

# **One Year Out**

**Findings From A National Survey Among  
Members Of The High School Graduating Class Of 2010**

**Submitted To:**  
The College Board

By Hart Research Associates

**August 18, 2011**

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**About The Research:** On behalf of the College Board, Hart Research Associates undertook a comprehensive survey to explore how young Americans assess their high school experience and its role in preparing them for their next step in life, including work, post-secondary education, or some combination of experiences. The survey involved a nationally representative sample of 1,507 respondents, all of whom graduated from high school in 2010. To reach out broadly to this highly mobile population, Hart Research employed multiple methodologies, including telephone interviewing on both landline and cell phones as well as online interviewing. All respondents completed the survey (either by telephone interview or online) from July 29, 2011, to August 3, 2011. A total of 775 respondents were interviewed by telephone, and 732 completed interviews online.

In the combined final sample, 43% of respondents reported that they had enrolled in a four-year college after graduating from high school, 25% reported that they had enrolled in a two-year college, 6% said that they enrolled in a trade school or a specific training program, and the remaining 26% said that they did not enroll in any kind of school after graduating from high school. Among respondents who went to a four-year college, 65% report going on to a public college whereas 33% say they went on to attend a private college. The racial and ethnic profile of the sample is diverse and representative of 2010 high school graduates nationally: 59% call themselves white, 18% describe themselves as Hispanic, 16% as African American, 4% as Asian, and 3% as some other racial or ethnic classification.

### Highlights Of The Key Findings

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**While most members of the class of 2010 are satisfied with their high school experience, nearly all would change something about it.**

- 41% say they are very satisfied with their high school experience and another 41% describe themselves as somewhat satisfied.
- 80% say that based on what they know with the benefit of a year's hindsight, they would change aspects of their high school experience, including 21% who would make a lot of changes, 33% who would make some changes, and 26% who would change just a little.

**Members of the class of 2010 say that the requirements for graduating high school are easy rather than challenging, and a substantial minority say that graduation requirements should be made more difficult.**

- 69% say the requirements for graduating high school are very or pretty easy, compared with 30% who say the requirements are very or pretty challenging. Thirty-seven percent (37%) say that high school graduation requirements should be made more difficult; only 10% say they should be made easier.
- 47% of 2010 graduates say they totally or mainly feel that they wish they had worked harder in high school; another 16% partially feel that way.

**Four in nine members of the class of 2010 say that based on what they know now they wish they had taken different courses in high school, with the largest proportion of these graduates saying they wish they had taken more math courses or more difficult math courses.**

- 44% say that they wish they had taken different courses in high school. Among this group, 40% would have taken more or higher level math courses, 37% would have taken courses that would have trained them for a specific job, and 33% would have taken more or higher level science courses.
- Regrets about course selection are higher than average among students who went on to college but felt less well prepared than others at their college, students who considered dropping out or did drop out of college, and students who were required to take non-credit remedial courses once they got to college.

**Students who took Advancement Placement or International Baccalaureate courses found them more rewarding and challenging than their other classes.**

- 83% found these courses to be more difficult than their other classes, but 82% also say these classes were more worthwhile and 73% say they were more interesting.

**Members of the class of 2010 look upon their first year out of high school in positive terms.**

- 34% say they had a “great” year and another 42% say they had a “good” year in their first year after high school, whereas 24% say it was just okay or less good than that. Students who went on to a four-year college were most likely to say they had a great year.

**Half the members of the class of 2010 say their high school did a good job of preparing them both for success in college and success in the workplace, whereas a quarter say their high school should have done a better job on both scores.**

- 66% say their high school did a good job of getting them ready for college and preparing them for college-level work, but 33% say their high school should have done a better job of this. Fifty-eight percent (58%) say their high school did a good job of preparing them for the working world and the skills that employers are looking for, but 41% say their high school should have done better for them in this regard.
- In combining these results, 49% say their high school did a good job in preparing them for both college and work, 18% say they were well prepared for college but not work, 9% say they were well prepared for work but not college, and 24% say they were not well prepared for either.

