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EDUCATION NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND STRATEGY

A faint, light gray background graphic featuring a graduation cap (mortarboard) with a tassel, and a diploma or certificate partially visible behind it.

in collaboration with

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In June 2002, the MELMAC Education Foundation initiated an *Education Needs Assessment*. Informed by statewide data about educational needs and priorities, the objective was to identify a strategic focus for the Foundation that would create a lasting impact on the education of the people of Maine.

The Foundation partnered with Foundation Strategy Group (FSG) from June through November 2002. Together they sought to complete the *Education Needs Assessment* by researching the educational needs and priorities in Maine, analyzing possible leverage points, and developing a strategy and approach that would maximize the impact of the Foundation's resources. The *Education Needs Assessment* was conducted in two phases.

Phase I Activities – Conducting a *Study of Studies*

- Catalogued, reviewed and synthesized over 25 recent studies on educational needs specific to Maine, including independent research, legislative recommendations, and presentations at major conferences [*See Appendix I*]
- Compared select educational statistics for Maine to national and regional figures

A number of priorities were highlighted by these studies. The work also gauged relative performance of Maine compared to national averages and the performance of selected peer states. The issue that was most prominent was the *Gap to College*. The *Gap to College* is defined as the startling gap between Maine's strong high school graduation rates and its college degree attainment rates, both for the population at large and traditional-age students graduating from Maine high schools.

Maine outperforms the nation in K-12 achievement and high school graduation rates. However, above average K-12 achievement does not translate into postsecondary success for almost 70% of Maine students. This issue was prioritized and explored in more depth during Phase II.

Phase II Activities – Examining Maine's *Gap to College*

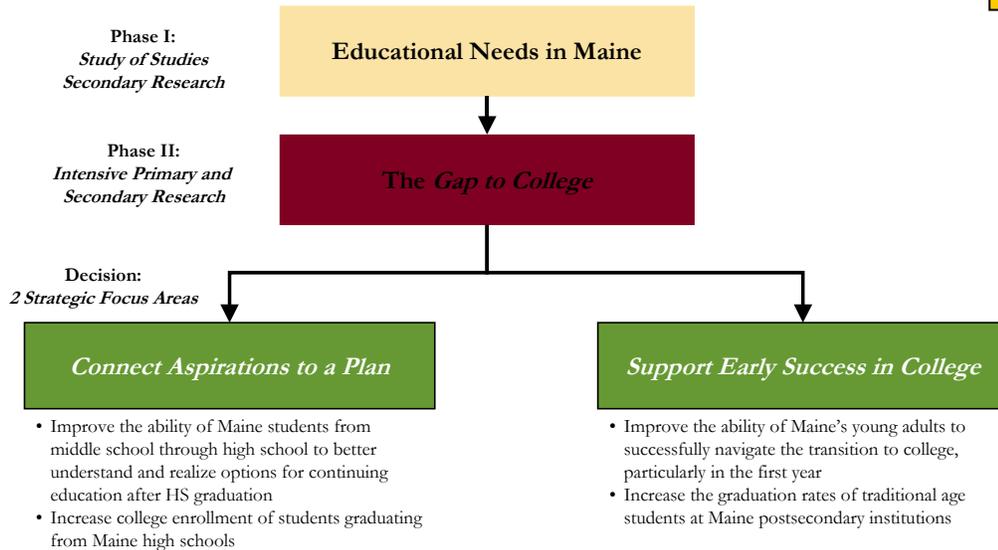
- Conducted interviews with over 65 educational leaders, funders, and practitioners across Maine [*See Appendix II*]
- Sized the different potential target populations in Maine considered at risk of not attaining a college degree
- Analyzed the funding landscape to identify the foundation and federal resources currently directed toward educational priorities in Maine
- Reviewed findings from the Mitchell Institute's study on *Barriers to Postsecondary Education in Maine (July 2002)* and analyzed data from its surveys
- Held eight focus groups with four different constituencies across the state – parents who did not graduate from college and have children in high school; young adults who aspired to college but did not enroll; young adults who attended college but left in the first year; and current non-traditional age college students

Through this research a number of potential leverage points were identified. After screening the findings against key criteria, two strategic focus areas for the Foundation emerged. The two focus areas were the specific needs affecting student aspirations to attend college, enrollment in college, and graduation from college.

The first is *Connect Aspirations to a Plan*. The goal is to improve the ability of Maine students from middle school through high school to better understand and realize options and adequately plan for continuing education after high school graduation, thereby increasing the college enrollment of Maine students. Over 80% of those interviewed cited this issue as a “top three” priority for the state in closing the *Gap to College*.

The second area is *Support Early Success in College*. The goal is to improve the ability of Maine students to successfully navigate the transition to college, particularly in their first year, thereby increasing student retention at Maine postsecondary institutions. Almost half of those interviewed cited this as a “top three” priority for the state in closing the *Gap to College*.

Exhibit A



These two areas will be pursued proactively and in sequence. This will enable the Foundation to follow a population of students from middle school through college through working with a group of core communities and institutions. Through this work, the Foundation will build a knowledge base regarding practices that can be shared throughout the state in order to increase the college aspirations, enrollment and persistence of Maine students.

II. NEEDS ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Examining Maine's Gap to College

The *Gap to College* is the startling gap between Maine's strong high-school graduation rates and college degree attainment rates.

Maine's adult population outperforms the nation in high school graduation rates but lags in bachelor's degree attainment. In 2000, 89% of Maine residents 25 or over had attained a high school diploma, as compared to 83% of the nationwide population. In 2000, only 24% of Maine residents 25 or over had attained a bachelor's degree, versus 26% nationwide.

Studies Show that Maine's K-12 Educational System Performs Very Well Relative to the Nation and to the Region

Aspirations

- Level of **parental involvement** in schools exceed national levels

Access

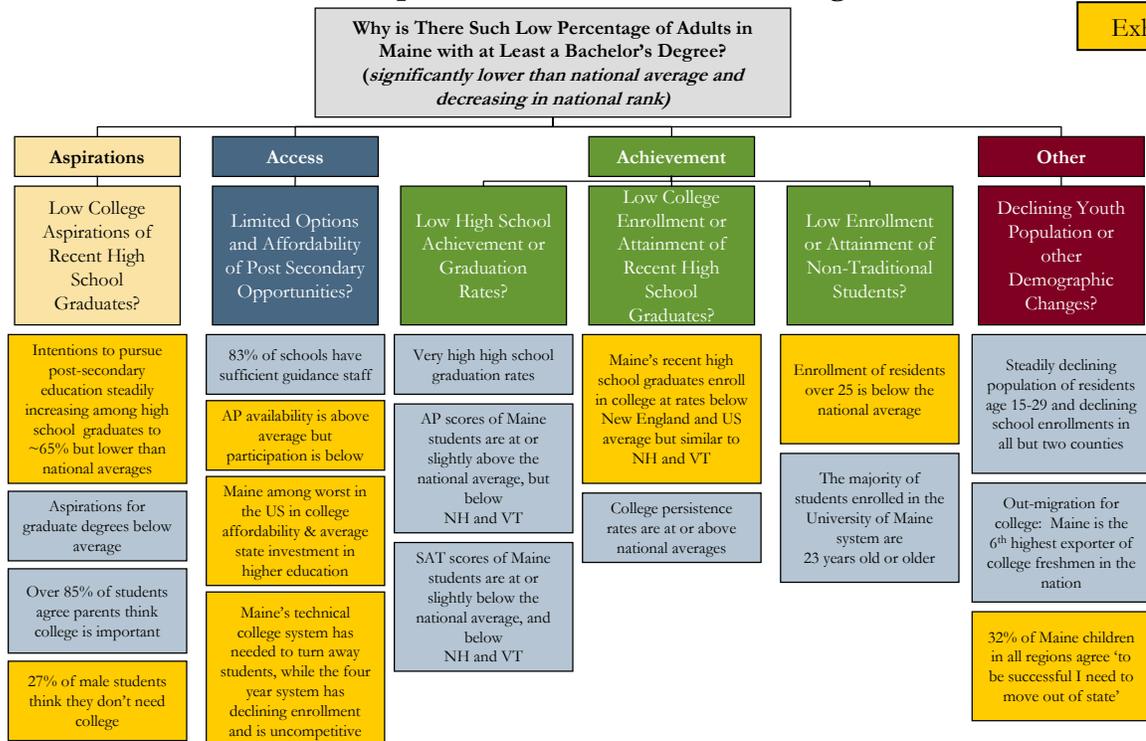
- K-12 **public school funding** and **expenditures** per pupil are above national averages.
- Teacher-to-student ratios are lower than the national averages

