



**IDAHO'S FUTURE INITIATIVE:**  
**Improving the Transition from**  
**High School to College and Career**

**Key Findings and Recommendations from**  
**June 11-13, 2017 Meeting in Boise, Idaho**

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# **Idaho's Future Initiative: Improving the Transition from High School to College and Career**

Jean M. Henscheid, University of Idaho, McClure Center for Public Policy Research

## **Executive Summary**

The Idaho State Board of Education is one of a handful of such boards to govern both a state's K-12 system and its postsecondary institutions. This consolidated structure offers an important platform for education sectors to join forces toward making improvements from kindergarten through graduate school. In June, 2017, 31 high school career and college counselors and postsecondary<sup>1</sup> academic advisors and career counselors used this consolidated platform to consider the persistently low rate of Idahoans earning postsecondary credentials and to offer recommendations for improvement. These educators gathered for a three-day Idaho's Future Initiative (IFI) meeting in Boise, examined the student pipeline from eighth grade through the first postsecondary year, and drafted nine recommendations to present to the State Board. Educators at this invitation-only event represented every region of the state, every size of high school, and every one of the state's eight public colleges and universities. One hundred percent of the Idaho's Future Initiative (IFI) participants have expressed interest in building a statewide structure to allow high school and postsecondary counselors and advisors to work together to implement these or other improvements.

The nine recommendations range from actions secondary and postsecondary educators, schools, and institutions could take immediately to review and revision of policies and practices at the state level.

### **IDAHO'S FUTURE INITIATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Create a statewide secondary and postsecondary advisor/counselor network.
2. Standardize financial aid and scholarship deadlines and offer summer support.
3. Streamline Advanced Opportunities processes.
4. Consider other options for student use of Fast Forward funding.
5. Streamline postsecondary placement testing.
6. Expand remediation in the senior year.
7. Create standard overlapping approaches to career exploration.
8. Clarify expectations for counselor and advisor professional preparation.
9. Standardize some aspects of support for first-year postsecondary students.

Strengthening relationships among students, their families, and educators and across educational sectors is the primary motive behind all of these recommendations. Streamlining and

standardizing systems, clarifying policies, and adjusting practices would clear space for students to receive the kind of support they yearn for from counselors and advisors and allow these professionals to do the work they were trained for and wish most to do.

## Introduction

This report begins with the rationale for using eighth grade and the first postsecondary year as bookends, then describes the process IFI participants used to arrive at their nine recommendations. Each recommendation includes an overview of relevant local and national factors that shape it. The report ends with concluding thoughts. At the outset of the June meeting, IFI participants were asked to base their recommendations on what they believed to be new actions needed to increase the number of students who complete postsecondary credentials. Prior to and during the June meeting, they were assigned readings germane to the discussion and were armed with national data and results of a statewide survey of first-year postsecondary students<sup>2</sup> conducted to inform the proceedings. To draft their recommendations, participants were invited to suspend doubts that fiscal, administrative, political or other barriers might stand in the way of implementation. They recognized that policy makers would not enjoy this same freedom so they offer these recommendations with the intention that they become part of a much larger conversation. These suggestions range from actions individual advisors and counselors can take immediately to statewide policy changes. Ninety percent of participants indicated after the meeting that they planned to implement changes in their own work with students.

## Background

Since the Lumina Foundation set its goal to see 60% of Americans attain a postsecondary credential by the year 2025,<sup>3</sup> Idaho and a number of other states have announced similar ambitions. Idaho's especially aggressive timeline, set in 2010, has 60% of its 25- to 34-year-olds holding a postsecondary degree or certificate by 2020. In the seven years since the state set its goal, the proportion of Idahoans completing formal education after high school has remained stubbornly around 40%. Two governor-appointed task forces, one for K-12 and one for higher education, have been high profile efforts to examine where improvements in each sector can be made. A third task force, on workforce development, recommended changes in both sectors and in tightening linkages with business and industry. The Idaho's Future Initiative spans secondary and postsecondary sectors to focus on six critical years overlapping both: eighth grade through the first postsecondary year. These six years were identified by IFI designers as the time when students either close the deal on college attendance or close the door.

### *The Eighth-Grade Launch*

IFI participants acknowledge that the journey toward postsecondary completion begins much earlier than eighth grade. In fact, the 2016 Treasure Valley Education Partnership survey of high school graduating seniors indicated that most students decide to attend college by eighth grade.<sup>4</sup> Preliminary results from the 2017 survey indicate that the majority decide even earlier

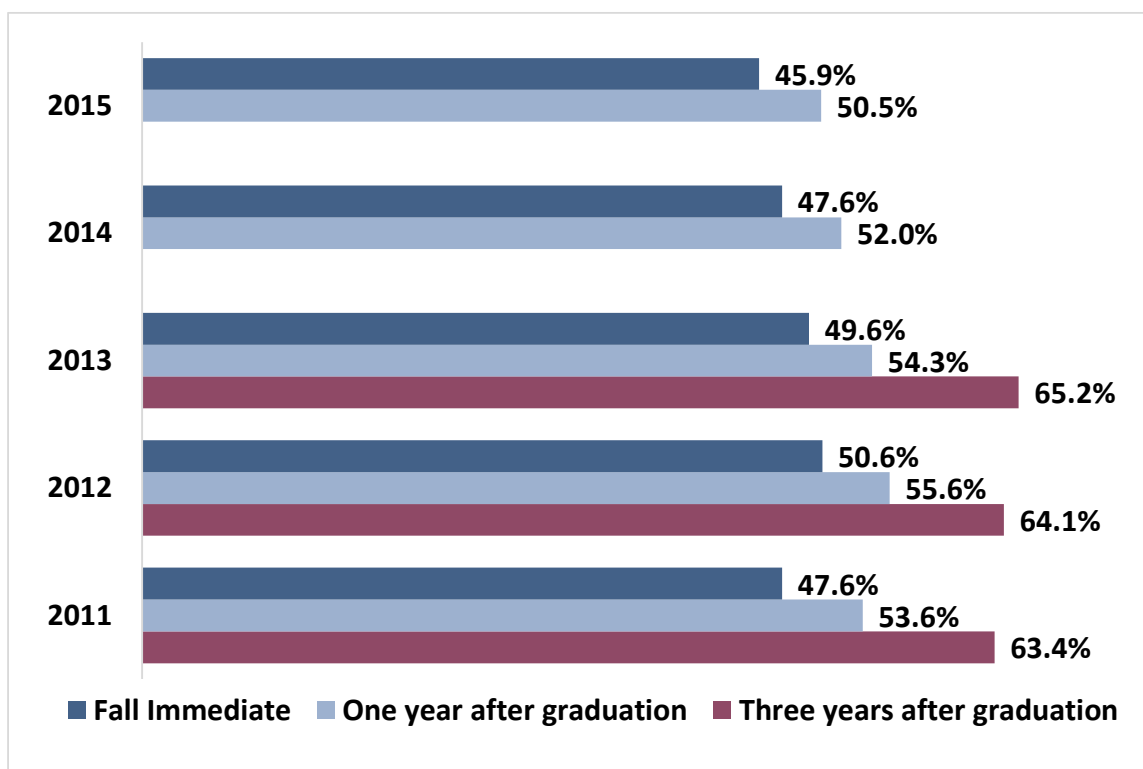
than that.<sup>5</sup> While barriers against and supports for postsecondary enrollment and completion exist in earlier grades, it is in eighth grade that each student in Idaho must, by law, formally commit to a plan for preparing for high school and beyond. Since 2006, Idaho's Administrative Code<sup>6</sup> has dictated the following:

*No later than the end of Grade eight (8) each student shall develop parent-approved student learning plans for their high school and post-high school options. The learning plan shall be developed by students with the assistance of parents or guardians, and with advice and recommendation from school personnel. It shall be reviewed annually and may be revised at any time. The purpose of a parent-approved student learning plan is to outline a course of study and learning activities for students to become contributing members of society. A student learning plan describes, at a minimum, the list of courses and learning activities in which the student will engage while working toward meeting...graduation standards.*

The state sends other signals that eighth grade is the official launch of postsecondary preparation. *Next Steps Idaho*, the State Board of Education's online academic guide, signifies that eighth graders need to, "Get ready for the big time. Next year you'll start an exciting new chapter. And now's the time to think about how you'll get the most out of high school and begin to prepare for life after graduation" (<https://nextsteps.idaho.gov/#grade-8>). During eighth grade, students are encouraged to begin talking to mentors about life after high school, plan out the high school courses that will prepare them for continued education, explore career paths, and weigh their post-high school options. Ninth and tenth grade include additional exploration and by eleventh and twelfth, students are guided to complete paperwork, take college entrance examinations, and prepare to head out the door.

