

# The 2002 Charter High School Graduate Survey

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## INTRODUCTION

The 1990's saw the explosive development of charter schools across the United States. Nationally, much of the research about charter schools is aimed at student achievement, the kind that can be measured with standardized tests. Less research has focused on the student perspectives on charter schools: How do they perceive the nature of these new learning environments? What is it that they are finding of value? Though important, the student perspective has been almost invisible, occurring under the researchers' radar.

The Center on Education and Work (CEW) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison studied charter high schools with programs that utilize "real-world contexts" for learning. These schools connect students to the world beyond the classroom through a variety of strategies and instructional practices. Some examples of strategies and practices include: (a) placement in real-world settings such as places of employment; (b) instruction that brings the outside world into classrooms; and (c) instructional practices that simulate learning challenges similar to those found in the community and in work settings.

The 2002 Charter High School Graduate Survey is part of a multi-faceted study (see <http://www.ceb.wisc.edu/charterSchools/>) that includes detailed case studies of a sample of charter high schools. As part of the study, CEW commissioned the UW-Madison Survey Center to administer a written survey of graduates from the eight charter sites. The survey captured data about the perspectives of the graduates themselves. Several important questions were addressed: What are characteristics of students attending charter high schools? What was the status of graduates? Did graduates consider attending a charter school and participating in real-world practices useful, given what they were doing at the time of the survey?

A synopsis of the survey is available under another title, *Summary Report of the Charter High School Graduate Survey*. Accompanying the synopsis is a CD of portions of interviews of some graduates who completed the survey. The case studies of the schools will be available in the fall of 2003. They provide rich descriptions of all aspects of school development, history, educational programming, use of real-world practices, and additional student perspectives of the charter school experience gathered through interviews. Information on obtaining these materials is available at the project's website listed above.

This report is broken into nine discrete sections:

- Overview of schools in the study.
- Who are the students in the study?
- Overall how did the graduates feel about the charter school experience?
- What are the reactions of graduates regarding what they had learned while attending their charter high school? Did attending prevent dropping out?
- How did graduates regard any "real-world practices"?
- How did graduates regard the usefulness of their charter experience to aspects of personal development?
- What are the graduates' recommendations for improving charter schools?
- The status of the graduates six to nine months after graduation.
- Conclusions.
- Summary.

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## PREVIEW OF THE SCHOOLS IN THE STUDY

Students who graduated during 2002 from seven charter high schools and four charter school academies sponsored by an intermediary school district were surveyed for this study. While schools were selected because each had a focus on real-world practices, they proved to be quite diverse as the following brief descriptions show.

- **The Center for Advanced Research and Technology (CART)** located in Clovis, California, is a joint venture of the Fresno and Clovis Unified School Districts. CART opened in the fall of 2000, and serves 950 students in grades 11 and 12. Students attend from 16 different high schools, spending half of each day (either a morning or an afternoon session) at CART and the remainder of the day at the home high school. During three-hour blocks, teams of students plan and complete projects in one of 12 labs organized according to 4 clusters: Advanced Communications, Global Dynamics, Professional Sciences, and Engineering and Product Development. In each lab, teams of three to four teachers (one with an English credential) are in charge of 60 to 75 students. CART's curriculum is project based and principles adapted from Howard Gardener's ideas of multiple intelligences influence instructional practices.
- **Cesar Chavez Public Charter High School for Public Policy (Chavez)** is located in Washington D.C. and serves 240 students in grades 9-12. It opened in the fall of 1998, and the D.C. Public Charter School Board is the authorizer. Chavez serves economically disadvantaged families, most with Hispanic cultural ties. A major innovation is a public policy emphasis that requires students to participate in community settings and with experts in their fields develop and implement public policy. At the senior level the public policy emphasis culminates with a thesis. This focus on developing public policy leadership skills is implemented in conjunction with a rigorous college prep curriculum and an extensive array of student support services. Chavez is one of eleven schools selected by the Association of Supervision and Curriculum and the First Amendment Center. The initiative is designed to transform how all schools model and teach the rights and responsibilities of the First Amendment and how they help students become active and engaged citizens.
- **Henry Ford Academy (HFA)** located in Dearborn, Michigan is chartered by the Wayne County Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA). The school was founded in 1997 through collaboration between Ford Motor Company, Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village and RESA. HFA offers a full-day comprehensive program to students in grades 9-12 and enrolls approximately 420 students who come from throughout Wayne County—a racially and ethnically diverse area near Detroit. Representatives of Ford Motor Company continue to have an active voice in the school. HFA has several distinctive features including a curriculum organized into five developmental areas (academic content, technology, communications, thinking and learning, and personal development), business and community partnerships including the Ford Motor Company, block scheduling, an emphasis on skills associated with workforce success, and a *Senior Mastery Process*, a culminating program in which seniors explore careers and participate in internships.
- **Indian River Charter High School**, located in Vero Beach, Florida, opened in the fall of 1998 and at the time of this survey served 240 students in grades 9-12. The school emphasizes career and college preparation and incorporates character development as an integral part of the curriculum. The SCANS Report (Secretary's Report on Achieving

Necessary Skills) has shaped the curriculum.<sup>1</sup> Each IRCHS student signs a contract for 25 hours of instruction resulting in a college-like schedule and follows an individual educational plan based on several factors, including results of the TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education) and what is learned during a required first semester careers course. Through dual enrollment IRCHS students take significant numbers of community college courses and can also earn associate degrees at the nearby Indian River Community College, Mueller Campus. IRCHS classes are conducted from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays and until 4 p.m. on Fridays and 10:00 to 1 p.m. on Saturdays. Besides courses in character development and careers, courses in core curriculum areas (English, math, social studies, science, health, physical education) meet at various different times of the day and week.

- **The ISUS Trade & Technology Prep Community School (ISUS) Dayton Campus** is located in Dayton, Ohio and is one of two charter schools operated by ISUS. ISUS stands for "Improved Solutions to Urban Systems," and is a non-profit corporation authorized to operate six charter schools in Ohio. Currently ISUS has another school in Cincinnati. Dayton students participated in the survey. The Dayton campus is an ungraded high school serving 160 students ages 16-21. ISUS opened the Dayton campus in the fall of 1999, and it is chartered by the Ohio State Board of Education. The school serves chronic truants, dropouts, and youth with behavioral problems. ISUS places high priority on youth transformation as a response to the problems of urban education. The Dayton campus offers academic courses targeted at students earning a high school diploma, a trade and construction program, and a computer technology program. Staff from the nearby Sinclair Community College manage and teach courses in both programs and ISUS students are enrolled as Sinclair students. Through the construction program students rehabilitate homes in nearby neighborhoods as part of Dayton's efforts to revitalize central city neighborhoods. A manufacturing program was under development at the time of the survey.
- **Four St. Clair County Intermediate School District (IMSD) Public School Academies** are located in Port Huron, Michigan and organized according to career academies. These academies and other non-charter academies operate under one administrative umbrella, the St. Clair Intermediate School District. The 4 chartered academies (Plastics Manufacturing Technology, Health Careers, Hospitality, Information Technology) are attended by 500 students on a half-day basis, with the remainder of the day spent at the student's home high school. Business representatives are involved in each academy through advisory committees. Teachers of the four academies are non-union while teachers of non-charter academies belong to a union. In this way the goal of workforce preparation is achieved through a pragmatic business/education partnership. Students come from one of twelve county high schools within seven local school districts and students enter an academy in their junior and/or senior years.
- **The Textron/Chamber of Commerce Charter School (Textron)** in Providence, Rhode Island, chartered by the Rhode Island Board of Regents of Elementary and Secondary Education, began in 1997 from an existing school program. Textron served 200 students in grades 9-12 from the Providence School District. Textron is divided organizationally into a "Lower School" and an "Upper School" based upon the age and demonstrated competencies of students, all of whom attend the school on a full-day basis. Leaders and staff, driven by the school's mission and a dedication to serving