Achievement

- Maine students have significantly **higher test scores** and **higher high school graduation rates** (including GED recipients) than the national and northeast averages

A Wide Variety of Factors May Be Contributing to Maine's Low Participation in and Attainment of Higher Education

Exhibit B



The *Gap to College* is present not only for the adult population, but also for current high school graduates. Some studies assert that the *Gap to College* is overemphasized and Maine's college-going and college graduation rates are not below national averages. However, the *Gap* between Maine's K-12 achievement and high graduation rates and college enrollment and college graduation rates is wider than it is nationally. Given the success of Maine students through high school, one would expect their success in college to outpace that of students nationally.

Maine's K-12 students, while achieving success in elementary and secondary school, under-perform in postsecondary education. When the path of Maine 9th graders through college is projected based on national statistics, fewer graduate from high school, but more graduates enroll in college [See Exhibits C and D].

The largest gaps in Maine students' path to a postsecondary degree, relative to the national averages, are:

- (1) the number of students who don't intend to pursue postsecondary education and
- (2) the number of students who intend to begin in a degree program immediately following high school, but don't enroll.

However, it is unclear to what extent college graduation rates would decrease or remain constant if the percentage of students intending to enroll and actually enrolling were to increase to national levels. The barriers that may be preventing some students from aspiring to or enrolling in a postsecondary program today may also affect their persistence rates in the future. If aspirations and enrollment increased to national averages and persistence maintained, then 1,355 more students would attain degrees each year [See Exhibit E].

Maine Underperforms in Postsecondary Attainment Relative to the Nation and the Region

Aspirations to pursue postsecondary education

- Steadily increasing in Maine but still trailing national averages by approximately 10%
- Parents' own educational attainment levels are critical and correlate to their children's educational success

Access to college preparation resources

- Number of high school counselors and AP course availability is above average
- Access issues are also significant after students leave high school, for both recent high school graduates and nontraditional students
- Cost is a significant barrier as Maine ranks as one of the worst in the nation in both affordability and average in state investment in higher education
- Maine's postsecondary infrastructure lacks sufficient low-cost entry points, a key component of success for states successful in increasing bachelor's degree attainment rates. The technical college system appears to close to maximum capacity

Achievement at the high school or postsecondary levels

- High school graduation rates are not a major factor contributing to Maine's low college attainment
- Persistence rates are at or above national averages

Demographic factors

- Maine's youth population is steadily declining and out-migrating as the older population grows
- Postsecondary enrollment for nontraditional students is below the national average
- Maine is a net exporter of college freshmen to other states, primarily to attend 4-year institutions

When Maine's Attainment Rate Is Disaggregated and Compared to National Expectations, the Largest Gaps Are Aspirations and Enrollment

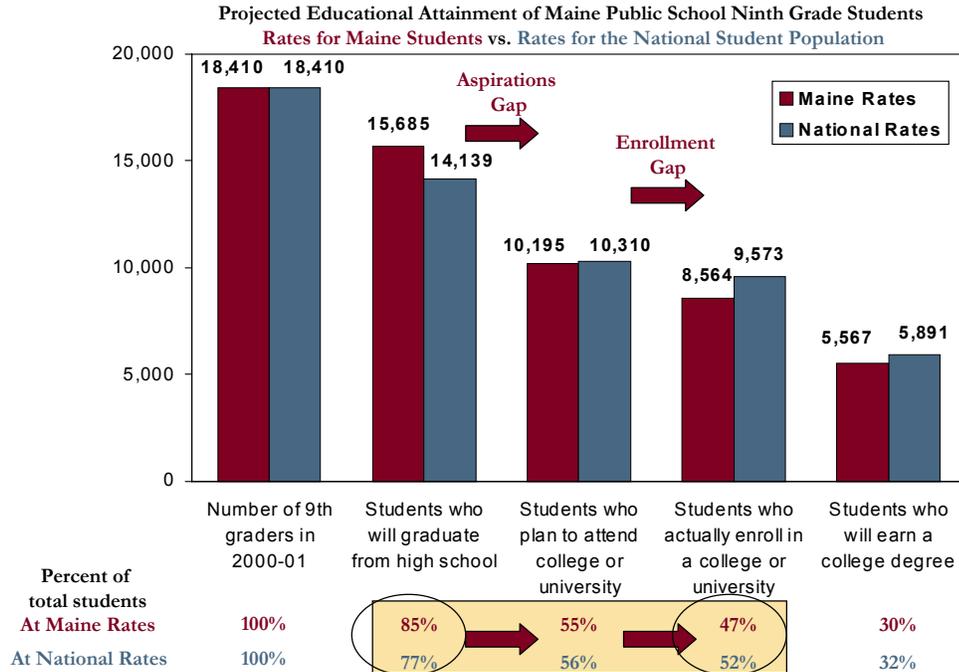


Exhibit C

Source for ME rates: Maine Education Policy Research Institute. Maine Department of Education (2001). National Center for Education Statistics (1999).
Source for US rates: National Center for Education Statistics (1999) for Graduation Rate; National Library of Education (1992) for Intentions to Enroll in Postsecondary; US DOE (1997) for Postsecondary Enrollment Rate; NCES *Condition of Education 1996* for Postsecondary Persistence Rates

Relative to National Expectations, the Gap to College Is Greater For Maine Students Who Don't Aspire To College or Aspire But Don't Enroll