### *The Summer in Between*

The vast majority of Idaho students have every intention of earning a postsecondary credential after they complete high school. In actuality, only about half immediately enroll in a college or university upon graduation. Three years post-high school, that proportion increases another 10%.<sup>7</sup> The summer in between the senior and first postsecondary year has been labeled by one set of researchers as the "turbulent period"<sup>8</sup> and is increasingly identified as a chief culprit in the gap between educational aspirations and attainment, especially among low-income students.<sup>9</sup>



**FIGURE 1.** Cumulative percent of Idaho high school graduates enrolling in postsecondary institutions immediately following high school graduation, one year after graduation, and three years after graduation. **SOURCE:** Office of the Idaho State Board of Education.

A recent report from Harvard estimates that 10-40% of all students fail to follow through on postsecondary enrollment plans they had when they graduated from high school.<sup>10</sup> Up to one-third of low-income students in the U.S. who have been accepted into and paid deposits to enter postsecondary education reconsider their decision during the summer.<sup>11</sup> Roadblocks to enrollment include inadequate funds to fill gaps between financial aid and the cost of attendance; incomplete college paperwork, including course registration and housing forms; and missed college entrance and academic placement tests. Many students face financial and informational barriers with little formal connection either with the high schools they just left or with personalized guidance from their intended institution.

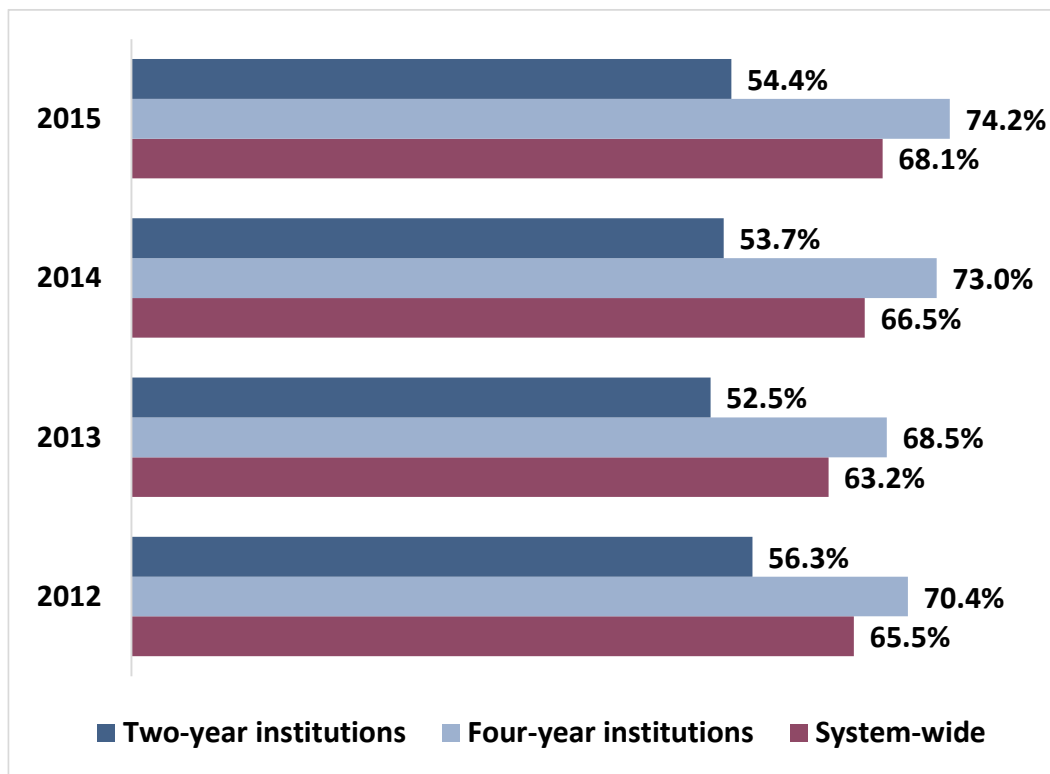
A minority of college-bound students receive individual assistance through summer bridge programs, while many more attend large college or university orientations with limited one-on-one advising and support. When pressing requirements are coupled with lack of financial resources, know-how, and individual guidance, many students opt out, at least in the short term. One new high school graduate responding to a 2015 McClure Center survey described how her own dreams were dashed on the shoals of summer: “Life is hard. I am going right into



work...without scholarships or any form of transportation I'm stuck in the rut of my life working to survive, saving lil' by lil', hoping to get an education and reach my dreams."<sup>12</sup>

### *The Critical First Postsecondary Year*

IFI designers chose to bracket the eighth grade with the first postsecondary year for three reasons. First is the agreement among most educators and researchers nationally that the transition out of high school and into the first postsecondary year is a key period in determining whether a student will eventually earn a degree or certificate.<sup>13</sup> Social integration as early as the first few weeks at a college or university is particularly important.<sup>14</sup> The first postsecondary year was also selected for the IFI based on attrition rates among new college and university students that are higher than those of their peers in upper grades. Each year, more than 30% of Idaho's first-year postsecondary students do not return for their second year.<sup>15</sup> If just over 50% of the state's students are entering a college or university immediately after high school and 30% of those are leaving after the first year, the state is taking a substantial hit economically and socially and large numbers of individual students are seeing their childhood aspirations to earn a postsecondary credential falter not long after high school. The significant push in the state to help students "Go On" to postsecondary education is half the battle. Helping students succeed in the first postsecondary year would bring Idaho much closer to achieving its goal.



**FIGURE 2.** Postsecondary retention in Idaho, by type of institution and system-wide.  
SOURCE: Office of the Idaho State Board of Education.

The third reason this year was selected was for the opportunity it could afford for cross-sector collaboration. IFI designers theorized that the critically important first postsecondary year could be enhanced by providing an opportunity for educators to share expertise across sectors. At the secondary level, counselors and advisors, especially in small districts, have spent at least a few years getting to know individual young people who go on to enroll in Idaho's colleges and universities. We conjectured that counselors and advisors at this level may have general insights likely to inform postsecondary advising and counseling, particularly in the first year. We hypothesized further that the reverse would also be true: postsecondary academic advisors and career counselors could enhance their service to first-year students if they could "reach back" and offer insights to their secondary counterparts about the send-off students receive.

One symptom of the need for action across sectors is first-year student confusion about the services postsecondary academic advisors and career counselors provide relative to those offered at the secondary level.<sup>16</sup> Academic and career counselors and advisors in the two sectors have different job descriptions, reward structures, and networks for student support. The vernacular<sup>17</sup> they use and professional preparation they receive are different. Unmet student expectations about the counseling and advising they will receive at colleges and universities can be a determining factor in postsecondary student attrition.<sup>18,19</sup> Clarifying how and why support structures in the two sectors are different can be achieved through collaborative messaging from the secondary and postsecondary sectors. How this collaboration might work is developed further in the recommendations.

### *A Cross Sector Meeting of Hearts and Minds*

IFI participants were selected by the Office of the State Board and the McClure Center for their combined decades of experience working directly with Idaho students from eighth grade through the first postsecondary year. These individuals are not highly positioned policy makers who often populate statewide task forces or advisory committees. They are the hands-on guides and mentors who work with students to determine best paths to college and career success. In Arco, Wallace, and many of the other small towns represented by IFI participants, high school counselors may work with the same cohort of students for the entirety of their secondary education. In Meridian, Idaho Falls, and other large districts counselors may work with hundreds of students for briefer periods. Each setting comes with its own challenges and opportunities.

The postsecondary advisors and counselors asked to join the IFI offer direct guidance to individual and groups of students about course registration, transferring credits, major selection, career exploration, academic regulations, and academic support services. A few are trained to offer personal counseling; the majority refer students elsewhere on campus for that service. Most of the college and university representatives tapped to participate have additional administrative responsibilities as advising or career service center directors. In the decentralized postsecondary



environment, these centrally located individuals are often required to coordinate across units and offer advisor training to other faculty and staff.



In a reversal of typical roles, several individuals representing the administrative and policy-making ranks in schools, colleges, universities, and statewide were invited to participate in the June meeting as silent observers. Individuals from the governor's office, State Department of Education, Idaho State Senate and House, and professional counselor and advisor associations were among 15 observers. The meeting was designed and facilitated by Byron Yankey from the Office of the Idaho State Board of Education, Jean Henscheid of the McClure Center, and Demarée Michelau and Christina Sedney from the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). The WICHE representatives also placed this effort in a national and regional context and shared best practices from elsewhere.

