

## SECTION II

### FAMILIAL INFLUENCES

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A high school student's parents are her or his strongest influence in the decision to continue on to higher education.<sup>70</sup> As the primary socializing unit, the family has a powerful role in shaping values and norms from an early stage. The family also provides an environment that can promote or hinder learning. Thus, parents influence the decision to gain a higher education through the various roles they play: promoters and encouragers of particular behaviors, providers of resources, and role models.<sup>71</sup>

This section examines the influence the family has on this important decision, primarily from the perspective of parents themselves. It analyzes the responses from the survey administered to the parents of the high school seniors surveyed, comparing the responses data from the senior's survey and other sources, here relevant. The three roles of the family--encourager and promoter, resource provider, and role model--are examined separately. Major barriers to seniors' participation in higher education are examined briefly. The parents surveys were distributed to seniors at the same time the seniors completed their surveys. The seniors were to take the surveys home and then return them completed to school. From 1,553 seniors sampled, 422 parent surveys were returned, a response rate of 27.2 percent. It is likely that this parent sample is biased toward parents with a greater interest in their children's education.

Two other sources of bias exist in the survey responses. First, 78.1 percent of the respondents are female and only 21.9 percent are male. Second, 56.9 percent of the seniors whose parents responded are female and only 43.1 percent are male. Although these two factors are liable to have an effect on the responses, it is difficult to specify precisely the nature of the effect.

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<sup>70</sup> Sandra L. Storey with Jesse Quails, Follow-up Study of High School Graduates: Survey of the Chicago Public Schools Class of 1989 (Chicago: Chicago Panel on Public School Policy and Finance, June 1991), 10; Stage and Hossler, 308.

<sup>71</sup>Smith, 89-90.

## **ENCOURAGERS AND PROMOTERS**

### **PARENTAL ENCOURAGEMENT**

Sewell and Hauser observe that:

the failure of many able lower status children to have high aspiration levels is at least as likely to result from the student's perception of lack of encouragement by parents and teachers as it is to lack of financial resources.<sup>72</sup>

The seniors' responses conform with this finding: 86.1 percent of the sample specified their parents as one of the three groups most influential on the decision to participate in higher education. Of this group, 60.1 percent ranked parents as *the* most influential group.

Almost all the parents in the sample, 91.9 percent, wanted their seniors to pursue higher education. This is even more than the 80.0 percent of seniors who said they wanted to go on to college. This would be consistent with the possibility that the parent sample was biased towards those with greater interest in the continuing education of their children.

Similarly, 96.4 percent of parents said they encouraged their seniors to pursue higher education; only 3.6 percent said that they did not encourage it. This response is similar to the seniors' responses: 89.3 percent said their parents encouraged higher education, while 7.4 percent said their parents did not. If these survey results can be generalized across the region, it appears that lack of parental support is not a significant barrier to participation.

This survey did not however, enquire further as to the type of encouragement offered by parents. Emotional support for the decision to attend college should be distinguished from support in the complex process of choosing a college, applying, and seeking financial assistance. The majority of parents are not college educated. The utility of the encouragement they can offer is therefore less than if they were able to speak from experience.

### **Discussion of Higher Education**

The early introduction of the concept of higher education in a family setting can be influential on the decision to pursue higher education. Stage and Hossler report the findings of Ekstrom "that 61 percent of students had made the decision [to attend college] by 9<sup>th</sup> grade."<sup>73</sup> If the possibility of higher education is discussed within the family at an earlier stage, it is more likely that the child will aspire to gain a higher education.

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<sup>72</sup>Sewell and Hauser, 65.

<sup>73</sup>Stage and Hossler, 304.

Most seniors in the sample, 93.1 percent, have discussed college with their parents. Almost all parents, 96.6 percent of the sample, claim to have discussed college with their seniors. Another recent study found that 73 percent of rural Ohio parents discussed college with their twelfth graders during the 1988-89 school year.<sup>74</sup> The qualitative nature of the discussion was not, however, specified in the present study. It is, therefore, difficult to infer anything from this quantitative data alone.