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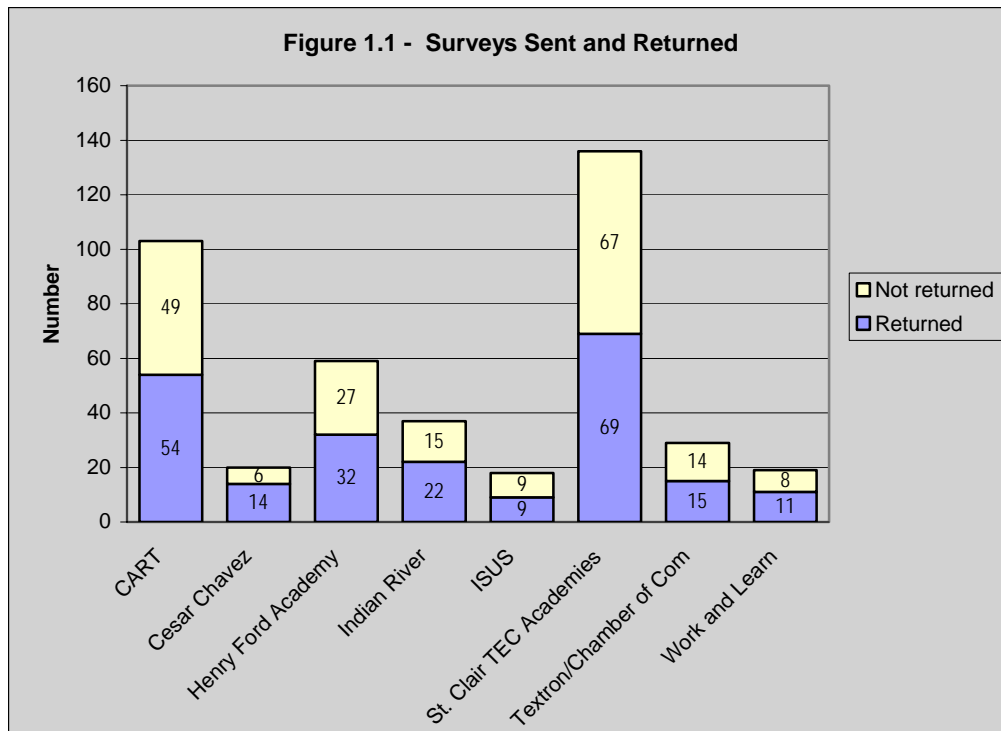
<sup>1</sup> See <http://wdr.doleta.gov/SCANS/>. SCANS was the result of a US Department of Labor Commission. The 1992 reports list competencies for students from the perspective of skill needed to succeed in the world of work.

urban youth, have developed a program with six components. These components are: (a) a core academic curriculum, (b) longitudinal assessment methods and skill building periods, (c) senior research requirements, (d) use of rubrics and an attempt to employ a variety of teaching methods, (e) school to work programs that include job placements and community service, and (f) additional programs that extend the school day and augment instruction.

- The Work and Learning Center (WLC)** located in Madison, Wisconsin, serves 16-20 year old high school dropouts and potential dropouts. WLC was founded in 1976 and in 1996 converted to a charter school. Students are admitted who are at least 16 years old, and would have been in their third year of high school. Most WLC students have failed many courses during the first two years of high school, and have either dropped out or are skipping school regularly. Serious problems at home or in the community have contributed to school problems. WLC is a small program in two, geographically separate sites: Brearly Street and Park Street. Each site serves 64 students and has four teachers. All entering students are classified as juniors, although most do not have enough credits to qualify for junior status at a regular high school. Students enter together in small groups of about 16. They move through the program as a cohesive cohort until graduation. The two year "completion program" is broken down into four semesters, each with a distinct curriculum involving specific work and class experiences. Students graduate on completion of all the requirements for all four semesters, without concern for credits. The school has stringent attendance and work completion requirements, both in class and at worksites.

**The School-by-School Response to the Graduate Survey**

Four hundred and twenty one 2002 graduates received the survey and 226 surveys were returned, a 54% response rate. As Figure 1.1 shows each site participating in the overall study was represented in the survey.



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## WHO ARE THE STUDENTS IN THE STUDY?

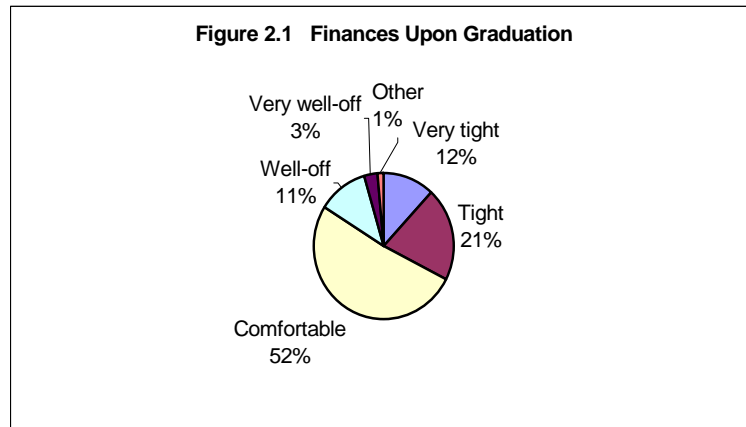
This section describes graduates who completed the survey in terms of characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, household financial status, and the kind of community they lived in while attending high school. Also described are the aspirations of surveyed graduates when they first entered the charter high school.

### Gender and Ethnicity

Survey respondents were composed of 238 females (59%) and 183 males (41%). The ethnic composition of all respondents was 60% Caucasian, 17% African American, 11% Hispanic, 7% Asian, 4% Native American or Alaska Native, and 1% Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. More respondents described their community as being suburban or urban than rural and small town, reflecting the geographic locations of the schools in the study.

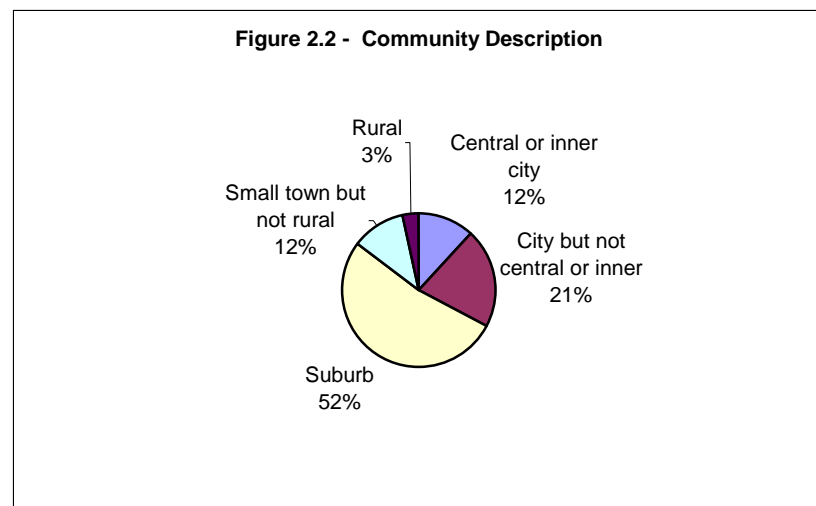
### Household Financial Status

Graduates were asked to describe their family's finances at the time of graduation. As Figure 2.1 shows, just over 50% said their finances were "comfortable", although one-third described their family finances in high school as "tight" or "very tight."



### The Community

Graduates described the community in which they lived while in high school and as Figure 2.2 shows half said they lived in suburbs, one-fifth in a city, and one-eighth in the central city.



## Aspirations While in High School

Graduates were asked to think back to the time in their lives before they attended the charter high school and recall what they thought at that time they would most likely do after high school. They selected from a list of possibilities. A large number (73%) of surveyed charter school graduates expected to attend two or four year colleges, with 21% planning to attend a 2-year college, technical school, or vocational school and 52% attending a four year college. Seven percent were anticipating entering the workforce and 13% said that they “never really thought about options after high school”.

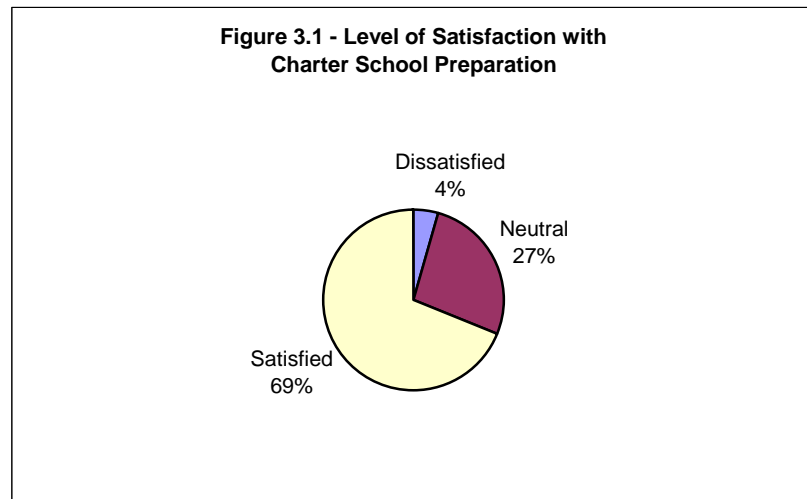
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## HOW DO GRADUATES FEEL ABOUT THEIR CHARTER SCHOOL EXPERIENCE?

Overall, graduates gave their charter school a strong endorsement. Graduates were asked a series of questions. How well did the charter schools prepare the graduates for what they were doing at the time of the survey? How did the quality of the charter high school compare with that of a typical high school? If the graduates had it to do all over again, would they go to the same charter high school?

