	%	Gender	#	%
14 yrs	9	1.3%	Freshman	24	3.3%	Female	373	51.9%
15 yrs	298	41.5%	Sophomore	622	86.6%	Male	331	46.1%
16 yrs	305	42.5%	Junior	37	5.2%			
17 yrs	39	5.4%	Senior	23	3.2%			
18 yrs	9	1.3%						
19 yrs	3	0.4%						

## Procedure

Leveraging an existing relationship between the prospective schools and the Student Assistance Foundation was the gateway to access into the schools. Coupled with an urgency to complete the data collection prior to the Christmas vacation season, the number of surveys completed and returned was quite impressive. From initial contact with the schools to the receipt of the completed surveys less than three weeks elapsed.

Small rewards encouraged participation in the survey. To encourage a high participation rate, each student who voluntarily completed the survey was entered into a random drawing in which three Apple iPods would be given away. Each shipment of surveys to the school counselors included a personalized thank you note from SAF, small incentives (various chocolates and candies), instructions for survey administration, prepaid return shipping, entry forms and entry box. The generosity of the incentives appeared to have a positive impact on the rate of return. Of the 885 surveys sent out, 718 or 81% were returned, coded and analyzed.

## VI. Results

### **Higher Education Motivations Survey Summary**

The analysis revealed several important themes which are key to high school sophomores' beliefs about higher education, the planning process, and opportunities available to them post high school graduation.

## **High School Sophomores Believe Their Future Involves Higher Education**

No matter how the question is framed, the vast majority of high school sophomores report that they know what they want to do after high school and that their plans involve higher education.

- 453 or 63% indicated they knew what they wanted to do when they graduated from high school,
- 460 or 64% indicated that they plan to continue their education immediately upon graduation from high school,
- 562 or 78% indicated that they planned to continue their education at some point in the future,
- 629 or 87% disagreed with the statement “do not plan to seek additional education beyond high school,”
- 629 or 87% report that they believe pursuing a higher education will help them,
- 595 or 82% disagreed with the statement “I have no desire to continue my education beyond high school”.

More specifically, the plans of high school sophomores regarding higher education heavily favor attendance at a 4 year college or university 76%, with important minorities considering community college 22%, vocational training 15% and certification programs 7%.

## **Uncertainty Key Issue in Higher Education Planning Process**

Despite the large numbers planning to pursue a higher education, uncertainty is still a significant force for many students in the planning process.

- Nearly half or 46% of the respondents indicated they were uncertain about their plans to pursue a higher education,
- More than 65% of the respondents indicated that they were uncertain they had the financial resources to pursue a higher education,
- 215 or 30% are unsure of the academic qualifications for higher education
- 134 of 117 or 19% report uncertainties regarding their ability to succeed in higher education,
- 326 or 45% report feeling anxious about their plans for after high school; of those, over half or 56% of the responses were female, and
- 331 or 46% report feeling uncertain about their plans for after high school; of those, over half or 51% were male.

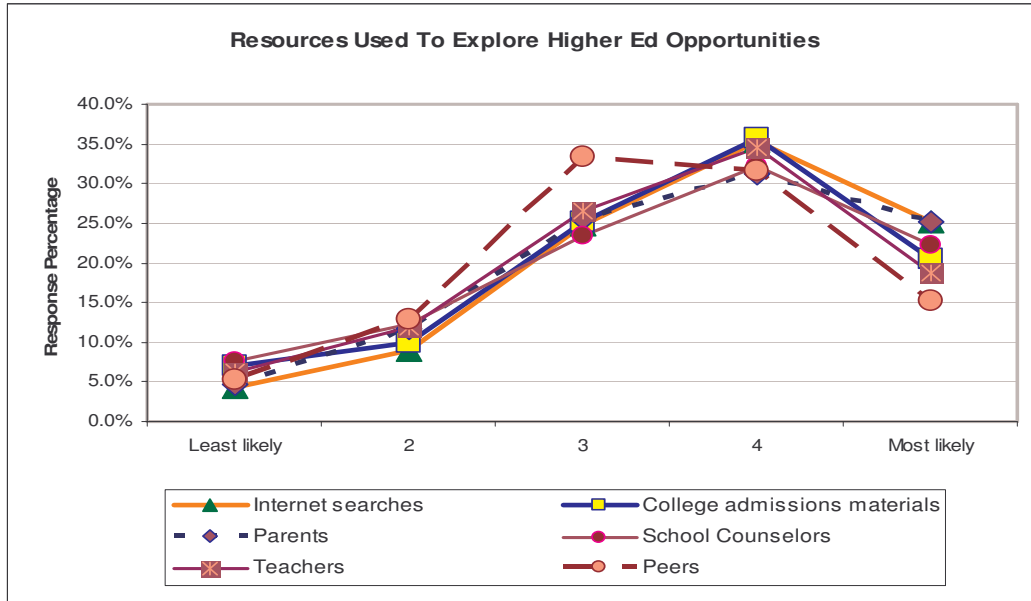
## **Knowledge of Opportunities Lacking, but Not Educational Resources**