**Among graduates who went on to college last year, the majority describe the transition from high school as “easy, but with challenges.” A majority found doing college-level work harder than they expected, and significant minorities were required to take non-credit remedial courses or failed to complete their first year in college.**

- 24% describe the transition to college as challenging and 14% describe it as easy, while the majority (62%) describe it as “easy, but with some challenges.”
- 54% report that their college courses were more difficult than they expected in terms of what students needed to know and what was required to get good grades; only 21% say their college courses were easier than they expected.
- 24% say they were required to take non-credit remedial or developmental courses by their college, including 37% of those who went to a two-year college.
- 16% say they did not complete the full year of their college program, including 9% in four-year colleges, 24% in two-year colleges, and 32% in other training or vocational programs.

**The most common challenge faced by the class of 2010 with regard to college is financial, with a majority of respondents who went on to college reporting that they faced challenges in affording college.**

- 55% of respondents who went on to college say that being able to afford college has been very or pretty challenging. Sixty-five percent (65%) in

private four-year colleges feel this way, as do 56% in public four-year colleges and 48% in two-year colleges.

- Among graduates who did not go to college last year, 56% say the cost being more than their family could afford was a very big or pretty big reason for their decision not to attend college.

**The large majority of members of the class 2010 who did not attend college last year still intend to go to college at some point. Only a minority report that they were able to find a good job in their first year out of high school.**

- 83% of respondents who did not attend college last year say they want to complete a college degree some day. Fifty-nine percent (59%) say they were strongly encouraged by their teachers and guidance counselors to go to college. In addition to the cost of college, the other big factors for their decision not to attend college last year were the desire to take time off before going back to school (62% big factor) and the desire to work rather than go to school (56% big factor).
- Among graduates who do not attend college, just 33% say they were able to find a good job after graduating high school, whereas 36% say they found a job but not a “good” one, and 21% say they were unable to find any job; just 10% say they did not look for a job after graduating high school.

**Even in a bad economy, the majority of the class of 2010 are optimistic about the long-term prospects for their generation to have good jobs and careers, and they see college as central to their ability to achieve that goal. Despite the high costs and hard work involved in going to college, the large majority of the class of 2010 say that college definitely is worth it.**

- 66% say they are very (22%) or somewhat (44%) optimistic that people their age will have good opportunities for jobs and careers in the years ahead, while 33% say they are worried about what their prospects are.
- 69% say that having a college degree will help a lot in getting the kind of job or career they are looking for, and another 18% say a degree would help somewhat. Nine in 10 agree that these days “high school is not enough and nearly everybody needs to complete some education or training after high school.”
- When asked about the benefits of college weighed against the cost and time it takes to get a college degree, 60% say getting a college degree definitely is worth it, and another 26% say it probably is worth it. Only 6% say getting a college degree is not worth the time and money it requires. Seventy-six percent (76%) of respondents who did not go on to any post-secondary training last year say a college degree is worth it, including 46% who say it definitely is worth it.

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### The Class Of 2010: A Retrospective Look At High School

With a year of formative new experiences behind them, the majority of 2010 high school graduates look back positively on their time in high school, expressing satisfaction both with the collective experience and on a variety of specific measures. Still, while these recent graduates have a generally favorable view of their time in high school, nearly all graduates say there is something that they would change or do different. These candid assessments provide important, first-hand insights into how the American high school experience simultaneously serves and in some ways shortchanges its graduates.

### Glory Days: The Positive Aspects Of High School

When asked to evaluate their high school experience overall, fully 82% of 2010 graduates are very (41%) or somewhat (41%) satisfied with their experience, just 9% feel dissatisfied, and 9% describe their experience as in between—neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Notably, this positive assessment is consistent regardless of post-graduation plans—84% of graduates who went on to a four-year college say they were satisfied with their high school experience, whereas 83% of those who went on to a two-year college and 78% of those who did not enroll in any post-secondary education say the same.