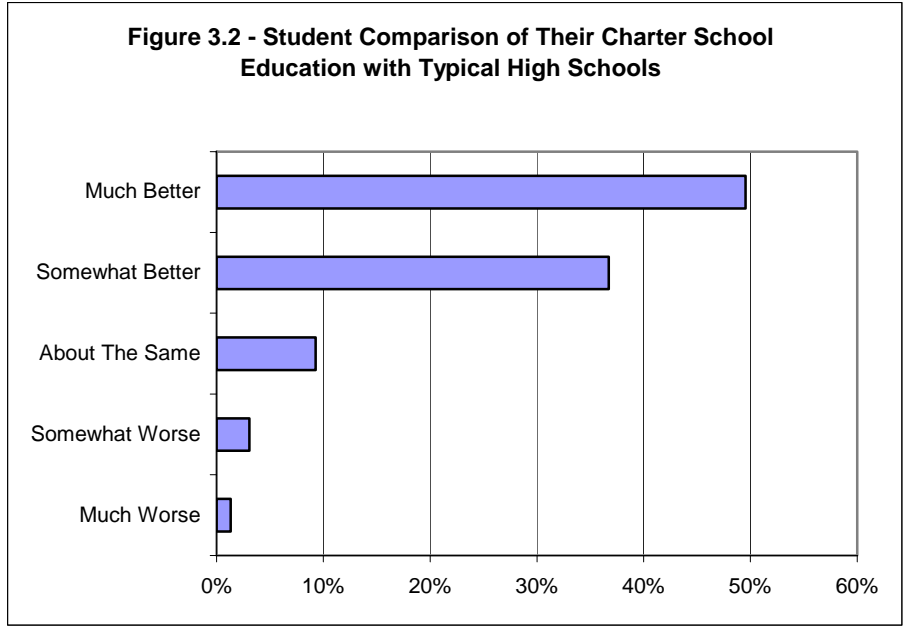
### Level of Satisfaction With Charter School Preparation

Graduates were asked how satisfied they were with the preparation they received while attending the charter school, given what they were doing at the time they completed the survey. As Figure 3.1 shows, almost 70% said they were satisfied, the most positive response. Slightly over one fourth picked neutral, and only 4% were dissatisfied.



### Comparing the Charter School With a Typical High School

As Figure 3.2 illustrates most of the graduates rated their charter schools as somewhat or much better than typical high schools. Only four% rated their school as somewhat or much worse.



**Choosing the Charter School Again**

When asked whether they would go to the same charter high school if they had to do it over again, 93% of the respondents said they would attend the same school. The comments made in connection with this question supported this overwhelmingly positive result. Many praised the school, with comments such as “It was fun” and “It was a great experience.” Many others made comments to the effect that their school prepared them for college or work. Still others praised the school environment (“Nice atmosphere”, “Small classes”) or praised the teachers (“The teachers were really nice and available at all times for all reasons”). Another group commented on the academic challenge (“It was a wonderful challenge”) and quality learning (“It was the best learning experience of my life”). Among the 7% indicating they would not choose to attend the same school, several called it disorganized. Others did not find the school was a good match to their interests.

Those 7% who thought the quality of their charter school worse than a typical high school, as one would predict, were less likely to indicate they would attend again. Yet 4 of the 10 of the graduates who felt that their charter schools were worse, or somewhat worse, than a typical high school would again attend the same charter school while six said they would not.

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**WHAT ARE THE REACTIONS OF GRADUATES REGARDING WHAT THEY LEARNED WHILE ATTENDING THEIR CHARTER HIGH SCHOOL? DID ATTENDING PREVENT DROPPING OUT?**

Graduates completed three open-ended questions about what they had learned at the charter school, one about something they wished they had learned while at the charter, and what the school could have done to better prepare them for life after graduation. Analysis showed that once again those completing the survey were satisfied with what they had learned while attending their charter schools. Following are findings according to questions.

## Things Learned at Charter High Schools Considered Most Useful

On an open-ended question, 70% of the graduates identified what they learned at the charter school that they consider "most useful" given what they were doing at the time of the survey. Only a very small percentage identified knowledge or skills that fall within the traditional academic disciplines, or that would have been measured by a standardized achievement test. Out of the 151 items mentioned by the graduates, only a handful relate directly to what most educators would consider core content of the academic disciplines. Examples are "the actual book work we did", "math", "writing papers," "writing efficient essays," "revising essays," and "APA style writing."

In creating categories of items identified by the graduates as most useful, most fall into four headings: public communication, professional conduct and work relationships, personal effectiveness, and skills related to job-specific success/college success. Rather than the content of the core academic disciplines, what the graduates were finding most useful was learning how knowledge and skills are applied in real-world settings where people work in teams, learning from and depending on each other, and where self-motivation and a sense of responsibility for completion of work are expected. Below, under the four headings, we list examples of the items.

### 1. **Public communication** (21 items classified in this category)

#### Examples

- Public speaking and making formal presentations (mentioned five times)
- Doing presentations, not being afraid to present to a class
- People skills and presentation skills

### 2. **Professional conduct and work relationships** (22 items classified in this category)

#### Examples

- Working well with a team (mentioned 7 times)
- Dealing with people
- Charter school made me more open-minded
- How to interact with people of all different races, backgrounds, etc.
- How to act and talk in a professional world

### 3. **Personal effectiveness** (31 items classified in this category)

#### Examples

- I learned my strengths and weaknesses
- Learning how to problem solve
- Spending my time wisely
- Self discipline
- Study habits

### 3. **Job-specific and college success-related skills** (52 items classified in this category)

#### Examples

- Computer skills (mentioned 13 times)
- How to do drafting and autoCAD
- I know a lot of medical terminology and learned a lot of nurse skills
- Learning skills that are taught at college
- Finding a job, they show you how and make it easier

## Little Use for What Students Were Currently Doing

When asked if there was something that they learned at the charter high school that was of little use to what they were doing at the time of the survey, three-fourths did not identify anything, again suggesting high levels of satisfaction. When asked if anything should be

dropped from the school's curriculum, several students singled out specific classes, both traditional academic subjects and vocational offerings. However, there seemed to be no patterns regarding the kind of classes that should be dropped.

A related question asked graduates to identify something that a team planning a new charter high school should definitely exclude because it really doesn't help educate high school students. Almost one quarter of the graduates said that that nothing should be left out. Several pointed to rules or dress codes. Some listed specific subjects, activities, or particular approaches to teaching that they thought were not productive. However, no patterns emerged showing that graduates would make major exclusions in the educational programs they experienced at the charter school they attended.

### **What Graduates Wish They Had Learned**

Almost 40% of the respondents identified something that they now wish that they had learned while at the charter high school. While the comments ranged widely, close to 20% suggested more mathematics, and 6% of the 83 graduates indicated that they should have had more writing. Several mentioned desiring more information on what it was like in college. A few mentioned a desire for specific academic subjects and help in improving their work or study skills. Several suggested courses that were clearly aimed at career preparation: culinary arts, web design and computer programming, and construction. Several listed other activities aimed at preparing students for careers, such as internships, mentor experiences, and job fairs.

### **What Could Have Been Done to Be Better Prepared for Life After Graduation**

About three quarters of the responding graduates had nothing to tell their charter high school about how they could have been better prepared for life after graduation, another indication of a high level of satisfaction. They left the relevant question blank as instructed. Furthermore, about one quarter who did respond showed high regard for the school and its teachers and that there was nothing that could have been improved.

Those who indicated some dissatisfaction fall in a distinct minority. A total of 23 respondents said their charter high school had not been tough enough, and two said it was too tough. Within the responses of the 23, a large category of responses focused on more preparation for life after school, including more assistance in knowing how college would differ from high school, and more emphasis on how to survive as an independent individual who must work and pay the bills. Several thought their former charter high schools should have better prepared them in areas that are traditionally handled by high school counselors, selecting a college, knowing more about the training and work requirements associated with various careers, and selection of a career pathway. For others, the differences between high school and college were dramatic, differences for which they felt at least somewhat unprepared. For example, several stated that college teachers did not care about them in the same way that their high school teachers had. A number of students felt that they had not been warned about how much time would be required for college success, and about how difficult it would be to manage both work and college together.

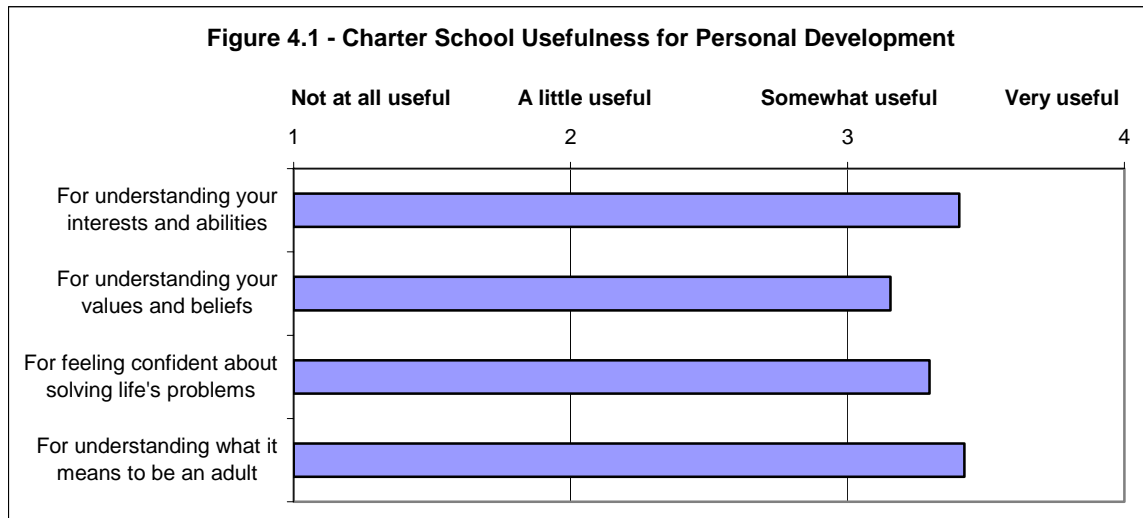
### **Did Attending Prevent Dropping Out?**

Graduates were asked whether they seriously considered dropping out and not graduating while at the charter high school. About 13% (28 of 226) said they sometimes or often thought about dropping out. Of 28 students, 71% credited the charter high school with preventing them from dropping out.