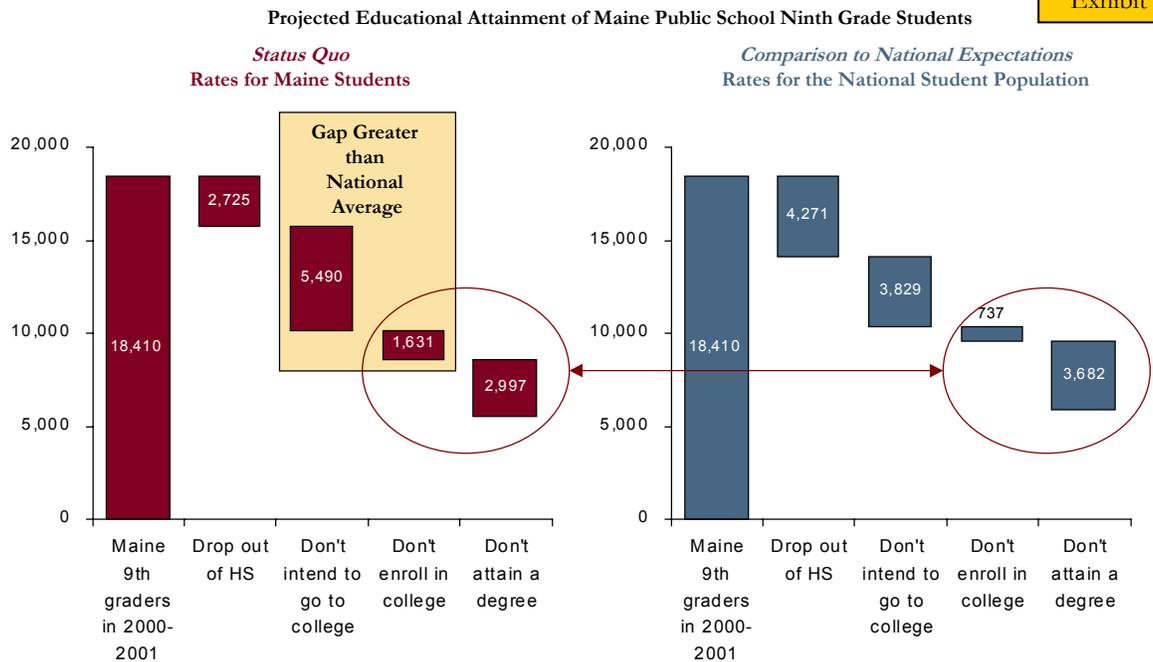
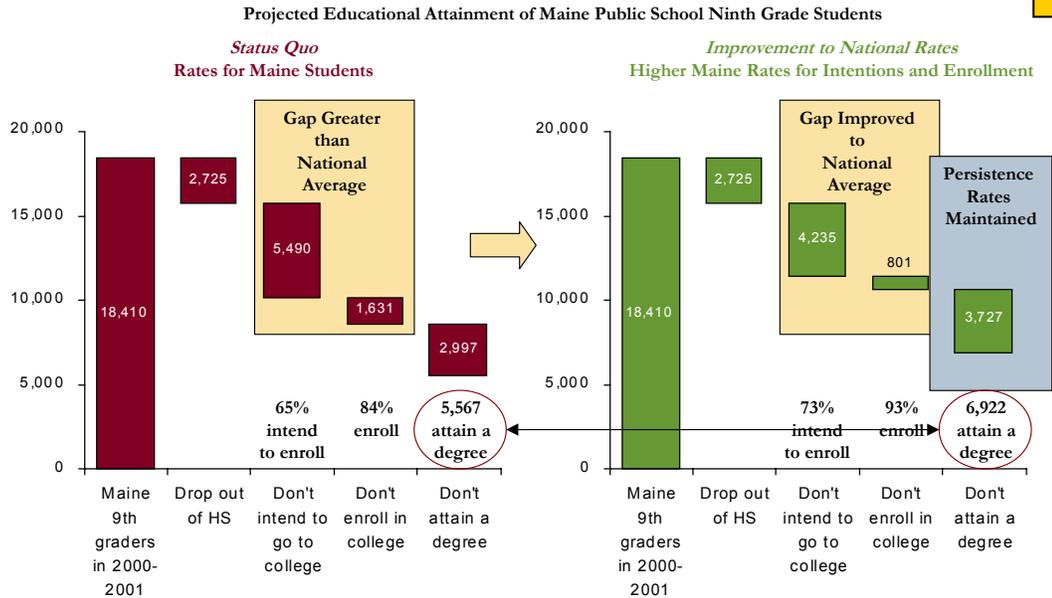


Exhibit D

Source for ME rates: Maine Education Policy Research Institute. Maine Department of Education (2001). National Center for Education Statistics (1999).
Source for US rates: National Center for Education Statistics (1999) for Graduation Rate; National Library of Education (1992) for Intentions to Enroll in Postsecondary; US DOE (1997) for Postsecondary Enrollment Rate; NCES *Condition of Education 1996* for Postsecondary Persistence Rates

If Aspirations and Enrollment Increased to US Averages and Persistence Is Maintained, 1,355 More Students Would Attain Degrees Each Year

Exhibit E

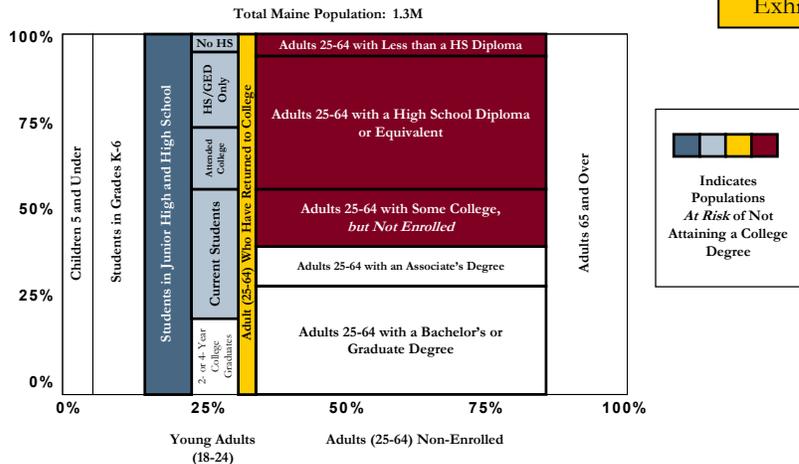


Source for ME rates: Maine Education Policy Research Institute. Maine Department of Education (2001). National Center for Education Statistics (1999). Source for US rates: National Center for Education Statistics (1999) for Graduation Rate; National Library of Education (1992) for Intentions to Enroll in Postsecondary; US DOE (1997) for Postsecondary Enrollment Rate; NCES *Condition of Education 1996* for Postsecondary Persistence Rates

Approximately half of Maine's population could be considered *at risk* of not attaining a college degree. An estimated 616,000 individuals have either fallen off the path toward a degree or are on the path toward a degree but are potentially at risk of not enrolling or persisting in a degree program. The various population sub-categories are:

616,000 Maine Residents Ages 12-64, or 48% of the Population, Could Be Considered *At Risk* of Not Attaining A College Degree

Exhibit F



Source: FSG Analysis of Census data, Mitchell Institute data, and USM data

- students in middle and high school,
- young adults who are not college graduates (current college students, students who attended and then left college, and those who did not attend),
- non-traditional adult students currently enrolled in a degree program, and
- non-enrolled adults under 65 with some or no college coursework. [See Exhibit F]

While all individuals at risk of not attaining a degree can be considered in need of assistance, in order to make best use of available resources, additional research into possible leverage areas was conducted to identify one or two population sub-categories on which to focus. In narrowing the focus to specific target populations, it is important to

There Are 7 Potential Target Populations Which Are Both At Risk and Higher Leverage in Impacting the Gap to College

Exhibit G

Population Category	High Leverage Population	Size (and % of Maine Population)	Higher Expected Return			
			Sizeable Population	Youth	Aspirations	Influence Next 1 st Generation Students
Current School Students	Grade 7-12 students who would be 1 st generation college students/parents do not have a 4-year degree	54,000 (4.2% of ME; 51% of grades 7-12)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Young Adults 18-24 in Maine Without College Degrees	Young adults who aspired to college, but did not enroll	12,000 (0.9% of ME; 11% of 18-24)		✓	✓	✓
	Young adults who attended college, but did not persist	18,000 (1.4% of ME; 17% of 18-24)		✓	✓	✓
	Young adults who are in college in Maine, and are 1 st generation	17,000 (1.3% of ME; 16% of 18-24)		✓	✓	✓
Adults 25-64 in Maine Without College Degrees	Employed adults with some college who did not complete a degree and are interested in returning to school	41,000 (2.6% of ME; 10% of 25-64)	✓		✓	✓
	Adults with no college, who are interested in returning to school	68,000 (11% of ME; 7% of 25-64)	✓		✓	✓
	Adults who have returned to school and are working toward a degree	34,000 (3.6% of ME; 5% of 25-64)	✓		✓	✓

recognize that the Foundation's ability to impact the statewide bachelor's degree attainment rate (measured for the resident population age 25 and over) is limited. Goals for impacting any target population need to be more specific than raising the overall postsecondary attainment of Mainers, a statistic largely driven by demographic and economic factors, in addition to changes in state educational policy [See Exhibits G and H].