Behind this overall favorable assessment are a variety of specific areas in which the class of 2010 credits their high school experience. These measures include a spectrum of both tangible and intangible components, from teachers who demonstrate commitment to individual students to school environments that foster confidence and independent thinking.

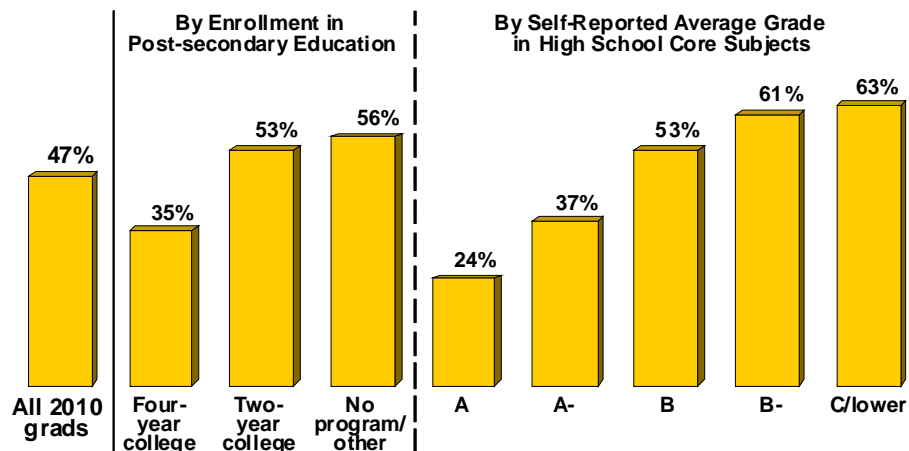
- ✓ **Caring Teachers:** Nearly three-quarters (73%) of 2010 high school graduates report that there were several teachers over the course of their high school careers who cared about them and took a personal interest in their lives.
- ✓ **Independent Thinking:** 71% of respondents say that their high school did a good or excellent job encouraging them to think independently.
- ✓ **Building Confidence:** 68% of respondents say their high school did a good or excellent job giving them confidence that they could set high goals and achieve them.

## Regrets And Lessons Learned—What They Would Do Different

Despite enjoying a generally satisfactory high school experience, these findings demonstrate that last year's graduates describe their high school careers as far from perfect—in fact, fully four in five (80%) say that they would change something about their high school years if they had it to do over again. This includes 21% who would make a lot of changes, 33% who would make some changes, and 26% who would change just a little.

### **Majorities of 2010 graduates who didn't go on to a four-year college now wish they had worked harder in high school.**

*This totally/mainly describes me: "Now that I am out of high school, I wish I worked harder in high school."*



The leading regret that these high school graduates express involves not studying more, working harder, or getting better grades—more than one in four (27%) graduates who would do something differently volunteers this as something they would change about their high school years if they had the opportunity. Further, nearly half (47%) of all respondents from the class of 2010 say the statement “now that I’m out of high school, I wish I had worked harder in high school” totally (29%) or mainly (18%) describes them.

Notably, this is an especially strong theme among students who did not matriculate to four-year colleges and among students who earned lower grades in high school—while just 35% of current four-year college students and 30% of

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students who earned mostly A's identify with this statement, a majority of two-year college students (53%), those who did not go on to any post-secondary education (56%), and those who earned less than a B-average (62%) say they now wish they had worked harder. One graduate describes how she would approach high school differently if she had it to do over again: "I would try harder and get better grades so if I wanted to go to college it would be easier."