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## HOW DID GRADUATES REGARD THE USEFULNESS OF THEIR CHARTER EXPERIENCE TO ASPECTS OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT?

Graduates were asked to consider how useful their charter school experience was for achieving what researchers considered aspects of personal development: understanding their interests and abilities; understanding their values and beliefs; feeling confident about solving life's problems; and understanding what it means to be an adult. On these aspects, average scores for scale points showed that all graduates completing the survey, as Figure 4.1 shows, regarded their former charter schools as being somewhat useful for personal development. For two aspects (interests and abilities, what it means to be an adult) average scores were approaching 3.5.



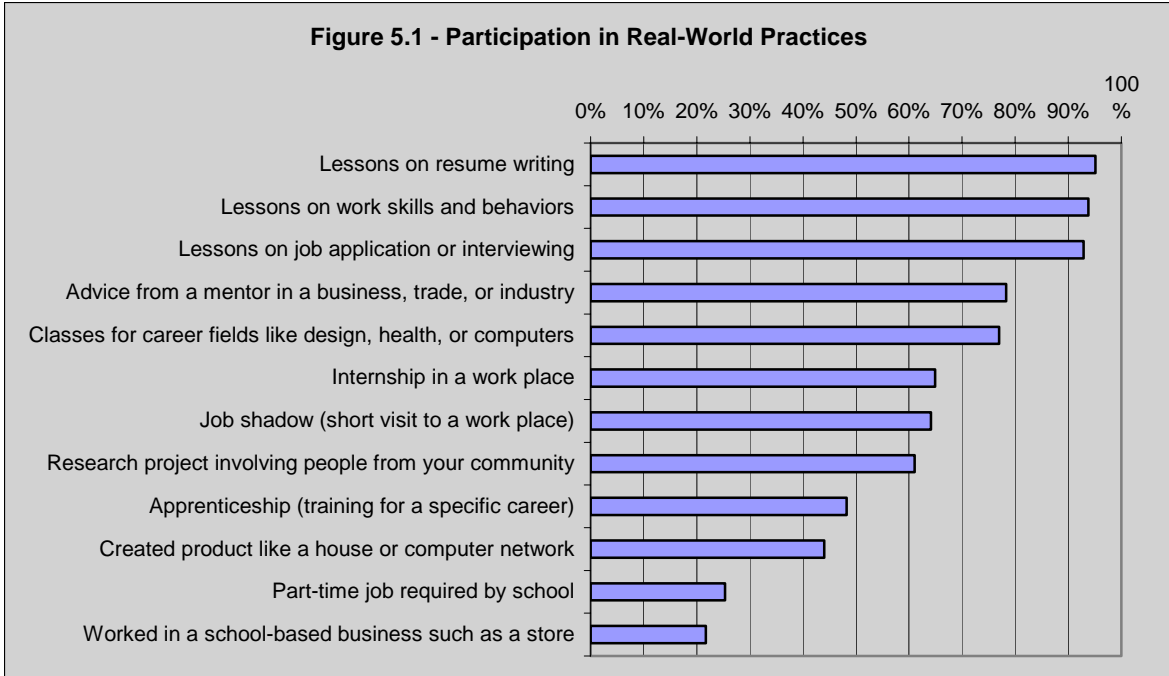
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## HOW DID GRADUATES REGARD REAL-WORLD ACTIVITIES?

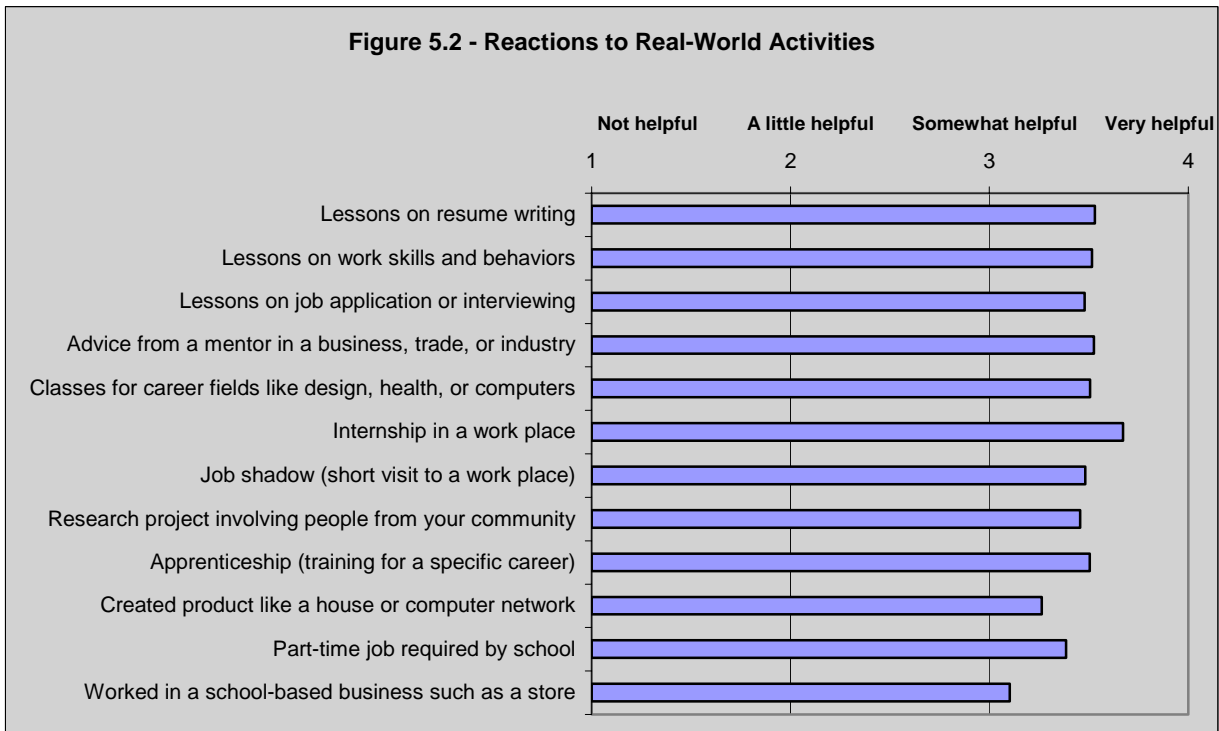
Researchers were interested in student reaction to “real-world practices”, a collection of strategies, practices and activities that connect learning to the adult world beyond the classroom. Thus, the survey aimed to address two basic questions: What practices were available to students? And how did students regard these practices?

### Activities Offered and Reactions

The graduates were given a list of possible real-world activities and were also asked to indicate those in which they had actually participated while in high school. Figure 5.1 lists the activities in order of the percentage of graduates who participated. Practically everyone had lessons in resume writing, work skills, and interviewing. Far less common was required work experience, such as a required part-time job or working in a school-based business. (It is important to point out that none of the programs had formal apprenticeship training, and that the graduates' responses probably mean only that close to 50% had some training for a specific career).



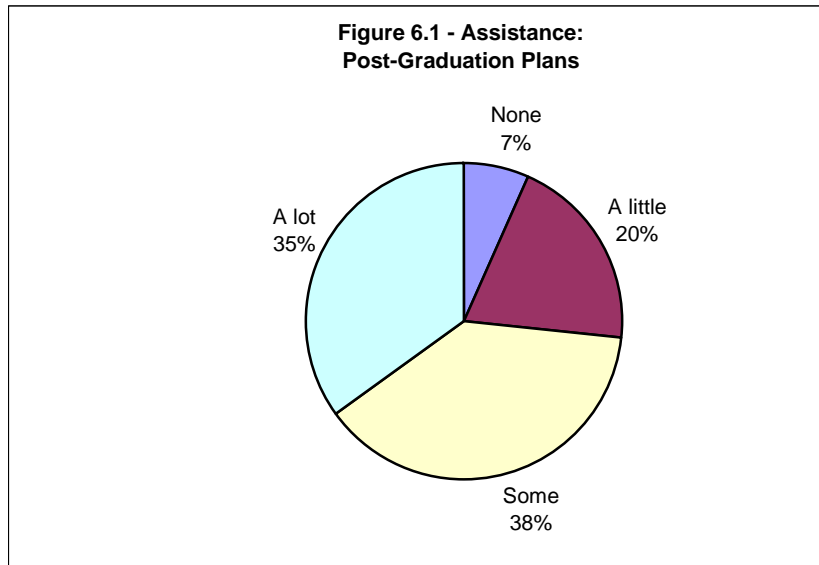
Graduates considered real-world practices in terms of how helpful each was in preparing them for what “you are doing now”, using a four-point scale from “not helpful” to “very helpful”. All real-world activities received high marks between “somewhat helpful” and “very helpful” as Figure 5.2 shows. The averages of all survey responses on each the four options and for each activity are presented.