Each Potential Target Group Accounts for 1-5% of the Maine Population, Is Significant and Sufficiently Large to Create an Impact

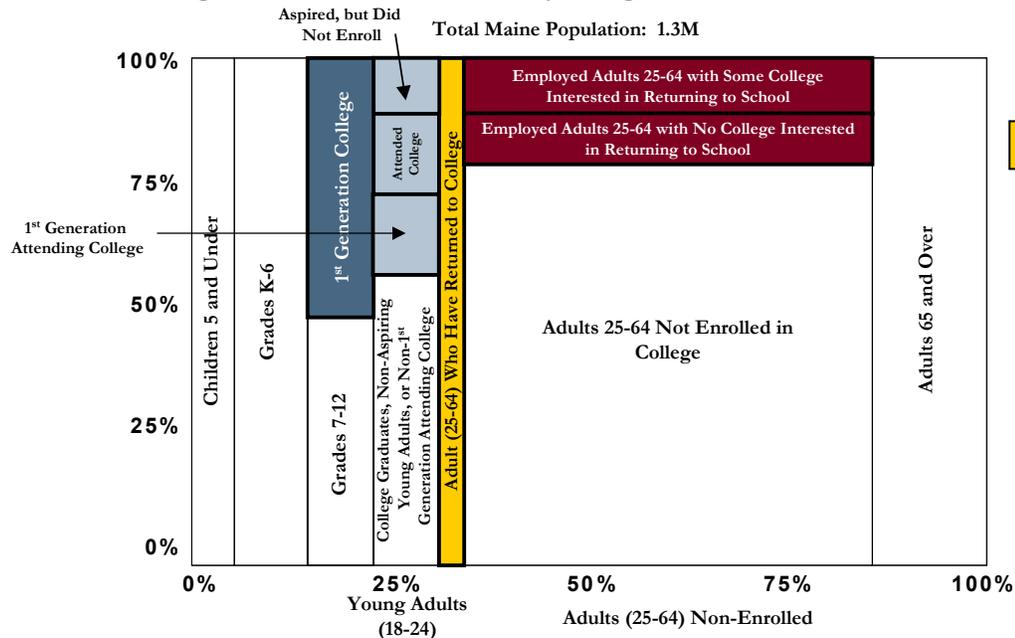


Exhibit H

Goals for impacting any target population will need to be more specific than raising the overall postsecondary attainment of Maine's residents – which is driven largely by demographic and economic factors

Source: FSG Analysis of Census data, Mitchell Institute data, and USM data

Identifying Leverage Points in the *Gap to College*

Additional research into the *Gap to College* focused on identifying high leverage areas for the Foundation to impact. Interviews, focus groups, and analysis were designed to probe into the critical, timely, and addressable issues that are most likely to narrow the *Gap to College* for a significant student population in Maine.

A broad range of issues surfaced through discussions and analysis, though two leverage points emerged as the top priorities. These findings were consistently reinforced by the interviews, focus groups, and the Mitchell Institute’s *Barriers to Postsecondary* (www.mitchellinstitute.org) survey research (July 2002) [See Exhibit I].

**Across the Range of Possible *Gap to College* Focus Areas,
Two Emerged With Very Strong Support from Constituents Interviewed**

Range of Possible Focus Areas	Priority for <i>Aspirations</i>	Priority for <i>Enrollment</i>	Priority for <i>Persistence</i>
Increasing Academic Achievement	Lower Priority	Lower Priority	Lower Priority
Changing Community Attitudes	Critical, but More Challenging Priority	Critical, but More Challenging Priority	Lower Priority
Increasing Planning and Preparation	Critical Priority	Critical Priority	Lower Priority
Providing Financial Support	Lower Priority	Lower Priority	Lower Priority
Changing Institutional Options (e.g. Community College)	Lower Priority	Critical, but More Challenging Priority	Critical, but More Challenging Priority
Improving Support During Transitions	Lower Priority	Lower Priority	Critical Priority

* 1st, 2nd, or 3rd priority – Interviewees were asked open-ended questions about priorities

Critical Priority
 Critical, but More Challenging Priority
 Lower Priority

Exhibit I

Connect Aspirations to a Plan
 Involving Parents and Community
*83% of Interviewees Cite as Top Priority**

Creating More Institutional Options is a Priority – but
 Changing Higher Education Infrastructure is Not
 Recommended for MELMAC

Support Early Success
 in College
*43% of Interviewees
 Cite as Top Priority**

Starting with the entire matrix, potential leverage points were screened based on the following criteria:

- Addresses critical needs or issues affecting student aspirations for college, enrollment in college, and graduation from college as surfaced by research conducted in Maine: education policy research, interviews with educational leaders, and primary research (surveys and interviews) gathering the perspectives of students, parents, and educators
- Focuses on a significant population of Maine residents that
 - Is easy to identify and reach
 - Demonstrates college aspirations
 - Disproportionately impacts future generations of Maine citizens
 - Is more receptive to behavior change

- Addresses the Board's stated values and priorities, including
 - Affecting systemic change to benefit the average Maine student
 - Working through existing institutions, particularly the public schools, to support new practices
 - Leading through action
 - Providing the opportunity for collaboration
 - Providing the opportunity to evaluate progress
- Addresses gaps in the funding landscape and capitalizes on collaborative opportunities.

Connect Aspirations to a Plan and *Support Early Success in College* were selected as two significant leverage points for the Foundation to impact with a focused strategy.

1. *Connect Aspirations to a Plan*

The intent of this focus area was to move beyond traditional definitions of college aspirations (*i.e.*, a student declaring “I want to go to college”) and to set Maine educators’ sights on increasing students’ self-direction, ability to articulate motivations for college, ability to connect college aspirations to real experiences, and understanding of the returns on an investment in college.

Research indicates that a successful solution must have a minimum of two components:

- (1) an emphasis on increasing **parents’ engagement** in the college planning process and
- (2) working with **schools to start comprehensive college planning and goal-setting** as early as middle school, covering topics from career options to financial resources and a course schedule that prepares students for a sufficiently broad range of options after high school.

The solutions must also involve a transformation of the role of the school guidance counselor, as practices and constraints limit their ability to effectively address students’ postsecondary needs.

It’s more than aspirations

Students and parents in Maine agree that college is a necessity. Recent surveys of Maine students confirm that parents value higher education. Over 90% of Maine students report that they view college attendance as important. However, this reported aspiration is not enough. These

Early Goal Setting and Understanding the Range of College Options is Critical to Making Aspirations Real and Closing the Enrollment Gap

- Student aspirations as traditionally defined (“I want to go to college”) are not the primary issue in closing the Gap to College
“My thinking has evolved about aspirations... The research done over the last 5 years suggests that the issue for Maine youth is not aspirations, but the ability to set goals and accomplish them.”
- Increasing self-direction, articulating motivations for college, and connecting college aspirations to real experiences are the key factors in making aspirations meaningful
“It is critical for aspirations to be based in reality – for students to see the opportunities a college education creates through some family member. If mom and dad didn’t go to school, they don’t know what it’s like, and kids have to get it from somewhere else.”
- The financing issue is significant – but it’s changing the perception of the price tag and helping people understand the return on investment rather than reducing the cost which is a priority
“[Too many] kids don’t have someone in their lives who helps them think through the financial tradeoffs.”
- Increasing parents’ engagement in the college planning and decision-making process yields significant impact – and is particularly important for those parents who did not attend college themselves
“If you’re looking at levers, the parents may be more important targets than the students themselves... If you can get the information into parents’ hands, they can help their children understand ways to afford postsecondary education and the importance of it for their children’s own future prosperity and well-being.”
- College preparation guidance should begin earlier – and needs to serve all students well

surveys of students and parents measure aspirations or intentions at a very general level, and do not reflect the reality in which these aspirations or intentions are based.