The respondents uncertainties might be expected as only 30 of 718 or 4% indicate that they have explored educational opportunities beyond high school “a great deal.”

The students recognize that they have multiple resources available to them and would likely access any one of them for their exploration of higher education of opportunities.

The students indicated they are likely to use a variety of resources to explore educational opportunities beyond high school, including the internet, parents, school counselors and peers; 61% would (likely and most likely) use internet searches. The next likely resources students would use are parents and college admission materials equally at 56%. School

counselors and teachers are also key resources students would likely use at 55 and 53 percent respectively.

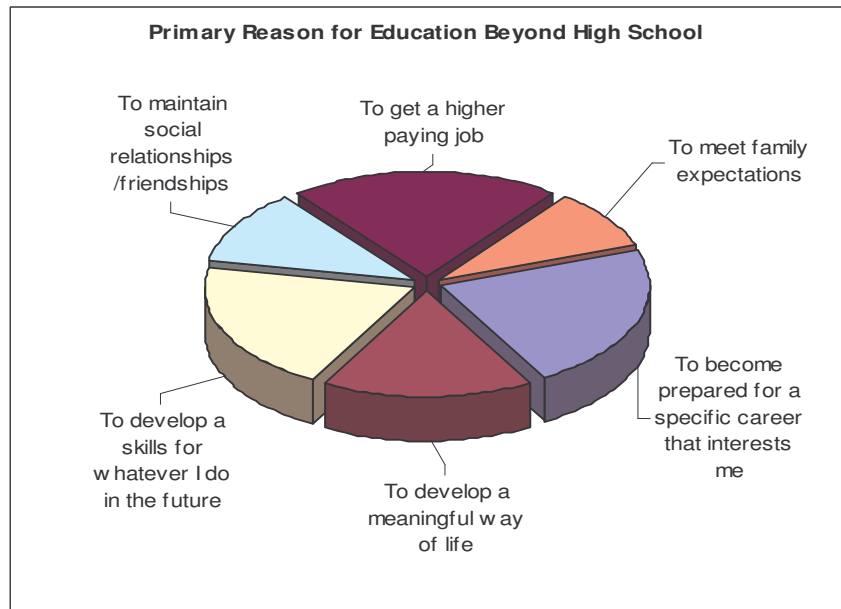


The percentage of students who indicated that it is likely they would use each available resource drops consistently as the parents' education level declines.

### Will Higher Education Pay Off?

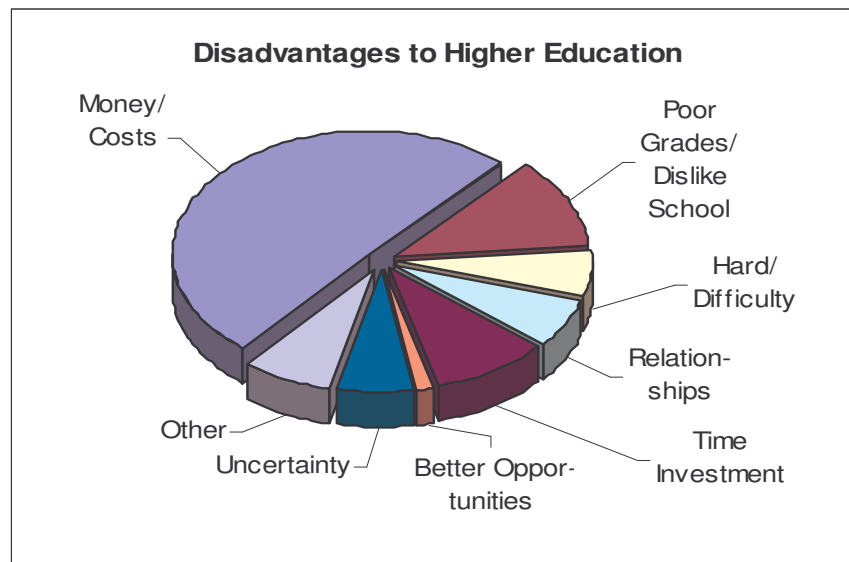
The reasons given for pursuing a higher education tend to be somewhat narrow and reflect the one key message that higher education is the path to better jobs, better careers and more money.

