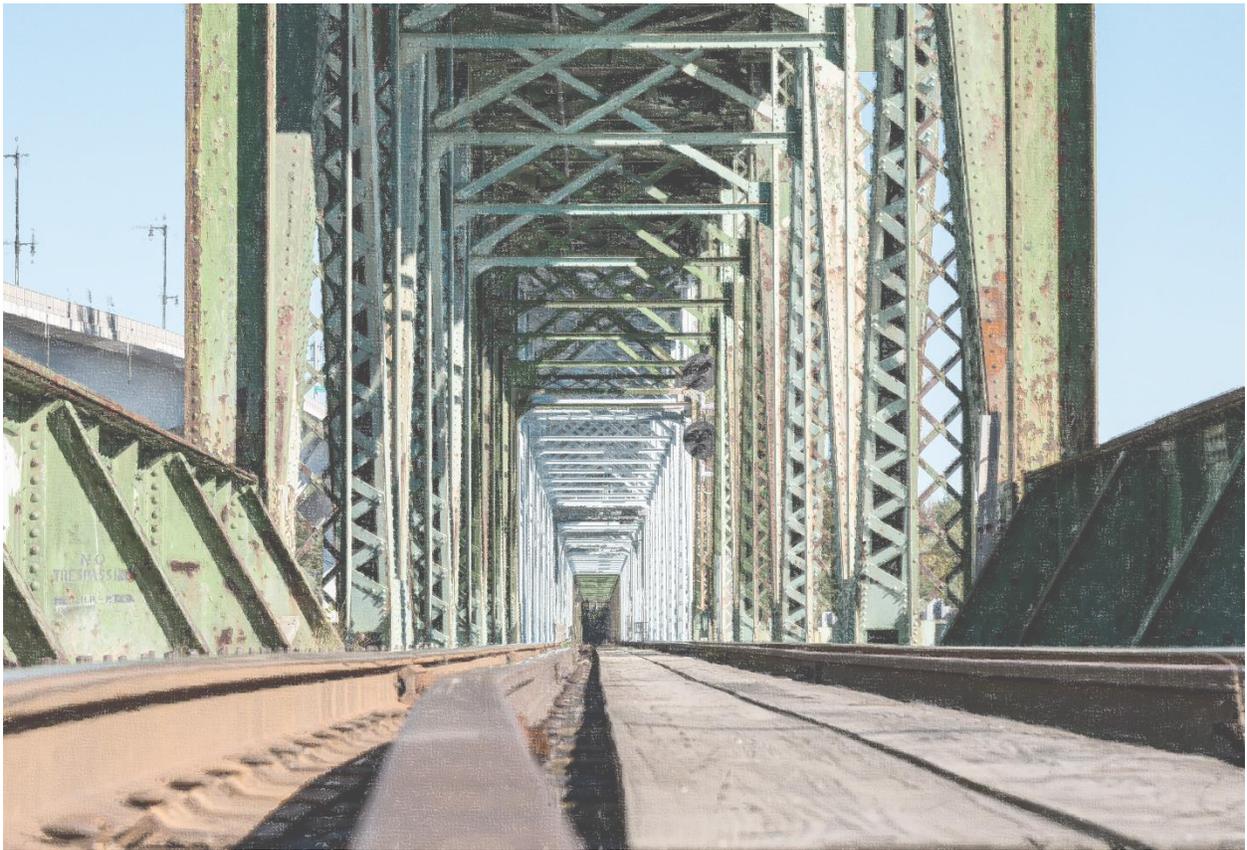


Maine Charter School Commission Graduate Study Second Year Report

November 2020



Prepared by

Plimpton
RESEARCH

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About this Report

The Maine Charter School Commission (MCSC) was created in 2011 to authorize and oversee public charter schools in Maine. In 2018, to augment its annual school evaluation process, the Commission initiated a study of charter school graduates. It contracted with Plimpton Research, an independent Maine-based consulting firm that specializes in policy-oriented research, to design this study and collect and analyze data on the outcomes and experiences of students who have graduated from Maine charters. This report summarizes the data analysis and synthesizes the findings, concluding with recommendations for the MCSC, the schools, and the broader Maine education community.

Process

Our study is a product of collaboration with the MCSC and each of the six Maine charter schools that have graduated students. In Year One, we met with staff at each school to learn about their graduate tracking efforts, student data capabilities, courses of study, and transcripts. We worked with the Commission and the schools to create a secure, FERPA-compliant data collection and reporting process. The MCSC entered into a contract with the National Student Clearinghouse to obtain detailed information on charter school graduates' college enrollment patterns. In Year Two, we added another graduating class to the transcript and college enrollment analysis, and Plimpton Research conducted telephone interviews with a sample of charter school graduates.

Appreciation

Many thanks to MCSC staff Amy Allen, Bob Kautz, and Gina Post for conceiving of this study and guiding our research. Special thanks to leaders and staff at the charter schools who met with us, explained their data systems, courses and transcripts, and provided the data that made this study possible. Thank you to the many graduates who responded to our request and participated in interviews.

Maine Charter Schools in the Study

School	Year Opened	Grade Span	Enrollment Fall 2019	Graduating Class Years
Baxter Academy for Technology and Science (Baxter)	2013	9-12	408	2016-2020
Harpwell Coastal Academy (HCA)	2013	6-12	195	2016-2020
Maine Arts Academy (MeAA)	2016	9-12	201	2018-2020
Maine Connections Academy (MCA)	2014	7-12	410	2015-2020
Maine Academy of Natural Sciences (MeANS)	2011	9-12	196	2013-2020
Maine Virtual Academy (MeVA)	2015	7-12	396	2016-2020
Total			1,806	

Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a study initiated by the Maine Charter School Commission to learn about the experiences of its schools' graduates and how well they were prepared for successful futures. The study includes 517 young people from six Maine charter schools who graduated in 2018 and 2019.