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## HOW MUCH ASSISTANCE DID CHARTERS PROVIDE STUDENTS IN DEVELOPING POST-SECONDARY PLANS OR IN ACQUIRING EMPLOYMENT?

As Figure 6.1 shows, almost all of the graduates, 93%, indicated that their high schools had helped them to some degree in developing post-graduation plans with 35% saying they received “a lot” of assistance and 38% “some” assistance.



On another question, 87% said that, while attending the charter school, they had developed career goals, and over 60% indicated the school had required them to develop a formal post-graduation plan. At one school, all 22 graduates said they were required to develop the plan, and there was no school in which less than a majority indicated they were required to develop a formal plan. This indicates that the opportunity to develop formal post-graduation plans was available at all of the surveyed schools. The results varied among the high schools, however, because at some schools the particular courses or experiences in which post-graduation plans were developed were not required and therefore not attended by all of the students.

Development of post-graduation plans typically takes place in a larger context of career and college preparation activities. Relating to the larger context, on another open-ended question that asked students to identify what they learned at the charter school that they found most useful given what they were doing at the time of the survey, analysis showed that a sub-group of respondents stated that career-related classes that taught skills in subjects such as anatomy and physiology, welding, or computers resulted in the most useful kinds of learning. For others what helped most were on-the-job experiences in an occupation having career interest. Still others indicated that it was the school’s general preparation for college that was most useful. Each of these may be considered part of the content and context for effective development of post-graduation plans.

Another survey question asked those working (full or part-time) if the charter high school had helped them in any way to get their current job. Fifty-one percent found jobs without help from the school, while 19% received some help.

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## WHAT ARE THE GRADUATES' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING CHARTER SCHOOLS?

Researchers were interested in what general advice graduates would give charter high school planners about features that should be included in the charter high school experience. More specifically, researchers were interested in what students would have to say about including real-world practices in new charter high schools.

### **Advice on What a New Charter School Should “Be Sure” to Include**

Given the open-ended opportunity to identify courses, programs, assignments, or activities that should be required components in a new charter school, the graduates contributed their thoughts and ideas. Many suggested new courses. These ranged widely and included, for example, computers, culinary arts, Japanese, welding, criminal justice, veterinary medicine, music, and courses in finance. In suggesting new courses, the graduates made 130 recommendations, but only a few were mentioned more than three times. The most frequently mentioned course recommendations related to computers (i.e. computers, CAD, Cisco, web design), and in this category there were 25 course recommendations. The next largest set of recommendations was in health and medicine, where there were nine courses recommended.

Rather than naming courses, other graduates suggested career-oriented activities, such as internships, mentoring relationships, career-oriented counseling activities, and hands-on activities relating to specific occupations. Within the career-oriented activities, there was a strong pattern evident. A large number of the graduates recommended that charter schools offer students opportunities to participate in community work settings through internships, apprenticeships, a senior practicum with a career-related component, or co-op programs.

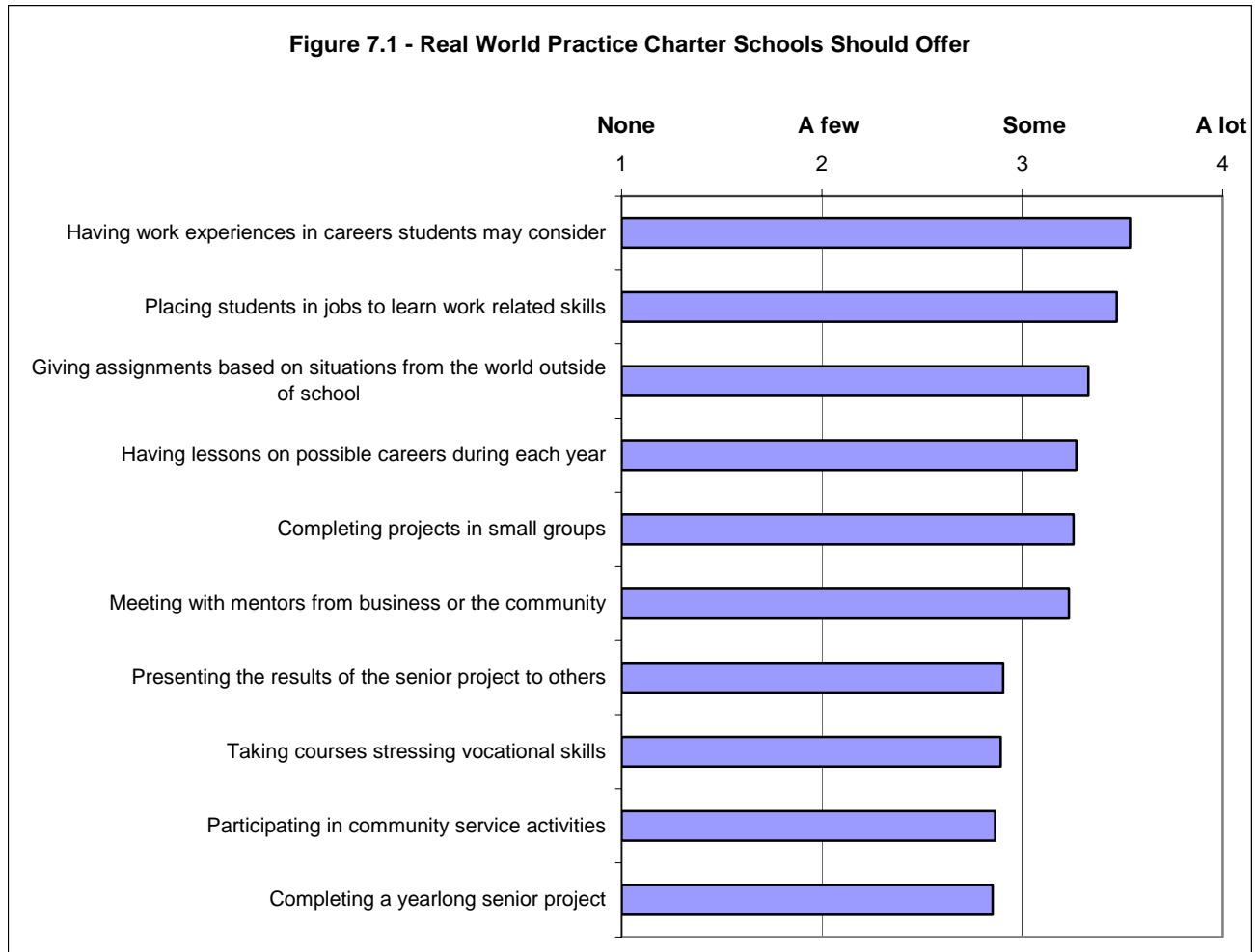
A number of the graduates thought that charter schools should provide two features often found in large schools but seldom in small schools—sports programs and advanced placement classes. The number of recommendations in these two areas was small, however, compared to the course and career-oriented activities recommended.

### **Advice About Real World Practices**

Graduates were asked their opinions on how many real-world practices a new charter school should offer. A list was provided and graduates responded by selecting "none," "a few," "some," or "a lot" of each practice. Figure 7.1 presents the results according to a computed average for each practice. Given these overall averages, the top two recommendations were forms of work-based learning: work experiences in careers that students may consider and jobs placements to learn work-related skills. According to average scores the second or middle group of practices that students would recommend are: (a) assignments based on situations from the world outside of school, (b) lessons on possible careers during each year, (c) projects in small groups, and (d) mentors from business or the community. Lower averages indicating more students marked “None” and/or “A few” were: (a) presenting the results of the senior project to others, (b) courses stressing vocational skills, (c) community service, and (d) year-long senior project.

A review of percentages of responses according to the four choices (none, a few, some, and a lot) on each activity supports the above findings. Just over 63% said new charter schools should offer “a lot” of work experiences in careers students may be considering and nearly 59% said that new schools should offer “a lot” of practices that place students in jobs to

learn work-related skills. In comparison, percentages of responses falling in the categories of “a few” or “some” increased for such practices as (a) completing a year-long senior project, (b) presenting the results of senior projects to others, (c) taking vocational courses, and (d) community service activities. So students were less in favor of these practices.