- 604 or 84% indicate that they would pursue a higher education for a specific career,
- 546 or 76% indicate the acquisition of skills for the future is their reason for seeking a higher education, and
- 563 or 78% indicate directly that money is an important reason for pursuing a higher education.



Of the 402 students who reported disadvantages to continuing education, money and financial concerns were cited most often, followed by affect of grades, the time investment and uncertainty of their future.

- 203 or 50% indicate money, cost, funding as greatest disadvantage,
- 48 or 12% indicate poor grades or a dislike of school,
- 40 or 10% indicate the time investment required for a higher education, and
- 26 or 6% indicate uncertainty of their future plans.

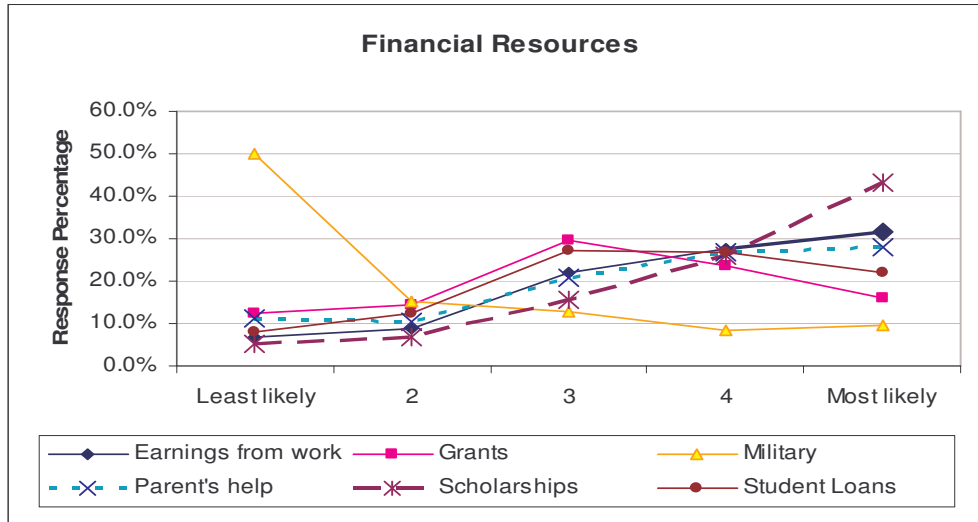


A majority of respondents disagreed with the statement that they “have the financial resources to pursue a higher education beyond high school.” However, an overwhelming number of respondents believed that they could find a way to pay for a higher education.

- More than 65% disagree that they had the money, and
- 632 or 88% believe that they could find a way to pay.

How the respondents would most likely expect to obtain assistance with financing their higher education produced a variety of options which included earnings from work, grants, military, help of parents, scholarships and student loans.

- 498 or 69% indicated they would likely utilize scholarships as a means to pay for a higher education,
- 424 or 59% indicated earnings from work would be a likely source of financing,
- 392 or 55% indicated would look to their parents for the money to continue their education/training beyond high school, and
- 351 or 49% indicated student loans would be the likely means of financial aid.



### Some Students Are Disconnected With The Dream Of Higher Education

While the numbers above are promising and suggest that most students assume that a higher education is a critical part of the career planning process (albeit one fraught with uncertainties), the survey also reveals the presence of an important minority of students who are in some way disconnected from the higher education dream.