### **THE OBSERVERS**

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**Ryan Kerby**, *Idaho State House of Representatives*  
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### **Recommendations across the Student Pipeline**

IFI participants worked chronologically from eighth grade through the first postsecondary year to determine what activities middle and high school students currently engage in to prepare themselves to enter college. From there, participants identified the typical actions students take to navigate through the summer after high school, to settle into their new academic home, to build a foundation for attaining a certificate or degree, and to plan for the rest of their lives. Through additional dialogue, participants identified a number of activities that could be added to create an “ideal” pipeline. The final assignment was to review both versions, add, drop, and rearrange activities and from there develop the list of recommendations listed below.<sup>20</sup>

## Brainstorm of Idaho's Postsecondary Transition Pipeline from 8<sup>th</sup> Grade through the First Postsecondary Year

Current Practice		Ideal Additions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Four-year learning plans</li> <li>Career exploration, fairs,* and camps*</li> <li>Electives, exploratory courses,* &amp; Advanced Opportunities</li> <li>Transition events,* presentations,* &amp; classroom visits*</li> <li>SBAC/ISAT</li> <li>AVID*</li> </ul>	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teach study skills &amp; infuse career development (grades 8-13)</li> <li>Mandatory career development and FYI classes</li> <li>Licensed career counselors</li> <li>Parent engagement/research/support groups (grades 8-13)</li> <li>Resources translated into Spanish (grades 8-13)</li> <li>Yearly uniform data collection across high schools</li> <li>Transfer resume writing and job search to advisors</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PSAT and PSAT supplements; SBAC/ISAT</li> <li>Parent high school counseling, orientation, and letters</li> <li>Exposure to college campuses, college fairs, and workshops</li> <li>Career advising and CIS</li> <li>College Fairs</li> <li>Advanced Opportunities Information</li> <li>AVID*</li> </ul>	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parent education (admissions, financial literacy, etc.)</li> <li>Soft skills</li> <li>Career cluster "strengths"</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review four-year plan (spring)</li> <li>PSAT (free); SAT; SBAC/ISAT; ASVAB test (Armed Services)</li> <li>Preparing for dual credit; IDLA Dual Credit</li> <li>Advanced Opportunities</li> <li>College fairs</li> <li>Career Unit</li> <li>AVID*</li> </ul>	10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parent information letters and events with college reps</li> <li>Multicultural programs presented by high schools and colleges</li> <li>College visits</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PSAT (fall); SAT (free); ASVAB</li> <li>Career Fairs</li> <li>Dual credit, AP, advanced opportunities, &amp; college prep</li> <li>Technical High Schools</li> <li>Begin college applications and hold parent orientation nights</li> <li>IACRAO college day</li> <li>AVID*</li> </ul>	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give students the option of SAT/ACT/or CTE placement exams during high school; allow students to maximize timing of these tests for dual credit or general college placement</li> <li>College field trips</li> <li>Dispelling scholarship and financial aid myths for parents</li> <li>Summer Boot Camp</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Senior project (state mandated) and advanced opportunities</li> <li>Career presentations; prospective student orientations (fall)</li> <li>Direct admissions (fall); register for college classes (spring)</li> <li>College rep visits</li> <li>IACRAO Application week</li> <li>FAFSA nights; scholarship applications; financial aid deadlines</li> <li>AVID*</li> </ul>	12 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>College reps meet with accepted seniors at school and make regular contact to help them set up college email, register for classes, line up financial aid</li> <li>Commitment of college intent</li> <li>Hybrid College 101 / Advanced Opportunities class</li> <li>All students able to take a CTE or college Math/English class</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For admitted students: summer orientation &amp; advising; summer bridge programs; option to take college classes; calls or emails to those who have not yet registered</li> <li>Campus visits; credit-free course "Bronco ready"</li> <li>Transcript requests; online registration; placement testing</li> <li>Advising workshop; FYE staff deployed to contact students</li> <li>Receive financial aid award letter</li> </ul>	Summer Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More collaborative opportunities like the Idaho Futures event</li> <li>Hand off students to a person, not an institution; should be someone students feel they can reach out to for help</li> <li>More personal contact with college reps and advisors</li> <li>Easier financial verification process</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Declare major</li> <li>Career assessments and exploration for undecided majors; phone calls from career advisors; career fairs</li> <li>Required advising and advising holds</li> <li>FYS FYE</li> <li>Mandatory midterms &amp; early alert/intervention</li> <li>Events (professional etiquette, networking, etc.)</li> </ul>	Fall, First Postsecondary Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mandatory career advising every semester</li> <li>Experiential learning required every year</li> <li>Masters-level counselors and advisors</li> <li>Enable advisors to work with students through the transition</li> <li>Industry-focused foundational studies or first-year courses</li> <li>Career education embedded in college curriculum</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Career Fairs</li> </ul>	Spring, First Postsecondary Year	

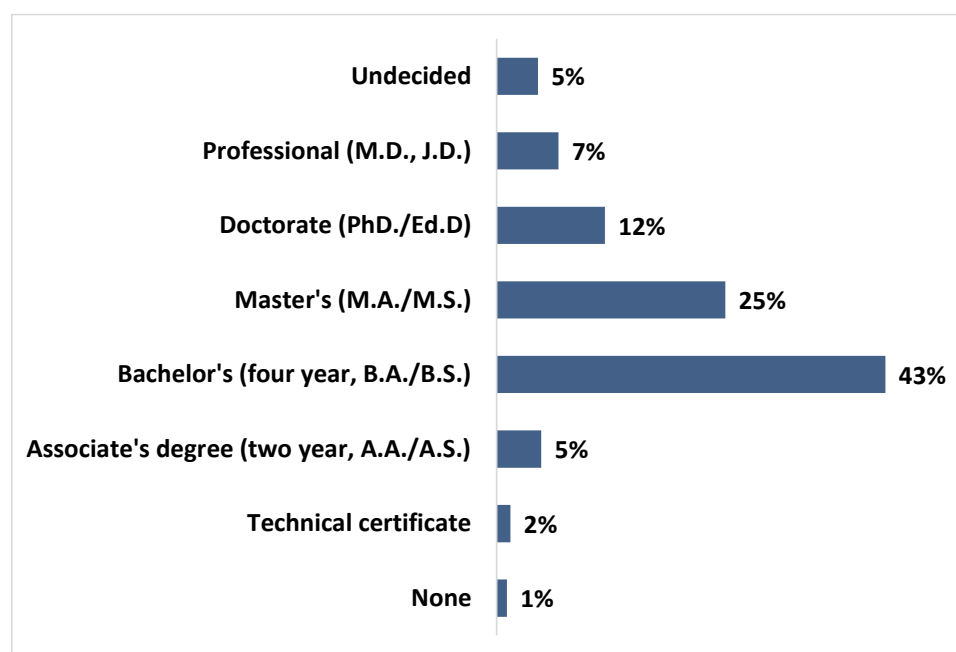
\* Not statewide; takes place at some schools/institutions

## IDAHO'S FUTURE INITIATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Create a statewide advisor/counselor network.** Provide ongoing opportunities for collaboration between secondary and postsecondary counselors and advisors to develop coordinated strategies for transitioning students between high school and higher education. Focus particularly on addressing the summer melt issue. *(K-20 pipeline and outcomes funding)*
2. **Standardize financial aid/scholarship deadlines and offer summer support.** Building on the momentum of Direct Admissions and Apply Idaho, streamline financial aid application deadlines and award notices to reduce barriers and to clarify the process for students, parents, and counselors. Extend financial aid and other support into the summer. *(Access and affordability)*
3. **Streamline Advanced Opportunities processes.** Educate counselors, parents, and students about how to better leverage Fast Forward dollars. Simplify the processes for participating in Advanced Opportunities. *(Access and affordability)*
4. **Consider other options for student use of Fast Forward funding.** Use data on current practices to open discussions for changes as necessary. *(K-20 pipeline and access and affordability)*
5. **Streamline postsecondary placement testing.** Review current postsecondary placement test policies and practices and adjust where necessary to ensure alignment, clarity, and transparency. *(K-20 pipeline)*
6. **Expand remediation in the high school senior year.** Consider implementing a strategy for leveraging the senior year to remediate students who are deemed not college or career ready through college entrance exam scores. *(Access and affordability)*
7. **Create standard overlapping approaches to career exploration.** Consider systematic and sustained career exploration guidance from secondary into and through postsecondary. *(Outcomes supporting workforce)*
8. **Clarify expectations for counselor and advisor professional preparation.** Increase transparency of expected counselor and advisor professional training, education, and ongoing professional development. *(K-20 pipeline)*
9. **Standardize some aspects of support for first-year postsecondary students.** Offer some system-wide approaches to supporting first-postsecondary-year students including postsecondary advising to seniors before they leave high school and summer advising co-designed by secondary and postsecondary counselors. *(Outcomes funding, K-20 pipeline)*

### *Statewide Advisor/Counselor Network*

During the June meeting, IFI participants shared stories of students they had worked with who personified postsecondary aspirations and, in too many instances, failure to realize them. Many goals of students in these stories were similar to those of first-year postsecondary students who responded to the spring 2017 first-year postsecondary student survey. The majority of respondents at both two- and four-year institutions reported that they aspire to earn at least a bachelor's degree.