Caldwell and Trainer, in an ethnographic study of educational participation in rural Pennsylvania, observed a phenomenon which may be of relevance in the present context--class differences in the manner in which possibilities for higher education were discussed in the family.

Working class parents shied at taking a proactive role in planning with their child for the future, almost as if planning with the child became somehow an unwarranted intrusion into the child's life . . . This sharply contrasts to the dominant middle class parents' ethic of insisting that children aspire to and plan for high educational and career objectives.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, it is not a sufficient indicator of parental encouragement that higher education was discussed in the family. The quality of the discussion is the more relevant question.

A discrepancy exists between when seniors and parents remember first discussing college in the family. Over half the parents, 54.2 percent, claimed to have discussed college with their child before the ninth grade. Only 28.2 percent of seniors recall discussions this early in their lives, however. The source of this discrepancy is unclear. It could be a function of the sample bias; equally, it could be a matter of misinterpretation of the question in terms of the depth of discussion held.

In comparison to the timing of a discussion of higher education in the family, 68.1 percent of seniors had decided on their occupations during high school. Only 12 percent had made a decision on a profession before the ninth grade. One in five seniors, 19.8 percent, remained undecided.

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<sup>74</sup>McCracken and Barcinas, 6.

<sup>75</sup>Corinne A . Caldwell an d James F . Trainer, An Ethnographic Study of Low Participation Rates in Higher Education in Southcentral Pennsylvania, Paper prepared for the American Education Research Association, San Francisco, 29 March 1989, 11, ERIC, ED 313181.

## **RESOURCE PROVIDERS**

### **FAMILY INCOME**

The higher the income and socioeconomic status of the senior's parents, the greater likelihood that she or he will go to college. The effect of this predictor was found to be stronger than that of student ability on the degree of parental encouragement.<sup>76</sup>

Students with lower family incomes are less likely to participate in higher education.<sup>77</sup> High school seniors in Ohio Appalachia were asked to estimate their family incomes for 1990. It was impossible to validate the accuracy of the responses. Although there is concern over the reliability of self-reported data, particularly where the data are hard, as is the case for family income, the responses of seniors were generally very similar to those of parents. Seniors tended to slightly overestimate their parents' incomes.

A comparison can be made between the family incomes reported in Ohio Appalachia and the incomes of all families in the United States with high school seniors. The same nationwide income figures, split into quartiles, are used as described in section 1, page 42.<sup>78</sup>

Parents' reported family income concentrated in the lower two quartiles, with 28.0 percent earning less than \$21,959 and 36.9 percent earning \$21,960-\$38,868. Only 12.2 percent were in the top quartile, earning above \$63,794 per year. If the two sample groups are comparable, seniors overestimated their parents' earnings slightly, placing only 27.1 percent and 32.8 percent of their families in the lowest and second lowest quartiles respectively. The amount by which they overestimate is less important than the finding, demonstrated elsewhere in their responses, that seniors are lacking precise awareness of their parents' capacities as resource providers.

The poverty status of the parent sample is indicated by the proportion who receive welfare or other forms of public assistance. Only 13.6 percent of respondents professed to receive such benefits. Given the average poverty levels in the Appalachian region (section V.A, page 96), this would appear to be an underestimate. However, even if the sample is biased to higher income families within the region, data on receipt of public assistance such as food stamps consistently underestimate the numbers of poor.<sup>79</sup>

### **PARENTAL SAVINGS**

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<sup>76</sup>Swell and Hauser, 67.

<sup>77</sup>Mortenson and Wu, vii.

<sup>78</sup>Mortenson and Wu, iv.

<sup>79</sup>CEOGS, 103.

Given the high proportion of seniors--76.7 percent of valid responses--expecting some help financing college from their parents, it is interesting to examine the numbers of parents who have saved money for their offsprings ; education. The majority of respondents, 62.6 percent, could not afford to save. Of those who had saved, 22.4 percent had been saving for less than five years and only 15 percent had been able to save for over five years.

Of the factors influencing the choice of a college, financial aid availability as mentioned by 63.5 percent of parents. Of this group, 45.9 percent said it was the most important consideration. The majority of parents in Ohio Appalachia are clearly unable to finance their seniors' college education without recourse to other sources of funding.