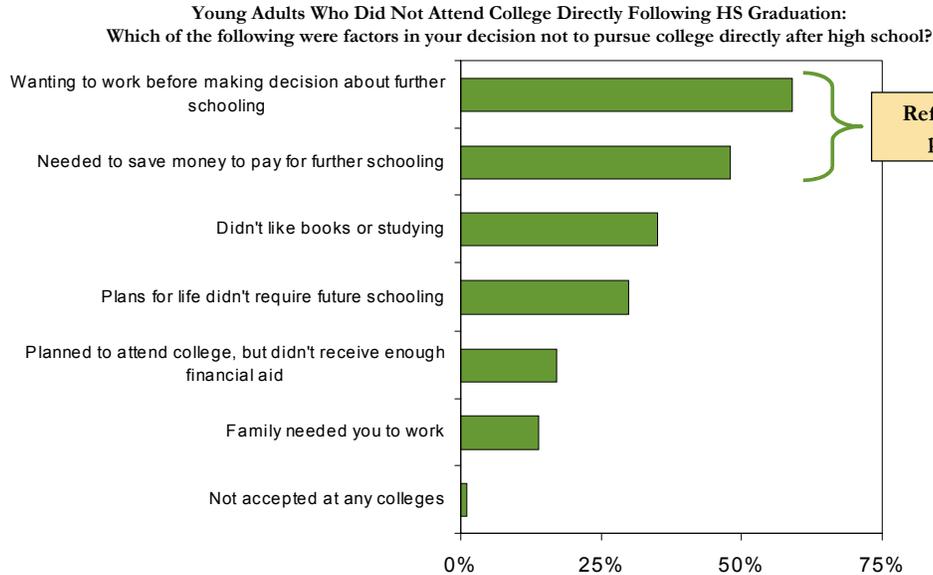
“There is a tremendous gap between what a 10 year old wants to be, what a 15 year old - and his or her parents - are empowered to do, and what a 20 year old is actually doing.”

Almost unanimously, Maine educators interviewed reflected that “contrary to the prevailing wisdom in the state” students aspirations as traditionally defined (“I want to go to college”) are not the primary issue in closing the *Gap to College*. Increasing self-direction, articulating motivations for college, and connecting college aspirations to real experiences are seen as key factors in making goals meaningful. Educators in the schools perceive that a lot of students applying to college put in a half-hearted effort because they haven’t taken the time over the course of their educational careers to learn about what they want to do, where they want to go, and what college really offers. Too often, this results in students not going on to college or “stalling out” for a few years, after which returning to school becomes more difficult.

In fact surveys of Maine’s young adults have found that not attending college or not finding the right college fit often results from a lack of planning – wanting to figure out what they will do with a degree before they enroll. Of young adults not attending college, three times as many claim they needed to work to save money for college versus planned to attend college but didn’t enroll because they did not receive enough financial aid [See Exhibit J].

A Lack of Planning, Along with Job and Money Considerations, Influences the Decision to Not Attend College Following High School

Exhibit J



Reflect lack of planning

Of young adults not attending college, three times as many claim they needed to work to save money for college versus planned to attend college but did not because they did not receive enough financial aid

Source: Mitchell Institute, *Barriers to Postsecondary Education in Maine*, July 2002, D-47

Parental engagement is critical

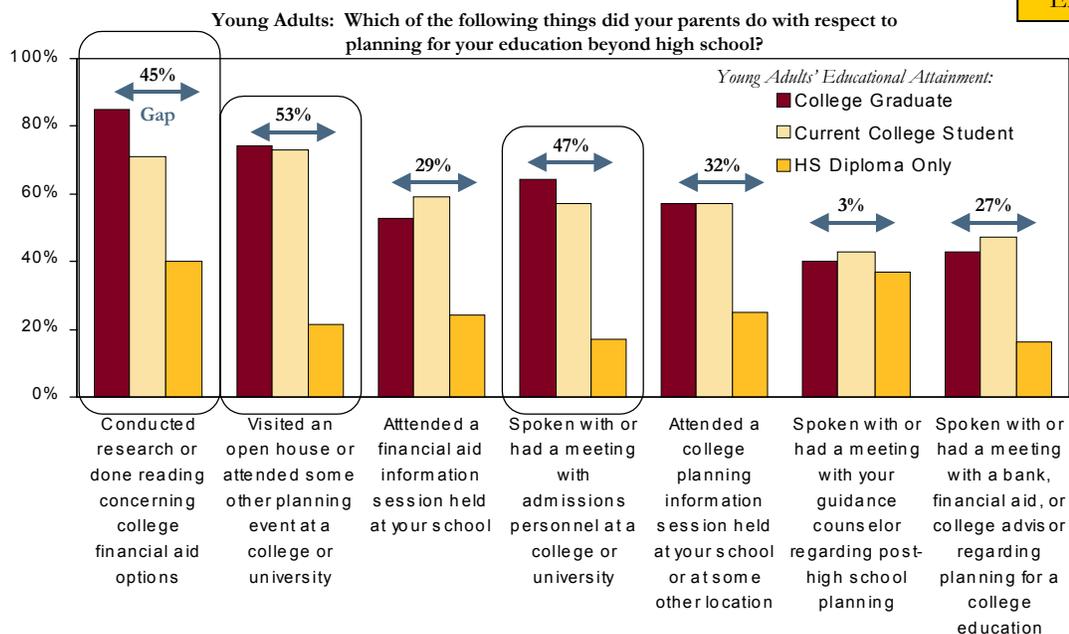
Increasing parents’ engagement in the college planning and decision-making process yields significant impact – and is particularly important for those parents who did not attend college themselves. Surveys of Maine young adults indicate that students whose parents are proactive in college planning had an increased likelihood of attending and graduating from college.

In fact educators interviewed cite outreach to parents as potentially more important than outreach to students themselves. This is particularly true with regard to options for financing a college degree. Young adults who pursued and attained bachelor’s degrees had families who were more comfortable dealing with college financial planning, more actively planned ways to finance college, and were more willing to take out loans and assume debt. Interestingly, these factors are not directly associated with a family’s income level.

Often a lack of confidence or of time, rather than lack of interest, prevents parents from becoming stronger advocates for their children in the college planning process. From the perspective of parents, guidance counselors, and financial aid officers, the financial aid application process is notoriously complex and intimidating, even for those parents who have college degrees or have been through the process with an older child. College campuses can prove daunting environments for many Maine parents, discouraging college visits. In addition, the connection between parents and activities held at schools, tapering off in middle school, is almost nonexistent at the high school level. Even if students think to tell parents about financial aid nights, college fairs, or meetings with guidance counselors, many parents schedules’ prohibit their attendance [See Exhibit K].

Students With Parents Who Are Proactive in College Planning Have an Increased Likelihood of Graduating from College

Exhibit K



Parents without college degrees are the least likely to take these action steps to help students plan for college – though participate more in events held at schools

Source: Mitchell Institute, *Barriers to Postsecondary Education in Maine*, July 2002, D-35, FSG Analysis of Mitchell Institute Data

Despite the fact that the average Maine parent tends to be under-informed about college options, their opinions influence students' choices – and such opinions are difficult to change. This can translate to students believing that colleges are too expensive, too far away, or too out-of-reach; despite the fact that most parents fundamentally want their children to go on to college.

For students whose parents are unable or possibly unwilling to be actively involved, surrogate role models are a priority. A number of young adults interviewed cite teachers or Upward Bound program directors as helpful in walking them through the college research and application process. Without this support, many of them believe they would not have continued on to college after high school.