- Over 4% of the respondents report that they have no desire to pursue a higher education and an additional 12% have questions about their desire to continue their education.
- Similarly, 4% of the respondents indicate that they do not intend to seek additional education/ training beyond high school with another 8% questioning whether additional education is right for them.

Of the 124 students who responded, the reasons given for not continuing on to a higher education were revealing and included the following:

- Uncertain about decision 18.5%
- Lack of money 17.7%
- Dislike for school 11.3%
- Lack of qualifying grades 11.3%
- Lack of Interest 7.3%
- Already have job 5.6%

Moreover, similar to the percentages indicating no plans to pursue a higher education, 4% of the respondents indicate that a higher education may not be worth the investment if they had to pay for it themselves. An additional 31% indicated some doubt about the value of the investment if they had to pay for education themselves.

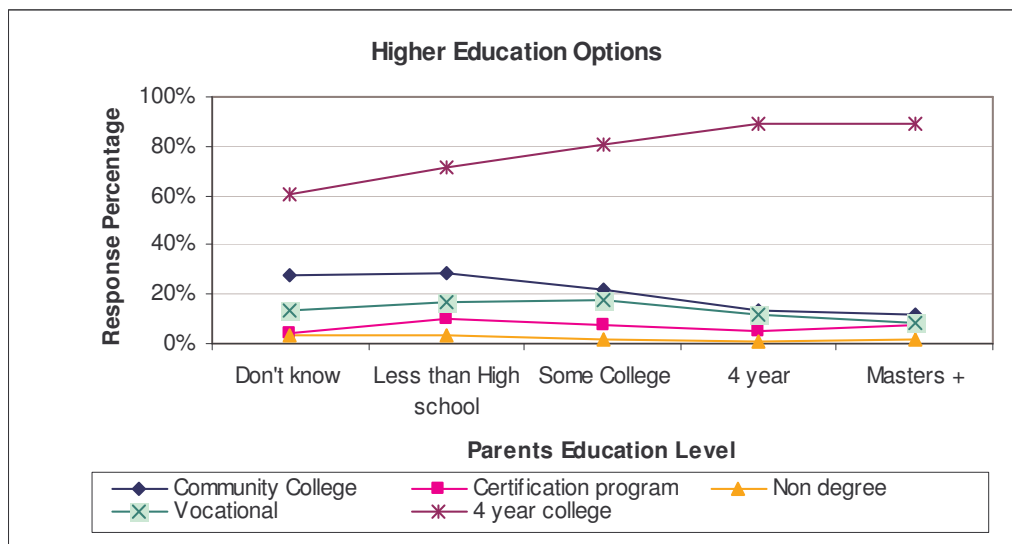
### Correlations of Ethnicity, Gender and Parents Education Level

When the data were analyzed to reveal gender, ethnicity and parent’s education level differences in response rates, the following observations included:

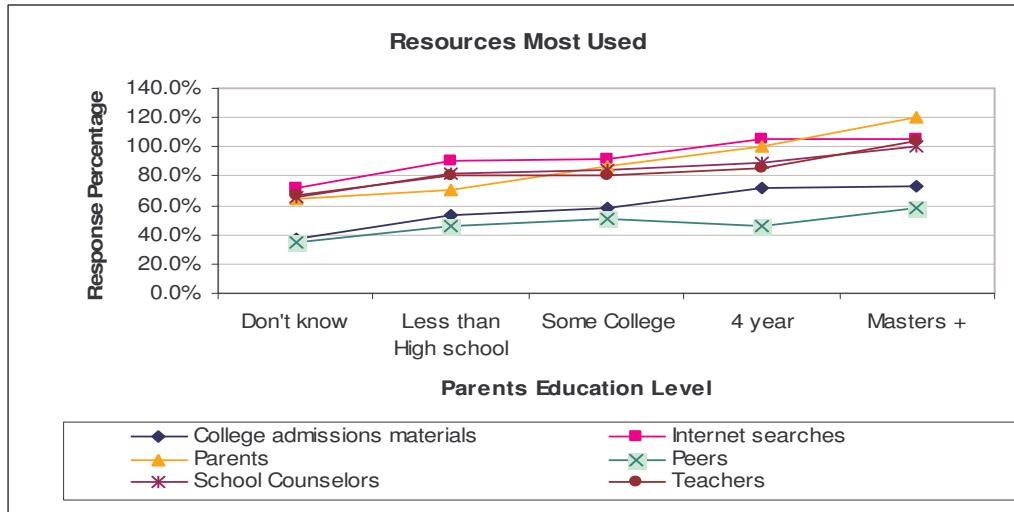
- Ethnicity** – of the sample, 52 respondents identified themselves as American Indian.
- 30 or 58% of respondents indicated they knew what they wanted to do when they graduated from high school,
  - 31 or 60% indicated that they plan to continue their education immediately upon graduation from high school, and
  - 42 or 80% disagreed with the statement “do not plan to seek additional education beyond high school.”