## **FAMILY SIZE**

One final influence on the parents ; ability to act as resource providers is the number of children in the family. As the number of siblings in a family increases, there is generally "a significant negative effect on parental aid."<sup>80</sup> High school seniors had no siblings in 8.8 percent of families, according to parents' responses; 66.6 percent of seniors had 1-2 siblings; and 24.6 percent had 3 or more siblings. The predominance of fairly small families in the sample indicates that the negative effect of family size on the availability of financial resources is not a major problem.

For the seniors surveyed, there is a weak relationship between family income level and the desire to attend college; as family income rises, a larger proportion of respondents in the quartile express the desire to attend college. In the lowest income quartile, 78.3 percent of seniors express the desire to attend college. In the highest income quartile, 85.4 percent of seniors want to attend college. In the two middle income quartile groups, 80.4 percent of those in the second lowest quartile and 84.0 percent of those in the second highest quartile want to attend college.

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<sup>80</sup>J. R. Behrman, R. A. Pollak, and P. Taubman, "Family Resources, Family Size, and Access to Financing for Higher Education," *Journal of Political Economy* 97, no. 2 (1989): 398-419.

## **ROLE MODELS**

It has already been observed that parents are the group most influential on the senior's decision to attend college. Parents and the family environment can provide a role model that influences the senior's aspirations. Parents' educational level and socioeconomic status are two of the most important factors to consider. The family structure and the number of siblings who have attended college can also be influential.

## **PARENTAL EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT**

Prior research has demonstrated that both mother's and father's educational attainment is correlated with the desire to attend college.<sup>81</sup> Whichever parent's attainment has the stronger influence, it is clear that parental is highly correlated with college-going aspirations.

The average level of educational attainment in Ohio Appalachia is lower than that in Ohio as a whole (table II.1). In Ohio, 23.9 percent of the population over 18 years of age did not graduate from high school; in Ohio Appalachia, including Clermont County, 31.7 percent of the population did not graduate from high school. Similarly, 40 percent of Ohio residents received some sort of postsecondary education, compared to only 25.3 percent of Ohio Appalachia residents.

Where only a quarter of the region's population has some experience of postsecondary education, parental education is a strong barrier to higher education participation. With no experience from which to speak, parents are limited in the help they can offer their children. Although it is not reflected in our sample, it is possible that some parents

feel enough satisfaction in their own lives that they feel a very limited need to subscribe to a better and brighter future for their children.<sup>82</sup>

The parents would thus be likely to take a less proactive role in encouraging higher education for their offspring.

The variation in educational attainment between the region's counties is fairly small, with the obvious exceptions of Athens County, influenced by the presence of Ohio University, and Holmes County, influenced by the large Amish population. What variation exists, however, is obviously correlated with per capita income levels: the poorer counties--for example, Vinton, Meigs, and Adams--have on average larger numbers of individuals who did not graduate from high school.

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<sup>81</sup>Stage and Hossler, 311; Howard R. Bowen, *Investment in Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), 97.

<sup>82</sup>Caldwell and Trainer, 11.

The parent survey respondents were better educated than the regional average. Only 9.8 percent of respondents, remembering that 78.1 percent of the sample are female, had been

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TABLE II.1  
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN OHIO APPALACHIA 1990  
18 YEARS AND OVER