Comprehensive early planning and awareness is needed

Educators, parents and young adults interviewed report that many students are not aware of the postsecondary options that would be the best fit for them. This is particularly true for students living in more rural communities, where only a handful of visible career and college opportunities exist. Young adults, who aspired to college but didn't attend or attended and then left, often graduated from high school and looked for options without a structured system of guidance. While in high school, most did not have someone helping them - or even pushing them to explore a range of paths to pursue after high school - until it was too late, and they defaulted to the path that seemed easiest.

For such students, as for all the rest, educators concur that college preparation guidance needs to begin earlier. Surveys of high school students found that only one third of students meet educators' recommendations of starting their own college planning by ninth grade. While educators expect that students whose parents attained college degrees have a head start, this group of students reports beginning their own college planning process only slightly before their peers.

Early planning is beneficial not just because it increases students' awareness of options, but also because it increases families' abilities to finance college. Guidance counselors and financial aid officers assert that money is an addressable barrier if parents are informed about the true costs of college rather than just the price tag, get comfortable exploring the financing options when their children are in middle school, and get aid applications in on time.

Early planning also has the potential to increase college persistence rates. Educators interviewed report that significant shares of students who have difficulty getting through the first year of college are mismatched with the institution. One educator noted that Maine students who start thinking about college late in high school perceive only three options: Bates, Bowdoin, Colby; the University of Maine at Orono; or the University of Maine at Farmington. Early planning and awareness of college tends to help students define their needs, research alternatives, and enroll at a campus likely to be a better match.

Address financial barriers by understanding tradeoffs

While there is widespread concern about the high cost of college, educators are equally concerned about Maine families' lack of financial planning and misperceptions about the financial tradeoffs involved in an investment in college. Changing the perception of the price tag of college rather than reducing the cost is widely viewed as an immediate and manageable priority.

Students and their families are more focused on the costs of a college education than on the financial benefits. As a result, many high school graduates across the state choose the immediate gratification of a job rather than the debt required to attend college, imagining that they will go on to school later after they save up some money. Older adults returning to school after taking a break for family or financial reasons often regret their decision to work or wait. This group of older students recognizes that it becomes harder to afford college later in life and that student loans can be paid off easier with the significantly higher salaries paid to college graduates.

Cultural issues play a major role in the different financial tradeoffs students and families make between investing in a college education and taking on debt. Educators perceive Maine families to be particularly debt averse. A number of recent high school graduates interviewed saw student loans of \$10-20K as out of the realm of possibility and were very sensitive to the price tag of college relative to their parents' salaries.

The price tag, rather than the actual cost after financial aid, influences the decisions of many potential college students. Most young adults interviewed because they had either not attended college or left during the first year had dreams of attending institutions like Emerson or Berkeley. But they viewed an in-state public institution as the only option they could consider due to the relative difference in the price tags. In contrast to the majority of those interviewed, one college-educated parent encouraged her children to apply to out-of-state private schools with high tuition and found that their financial aid packages made those institutions competitively priced and less expensive than the University of Maine System schools. Without education about the financial aid process, students and families are likely to continue making decisions based on price tag rather than actual cost.

Implement change by transforming the Guidance Counselor role and resources

In addition to starting earlier with a more comprehensive approach, the level of resources dedicated to pre-college guidance needs to increase. Virtually all educators interviewed agree that guidance counselors' loads are too large (an average of 222 students each). This circumstance prohibits school systems from providing personal college guidance to students other than the "sure bets" for college or those whose parents are proactive about their child's needs.

The situation is exacerbated by the fact that not only are guidance counselors responsible for supporting a large number of students, counselors are also called upon to spend time on a wide range of things outside of postsecondary planning. Students report feeling like their guidance counselors didn't care what they did after high school as long as they didn't cause trouble. When guidance counselors are called upon to address students' non-academic

needs, as they are in most schools, the capacity to provide personal planning support to all students is limited.

Based on the perspectives of many interviewed, it is clear that there is a need for additional guidance staffing and role clarity if students are to have sufficient assistance in understanding and planning for postsecondary options – and if this assistance is to begin earlier in a student’s educational career. There is a range of options for supplementing the guidance counselor role with additional resources, but each option requires rethinking the responsibilities of guidance counselors. Educators report that this need will remain significant even in districts where teachers are increasingly called upon to take on more of an advising role.

“We need to be putting things into place to help students get in the frame of mind where they’re planning for college...The kids who don’t go to college don’t know how to go. It’s not that they don’t want to...We also need to be making sure that kids who go to any school are making the right choice for them – a school that fits preliminarily with what kids want to do with their lives.”

2. *Support Early Success in College*

The intent of this focus area is to extend the definition of success for Maine students beyond college enrollment to include college persistence, recognizing that as many as half the students who enroll in college do not attain a degree within six years. For traditional age students, at least one third do not follow through to graduation. At Maine's public institutions, 50-80% of this student attrition happens during the first year [See Exhibit L].

“A lot of our kids go on to college for a year and come right back because they were scared and nervous. And they don't bring any resources back into the community because they didn't stay in school...Kids don't find support from an adult in college. They get overwhelmed. Some are not ready to handle things on their own. Some early successes and good relationships can help build confidence and ensure persistence.”

While educational leaders acknowledge that financial and academic issues can prove to be barriers to success, they cite social issues as the most critical hurdles preventing Maine students from staying in college, particularly during the first year. Postsecondary administrators and professors reflected that there is not enough attention currently focused on this topic in Maine – and not enough consistent attention from educators at postsecondary institutions. Research indicates that the solution must begin with:

- (1) a **heightened dialogue** between educational leaders about the issues of **student persistence and retention**,
- (2) **further research** into the **success factors and successful programs** that make a difference for students enrolled in college.

More dialogue and information is needed

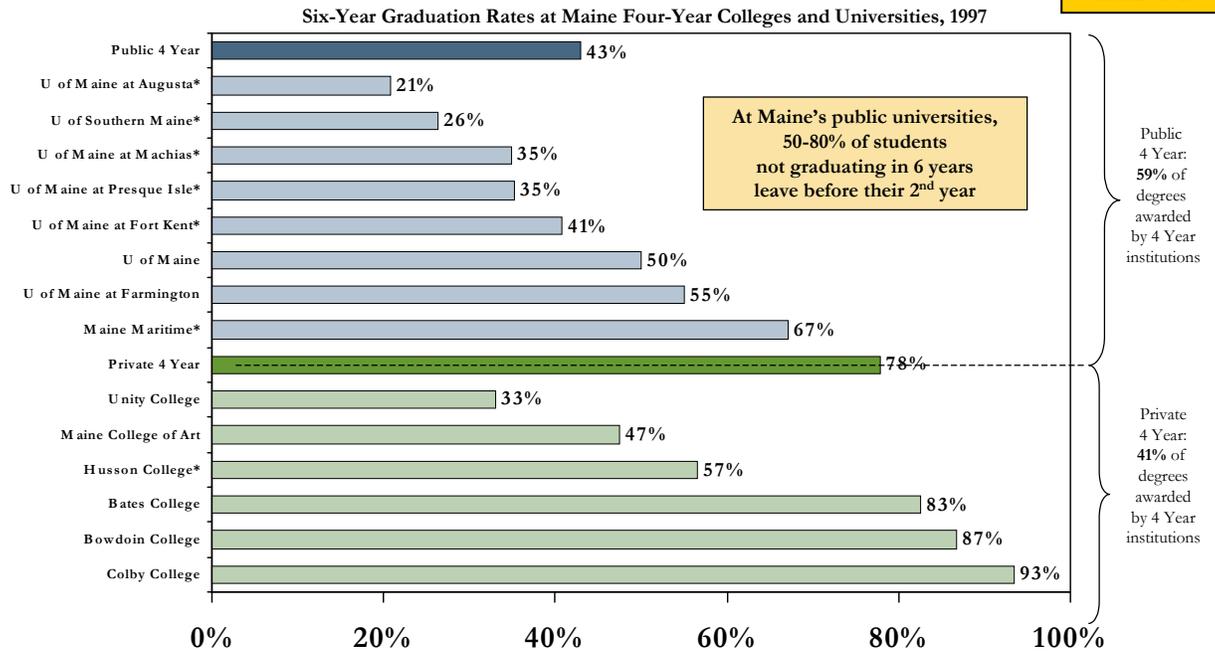
Not enough is known about the persistence challenges Maine's traditional-age students experience, the reasons they leave, or what it will take for them to return to school. In addition, there are virtually no conversations between institutions about different goals, findings, or practices that affect the persistence of students at Maine's postsecondary institutions. As one administrator reflected, “we need to start thinking together about the broader impact of our priorities on the state.”