**FIGURE 3.** “What is the highest academic credential or degree you intend to obtain?”  
Percent of respondents; combined responses from respondents at Idaho’s  
two- and four-year public postsecondary institutions. (n=522)

The consensus was universal among IFI participants that narrowing this aspiration/achievement gap would be aided by the creation of a mechanism for ongoing collaboration between Idaho secondary and postsecondary counselors and advisors. Participants saw the greatest need for collective effort in the final term of the high school senior year, during the summer transition from high school to college, and in the first postsecondary term. While Idaho is rich in partnership arrangements between K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions, none currently involve ongoing linkages between secondary counselors who are directly charged with preparing students for life after high school and their counterparts providing academic and career support at the postsecondary level. Participants in a statewide advisor/counselor network could help design and deliver a continuation of approaches now employed to ease student

transitions between many elementary and middle schools and between middle and high schools and would be a unified counselor and advisor voice offering input to policy makers.

Idaho's Future participants are, as Byron Yankey indicated, "the right players at the table" to develop such a network. Individuals were purposefully selected for their expertise and, as importantly, for their span of influence with colleagues in every region of the state. IFI participants and observers included:

#### **A SAMPLING OF IFI PARTICIPANT CREDENTIALS**

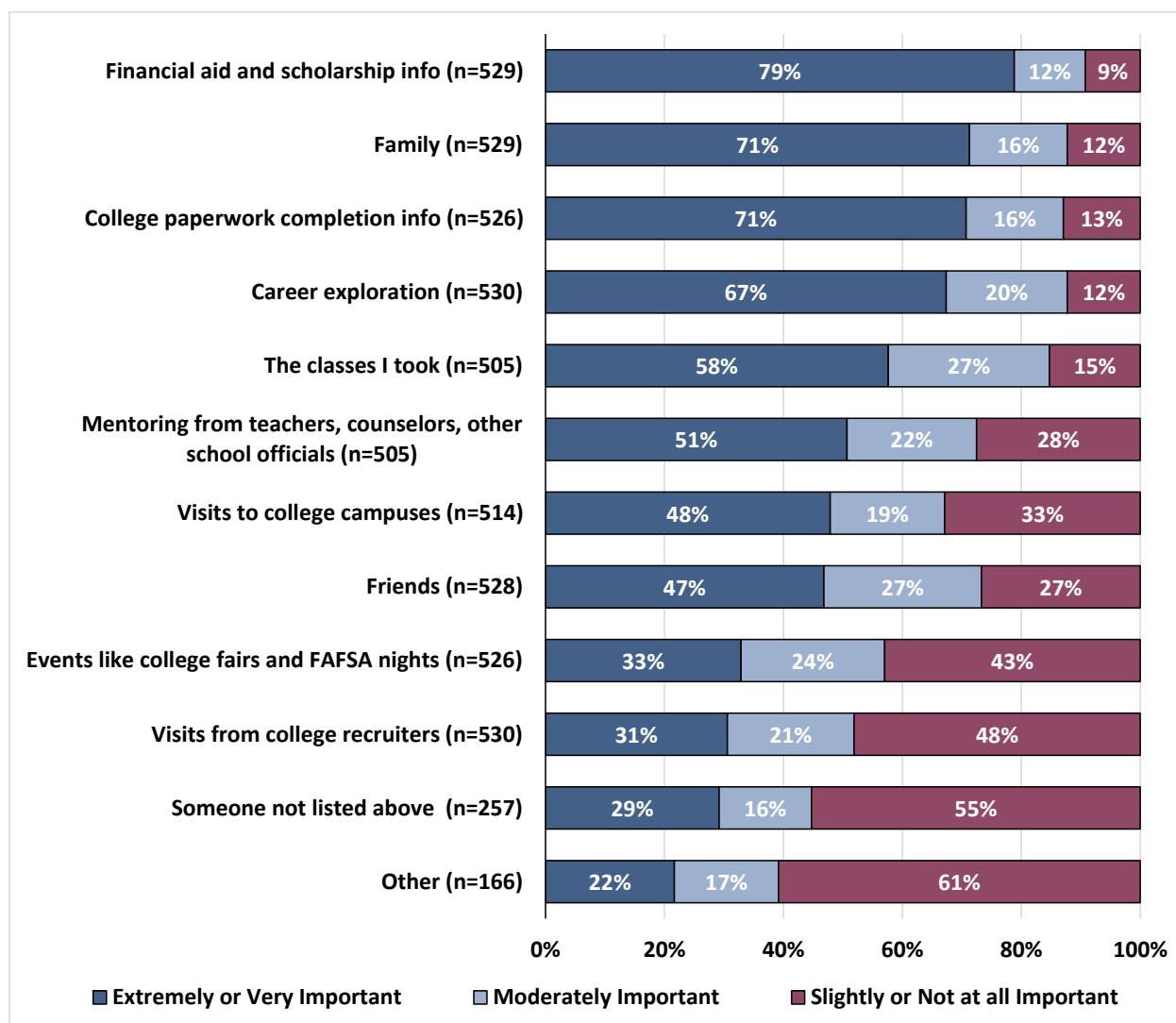
- ◆ The president of the Idaho School Counselors Association
- ◆ The American School Counselors Association's Counselor of the Year
- ◆ The incoming president of the Pacific Northwest Association for College Admission Counseling
- ◆ An executive officer from the Idaho Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers
- ◆ A past Idaho Counselor of the Year
- ◆ Idaho's only Master Career Counselor
- ◆ A past Idaho Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers Higher Education Advocate

This network, meeting regionally and, on occasion, statewide, would be the forum for continuing the work started in June, 2017. IFI participants are convinced that a "one and done" meeting would have limited impact.

#### *Financial Aid/Scholarship Deadlines*

According to respondents to the spring 2017 survey of first-year postsecondary students, information about financial aid and scholarships is now more important than family as a support for college preparation.

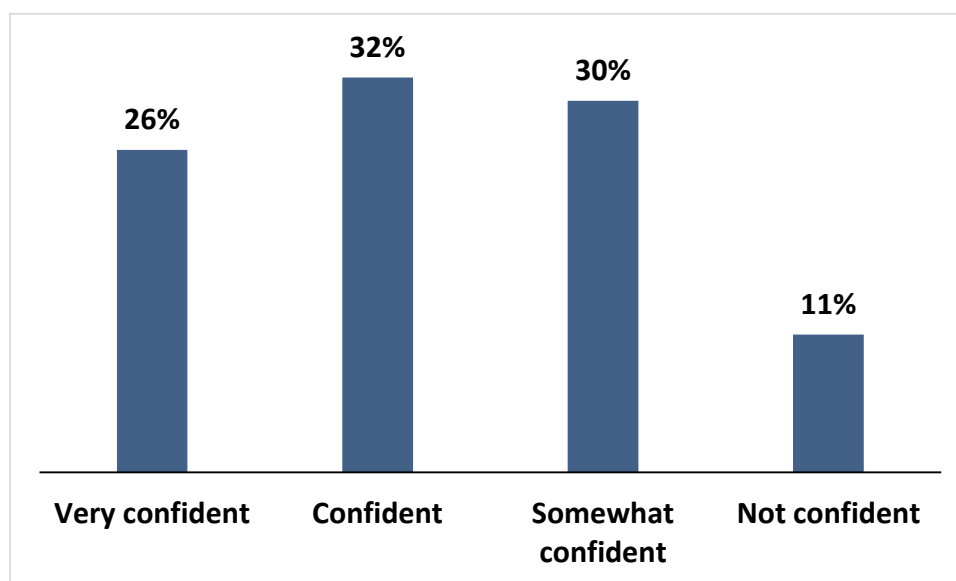




**FIGURE 4.** “Looking back at your high school experience, how important were the following in helping you get ready for college?” Percent of respondents; combined responses from respondents at Idaho’s two- and four-year public postsecondary institutions.