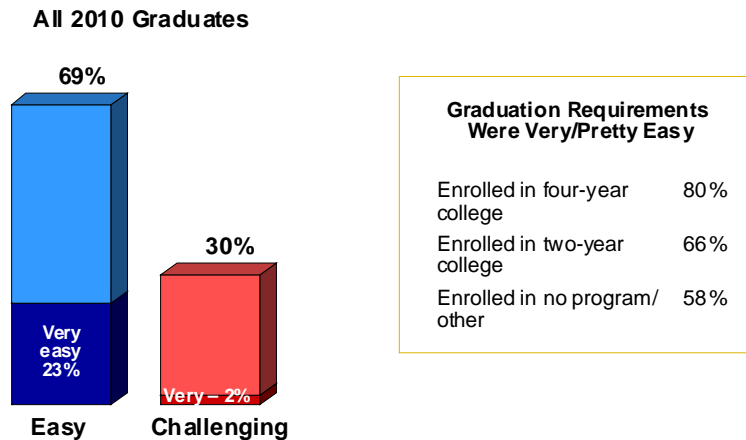
In addition to wishing they had tried harder, the selection of specific courses is another common area that students say they would improve upon if they could. In fact, 44% of graduates say they wish that they had taken different courses during high school. Among those who wish that they had taken different courses, 40% wish they had taken more math courses, 37% wish they would have taken more classes that prepared them for a specific job, and 33% say they wish they had taken more science courses. In addition, based on what they know now, 29% of those who wish they had taken different courses would have taken more classes that emphasized writing skills and 26% would have taken more classes that emphasized research.

**"My high school only cared about the kids who knew what they were doing after high school and didn't take much time to help the ones who didn't quite know yet. I was one of the ones trying to figure it out and I was left confused with all the different opportunities out there these days for high school graduates."**



### Large majorities say requirements for graduating high school were easy rather than challenging.

*The requirements for graduating high school, including tests and courses I had to pass were:*



Consistent with their reflection that they wish they had worked harder and taken more difficult courses, nearly seven in 10 (69%) members of the class of 2010 say that in retrospect, requirements for high school graduation were easy (23% very easy, 46% pretty easy), compared with just 30% who describe them as challenging (28% pretty challenging, 2% very challenging). While students who went on to a four-year college were most likely to describe graduation requirements as easy (80%), a strong majority of students who did not go on to a post-secondary education also describe the requirements this way (58%). Although about half of the respondents from the class of 2010 say that the requirements should stay as they are, more than one in three (37%) says that high schools should make the requirements for graduating more difficult, including 45% of those who went on to four-year colleges, 33% of those who went on to two-year colleges, and 30% of those who did not pursue post-secondary education. Only 10% say that graduating high school should be easier.

And while many high school graduates wish they had worked harder and pursued more challenging courses, those who actually took more demanding

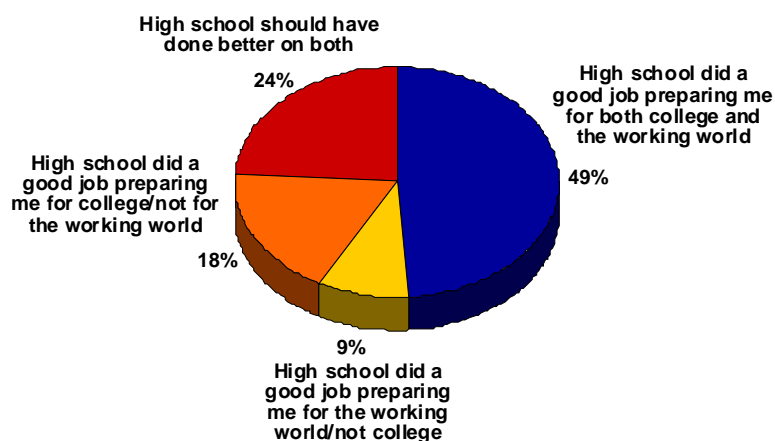
classes found them especially rewarding. Respondents who took Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes during high school (39% of all respondents) overwhelmingly describe these accelerated courses as more interesting (73%) and more worthwhile (82%) than their other courses.