REGION	% LESS THAN 9TH GRADE	% 9-12 NO DIPLOMA	% HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE*	% SOME COLLEGE NO DEGREE	% ASSOCIATE DEGREE	% BACHELOR DEGREE	% POST GRADUATE DEGREE
Ohio	7.0	16.5	36.0	19.3	5.1	10.5	5.1
Appalachia	11.8	19.8	42.7	13.3	4.1	5.2	2.7
Appalachia (exc. Clermont)	11.9	20.0	42.8	13.2	4.1	5.1	2.6
Adams	18.5	22.4	41.1	9.0	3.4	2.9	1.9
Athens	5.3	13.3	27.1	31.2	4.7	9.7	8.0
Belmont	10.5	18.6	45.2	13.9	5.2	5.5	2.9
Brown	12.0	21.0	41.4	13.5	4.1	3.9	2.7
Carroll	8.6	19.4	49.4	11.7	3.4	4.4	2.7
Clermont	6.5	16.3	37.2	17.6	5.1	9.2	3.9
Columbiana	8.5	19.1	44.9	14.0	4.0	5.3	2.6
Coshocton	9.0	16.8	48.2	11.7	3.3	5.4	2.2
Gallia	14.4	20.1	37.3	14.2	3.9	6.2	3.7
Guernsey	8.9	19.7	44.0	13.7	4.2	6.3	2.3
Harrison	10.1	19.9	47.0	12.5	3.7	4.6	1.7
Highland	11.8	21.7	42.3	12.5	2.9	5.2	2.2
Hocking	9.0	22.2	43.5	13.2	4.4	5.1	2.4
Holmes	35.6	19.2	26.5	7.6	2.4	4.2	1.5
Jackson	14.2	23.7	39.7	11.7	3.1	4.8	2.6
Jefferson	9.5	17.7	44.9	14.3	5.0	5.5	2.5
Lawrence	11.8	22.0	41.1	14.2	3.9	4.6	2.8
Meigs	12.7	21.8	42.5	10.7	4.8	4.5	2.2
Monroe	13.0	16.7	50.5	5.7	3.5	3.9	2.3
Morgan	9.7	18.2	50.6	10.9	3.8	4.5	2.1
Muskingum	8.4	19.4	42.7	15.5	4.9	6.0	3.1
Noble	6.4	21.5	53.5	6.7	3.3	3.8	1.4
Perry	9.3	21.1	40.1	18.4	2.3	2.4	1.8
Pike	16.1	22.3	38.0	11.7	4.4	4.4	2.8
Ross	9.0	22.4	30.9	14.7	4.7	5.8	2.6
Seiote	14.6	20.3	35.3	15.9	5.1	4.8	2.6
Tuscarawas	9.3	18.5	45.5	13.1	4.2	5.8	2.7
Vinton	14.6	24.7	42.8	9.7	3.1	2.9	1.5
Washington	7.1	14.7	43.2	17.3	5.0	8.4	3.8

\* High School Graduates are persons who received either a high school diploma or equivalent (GED) and did not attend college.

Source: Ohio Data Users Center, 1990 STP3 Subject Report Series; June 1992.

educated at less than ninth grade level. Over half, 52.7 percent, were high school graduates with no advanced education; 37.4 percent had some sort of postsecondary education. Spouses were recorded as having a very similar level of educational attainment.

Although the parent sample has a higher level of educational attainment than the regional population, parental education still constitutes a barrier to educational participation. Even for this sample, just over a third of respondents have experience in postsecondary education. This limits the extent to which they can act as positive role models for the benefits of higher education.

### **SIBLING EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT**

Other siblings who have attended or are attending college, could counteract the negative influence of lower parental educational levels. The sibling provides a role model in place of the parents. Less than half of the parent sample, 38.6 percent, had other children who had attended college. The majority, 61.4 percent, had no children with college experience.

### **PARENTAL MARITAL STATUS**

Family structure has been demonstrated to be correlated with educational aspirations. Compared to the regional average of 61.1 percent married couples, 82.7 percent of the parent sample were married and only 14.4 percent separated or divorced. Again, this is probably a function of sample bias and may explain, in part, the predominantly positive attitudes to higher education expressed by the parents.

## **BARRIERS**

Perhaps not surprising, parents do not identify lack of parental encouragement as a barrier to their seniors' participation in higher education. By far the most frequently cited barrier is lack of finances, mentioned by 64.7 percent of respondents. It was the number one barrier for 41.2 percent of respondents.

The second most frequently specified barrier was lack of information about financial aid, referred to by 36.5 percent of respondents. Three more barriers are cited by a notable number of respondents: poor grades in school, 19.43 percent, dislike of school, 18.5 percent, and college being too far away, 17.8 percent. The pattern is similar to the responses of the seniors themselves, although seniors were also likely to cite not being intelligent enough.