IFI participants agreed that helping students understand and corral myriad sources of college funding can be time-consuming. They reported that school and district-wide events to assist students with completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid have helped but barriers remain. These include disparate deadlines and processes across the state’s colleges and universities and termination of formal financial aid and scholarship process support for many students immediately after they leave high school (especially for those not yet committed to a specific college or university). One high school counselor has memorized the financial paperwork deadlines for each postsecondary institution and listed them for the group meeting in

June. In some cases, deadlines that are inexplicably one or two days apart require extra care to prevent mistakes. IFI counselors and advisors recommend that the state build on the momentum of Direct Admissions and Apply Idaho to streamline and bring consistency to financial aid application deadlines and award notices. They believe much more effort is required to ease the financial burden of postsecondary participation, but procedural changes at all state institutions could bring necessary order and clarity to the financial aid and scholarship process.



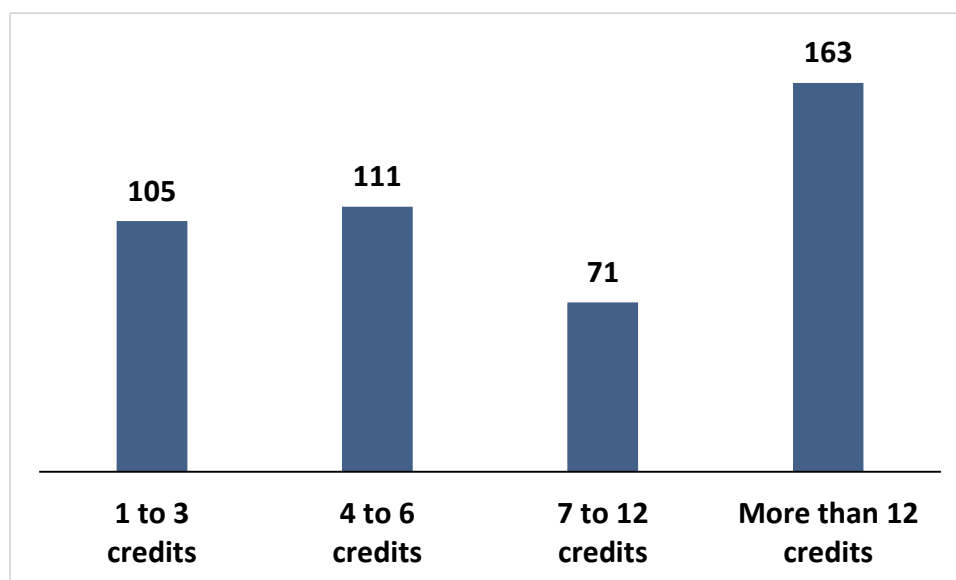
**FIGURE 5.** “How confident are you that you can continue to afford college?”  
Percent of respondents; combined responses from respondents at Idaho’s  
two- and four-year public postsecondary institutions. (n=525)

Consistency in financial aid and scholarship deadlines would be a key ingredient in an even more important effort: supporting students and their families during the critical summer “in between.” Participant stories of high school graduates who did not immediately enroll in postsecondary education often involved money worries and confusion that hit their apex for students and their families during this period. IFI participants recommend statewide summer efforts to help with financial aid difficulties and other issues related to postsecondary enrollment. The state’s cadre of Career and Technical Education transition coordinators offer a good model for supporting all students between high school and college or career (<https://cte.idaho.gov/students/transition-to-college-career/>) as do summer bridge programs and an experimental Massachusetts program that used college counseling in the summer after high school graduation to significantly improve the rate of immediate postsecondary enrollment among low-income students.<sup>21</sup> The approach Spokane Public Schools is taking is also one to

consider.<sup>22</sup> There, each high school extends one counselor's contract through the summer to offer the kind of logistical support and encouragement that typically ends when students graduate. A similar approach throughout Tennessee assigns Tennessee Reconnect advisors, in this case to adults returning to college, to offer free advising, career and financial aid guidance, and help connecting with the institution best suited to them.<sup>23</sup>

### *Advanced Opportunities Processes*

IFI participants and their colleagues from both secondary and postsecondary sectors are navigating through a tsunami of student interest and participation in using Fast Forward dollars to pay for overload high school courses, dual credit, and technical competency credit and college credit-bearing examinations. The June conversation focused primarily on the unexpectedly high number of dual-credit courses students are completing in high school and on what participants perceive to be an overtaxed statewide system for managing the volume.



**FIGURE 6.** “How many dual credits did you complete in high school?” Number of respondents; combined responses from respondents at Idaho’s two- and four-year public postsecondary institutions. (n=450)

Even with concerns about the process, few IFI participants said they doubt that completing dual-credit courses increases student confidence that they are capable of succeeding in college-level courses. Although some participants sense, as has been reported nationally,<sup>24,25</sup> that these opportunities may be disproportionately advantaging the already college-bound, they believe that, overall, money and time is being saved when these courses count as college general education or degree requirements. Many student respondents to the statewide first-year

postsecondary student survey believe that completing dual-credit courses jump started their college or university experience. As illustrated below, survey respondents' advice to high schoolers coming after them is to "do it."



#### TWO-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

#### FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

**FIGURE 7.** Advice from respondents at two-year and four-year institutions. Larger text indicates more respondents would give advice containing that concept, and vice versa.

Reports on how dual-credit courses transferred to postsecondary institutions varied among survey respondents, as did how satisfied they were with transfer procedures. For all of the program's benefits, IFI participants join others in the state<sup>26</sup> in their concern that secondary and postsecondary educators, schools, and institutions just can't keep up. While legislative action in 2016<sup>27</sup> worked to improve the process, IFI participants recommend additional action including increased education for counselors, parents, and students, and increased consistency in processes used by schools and universities that participate in delivering dual credit. They applaud efforts by the State Board of Education and State Department of Education to improve the system and offer their support for designing and implementing changes.

### *Fast Forward Funding*

IFI participants are also interested in joining conversations about how students are deploying the \$4,125 allotted to each of them to fund college preparation opportunities, including overload and dual-credit courses, and examinations. Several ideas were floated during the June gathering, including expanding authorized uses of the funding to opportunities prior to high school, for remediation during high school, for retaking college entrance examinations, and even to fund opportunities after high school. Participants concluded that they lacked the necessary information to recommend specific actions at this time and offered to engage in efforts

underway by the State Board and State Department to study deployment of these funds. As educators with direct and sustained student contact and responsibility for helping students use funds for Advanced Opportunities, these secondary and postsecondary advisors and counselors are a rich source of data for evaluating and improving policies.

### *Postsecondary Placement Testing*

As the frontline for ensuring that students complete K-12, college entrance, and technical competency examinations, IFI participants held extended conversations about bringing alignment, clarity, and transparency to these tests. In Idaho, K-12 students are tested in civics, English language arts, literacy, reading, mathematics, science, and college readiness for placement purposes. Subsets of students are also tested for English language proficiency on national and international exams and in special education. IFI participants are most interested in ensuring that the exams they proctor to test college readiness and for college placement are designed and timed to be effective. They join others nationally who have become frustrated by the limitations of current testing.<sup>28,29,30</sup> Their recommendation here is to continue statewide efforts to bring greater order and purposefulness to college readiness and placement examinations. They are interested to watch state and national work on developing college and career readiness policy statements, guidelines, and standards including those from Governor Otter's task forces on workforce development and higher education, The Educational Policy Improvement Center, Georgetown's Center on Education and the Workforce, the Association for Career and Technical Education, and Advance CTE: State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work. IFI participants are open to invitations to work statewide to champion these efforts.

### *Senior-Year Remediation*

Some IFI participants expressed worry that the senior year has been primarily given over to activities that signal leaving high school as a top priority (in the form of Advanced Opportunities and a focus on college decision-making and paperwork completion). This emphasis, they said, can be counterproductive especially for students who have been deemed not college or career ready based on their college placement scores and other measures. They recommend a shift in policy grounded in an awareness that preparations to leave should be coupled with additional supports for college and career readiness. They suggest looking at strengthening the full range of interventions to improve readiness including academic remediation, additional psychosocial and behavioral supports, and further development of the students' "habits of mind necessary to succeed in college [and career] including critical thinking, an inquisitive nature, a willingness to accept critical feedback, an openness to possible failure, and the ability to cope with frustrating and ambiguous learning tasks."<sup>31</sup> IFI participants agreed that this approach will necessitate a shift in the way educators are trained to help secondary students, especially seniors, meet college and career readiness standards and make final preparations to commence their next journey.