### Making The Grade—Improving High Schools

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While high school graduates readily acknowledge there are things they personally could have done better or handled differently over the course of their high school careers to prepare for their next step, they also think that their high schools should have done a better job preparing them for work and college. Nine in 10 (91%) graduates agree that one of the main goals of high school should be to ensure that all students are ready for college and able to do college-level coursework (56% strongly agree, 35% somewhat agree). Similarly, an overwhelming majority (90%) say the same about the importance of high school preparing all students to be ready for the working world and to have the skills that employers value most (51% strongly agree, 39% somewhat agree).

### Only half say high school prepared them well for both college and work.



But graduates are closely divided in grading their high schools by these important standards and expectations. Just less than half (49%) of 2010 graduates say that their high school did a good job preparing them for **both** work and school.

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Nearly one-quarter (24%) of 2010 graduates say that their high schools should have done a better job on both counts. The remaining quarter (27%) say that their high school should have done a better job on either preparing them for college (9%) or for the working world (18%).

When respondents rate their high schools on a variety of specific content areas—from understanding the college application process to having effective basic communication skills—the main area of weakness they identify surrounds giving students specific preparation for navigating life after high school. For example, less than half (48%) of graduates say their high schools did an excellent or good job at teaching them basic financial skills, like how to budget and deal with money. Just more than half (52%) of graduates credit their high school with helping them to identify the best college, school, or training program to attend after high school. Other areas where 2010 graduates give their high schools mixed reviews—with notable room for improvement—include showing them how their schoolwork connected to their goals for after high school (55% excellent/good job), preparing them for the working world by showing them how to write a resume and handle a job interview (56% excellent/good job), teaching them good study habits (57% excellent/good job), and informing them about college costs and financial aid to help plan for the cost of college (58% excellent/good job). One respondent captured the sentiment shared by many in the 2010 class that high school should prepare students more for the real world:

**“Preparing students for life after high school was something that I wish would have been further stressed. My school did an excellent job of preparing kids for college, and getting them to actively look for the right college, but that’s it. There was no emphasis on all the hardships that would come alongside that, such as maintaining a job profitable enough to provide for college tuition, and absolutely no light was shed on the possibility of internships and apartments.”**

Another concern of 2010 graduates—just behind wishing their high schools had better prepared them for the working world with tangible skills such as resume writing and interviewing—is a desire for their high schools to have better prepared them for college-level work. In particular, high school graduates felt unprepared for the writing expectations that they faced outside of high school and in college—in fact, more than one in four (26%) reports that they wish they had taken more

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courses in high school that emphasized writing (just behind math and science in the kinds of classes they wish they would have taken more of). Further, nearly three in 10 (29%) high school graduates say that their high school did an okay job *at best* ensuring that they had the writing skills they needed after high school. As one graduate comments, "My school was very focused on creative writing and essays. They did very little to teach me how to write a scientific research paper. This is especially hard for me since I am going to college for a science degree." Another graduate adds, "I did not realize how different college writing was compared to high school writing until I was in a college composition class and had to deal with it then."

## **Resources Within And Beyond The High School Itself**

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While 2010 graduates do not think their high schools completely prepared them for life after graduation, these students also report having a rich variety of complimentary resources. Whereas 35% of respondents say that during high school they relied on teachers for guidance to help them identify and achieve their goals for life after graduation, 58% say that they relied on their family, and another 30% say that they relied on their friends. The role of the family in providing guidance appears tied, at least in part, to parents' education level. Seven in 10 (71%) respondents whose parents both graduated from college report that they relied on their family as a primary source for guidance. In contrast, among respondents whose parents both did not graduate from college, only half (48%) say that they relied primarily on their family.

## **Transitioning To Life After High School**

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Graduates from the class of 2010 describe their first year out of high school in solidly positive terms, but the overwhelming majority say it was different than what they expected. Students' insights into both their successes and their difficulties in making the adjustment from high school to work, post-secondary education, and other experiences are in many ways just as instructive as their direct assessments in evaluating the strengths and limitations of their high school experience.