- Gender** – of the sample, 373 were female, 331 were male.
- 267 or 72% of female respondents indicated they knew what they wanted to do when they graduated from high school as compared to 187 or 57% of the male respondents.
  - 347 or 93% of female respondents disagreed with the statement “do not plan to seek additional education beyond high school” as compared to 273 or 83% of the male respondents.

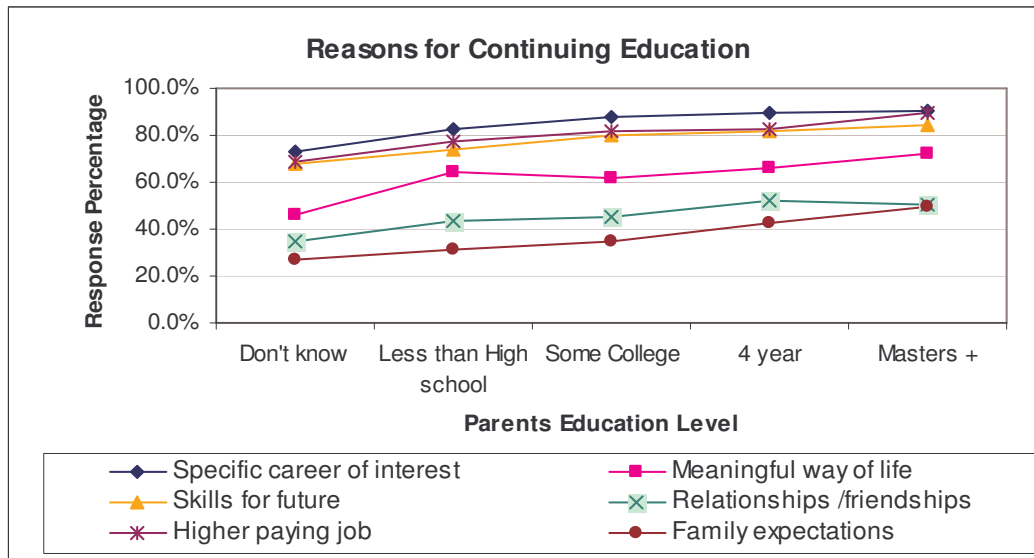
**Parent’s Education Level** – the study reveals that broader reasoning regarding higher education is associated with parent education levels. For example, the number of options and resources available to the respondents have has a direct relationship to the level of their parents education.



Resources used for information regarding higher education opportunities increase in direct relation to the amount of education the parents were reported to have.



The level of parents' education impacts the view respondents have towards their reasoning for continuing their education beyond high school.



### Higher Education Motivations Focus Groups Summary

In order to better understand the motivations of the survey subjects, questions regarding satisfying and dissatisfying life experiences were addressed along with other more detailed questions in the focus group setting.

### Students Recognize Higher Education Offers Benefits

The findings from these questions suggest that students recognize that a higher education offers a promise of opportunities and subsequent successes. "I see successful people and they have higher ed, so ..." commented one female student.

At present however, the uncertainty about their future and the commitment of higher education is fraught with pressures, competition and fears – fear of failure, not getting into the “right” school, choosing the wrong career, and spending too much time of their life in more schooling. One student’s expressed his feeling intense pressure to perform well in high school as it would invariably define his entire future in higher education. “...Are you kidding! I’ve got a paper due that will determine if I get to go into the advanced class, and if I blow that paper, I’ll be blowing the entire rest of my life.”