### *Career Counseling*

In the past several years, the career counseling profession has shifted its focus from waiting for students to access services to imbuing career exploration and preparation throughout secondary and postsecondary experiences.<sup>32</sup> Some experts have even gone so far as to suggest that traditional career services should be completely overhauled.<sup>33</sup> IFI participants applaud this shift from isolated services to a careers-across-the-curriculum approach and recommend the state's encouragement of its expansion in conversation with the state's cadre of professional secondary and postsecondary career counselors. In Idaho, these professionals teach career exploration courses and provide other teachers with resources for creating in-class learning opportunities for students to explore career options, community engagement, and other future-building activities. Employers are increasingly tapped to partner with secondary schools and postsecondary institutions to provide intern and apprenticeship opportunities and to offer curriculum advice that supports linking formal learning to life. Business leaders and community members are increasingly invited in to serve as mentors and to encourage students to articulate how the skills they are learning in school have prepared them to be good employees and informed and active citizens. Tiny Clark Fork High School in Idaho's Bonner County offers a model of this approach.<sup>34</sup> The curriculum at Clark Fork includes teaching and learning in topics of interest to the students including radiology, welding, cooking, and fishing. Students spend each Friday in the community engaged in activities related to their interests and integrate classroom lessons with these experiences through writing. Internships and service-learning at the postsecondary level offer similar opportunities with documented payoffs after graduation.<sup>35</sup>

Respondents to the statewide first-year postsecondary student survey seem to support the transformation of methods for career counseling in both sectors. Few indicated that high school career exploration, in isolation, helped them get ready for college. Their experiences in individual classes and general mentorship from a caring adult had a far greater impact. Counselors are taking note and reaching farther into the students' overall experience to provide guidance and support. At the postsecondary level, colleges and universities are increasingly engaged in making demonstrably effective career and life preparation opportunities institution-wide priorities. In part, this press is an attempt to articulate the value of education after high school and to stem the tide of distrust and suspicion of colleges and universities coming increasingly from certain sectors of the U.S. population.<sup>36,37</sup>

IFI participants and their colleagues throughout the state are uniquely positioned to offer policy makers advice on the creation of a system-wide career and life planning approach. The complementary skill sets counselors possess in each sector can be brought to bear on the design and delivery of a seamless secondary/postsecondary approach.



### *Professional Preparation*

As noted above, many students in their first postsecondary year experience dissonance when they meet with academic advisors expecting the kind of academic, career exploration, and personal support they may have received in high school. College and university academic advisors adhere to a set of core values<sup>38</sup> that focus primarily on addressing the student's academic, career, and life goals. The state of the art in postsecondary advising does include recognizing and working through the personal and social factors that may impact these goals. However, postsecondary academic advisors are typically not trained personal or career counselors. The difference in advising across sectors is indicative of differences across all professional groups represented by IFI participants. Student confusion and unmet expectations do not surprise them. In this light, participants recommend that the state encourage schools, colleges, and universities to better articulate various counselor and advisor roles across sectors and to students and families. Participants also strongly recommend the state bring more consistency to the level of professional preparation expected of those who hold these roles. As some of the most inveterate counselors and advisors in Idaho, IFI participants encourage application of the highest professional preparation standards across the board.

### *First Postsecondary Year*

Despite several decades of effort to increase postsecondary access and first-year student success, colleges and universities have made some gains but little overall progress. Nationally, first-year students have increased in ethnic, racial, and, until recently, socio-economic diversity, and individual institutions have implemented, and in some instances, sustained a number of innovations.<sup>39</sup> However, these advances are being chipped away as the gap in income among Americans widens and uncertainty grows about the value of a postsecondary credential.<sup>40,41</sup>

For Idaho, IFI participants are looking to the state to consider implementing some system-wide approaches to student support in the first postsecondary year. Just as many of the preceding IFI recommendations are for statewide action at the secondary level, these advisors and counselors see a need for collective efforts in the first postsecondary year. They acknowledge that system-wide approaches break with the tradition of autonomy at most colleges and universities but believe strongly that the first postsecondary year offers special opportunities and challenges best addressed statewide. The belief that states, rather than individual institutions, are the best place to address such issues is echoed by others, including the Lumina Foundation, a major funder of higher education initiatives. Lumina believes, "States are well-positioned to lead in the effort to make higher education more accessible, navigable, and affordable... We aim to spur states to drive innovation and improvement in ways that are not possible through institutional efforts alone."<sup>42</sup>

IFI participants recommend that Idaho policymakers consider convening a statewide conversation about first-year postsecondary students modeled after similar gatherings elsewhere that have addressed the needs of student subpopulations. Examples include:

♦ **UTAH**

The second annual First-Year Experience Consortium was held at Salt Lake Community College on March 2, 2017.

[https://epay.slcc.edu/C20011\\_ustores/web/product\\_detail.jsp?PRODUCTID=1831](https://epay.slcc.edu/C20011_ustores/web/product_detail.jsp?PRODUCTID=1831)

♦ **ARKANSAS, NEVADA, and SOUTH DAKOTA**

With Lumina funding, WICHE worked closely with policymakers and educators at the state and institution level to address the needs of adults ready to return to college. Of the six states in the original 2010 Nontraditional No More project, Arkansas, Nevada, and South Dakota had implemented a Ready Adult Concierge model as of 2014. The model was also adopted by Ivy Tech Community College, Indiana's largest postsecondary institution and Long Island University in New York.

<http://www.wiche.edu/ntnm/resources>

♦ **MICHIGAN**

Colleges and universities throughout this state have come together to address issues related to "gateway" courses that are chief stumbling blocks to student retention and degree completion. Many of these courses are offered in the first year.

<http://www.mcca.org/uploads/ckeditor/files/Michigan%20Guided%20Pathways%20Institute%20G2C%20Overview%20042216.pdf>

♦ **CALIFORNIA, WISCONSIN, VIRGINIA, KENTUCKY, and MASSACHUSETTS**

Addressing the needs of students transferring from two-year to four-year institutions was a chief impetus for institutions in these states' participation in the Association of American Colleges & Universities' Quality Collaboratives Project.

<http://www.aacu.org/qc/casestudies>

Currently, several functional groups hold annual gatherings in Idaho including those in postsecondary financial aid, admissions, orientation, general education, delivery of dual credit, and registration. The IFI pipeline exercise in June made clear the need to train attention on distinct periods in the student journey, including the first postsecondary year. A statement made by researchers in 1990 still holds true today. "If students make it through that first year successfully, the chances that they will persist improve considerably."<sup>43</sup>

IFI participants offered several strategies for helping students in the transition into and through the first postsecondary year that may be considered for wider adoption during the

proposed statewide meeting about first-year postsecondary students. Secondary advisors and counselors were enthusiastic about creating organized opportunities for postsecondary academic advisors and career counselors to meet with students admitted to their institutions at the high schools before those students graduate. Representatives of both sectors saw multiple advantages to collaboration on the design and delivery of services during the summer after the student's high school graduation. In an effort to codify the connections between the state-mandated eighth-grade learning plan and postsecondary education, IFI participants were intrigued by the idea of working together to strengthen its implementation. Every college and university in the state has developed their own strategies for easing the first-year student transition, including first-year seminars, orientations, and first-year advising. A gathering of like minds across the state to share best practices and perhaps devise shared initiatives also drew interest from the participants. Such a meeting might also result in a collaboratively written message to all state residents on the value of an Idaho postsecondary education.

### Final Thoughts

Office of the State Board of Education Executive Director Matt Freeman opened the Idaho's Future Initiative meeting with an enthusiastic endorsement of a gathering he anticipated would produce "actionable and strategic items" to inform the work of the State Board and of the Governor's Higher Education Task Force. He congratulated participants for timing this "unique opportunity" to make immediate contributions to current high-level strategizing around increased postsecondary completion.

The nine recommendations resulting from the June meeting are indeed intended to produce statewide results. Much more important to IFI participants, however, is the transformation that may result in personal relationships – among secondary and postsecondary counselors and advisors and with the students they all serve. Enriching relationships was the undercurrent throughout the meeting and is the centerpiece of each of the recommendations. Better, more seamless systems and processes are the means for building these relationships – not the end. Students long for more one-on-one mentoring and guidance from a trusted adult. Respondents to the first-year postsecondary student survey reported that generalized advice, information, and support is fine, but what they seek is not on a website, in an online portal, or part of big events or group conversations. More than anything, they wish someone to get to know them and then help them decide their post-graduation path. Below are typical student comments about how their high school could help more students achieve their goals. First-year student advice to their postsecondary institution was similarly, "please just get to know me":

*"Be sure to reach out to every student, don't wait for the student to reach out to you."*

*"Have more mentorship so kids can realize that they can make it to college, and that college is for anyone if you have the mindset."*

*"Make more of an attempt at communicating with students one-on-one to find out what they want to do so they can be helped."*

*"Perhaps a more individual experience, more non-academic advice."*

*"Instead of having us just meet with our counselor once a year to ensure we are on track to graduate, have them also check in on our post-graduation plans and make sure we are on track for that."*

*"Having mentors who were open, friendly, understanding, and genuinely wanted you to succeed in college helped."*

*"A deeper focus on the student's interests and helping them find a subject they love."*

*"Search for the student's interest and find a mentor early."*

*"Listen to what we want to do, and not really prepare us for something other than that."*

*"Don't give up on students."*

IFI-participating counselors and advisors also desire more opportunities to build relationships with individual students – the work they were trained for and wish most to do. While it was tempting to recommend increased funding for additional staff to allow more one-on-one attention to students, participants instead generated recommendations that would take advantage of cross-sector synergies, existing staff, and current and new relationships. Their hope is that they have achieved some success in this effort and look forward to continuing the dialogue.