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### **The First Year: Somewhere Between Good And Great**

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Three in four (76%) high school graduates describe their first year following graduation as a great year (34%) or a good year (42%). Notably, the vantage point from which graduates make this retrospective evaluation carries considerable influence: those who went to a four-year college are much more likely to say that it was a great year (41%) than are their counterparts who went to a two-year college (33%) or who did not go to college (25%). For those high school graduates who went on to post-secondary education, achieving academic milestones such as succeeding in college classes and social factors such as making new friends are overarching highlights. Compared with their peers who went on to post-secondary education, high school graduates who did not attend college during their first year out were more likely to explain that they had a good year because they had a job and earned money for themselves and simply because they enjoyed being done with school.

### **Challenges The First Year Out**

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While 2010 graduates' assessment of their first year out of high school is connected to the paths they pursued over the past 12 months, these students agree—regardless of their current situation—that the year has been different than they expected. Fully 77% of graduates say their first year has been different than they anticipated, but the nature of these surprises and challenges vary by graduates' current situation.

Graduates who went on to two- or four-year colleges report a mix of experiences in adjusting from high school to college. On the one hand, 76% describe the transition from high school to college as generally easy (14% totally easy, 62% easy with some challenges), but on the other hand, a majority (54%) say that doing well in college and getting good grades was more difficult than they expected (10% much more difficult, 44% somewhat more difficult). Notably, this sentiment holds up regardless of the type of post-secondary educational experience a young person pursued their first year out—for example, 59% of four-year college students say the academic work is more difficult than they anticipated, while 49% of two-year college students say the same. Students at selective and nonselective

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four-year institutions are equally likely to find the coursework harder than they expected.

Fully one in four (24%) 2010 graduates currently enrolled in college reports that they were required to take developmental or remedial courses; this figure is higher among minority respondents, with 29% of African Americans, 34% of Hispanics, and 20% of whites saying they had to take these noncredit courses. Those who went to a two-year college (37%) also were more likely than those who went to a four-year college (16%) to say that they had to take remedial classes.

For some, the experience of their first year in college was especially daunting. About one in seven (16%) high school graduates who pursued some kind of post-secondary education in their first year out reports that they did not complete their studies or program. This includes 9% who are enrolled in a four-year college, 24% who are enrolled in a two-year college, and 32% who are pursuing other training or vocational programs.

High school graduates who did not pursue post-secondary education describe a different set of challenges and concerns. Nearly two in three high school graduates from the class of 2010 who did not go on to college were able to find work after graduating (69%); however, only half of those who found employment say that they found a good job. The other half say that even though they have a job, they do not consider it a “good” job. One in five high school graduates says that they looked for a job after graduating but failed to find one.

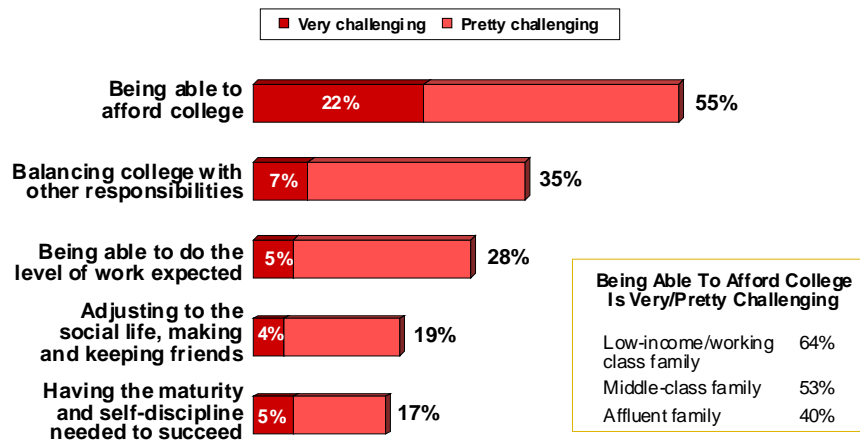
## Financial Challenges Loom Large

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Concerns about paying for college are a dominant and unifying theme for the high school class of 2010—both for those who went on to college and even for those who did not.