It was not uncommon to find many students who indicated that they would probably go to college, but they had no idea what they wanted to be yet. A female student’ said this about the uncertainty of not knowing what she was going to do with her future, “...if I knew I was going to be successful, I guess, knowing I’ll do well, not that I don’t think I will, but I just want to be sure of it.”

Often the idea of not knowing what career to pursue reflects nervousness in the need to determine the course for their higher education. A female student had this to say, “My dad did 12 years of college because he’d change his mind so many times, that kinda worries me because I don’t want to continue school, I want to find a career and get on with my life...”

### **Information Is Needed, But Not Too Much Too Soon**

While most students have already given thought to their education beyond high school, and indicate the importance of it in their future, many still had concerns about their a lack of information specific to certain types of degrees. However, they didn’t want to be inundated with that data at this point. One female student phrased it this way, “... it [information] could be given a little bit more, so that when you’re a junior or senior its not just all of a sudden coming down upon you, it’s like you just kinda get used to it what you need to know. But not a lot more cause then it’d be overwhelming. We’re still sophomores and you’d be frantic and crazy and you’re trying to get ready for college and you still have 2 years to do it.”

Information about the requirements for college appears to be difficult for some to locate. Access to the internet was cited as the one place students most often indicated they would go to look up information about colleges, jobs and career types. Most specifically, they would use search engines like Google as well as various college websites. School counselors, college materials and career day activities also provided information they would access.

Students addressed their concerns of how to pay for college. They have specific questions about where to find financial information other than for scholarships. They want to know how other people are doing it. Their familiarity regarding student loans is shrouded in skepticism and misunderstanding. “... loans, like that’s a hard thing. My mom’s still paying for them. That’s why I don’t think I want to do student loans, besides, I don’t want to be like worrying about the payments and everything.”

### **Support of Self Strongly Embraced**

There’s a strong association with the role a higher education plays in their life with those in their personal reality; siblings, friends. When asked about their future plans for education or training beyond high school many students referred to personal experiences as motivators.

For example, one male said, “my brother dropped out of school and that was hard to get a better job.”

Earlier studies have suggested family support as a very strong predictor of students developing and maintaining college aspirations, academic achievements and actually enrolling into college. Students in focus groups cited the support and approval of parents, friends, teachers, and coaches most often as necessary for them to feel they were making the good quality choices.

There was also a very strong sense of “self-support” necessary for students to feel confident. One male student put it this way, “... you may think I really aspire to do something but I don’t think I can do it because, I don’t know, you know, it’s a big risk, I don’t know if I could do that, I don’t know if I could go do this or, I don’t know if people will accept me if I go do this, so I think if you have faith in yourself, it’d be good.”

### **Words Describing Higher Education Are Ambiguous**

Sophomore students have the perception that colleges and universities are different entities;

- College is more like high school; much more school; where smart people go; lots of time commitment; sports opportunities; scholarships; and cost a lot of money.
- University is all education, harder; more prestigious; a place to party; far away from home; and costs a LOT of money.
- Community College is closer to friends and family; substandard education; not well known; less expensive; and not as intimidating.
- Vocational school is about job training; it’s local, harder trades and agriculture; a place where some students are concerned they’ll end up.
- Apprenticeships were for most a foreign term. Although some students who knew about it did so from a family/friend who was involved with one. Incidentally, the most frequent answer was “The Donald, (The Apprentice) TV program.

When considering the creation of messages designed to motivate high school students, an awareness of how the terms are understood by students including the way in higher education descriptions are used will have a different meaning for different students. The more clearly and simply the concepts are presented, the students will embrace a better and more complete understanding.

### **Messages Offering Optimism, Realism Are Appealing**

In as much as the words describing post secondary education, college, university or a higher education differ, the messages to students will have different appeal to different students. Which messages appeal to students regarding higher education are varied yet reflective of achievement and self satisfaction. “...College, like everyone said, it’s a big money investment, and a big time investment, if you go there you’re not gonna do something that’s not gonna make you happy.” Another expressed this, “When a person goes to college, it’s a big commitment financially and if you want to do something, you’re more prone to do a better job at it and really want to excel in it and if you don’t want to do it, you aren’t gonna do your very best.