### **LOOKING FORWARD**

Like the opening line of a great book, the Idaho's Future convening and the First-Year Student survey were just the beginning. They are a glimpse into an exciting future. The energy, excitement and commitment seen at this event is a predictor of things to come. As I am writing these remarks, plans are already being made on college campuses and at high schools that build on this collaboration.

All of us have, at times, thought, "I wish someone would have asked me..." That is exactly what we did as a piece of the first-year survey. We asked students to reflect on their own experiences and to provide advice to current high school students, to their high schools, and to their colleges. While only a handful of these remarks are contained in this report, what students have to say is powerful. After reading hundreds of responses, I was struck by the clarity and usefulness of their comments; a reminder to me of the value of simple questions.

One-time events and activities seldom satisfy our continued search for greater results. It is my hope future convenings and surveys will occur to gather input and data needed to guide our continued progress.

Respectfully,  
Byron Yankey

## Endnotes

- 1) The term postsecondary is used throughout this report to signify any formal education beyond high school leading to any type of certification, licensure, or two- or four-year degree earned after at least one year of coursework. Budget and time restrictions necessitated that the first Idaho's Future Initiative meeting be limited to representatives from public high schools and postsecondary institutions. Expanding the circle to others was seen as a logical future step.
- 2) The Spring 2017 Statewide Survey of First-Year Postsecondary Students was collaboratively designed by researchers from the McClure Center and the Office of the State Board of Education with input from high school counselors, postsecondary academic advisors, students, and educational administrators. The instrument was piloted with current high school and college students and emailed by individual state institutions to first-year students who graduated from an Idaho high school in Spring 2016. A cover letter from the institution's president was included. The survey was open from April 17, 2017, to June 1, 2017. From an estimated 5,000 recipients, 728 students participated in the survey (169 – two year; 559 – four year) for a response rate of 13%. Additional information about the survey is available from Jean Henscheid at the McClure Center, [jeanh@uidaho.edu](mailto:jeanh@uidaho.edu). The author wishes to thank the eight state college and university institutional research directors, the institutions' presidents, and the University of Idaho College of Education's Dan Campbell for collaborating on this project.
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## ADDENDUM



Madison Jackson, at home in Boise for the summer, was the one student involved in the Idaho's Future Initiative meeting in June, 2017. As the McClure Center's summer International Studies Ambassador, Madi was tasked with providing support to IFI meeting organizers. Participants at the gathering also found in Madi an ideal "focus group of one," and called on her often during the meeting to offer the student voice. She was asked to share her perspective as an addendum to this report.

### The purpose of college

My name is Madison Jackson, and I am a junior at the University of Idaho seeking degrees in international studies and environmental science. My reason for writing to you today is to share one student's perspective on the value of higher education and why many students may not choose to go on after high school. The time periods before and after attending college mark distinct eras in my personal life. The difference between the two easily stands out to me – I now see my potential and purpose in life as meaningful and intertwined with my university studies. Coming out of high school, I knew I wanted to attend a university, yet I found myself lost and confused as to what I wanted to do. The melancholy of choosing one career to have for the rest of my life right out of high school overwhelmed and frightened me. I did not want, and could not afford, to waste time or money doing college "wrong," a view shared by many of my peers. What I did not know, but soon discovered, is that higher education is more than just an extension of high school or preparation for just one job. College is a unique opportunity that fosters the development of character, identity, and maturity on top of teaching career-specific content. I actually believe Idaho leaves students in the dark about what completing a higher education means. I also believe we put too much pressure on students to choose a single occupation. The message that higher education guarantees you a job is simply not believable enough for many students to invest in continuing education after high school. I will expand on these arguments below in a series of five points, and I invite you along to better understand my viewpoint regarding this important topic. Right now, I believe Idaho cannot afford to be unclear about what higher education can actually do for students or we will fall further behind the rest of the quickly progressing world.

**The message that higher education guarantees you a job is simply not believable enough for many students to invest in continuing education after high school.**

I consider myself extremely fortunate to be part of distinct higher education communities at my university, especially those within the College of Letters, Arts and Social Sciences and the International Studies program. Although I was highly encouraged multiple times to invest solely in engineering or other related STEM programs, I decided I wanted to diversify my education and work toward earning both a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Science. After two years, I have many credits toward my BS in environmental science. I can speak generally about major environmental issues and recite knowledge I have memorized, but I have forgotten much information shortly after I was tested on it. All along, I felt something missing in this single-minded pursuit of one degree. I would undoubtedly question my time and experience in college if I had limited myself to just this one choice. I had to think more broadly.

International Studies challenges and stretches my personal, mental, and ideological boundaries every time I walk into a classroom. The professors conduct classes by integrating interactive scenarios, real-life situations, debates, and small group discussions. They make extensive efforts to engage students, ask open-ended questions, provide sufficient background while still allowing students to make their own points, and expect every student to use their intellectual capabilities to come up with innovative solutions to major problems. There are few “correct” answers when my professors ask questions, which makes students more comfortable and open during discussions. For the first time, I now understand how this broad education is actually extremely relevant and applicable to the workplace. If it were not for my addition of international studies, I would find myself among the crowd of other astray students who decided to go to college and are unsure why.

My personal education and development has just begun, yet I have already seen huge transformations in myself compared to who I was in high school. This has happened as I have matured and gained more life experience, but I credit the bulk of my progress to the arts and humanities courses I have taken. In the past, I had difficulty seeing life as larger than my hometown of Boise, Idaho, and struggled making personal connections. I lacked confidence and refused to challenge myself in school, work, or my personal life for fear of the unknown and of failure. I sincerely struggled to do anything other than wash, rinse, and repeat. When my teachers asked me to memorize information, I passed; when my teachers asked me to participate, interpret, evaluate, compare, and come up with plausible and unique conclusions, I overwhelmingly struggled. The person who I used to be is not unlike most other high school students, so I relate to the reasons why many do not desire or choose to attend college. The true

purpose of higher education is unclear to many middle and high school students who are overwhelmed with messages to “go on.”

My experience in higher education has given me much more than knowledge. It has given me the ability to think critically about information instead of just taking everything at face-value, and has prompted me to participate without fear. Above all, I notice now that I value my own opinions and understand that I have a lot to contribute rather than just being another face in the crowd. This, then, is [my first point](#): I believe higher education should embed more of the valuable themes of arts and humanities – thinking and acting creatively, empathetically, and courageously – throughout a student's college experience. I see the themes of arts and humanities as the equivalent of today's essential life and career skills. I have experienced them most profoundly in these courses, but to make my argument I refer to them below as essential skills that belong in every course.

The divide between vocational and essential skills-based education is growing; but now is the time to understand the two are not separate, they are interdependent. Mine is not a proposal to scale back professional and technical education programs, but just the opposite. It is a proposal to strengthen them by integrating the development of “real-world” thinking and personal growth into every course rather than leave them to general education courses disconnected from the rest. Getting kids to college is a challenging and lengthy process, so once they get there we need to help them experience vibrant teaching that encourages students to first understand themselves and their own ideas and beliefs, and gain the confidence they need to do well in life. The better the education, the more students comprehend that they have a purpose in the world. Moreover, students with a solid appreciation for their own value and the value of others will begin to expand their worldview. An essential skills-based education builds the foundation necessary for today's generation to view work as less of a depressing, end-all-be-all obligation and more of a supplement to the type of life each and every individual desires, and deserves, to build.