## The biggest challenge faced in transition to college was financial.

*Experience of Specific Aspects of Going to College*



More than half (55%) of respondents currently enrolled in college say that they found it very (22%) or pretty (33%) challenging to afford college during the past year. Placed in context, the magnitude of this challenge is even more dramatic—in fact, by 20%—college affordability trumps any other single concern, including balancing college with other responsibilities (35% very/pretty challenging), being able to complete the level of work expected of students at college (28% very/pretty challenging), adjusting to the social life at college and making new friends (19% very/pretty challenging), and having the maturity and discipline needed to be successful in college (17% very/pretty challenging). Not surprisingly, college students who describe themselves as coming from low-income and working-class backgrounds (64%), and even middle-class backgrounds (53%), say this is a greater burden than those who come from an upper-middle-class background (40%).

To help pay for college, seven in 10 (70%) college students say they took out loans or worked at least 10 hours a week to help pay for college; one in five (20%) took out loans and worked. In some cases, the financial impact of college tuition prevented high school graduates from going to the college of their choice, as one respondent explains:

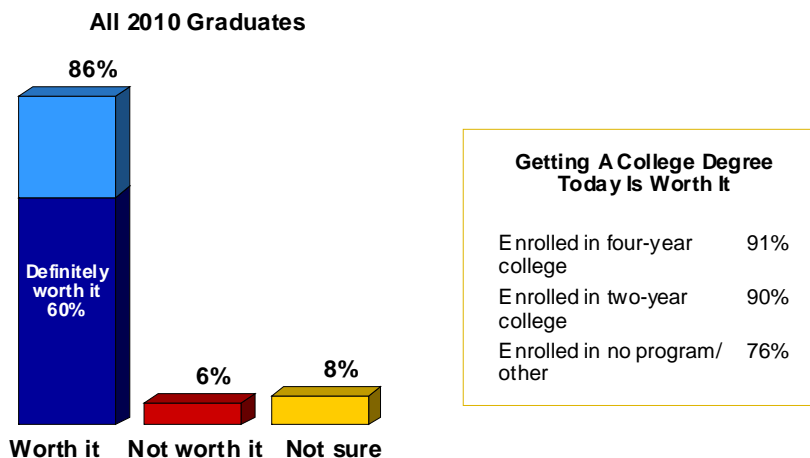
**“I didn’t obtain the funds I needed to attend the college of my dreams and ended up in a two-year college in my home state and did really poorly because of it, I was just really depressed. I was one of those teens who wanted the full out-of-state experience and I’m not getting it.”**

**-Two-year college student**

For those who did not go on to college, cost was a significant barrier to this path with a majority (56%) describing it as a very (35%) or pretty (21%) big consideration in their decision not to pursue college. This places cost as second only to a desire to take time off before going to college (62% very/pretty big consideration) and ahead of other concerns such as not feeling sure about one’s preparation for college-level work (40% very/pretty big consideration) and not having the right grades and courses to get into college (29% very/pretty big consideration). Again, the financial burden of college weighed heavier on graduates from less affluent backgrounds, with fully 63% who say that they came from a low-income or working-class background citing the cost of college as a major consideration in their decision to not enroll in college.

**Most members of the class of 2010 believe getting a college degree is definitely worth it, including many who did not yet go on to college.**

*Considering the money and time involved in getting a college degree, do you think getting a college degree today is worth it?*





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Despite an overarching concern about college affordability, 2010 graduates resoundingly agree that the investment of money and time required to get a college degree is worth it. Fully 86% of all 2010 high school graduates say a college degree is definitely (60%) or probably (26%) worth the time and money, including 91% of those currently attending a four-year college, 90% of those currently attending a two-year college, and even 76% of those who did not pursue post-secondary education. In this regard, we note that 83% of those who did not attend college last year say they want to complete a college degree some day, and 59% say they were strongly encouraged by their teachers and guidance counselors to go to college. In addition to the cost of college, the other big factors for their decision to not attend college last year was the desire to take time off before going back to school (62% big factor) and the desire to work rather than go to school (56% big factor).