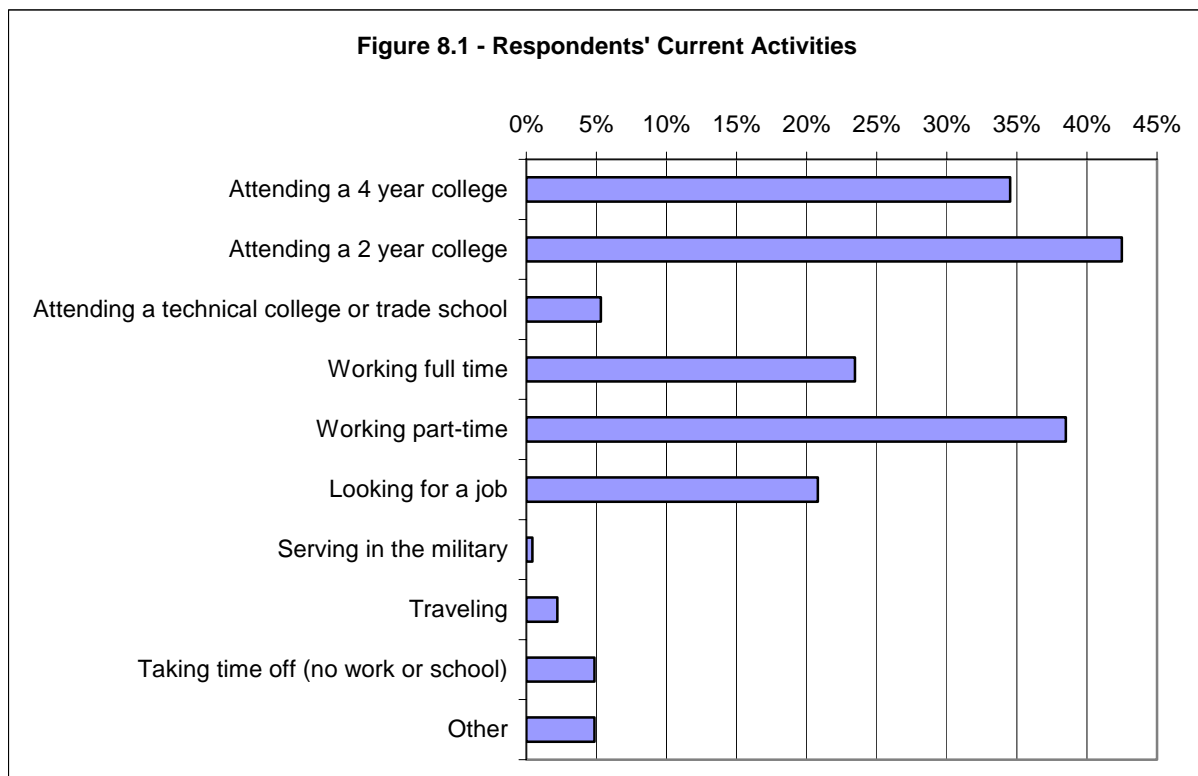
## STATUS OF THE GRADUATES SIX TO NINE MONTHS AFTER GRADUATION

Six to nine months after completing high school, what was the status of the charter school graduates? Were they working? Furthering their education? Were they satisfied with the opportunities that became available after high school? The survey addressed these and other questions through a series of items relating to the graduates’ current status and to the transition from high school. The graduates’ responses indicate that the majority of the group has made a successful transition to post-secondary education and to the workforce. They appear to be both optimistic and also realistic about their futures, and express hopes and priorities reflecting solid middle-class American values.

Information about the current status of the graduates is presented through a series of questions: What are the graduates doing now? Are their current activities what they had anticipated while in high school? What are the sources of income and support? To what extent are the graduates self-supporting? Are they satisfied with what they are doing? Did they experience difficulty or anxiety in making the transition from high school? How do they view the future? What are their priorities?

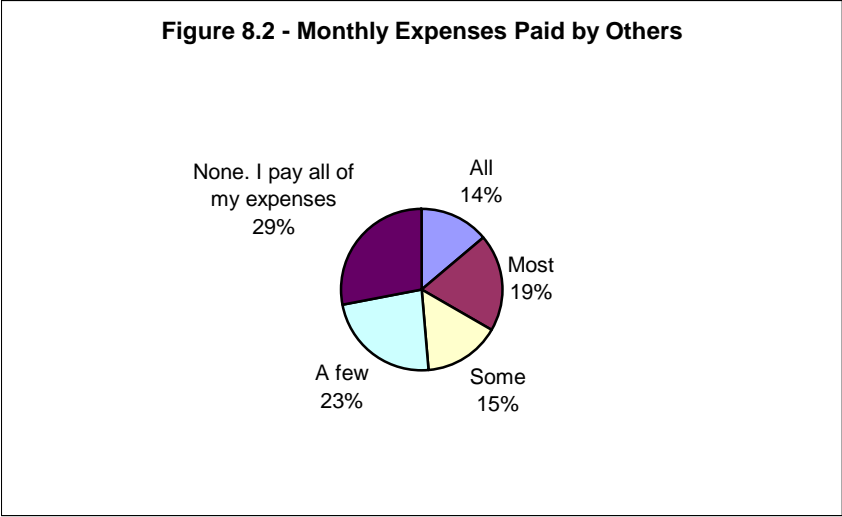
### What Graduates Were Doing At the Time of the Survey

Figure 8.1 below illustrates that over 80% are currently engaged in some form of additional education at the time of the survey. At the same time, however, 61% are working full or part-time or are job hunting. A subsequent question indicates that about half of the graduates are also paying all, or all but a few, of their monthly expenses. Consequently most of these youth are trying to balance the demands of both schooling and the workplace. In addition, it is important to note that because it is only 5% who report that they are not involved in work or school, most of the 21% who are looking for a job are currently enrolled in a post-secondary school.

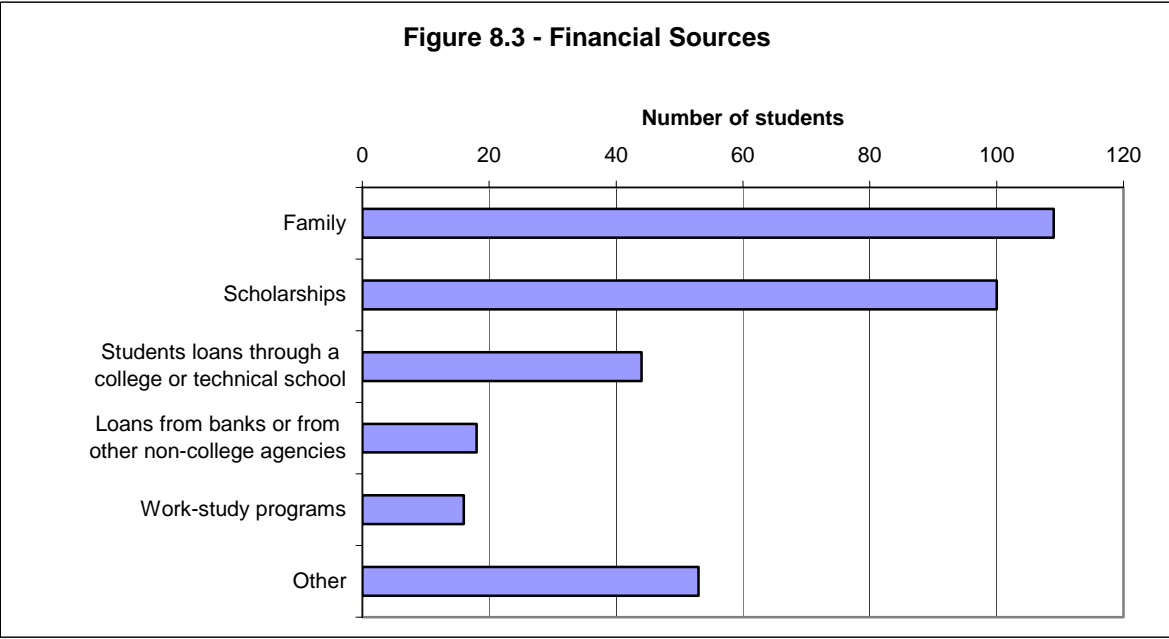


### Sources of Financial Support

As shown below in Figure 8.2, when asked about the sources of funds for their living expenses, 29% said they were paying all of their own expenses, and another 23% were paying all but a few of their monthly expenses. The 48% remaining were getting some or all of their support from others.



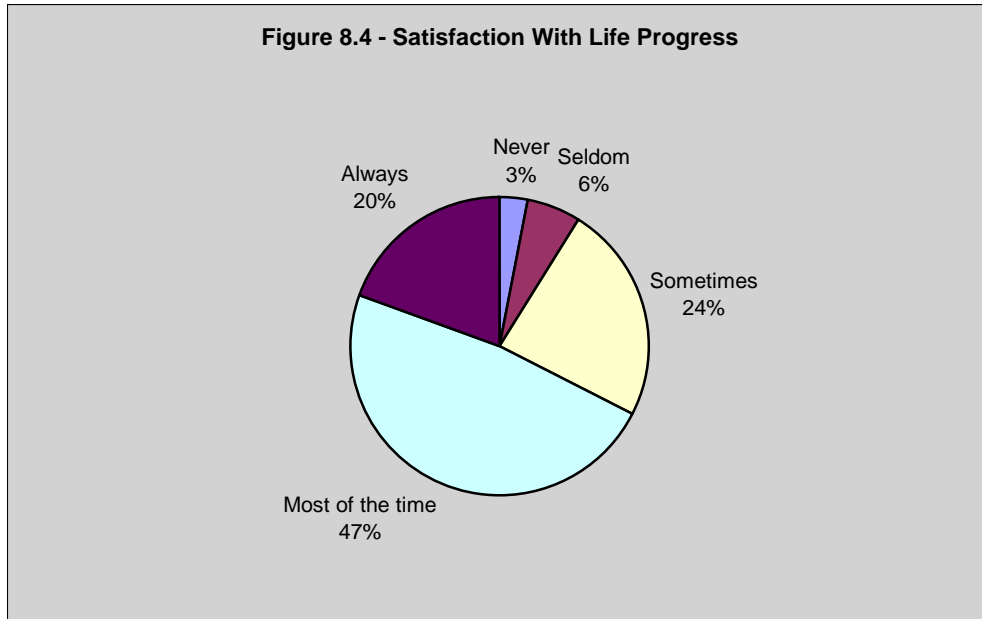
Though 80% of the graduates were working, only 29% were receiving no support from other sources. For the 69% receiving support, as illustrated in Figure 8.3, the graduates listed family and scholarships as sources. Loans were the next largest source of funding.