The distinction between my two majors is stark and not what I was prepared for walking into college. I had continually heard the only marketable, and thus, worthwhile, majors to choose from were those in STEM fields. My technical and scientific classes have addressed important topics but have not been designed to push me to grow as a person or helped me understand my identity, ethics, or purpose. This development has come from such courses as “NGOs in the International System,” “Comparative Politics,” and “International Environmental Issues.” Through these courses, my perspective has evolved dramatically. I now catch myself questioning and analyzing situations at school and work, during social interactions, and in day-to-day settings. I have gained the ability to empathize and see my background and myself critically. If it were not for my humanities and art classes, especially upper division ones, I would not know that college classes even have the capacity to develop a person like they do. I am fortunate enough to



have both aspects of education to compare: BA and BS courses. This is [my second point](#). I believe Idaho should encourage students to attend college because they will grow intellectually, socially, ethically, and personally in ways they could not if they opted out of higher education. We must make college more than an expensive investment required to make more money in the vague period labeled “one day.” We have to shift the way we discuss STEM *versus* humanities majors and the perceived narrow result of obtaining a degree, and toward the purpose of contributing to a better and more productive society.

**Our state should resist the appeal of narrowing students' paths too soon and move increasingly toward developing critical thinkers prepared to tackle challenges head-on.**

**Thirdly**, as a student from this state, I believe Idaho should offer essential skill messages as frequently as they offer messages about fast-paced technological changes and the credentials that are perceived to be the quickest route to navigating these changes. In truth, the challenges of today's world are dynamic and complex, and would be unimaginable to previous generations. These challenges shape daily news headlines: terrorism, climate change, globalization, democracy, recession, nuclear weaponry, war, displaced persons, and many more. Faced with such multifaceted issues, ours and future generations will be ill-prepared to handle the changing world if we are taught too narrowly. To me, Idaho colleges and universities may be producing too many graduates who are not the flexible, adaptive, creative, and self-sufficient individuals today's employers seek. Our state should resist the appeal of narrowing students' paths too soon and move increasingly toward developing critical thinkers prepared to tackle challenges head-on. A narrow education prepares students to repeat and execute the same skill over and over, but not to investigate, challenge, invent, design, discover, analyze, or communicate as efficiently and effectively as they could. We desperately need essential skill experiences that equip students with abilities that kick-start holistic development of character and make students more marketable in the process.

So what exactly are the skills acquired through an education like the one I have described? First and foremost, this kind of education teaches students to think broadly and put their own lives into perspective relative to others. This is achieved through what educator Steven Fesmire calls “empathetic projection,” which essentially is the ability to comprehend other viewpoints and use “creative tapping of a situation's possibilities to find innovative and effective solutions to moral problems” (cited in Abowitz, 2006, pg. 18). Secondly, this kind of education promotes development of both written and oral communication skills. Thirdly, students gain the ability to “frame issues in historical and multicultural contexts,” which stems from the ability to put themselves in others' shoes (The National Leadership Council for Liberal Education &

America's Promise, 2007, pg. 2). Fourthly, self-awareness and new knowledge can be applied to real-life situations and circumstances. This also allows students to transform into critical thinkers and analyzers who solve complex problems. For me, these skills are important right now in the role that is helping me pay for school: working in restaurants. I am more adept at handling challenges efficiently and can adapt to rapid change far more quickly than I could in high school. I also have much better judgment and improved social skills. Finally, because of my broad education I have learned to work both independently and in a team.

The "vocation-first" focus of college leaves many students doubtful of its value. As students weigh the checks and balances, they may determine that the steep cost of education is not worth what educators and policymakers promise.

My fourth point regards the messages our state sends about higher education. I believe it may be time to reshape the way we talk about college, both to individuals and across the state. *60% of Idahoans will have a postsecondary credential by the year 2020* is the most important statistic we hear regarding higher education in this state, and while educators and policymakers have worked tirelessly to raise the percentage of students attending college in recent years, we continue to fall short. The "vocation-first" focus of college leaves many students doubtful of its value. As students weigh the checks and balances, they may determine that the steep cost of education is not worth what educators and policymakers promise. Students are prompted to secure a degree in as little time as possible while avoiding a mass amount of debt, all in order to attain a specific occupation. The pressure placed on students to have every detail of their lives figured out so they don't waste time or money is extremely overwhelming. We train students to ask themselves: *What kind of work do I want to get paid to do?* Then, the system seems to shame those who choose a career that does not require going to college. These students feel caught: if they don't want to go to college, they may be labeled lost, misinformed, or lazy. If they succumb to the pressure and go on, they are anxious to do only those things in college that will get them a good paying job later. Under these circumstances, what motivation do students – especially those from low-income families – have to make their way through college when they could join the workforce after high school and start making money? In these students' eyes, the outcome of the two is the same: if they join the workforce after high school graduation, they will earn a salary, but without the added cost, stress, time, and factor of the unknown that comes with college. I believe Idaho has focused too narrowly on getting more students through college so they can join the workforce and start making money. Is it possible to change the way we describe the value of higher education? To make the appeal of college greater than the drawbacks? This could happen if we emphasized its benefits beyond just the financial gains that, "trust us," will be there.

Contrary to the views of some adults, my generation wants to contribute to the changing world and shape it in positive ways. We are more interconnected and technologically capable than ever, and we must complement these aptitudes with the foundation to challenge ideas and provide solutions. To equip students with the necessary education to reach their full potential means that they will then go on to be productive contributors to all aspects of society. This is [my fifth and final point](#): an investment in higher education, including essential skills, is an investment in a more productive Idaho workforce. A report from the Association of American Colleges and Universities states that Americans switch jobs 10 times, on average, in the 20 years following their 18th birthday (The National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise, 2007). It is critical, therefore, that college curriculum be designed with this in mind and that we embed essential skills in every degree program. I believe Idaho educators should be hired and trained to apply higher-level thinking and questioning into all courses through the incorporation of art, activities related to multicultural literacy, open discussions, personal and career exploration, real-world examples, and examination of global themes. If every class was structured this way, Idaho would excel in yielding marketable, confident, and passionate college graduates who have both soft and hard skills. I am confident that many students are experiencing the same kind of rich education at other Idaho colleges and universities as I am at University of Idaho. My sincere belief is that every student in Idaho who aspires to this kind of experience deserves it. I also believe this kind of education for our citizens is what this state needs.

Idaho's future is dependent on the educational system's ability to prepare students for a globalized and dynamic world. Edward B. Rust, Jr., the chairman and CEO of State Farm Insurance Companies said:

“At State Farm, only 50 percent of high school and college graduates who apply for a job pass the employment exam.... Our exam does not test applicants on their knowledge of finance or the insurance business but it does require them to demonstrate critical thinking skills and the ability to calculate and think logically. These skills plus the ability to read for information, to communicate and write effectively, and to have an understanding of global integration need to be demonstrated. This isn't just what employers want; it's also what employees need if they are to be successful in navigating the workplace.” (The National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise, 2007, pg. 16)

Statements like this are increasingly common among employers. Many U.S. colleges and universities have already begun to modernize their educational systems. At Bard College, students do not choose a traditional degree; instead, they obtain a degree in one of five academic divisions, e.g. Languages and Literature that have clusters of related course concentrations which emphasize program-based approaches supplemented with core curricular experiences. This minimizes the pressure for students to choose the singular perfect major right out of high school and gives them both broad background and specific skills. At the University of Rochester,

entrepreneurship has become a campus-wide focus as the university offers entrepreneurial classes related to each academic major and holds workshops and seminars with the same theme for faculty. San Jose State University has employed a program dedicated to revolutionizing general education by requiring students to take an upper-division course in each of the following themes: Written Communication; Earth and Environment; Self, Society, and Equality in the U.S.; and Culture, Civilization, and Global Understanding. These are three examples of the ways that institutions in other states have evolved to teach essential skills throughout the curriculum, including in vocational and pre-professional programs. Idaho has a solid educational foundation already, but we need to take additional steps similar to those elsewhere. For example, Idaho could hold regional professional development workshops where educators work together to incorporate essential skills into their classes; we could reexamine general education throughout the state with the purpose of integrating essential skills in more of these courses; Idaho colleges and universities could design experiences for students that more closely integrate job-related and essential skills education as has been done with entrepreneurship at the University of Rochester.

In order to advance Idaho's future, we need to invest in essential skill development throughout the curriculum, and we need to change the way that we talk about higher education. We must stop asking kids what they want to be when they grow up and start asking them what kind of life they want to live and how an occupation can support their goals. We have to relieve the pressure to choose just one occupation and begin underscoring the intellectual and personal development that a student will undergo in college and carry on throughout life. Conventional practices will not help Idaho achieve its higher education goals. We need to think outside the box and follow through with statewide policies that will prepare Idaho citizens to become movers and shakers in society and tackle issues in the ever-changing and complicated world in which we find ourselves.

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