### Looking Forward To The Future

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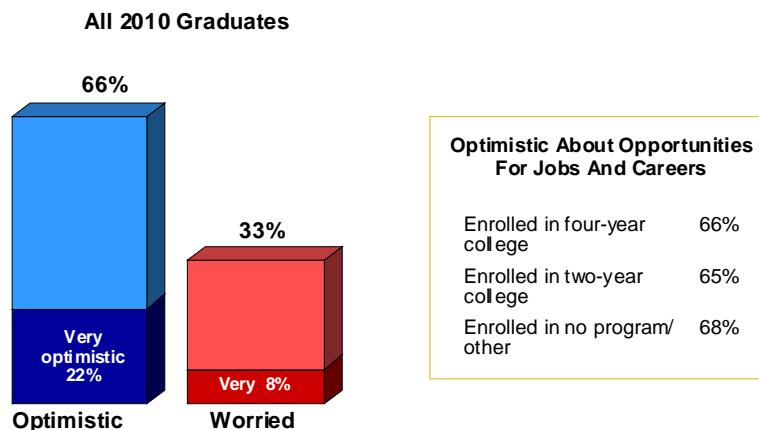
Even in the most perilous economic climate that young adults have faced in generations, 2010 high school graduates remain generally optimistic about their future prospects, though this hopefulness is laced with a series of specific concerns and anxieties.

### A Positive Outlook

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## Even after the great recession, most are optimistic that their generation will have good opportunities for jobs.

*Are you optimistic or worried about whether people your age will have good opportunities for jobs and careers in the years ahead?*



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As the country slowly climbs out of recession, two in three high school graduates are optimistic that their generation will have good opportunities for jobs, though this optimism tends to be guarded (22% very optimistic, 44% somewhat optimistic). Thirty-three percent (33%) say that they are somewhat or very worried about their generation's economic future. This general pattern—with two-thirds optimistic and one-third worried—holds across racial groups and across educational path. In other words, high school graduates who immediately went to a four-year college are generally no more and no less optimistic about their future than are those who went to a two-year college and those who did not enroll in college after graduating.

### **Graduates Distinguish Themselves By Their Career Goals**

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High school graduates from the class of 2010 exhibit a wide and distinctive array of career goals. Across the board, high school graduates say that doing work that they find interesting or care about is the most important thing to them in pursuing a job or career (59%). But this ambition is more common among those who went on to a four-year college—in fact, compared with just about half of respondents who went to a two-year college (52%) or did not enroll in post-secondary education (48%), 70% of high school graduates who went to a four-year college said that they want work that they find interesting and that they care about. Whereas helping other people was the next most common thing that students at a four-year college wanted in a job or career (31%), the second priority for those who went to a two-year college and those who did not enroll in school was having a job that pays the bills while they have fun outside of work (34% and 30%, respectively). High school graduates who did not immediately go on to college also were twice as likely (12%) as those who went to a four-year college (6%) to say that they wanted to be able to work with their hands and that they wanted to be their own boss (10% among those who did not enroll in college, 4% among those who went to a four-year college).

### The Value of A College Degree In Achieving Future Goals

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In terms of being able to ultimately achieve their career goals, seven-in-10 high school graduates (69%) think that a college degree will help a lot. Perhaps reflecting their own life decisions, respondents who went on to a four-year college (78%) or went to a two-year college (73%) were more likely to say this, but even a strong majority of those who did not go on to college (56%) believe a college degree would help them a lot.

Among all 2010 graduates, nine in 10 (90%) agree that in today's world, high school is not enough and that nearly everyone needs to complete some type of training or education after high school, including 60% who strongly agree. An overwhelming majority of those who did not go on to a post-secondary education concur with this sentiment (83% agree, including 46% who strongly agree).