While educators, particularly administrators at the postsecondary level, report that retention is a top priority at each institution, they share the view that there is a lot of work to be done. In practice, postsecondary professionals report that at many institutions there is more emphasis placed on enrollment rather than retention. Even when retention is a clear institutional priority, they report that it is inconsistently supported by faculty – who play the largest role in impacting the persistence of new students.

Across institutions, not enough is known about why students leave college. While asked why they are leaving in surveys or exit interviews, the reasons given by students are often not accurate. Financial justifications are the easiest response, but educators report that after drilling down, students find a lot of other reasons they are leaving. Interestingly, survey findings indicate that three fourths of Maine's young adults who attended college and left plan to return.

Over Half the Students Who Enroll In Maine's Public Institutions Do Not Get a Degree Within Six Years

Exhibit L



The first year of college is currently when most of the attrition occurs

* Four-year colleges and universities that offer associate as well as bachelor's degree programs – Maine undergraduates interested in pursuing non-technical associate degrees enroll at a public or private four-year institution that offers both associate and bachelor's degree programs.
Source: *A Fresh Look at College-Going Rates in Maine*, December 2000, FAME

Social, financial, and academic factors affect persistence

Students, upon entering college, exhibit very different abilities to articulate their reasons for being there. One administrator familiar with her institution's student population reported that 80% of incoming students struggle to articulate reasons for attending college. "I can predict who will stay and who won't based on what their motivators are. Students need to be convinced that they want higher education and that it's important to their future."

First and foremost, educators interviewed shared the perspective that social issues are extremely critical to student persistence, particularly during the transition period through the end of freshman year. Social issues are difficult to address and often overlooked by higher education institutions as an area to focus institutional resources. At many colleges and universities, educators believe that the message sent to students is "you're here, you're on your own." While professors are looking after students' academic achievement, little other assistance is provided to all students.

Second, educators reinforce that financial issues are a factor throughout college. Upon enrolling in college, students have generally not planned for the fact that living expenses will strain their budgets. Continuing into the second year, many students are not prepared for the fact that their financial aid packages could change. When students are committed to college, well adjusted to their new environment, and prepared to find help, they generally succeed in overcoming these financial hurdles. Others do not.

Many of these same educators reflect that financial challenges are overemphasized and are not the primary barrier to persistence. The majority of students leaving college before graduation claim they are leaving because it's too expensive – though students tend to give this reason because it's straightforward and socially acceptable. Students interviewed in focus groups first cited financial challenges as the reason for leaving college; after further discussion, however, most opened up and gave other reasons: not being committed to the idea of going to college, knowing the campus was not the right fit, breaking up with a girlfriend, struggling with a difficult living situation, missing home, to list a few.

Third, educators assert that academic challenges, while a hurdle for some students, play a limited role in the ultimate decision to stay or go. These challenges are also better addressed by student support resources at postsecondary institutions (e.g. academic tutoring programs).

Support programs exist, but are not comprehensive or well known

Educators interviewed indicated that across all of Maine's postsecondary institutions, there are a full range of programs designed to support student persistence. Some focus on social issues, some on financial, some on academic – and some work at addressing students' overall needs through approaches like peer mentoring and internship programs.

However, most interviewees believe that at least two major gaps exist in this system of support. First, most of these programs are focused at sub-populations of select student groups, rather than the average student. And second, there is little collective knowledge about what programs exist and how they are working within and across postsecondary institutions. As one administrator reflected, “we are not yet sure what the best support programs are and which contribute to retention.”

Focusing Attention and Research on Ways to Support Students Early in College is Critical to Addressing the Persistence Gap

- Social issues are critical. **Providing support during the transition period** into college (through sophomore year) is important to students' persistence, but often receives inconsistent attention by institutions
“At the public universities, the message we send is ‘you’re here, you’re on your own’.”
“It’s not a matter of persistence, it’s a matter of assistance... Providing this requires behavior change on the part of the whole system, particularly professors.”
- The impact of existing programs designed to support student persistence is unknown. **Student cohorts** are sometimes cited as a successful intervention that increases student retention
“Students succeed when they have a support group, are getting attention, and they have mentors... This happens today in the honors groups and in specific vocational programs.”
- **Students need to be prepared to deal with financial issues throughout college** – financing is more difficult to manage in the second year as financial aid packages change. Students and families who have support and are motivated to make the college investment are much more likely to make it work.
“Financial issues continue to be significant once a student is enrolled in college – working out living expenses and getting more help in the later years is big for people to make it work.”
- **Academic factors play a limited role**
“For some kids that leave college early and come home – the issue is the big world versus the small town. They get out there and it’s too different of a lifestyle. It’s not academic.”

III. MELMAC EDUCATION FOUNDATION STRATEGY

Goals

For *Connect Aspirations to a Plan*, the goals of the Foundation are:

- Improving the ability of Maine students from middle school through high school to better understand and realize options for continuing education after high school graduation
- Increasing the college enrollment of Maine students

For *Support Early Success in College*, the goals of the Foundation are:

- Improving the ability of Maine students and students attending postsecondary institutions in Maine to successfully navigate the transition to college, particularly in their first year
- Increasing Maine students' college graduation rates
- Increasing student retention at Maine postsecondary institutions

The goals for each focus area share a common thread in addition to having a similar target population. As one educator noted, addressing the key issues for each area requires “connecting with people and helping them understand how the system works and how to define what they want out of it.”

For each focus area, the Foundation expects to achieve these goals first in selected communities and institutions across the state to implement new programmatic approaches. After sharing knowledge with the goal of improving practices statewide, the Foundation will ultimately expect to achieve student enrollment and persistence goals statewide.

Target Populations

The focus in *Connect Aspirations to a Plan* is on middle and high school students because they are in the process of forming aspirations and plans for the future, have momentum, and are the most receptive target for behavior-change efforts.

The older student populations (*e.g.*, adults over 25 years old) will not be a focus for *Connect Aspirations to a Plan*. Those students that the Foundation would be able to reach have already made enrollment decisions or have reasons for high aspirations – for example, displaced workers or women experiencing a change in life circumstances.

The focus for *Support Early Success in College* is young adults who are enrolled in college – particularly first year students because they have the greatest difficulty sustaining motivation and adjusting to a new environment. This is particularly true if they lack a support network or cannot articulate the reasons they are enrolled in a college program. For this group, behavior change is more necessary and more likely if they receive support at the right time.

Non-traditional college students will not be a focus for *Support Early Success in College* because unlike young adults, non-traditional college students already have very high levels of motivation (e.g., knowledge of improved job opportunities). In addition, barriers to non-traditional students' persistence are different from young adults and are very difficult for a foundation to address (e.g. health, childcare, and transportation).