“Teenagers in general like to hear that it’s gonna be for them and about them ... it’s about what’s important for them.” Other thoughts included talking to students one to one, face-to-face; they won’t pay attention unless it’s right in front of them.

For many students, the idea of illustrating life with and with out a higher education would be motivator enough to seek higher education. Most often the phrase used to was, “...and do you want fries with that?”

However the message of higher education / training after high school was illustrated, the sentiment reflected the need for self satisfaction and achievement.

## **VII. Discussion**

This study sought to expand upon and go beyond previous studies by taking a close look into the attitudes, perceptions and motivations involved in the decision-making process among high school students as they begin the transition from high school to a post-secondary education.

While it is clear that high school sophomores are, in general, positively disposed toward higher education opportunities, their motivations appear to be based on a somewhat oversimplified cost benefit analysis. For the majority, the decision to pursue a higher education appears to be based on little more than a blind acceptance of the importance of education as presented by parents and society at large.

The degree of exploration involved in sophomore’s decision-making is reminiscent of the foreclosed state of identity development as described in the work of James Marcia. According to Marcia, many adolescents make important life decisions before having been challenged to asses the true significance of the decisions in their lives. This state of foreclosure leads to commitment without experience or deep thought<sup>9</sup>. A teenager in one study described the process in the following terms: “it’s simple, you go to college you find a job you make money and you stabilize your life.” Another student in the same study was quoted as saying “its either college or McDonalds.”<sup>10</sup> In the present study these attitudes are reinforced by the data suggesting most students see the value of a higher education as limited to career skills and better paying jobs. The decision to pursue a higher education is directly connected to a belief in the enhanced career/money/satisfaction to be gained. Perhaps one reason for the apparently simplistic analysis carried out by many students is that parents and schools are encouraging higher education decisions without encouraging a great deal of intentional deliberation on the part of their students.<sup>11</sup>

Although the vast majority of the sample in the current study report that they have already decided to pursue a higher education by their sophomore year in high school, there is an important minority who either do not see, or seriously question, the value of continuing their

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<sup>9</sup> Marcia, J., 1980 Identity in adolescence. In J. Adelson (Ed), Handbook of Adolescent Psychology. New York: Wiley

<sup>10</sup> M. H. Sandfort, J.G. Haworth, Whassup? A Glimpse Into the Attitudes and Beliefs of the Millennial Generation, Journal of College and Character, Featured Journal Articles Volume 2 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

education. In the current study over 20 percent of the sample was uncertain about their plans for higher education and 4 percent were certain they were not going to continue their education. These students appear to be disengaged from the typically unchallenged wisdom that higher education is necessary and worth the costs. The current study suggests that as many as 1 in 3 students have some questions regarding the value of higher education. Perhaps we are reaching a point of diminishing returns regarding the messages society provides concerning higher education. The present study, as well as other studies seems consistent in reporting a small but stable portion of the population with serious reservations about pursuing a higher education.<sup>12</sup>

In the present study, value seems to be the key to the higher education decision. Value, however, is not as simple for many of these subjects as a dollar comparison between college costs and potential future earnings. Value is a factor of overall investment and includes monetary costs, time commitments, and emotional outlays. The primary reasons shared by our subjects for not pursuing a higher education are riddled with references to money, the possibility of wasting one's time, and fears of failing.

Special attention is due in the case of value in relation to perceived possibility of success. Students in the focus groups made it clear that making the financial commitment to higher education was scary in light of the possibility that they might not finish with a degree. Moreover, value is linked to risk assessment. Subjects may have been educated as to the potential value of a higher education but still felt that the personal risks were too high to make a long-term investment. For some, the likelihood of success was the key concern. For others there simply did not seem to be a high enough risk tolerance to make the plunge into the forest of financial aide possibilities. As the personal investment in time and money go up the potential value of a higher education goes down. These concerns are evidenced by the subjects responses indicating that loans and military commitments were less likely to be considered as options for financing their education than parents or scholarships (it is important to note that grants were also rated lower as a source of funding for higher education suggesting that some students may not have a sound grasp of the financial options available).