**Satisfied With Post-Graduate Status**

Two-thirds of the graduates reported that they were “always” or “most of the time” satisfied with what they were doing at the time of the survey as reflected in Figure 8.4 below. Those saying they never or seldom felt satisfied make up only 9%. These results support the picture of graduates who are generally quite satisfied with their lives.

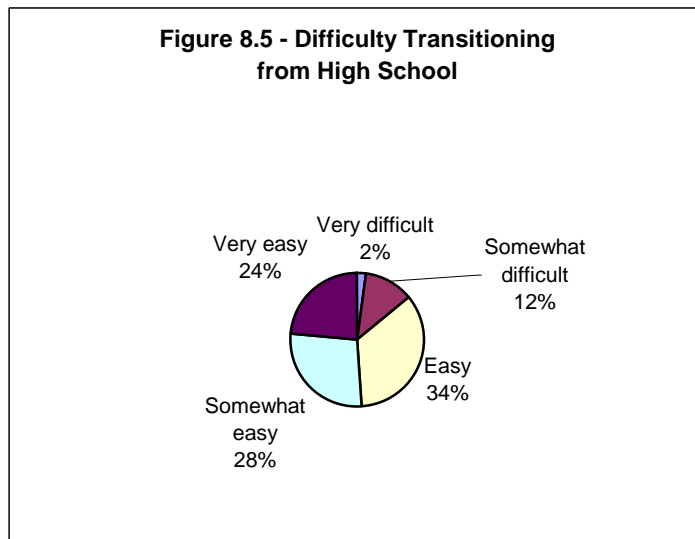
**Figure 8.4 - Satisfaction With Life Progress**



**How Difficult was the Transition from High School to Present Status?**

The graduates were asked how easy or difficult it was to make the transition from high school to whatever they are doing now. As Figure 8.5 shows, only 14% described the transition as difficult or somewhat difficult. Most described the transition as very easy, somewhat easy, or easy.

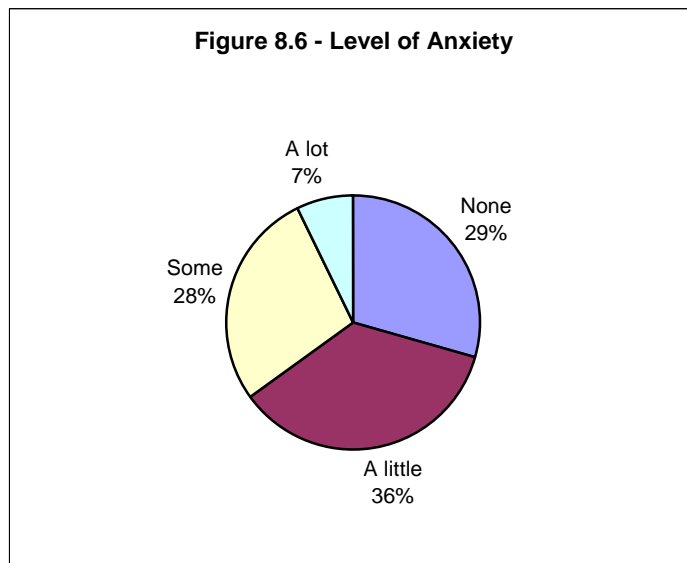
**Figure 8.5 - Difficulty Transitioning from High School**



**Transition: Worry or Anxiety?**

The majority of graduates reported having made this transition without a great deal of anxiety. Figure 8.6 indicates that only 7% said they had experienced "a lot" of anxiety.

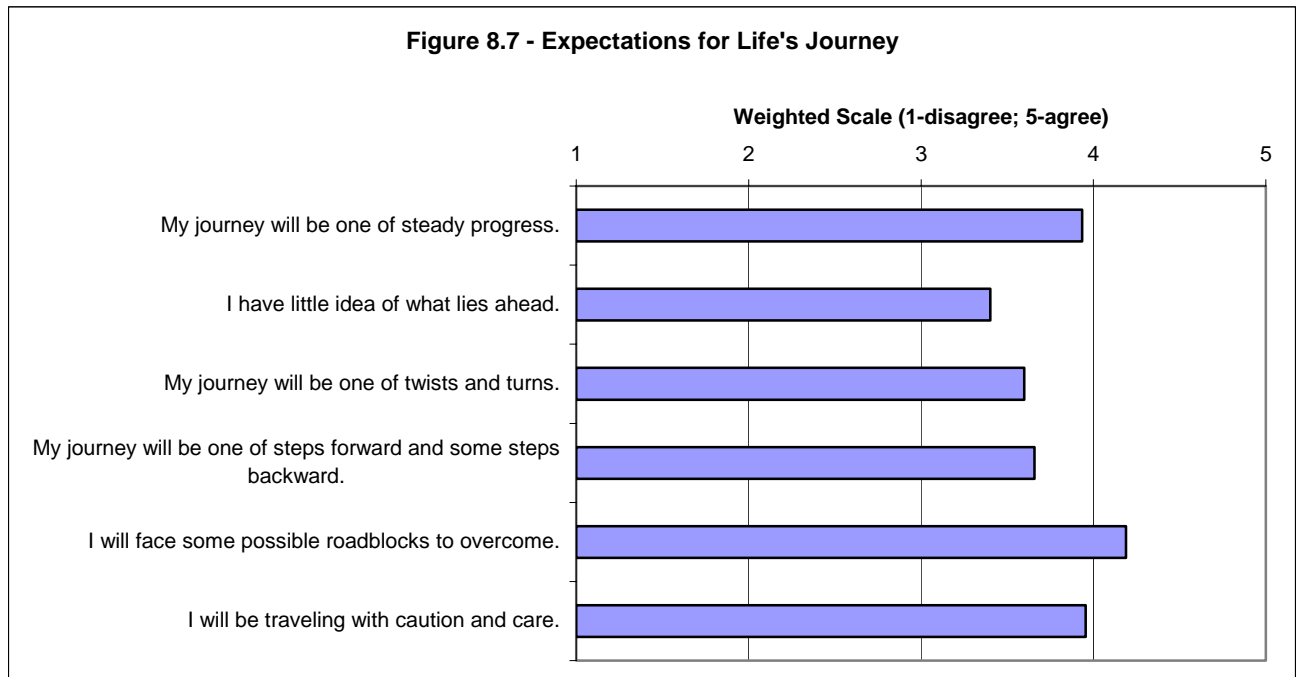
**Figure 8.6 - Level of Anxiety**



## How Graduates View the Future

Graduates were asked to think about their life as a journey and indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with each of several statements about how the journey might proceed during the next five years. Figure 8.7 below charts the results. As a group the graduates seem to be optimistic about the future, although they recognize that there will be setbacks and challenges.