For each of the focus areas, the target population is “the students in the middle” – often, but not always, students whose families do not have a college-going tradition, or students who would be the first in their generation to attend college. Interviewees describe these students as the “middle of the bell curve,” those students who are not in vocational programs, not in honors programs, and generally not going out-of-state to college. They tend to be quiet, and often do not get a lot of attention from the school system or community. Educators describe these students as capable of succeeding in college and having the aspirations to go, but hindered by not having a plan that will get them there.

Educators recommend starting work in middle school because this is the age at which students are in the process of forming aspirations and plans for the future, have momentum, and are the most receptive to a change in outlook or behavior. In addition, educators emphasize that parents are easier to engage when their children are in middle school versus after they enter high school. One parent who is also an athletic coach observed, “You see big parental involvement in the early grades, and then it starts dropping off in middle school. By high school, there’s not much.”

“The foundation should focus on the average student, who is doing well enough in school to succeed in college, and has caring parents who probably did not attend college themselves... These students just don’t make a lot of noise and as a result they don’t get enough of our attention. A lot of them slip through and either don’t end up going to college right away - or go, but aren’t prepared for how different it will be.”

If these students are able to realize plan successfully and enroll in college, successfully completing the first year often proves challenging. This is particularly the case for those who are first generation college students, from rural areas of the state, or chose an institution as a default option rather than because it was the best fit. While many Maine families are supportive and encouraging, many parents are likely to talk to kids having trouble in college and say ‘Why don’t you come home?’ rather than ‘We can get help figuring it out so that you stay there and finish your college program.’

Approach

In order to achieve the greatest impact for students in the state of Maine, the MELMAC Education Foundation plans to be both focused and proactive. The Foundation will support Maine communities and educational institutions interested in making the college aspirations of students and families a reality.

The Foundation will bring together Maine communities and institutions to work toward achieving specific goals, issuing calls for proposals and partnering with successful applicants and committed leaders over multiple years.

Success will require collaboration with a variety of partners - working directly with Maine’s public schools and postsecondary institutions, but also bringing together business partners, policy leaders, and community-based organizations.

In addition to directly working with communities and institutions to transform their work with students, MELMAC Education Foundation anticipates it will dedicate a portion of its resources to fostering dialogue across the state about the issues critical to students' success in college.

The Foundation's approach will emphasize building and sharing knowledge that is based on the experiences of Maine communities and institutions as they work to *Connect Aspirations to a Plan* and *Support Early Success in College*. The Foundation expects, that with a rigorous evaluation of outcomes and the development of successful models that can be replicated across the state, its work will yield impact for students throughout Maine.

APPENDIX I - TWENTY-FIVE STUDIES REVIEWED FOR THE *STUDY OF STUDIES*

<i>Study</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Source</i>
30 and 1000: How to Build a Knowledge-Based Economy in Maine and Raise Incomes to the National Average by 2010	2001	State Planning Office
A Decade of Progress and Some Lessons Learned	2001	Maine Education Symposium
A Fresh Look at College Going Rates in Maine	2000	Finance Authority of Maine
Aspirations Survey - Data from 60,000 Students Representing Every County in Maine, October 2001	2001	National Center for Student Aspirations
Barriers to College in Maine	2001	Mitchell Institute
Comparisons of Higher Education Information for New England States	2001	Maine Education Policy Research Institute, USM
Degree Recipients Older, Census Shows	2001	Bangor Daily News
Essential Programs and Services	1997	Maine State Board of Education
Higher Education Achievement in Maine	1998	Maine Development Foundation
Higher Education for All Maine People	2001	Maine Center for Economic Policy
Maine Kids Count	2002	Maine Children's Alliance
Maine Marks	2001	Governor's Children's Cabinet
Maine's Disappearing Youth: Implications of a Declining Youth Population	2002	Maine Leadership Consortium
Maine's Labor Force Analysis Regions	N/A	N/A
Measures of Growth 2002	2002	Maine Development Foundation
Quality Educators: The Best Opportunity for Maine Children	2001	Maine Legislature
Report of Blue Ribbon Commission on Postsecondary Attainment	2002	Maine Legislature
Report of the Commission on Higher Education Governance	1996	Maine Legislature
Rising to the Literacy Challenge	2002	Jobs for the Future
Survey of Maine Citizens Who Have Not Attained a College Degree	2001	Maine Technical College System
The Community College Gap in Maine Higher Education	1998	Maine Center for Economic Policy
The Condition of K-12 Public Education in Maine	2002	Maine Education Policy Research Institute, USM
Types of Barriers Maine High School Students May Face in Fulfilling Post-Secondary Educational Aspirations	N/A	Maine Education Policy Research Institute, USM
The Public Policy Dilemma for Financing Opportunity for Higher Education in Maine	1997	Finance Authority of Maine
Youth and the Labor Market in Maine: Holding Our Own Will Not Hold Us	N/A	Muskie School

APPENDIX II - INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED WITH 44 CONSTITUENCIES AND 65 INDIVIDUALS – LEADERS, FUNDERS AND PRACTITIONERS

<i>Individual</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Organization</i>
Joyce Hedlund	President	Eastern Maine Technical College
Hank Schmelzer	President	Maine Community Foundation
Arthur Doyle		College Board
Rick Sykes	Former Principal and Chair of Public Advisory Committee	MELMAC Education Foundation
John Fitzsimmons	President	Maine Technical College System
Mark Gray	Executive Director	Maine Education Association
Henry Bourgeois	Executive Director	Maine Development Foundation
Dennison Gallaudet	Superintendent	Richmond School Department
Gene Lee	Director of Grants Management	Nellie Mae Education Foundation
Dale Douglass and Terry McCabe	Executive Director	Maine School Board Association
Pete Thibodeau	President	Jobs for Maine Graduates
Duke Albanese	Commissioner	Department of Education
Stephanie Cook and Nelson Walls	Staff	Maine Leadership Consortium
Gordon Donaldson and Dave Brown	Professors	University of Maine, School of Education
Colleen Quint and Lisa Plimpton	Executive Director	Mitchell Institute
Bob Woodbury	Former Chancellor	University of Maine System
Sawin Millett	Former Member (R)	Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
Julian Haynes	Former	University of Maine System
Dierdre Mageean	Policy Research	Margaret Chase Smith Center
Paula Tingley	Guidance Director	Bangor High School
Tony Krapf	Superintendent	Madison Area Memorial High School
Numerous Individuals	Financial Aid Officers	Maine Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators
Chris Hall	Vice President, General Counsel	Maine Chamber of Commerce
Numerous Individuals	Program Directors	TRIO
David Silvernail	Director	University of Southern Maine, Education Policy Research
Rosa Redonnet	Director	University of Southern Maine, Enrollment/ Admissions
Charlie Colgan	Director	University of Southern Maine, Labor Policy Research

<i>Individual</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Organization</i>
Bonnie Sparks and Joan Fink	Directors	Distance Learning/ University College Centers
Dick Durost	Executive Director	Maine Principals' Association
Peter Geiger	Businessman and Former Member	State Board of Education
Charlie Lyons	President	University of Maine at Augusta
Numerous Individuals	Guidance Directors	
Margaret Rotundo	State Senator (D) Educator	Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs & Bates College
Gilda Nardone	Executive Director	Women Work and Community
Jim Reir		State Board of Education
Ron Bancroft	Chairman	Maine Coalition for Excellence
Judy Ryan		Parents as Scholars
Marty Duncan and Sally Daniels	Instructor	Adult Education Programs
Jean Gulliver		State Board of Education
Sarah Rademacher and Christine Seavey		MBNA Scholars Program
Kathy Klock	Program Officer	Gates Foundation
Bob Kautz	Superintendent	
Greg Gollihur	Director of Education Services	Finance Authority of Maine
Russ Quaglia	Director	National Center Student Aspirations