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the present findings is the data regarding subject's experiences with satisfaction and disappointments in life. The evidence suggests that what is important is not necessarily money or a specific career but a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of being productive. In addition there is a strong sentiment communicated by the subjects that they are least satisfied with life when they experience some sort of failure or sub-par performance. These responses indicate that a realistic assessment of the value of a higher education would need to account for the likelihood of accomplishment and productivity when weighed against the likelihood of failure. The tricky part of this picture is that accomplishment and failure must be assessed in a very individualistic manner in order to be effective. What appears to be an opportunity for personal accomplishment for one student may appear to be an opportunity for failure to the next.

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<sup>12</sup> ----. (2001). *Students whose Parents did not go to college: Findings from the condition of education 2001*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (NCES 2001-126).

A final observation based on the present study concerns the relationship between a student's assessment of the value of higher education and their parent's education level. The depth of understanding of the variety of reasons for attending college seems to be related to parental education levels as does understanding of the information resources that may be used to make better decisions. While other studies have linked parental education to students pursuing higher education<sup>13, 14</sup> the present study suggests that the link may be at least in part the result of an environment that doesn't adequately demonstrate the more complex and personally relevant value to be gained through higher education. In the absence of day to day contact with important models of higher educational success who can demonstrate the more subtle values of education, students may find it difficult to find the personally relevant motivations to support their own decision-making process.

### **Summary of findings**

- For most high school sophomores a simple cost benefit analysis has led them to conclude that a higher education is necessary for their financial and personal success. As sophomores their reasoning seems to be based on their assessment of available financial resources, their desire to have good paying jobs, and their acceptance of the message that college is a required hoop to jump through in life. This analysis may be somewhat naïve and may not sustain investment in higher education after enrollment, but it does get the vast majority of Montana students to pursue some form of higher education.
- For some students the simple cost benefit analysis that leads their peers into higher education doesn't add up. They find it hard to identify possible sources of financial support, to see the long-term value of a higher education and or to see themselves as having a realistic chance of succeeding in higher education.
- While socioeconomic status seems to be linked to students plans for continuing education there seems to be an additional factor that prevents serious consideration of higher education opportunities. The absence of a strong family history of higher education seems to reduce students awareness and consideration of both the varied motivations for pursuing higher education and the varied informational resources available.

### **Recommendations**

- In order to increase the number of students who pursue higher education in Montana and improve completion rates for those who already plan to pursue a higher education, a more sophisticated approach to marketing is needed. More emphasis is needed on individual student values and motivations especially for those who lack a strong family history of higher education. Questions students need to have answered in more detail include: what is higher education about? what is in it for me above and beyond the possible monetary rewards? how does higher education fit into my sense of what's important/valuable in life? The messages about money and career success need to be expanded to take into consideration the need to feel productive, the need for a sense of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> M. H. Sandfort, J.G. Haworth, Whassup? A Glimpse Into the Attitudes and Beliefs of the Millennial Generation, *Journal of College and Character*, Featured Journal Articles Volume 2 2006

accomplishment and the need to feel that one's efforts are likely to produce desired results.

- Students continue to need more and better information regarding financial options for higher education and the associated risks those options bring. A student who expects to have his education paid for by parents can accept a simplified version of the cost benefit analysis. The student who has to find his or her own funding options needs more detail. Information on how grants work and where they come from is important. More detailed information about loans is also needed including: where to apply, how they work, who pays, when they pay, how long it takes to pay. Specific examples of typical student loan obligations tailored to mimic the individual student's circumstances may also be valuable.
- Students may need assistance combining their own personal motivations, their own financial picture and their own emotional status into a realistic cost benefit assessment. Of particular importance is an awareness that higher education involves an investment of time, money and emotional resources. When investing in equities the trend is toward more individualized understanding of investment needs and goals. The same should be true for students considering a higher education. An assessment of personal values, risk tolerance, and personal values is essential to finding the right equation for each student.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

High school students by their sophomore year seem to be engaging in a somewhat naïve cost benefit analysis regarding higher education. For many the decision is predetermined based on a simple desire to get good jobs and make more money. For others the decision to pursue a higher education is precluded by grades, money and attitudinal factors. For these students it appears that the simplified – go to school get a good paying job mantra – is inadequate. The risks in terms of the potential for personal failure, financial loss, and even wasted time seem to outweigh the potential benefits of a higher education.