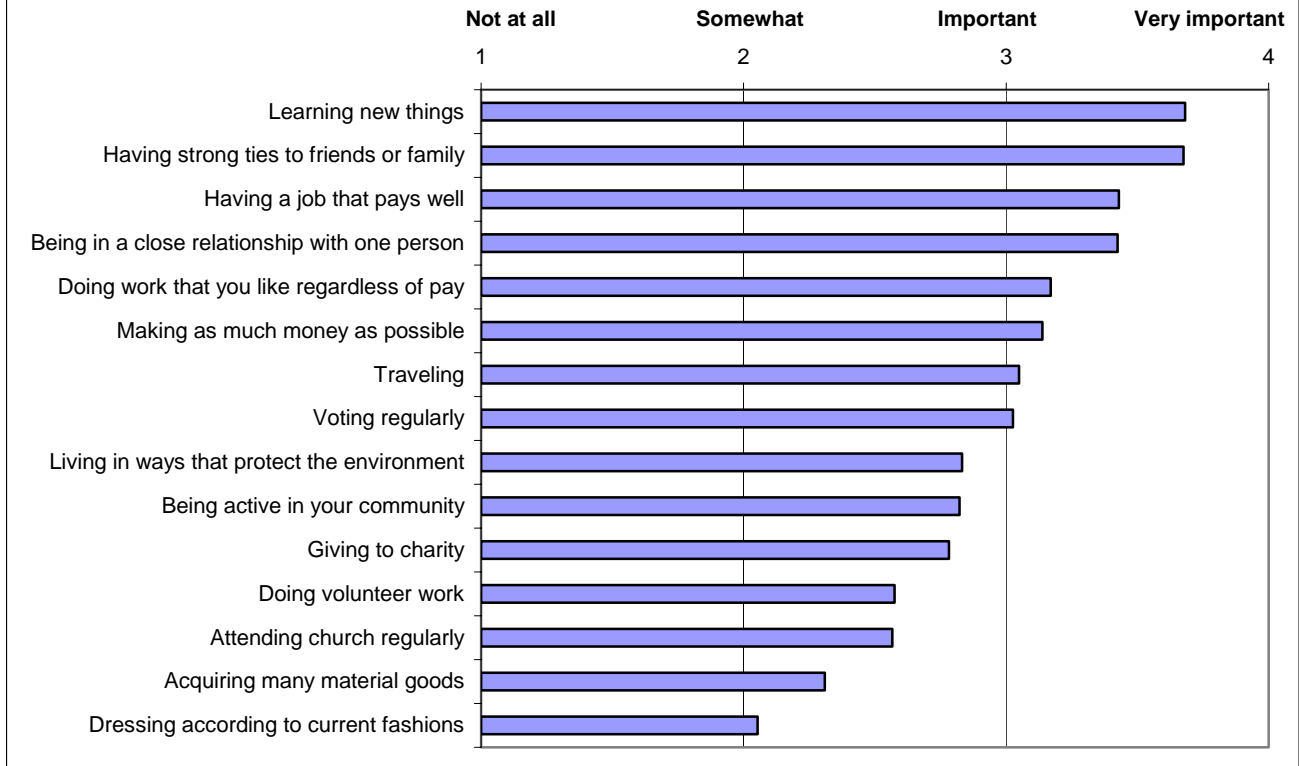
The largest agreement came on the statements, "I will face some possible roadblocks to overcome" and "I will be traveling with caution and care." These suggest the graduates face the future with some trepidation. Yet close behind came, "My journey will be one of steady progress." It appears that they are neither unrealistically optimistic nor pessimistic about their future, recognizing that there will be obstacles but that these can be overcome.



## Long Term Priorities of Graduates

Graduates were asked to indicate how important they expected several activities to be to their lifestyle when they reached age 35. Below in Figure 8.8, the responses are shown in order of the weighted average of the scores. It appears these high school graduates place a high premium on education and job success, as well as developing a relationship with one person. They put much less emphasis on acquiring material possessions or clothing. In the middle were activities related to being a good citizen, such as voting regularly, protecting the environment, being active in the community, giving to charity, and doing volunteer work.

**Figure 8.8 - Life Priorities By Age 35**



## CONCLUSIONS

The findings reported above resulted in seven major conclusions.

### **Overall, Graduates of Charter High Schools Were Satisfied With Their Charter Experience**

Survey findings showed that responding graduates were highly satisfied with their charter high school experiences. Nearly 70% of all respondents were satisfied with how the charter school prepared them for what they were doing at the time of the survey. High percentages (nearly 87%) also felt that compared to the typical high school their charter schools were either somewhat or much better. If they had to do it all over again almost all responding graduates (93%) would attend the same charter high school.

### **Charter School Experience Helped Graduates in Several Ways**

Survey findings suggested that the charter school experience helped graduates in several ways. When asked to consider the usefulness of their charter school experiences across four developmental areas: understanding their interests and abilities, understanding their values and beliefs, feeling confident about solving life's problems, and understanding what it means to be an adult, schools got very high marks. Average scores were well over 3 on a 4 points scale (not at all useful, a little useful, somewhat useful, very useful) on the four developmental areas. This suggests that represented charter high schools made significant

contributions to personal development.

Represented charter high schools also contributed to career planning and educational planning. Graduates felt that they were well prepared for life after high school, and most had developed post-graduation plans. High numbers (87%) had developed career goals while in high school, and over 60% had developed formal post-graduation plans. Three-quarters of all graduates said that school staff gave them some or a lot of help in developing post-graduation plans.

Charter schools also deterred small numbers of students from dropping out. About 13% of the respondents (28 of 226) said that they had sometimes or often thought about dropping out, and 71% of this subgroup credited their charter high school with preventing them from dropping out.

### **Charter High School Graduates Felt That They Had Successfully Made the Transition From High School**

Passage from high school and to life after high school can be a difficult time period for the developing adolescent. Survey findings showed that significant numbers of graduates reported that they had successfully made the transition to higher education and work with a minimum of anxiety and worry. Furthermore, high numbers (86%) reported that their transition was easy, somewhat easy or very easy. High numbers (67%) also reported that they were always or most of the time satisfied with what they were doing at the time of the survey. Thus, these charter school graduates appeared to have successfully made a significant life transition.

### **Prevalent Forms of Real World Practices**

While charter high schools represented in the survey had an array of real-world practices more students participated in school activities as compared to practices requiring the involvement of community representatives such as employers. Practically everyone had lessons in resume writing, work skills, and interviewing. In comparison fewer students participated in forms of work-based learning or placement on a job.

### **High Regard for Real World Activities and the Value of Such Practices**

Schools attended by graduates completing the survey in some form utilized “real-world practices” which connected students to the world beyond the classroom. Therefore, real-world practices and activities were a focus of a number of survey questions.

Graduates completing the survey had high regards for real-world activities. Responding graduates considered an array of such activities from resume writing to internships as being either “somewhat helpful” or “very helpful” given what graduates were doing at the time of the survey. In addition when asked to provide advice to planners of new charter schools regarding including real-world practices, forms of work-based learning received a high recommendation.

Furthermore, the value of these real-world activities appeared to be derived from how they contributed to personal career planning, and from what was learned about the ingredients for success in a real-world, adult-oriented setting. Taken together, the capacity for personal career planning and the direct learning from experience in real-world settings appear to have been important factors for these youth while they were in high school and in the transition to post-secondary education or to work.

## **Charter Graduates, Like Most High School Students, Pursued More Education While Working**

Most charter school graduates aspired to continue their education after graduation and most met that aspiration at the time of the survey. Before enrolling in the charter school, 52% of the responding graduates thought they would attend a four-year college and 21% a two-year college for a total of 73%. These responses were very similar to those expressed by high school students completing the University of Michigan Survey Research Center study "Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth." This recent study used a large sample of youth while they were still in high school. The study found that 23% of youth projected that they would probably graduate from a technical school or a two-year college, and that 50% projected graduation from a four-year college. This suggests that, when considered as a whole, graduates completing the survey are representative of American students in terms of aspirations for more education.

The survey also revealed that charter school graduates had pursued their aspirations—slightly more than 8 out of 10 were continuing their education in some form at the time of the survey with nearly 35% attending a 4-year college, 42% a 2-year college, and 5% attending a technical college or trade school. These high percentages attending a four year or two year college appear to exceed national figures showing that 43% of high school graduates enrolled in college in the year 2000.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, reflecting national trends showing more college students work while pursuing additional education, large numbers of charter school graduates work while enrolled in a college, technical or trade school.<sup>3</sup> Approximately 23% of survey respondents were working full time and another 38% part time while enrolled in some form of post-secondary educational institution.

## **Optimistic About the Future While Accepting American Values**

As a group the graduates were optimistic about the future, although they recognize that there will be setbacks and challenges. Survey findings based on long-term priorities of graduates also showed that most would embrace typical American values as 35-year-olds. Graduates were asked to indicate how important they expected several activities to be to their lifestyle when they reached age 35. Responding graduates placed a high premium on education and job success, as well as developing a relationship with one person. Lower priority was assigned to acquiring material possessions or clothing. Middle level priorities were activities related to being a good citizen, such as voting regularly, protecting the environment, being active in the community, giving to charity, and doing volunteer work.

## **A Few Troubling Messages**

While the survey showed that most responding graduates held their charter schools in high regard, among the praise were a few troubling messages. Almost 40% of the respondents identified something that they wished that they had learned while at the charter high school. On the wish list were more instruction in mathematics and in writing, more information on what it was like in college, more emphasis on study skills, courses clearly aimed at career preparation, and work-based learning experiences.

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter 8. SCHOLARS OF ALL AGES School Enrollment, 2000. <http://www.census.gov/population/pop-profile/2000/chap08.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See Thomas Mortenson (October 2000), American Demographics, [WWW.comproj.com/news1-1.htm](http://WWW.comproj.com/news1-1.htm) who reports that more than half of all full-time college students work and that 22% of freshman work at off-campus jobs.

## Summary

This graduate survey, part of a more comprehensive study of charter high schools with real-world practices, was completed by 56% of the 421 graduates of charter high schools located at 8 sites throughout the United States. Graduates of these charter high schools are representative of students growing up in the nation's cities and suburbs. Overall, graduates rated their charter high schools highly and almost all would repeat the experience. Given the current status of the graduates and their high regards for their *alma matres*, schools represented in survey have demonstrated a capacity to assist youth through adolescence and with a successful transition to higher education and work.

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Bruce Thompson, independent consultant and Milwaukee School Of Engineering Professor, analyzed survey data, identified findings, and wrote an initial draft report. Calvin Stone, CEW Assistant Researcher, reviewed findings and wrote a second draft. Project Director, Jake Blasczyk reviewed and critiqued the second draft resulting in this final report. For further information or comments contact Jake Blasczyk at 608.263.6786 or [jblasczyk@education.wisc.edu](mailto:jblasczyk@education.wisc.edu).