High School Transcripts

The first section of the report presents our analysis of graduates' high school transcripts. We compared transcripts to definitions of "career-ready" and "college-ready" developed by the national group The Education Trust, which gives us a national point of comparison. The performance of other Maine public schools on these measures are not known.

We found that Maine's charter schools outperform the national comparison sample:

- Maine charter graduates completed "college- and career-ready" elements at more than twice the national rate: 27% of Maine charter graduates had "career- and college-ready" transcripts, compared with 8% in the national sample.
- Another 21% of Maine charter graduates met the "career-ready" criteria only, compared with 13% in the national study.
- 14% of Maine charter graduates completed the "college-ready" elements only, only about one-half the national rate of 31%.
- Graduates in the national sample were more likely to miss both the career- and the college-ready transcript elements (47%) than were Maine charter graduates (38%).

College Enrollment

In the College Enrollment section, Maine charter graduates' college enrollment and persistence rates are presented. The National Student Clearinghouse Student Tracker service provided college enrollment records showing that:

- 54% of graduates from Maine charter schools have enrolled in college, very close to the national average and about five percentage points below the Maine average.
- 62% of college enrollers from Maine charter schools returned to college for a second year.
- Given the disruption to higher education posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, an unusually high number of college students are on hiatus this fall. Nearly one-quarter (23%) of college students in our study are not enrolled this semester. It remains to be seen whether or not these students will return to college in the spring.

Graduate Interviews

The third section summarizes interviews we conducted with 37 graduates in spring and summer 2020. We learned about their reasons for choosing a charter school and their experiences in high school, in college, and in the labor market. Just over one-half (51%) are primarily pursuing college education, 41% are primarily working or looking for work, and three (8%) are concurrently studying and working. Interview subjects are working in and studying toward career fields including beekeeping, behavioral health, business, criminal justice, culinary arts, dog grooming, early childhood education, economics, engineering, finance, food science, information science security, law, logging, osteopathy, pharmacy technology, shipbuilding, sociology, teaching, theater, visual arts, and writing.

Aspects of high school that interview subjects named as helpful in preparing for careers and college include:

- Graduating from high school. Several subjects said that they don't believe they would have earned a diploma without the option of their charter school.
- Tracking progress to graduation. Students appreciated systems that allowed them to check their progress regularly and to explore options available to meet requirements, as well as counselors or homeroom teachers who helped them navigate the requirements.
- Clearly defined learning standards. Students appreciated knowing what they needed to learn and how to demonstrate their knowledge. Students struggled when learning standards were not communicated or changed mid-course.
- Rigorous academic courses. Several students said that their most challenging academic experiences in high school were among the most valuable in preparing them for success later.
- Career and college planning courses. Students appreciated support in walking through the steps of choosing and applying for college. Many appreciated offerings that also provided guidance about non-college postsecondary options.
- Faculty and staff guidance. Many students expressed gratitude for the teachers who developed relationships with them and offered advice and encouragement as they made postsecondary plans.
- Hands-on Learning. Many charter school graduates highly valued the opportunities to engage in projects and hands-on learning in order to demonstrate mastery of academic standards.
- Work experiences. Several students spoke highly of internships during high school that helped them develop career goals, gain skills, and make valuable connections.
- Financial literacy. Many students from different charter schools named financial literacy courses as among the most valuable to them in everyday life after graduation.

Areas where some graduates felt less well-prepared for success in college and the workplace include:

- Changing graduation requirements and grading policies and practices. Many interview subjects enrolled in their schools' first few years of operations. This led to confusion that ranged from "a bit tricky" to "chaotic" in terms of students' ability to track their progress and ultimately meet graduation requirements.
- Lack of career-focused courses and career planning. Many students spoke of college planning courses that were helpful but said that there were fewer options for learning about career options and working toward career-ready concentrations.
- Weak academic preparation and work habit expectations. Some students felt underprepared after graduation in academic areas like math, history, and English. Others said that their high school assignments did not prepare them well for work habits and study skills needed for success in college.

College-enrolled graduates have an institution to help them work toward career goals, and subjects working in career-trajectory jobs are developing marketable skills and sometimes furthering their education. But about one-quarter of our interview subjects are stalled without a path toward onramps to careers or college. Without guidance and support from school or another institution, it is unclear where the needed help might come from.

Recommendations

Our recommendations center around two main areas for improvement that could benefit all Maine students: (1) Setting, communicating, and maintaining high academic standards and (2) Developing a career development curriculum and staff expertise at the state level to support all Maine public schools in improving career development and support.

Introduction

In 2011, Maine established the Maine Charter School Commission (MCSC) to authorize and monitor up to ten schools. The first public charter schools in Maine opened during the 2012-2013 school year, and there are currently nine charter schools operating in Maine. Charter schools are public schools of choice, meaning students can decide to attend a charter school as an alternative to the district public school to which they have been assigned. Charter schools are publicly funded but operate independently of the traditional public school system. They have more flexibility in curriculum and instruction, scheduling, staffing, and finance than district public schools. The MCSC authorizes charter schools through multi-year contracts and holds the schools accountable to the terms of their contracts.

In 2018 and 2019, six Maine charter schools graduated students: Baxter Academy (Baxter), Harpswell Coastal Academy (HCA), Maine Arts Academy (MeAA), Maine Connections Academy (MCA), Maine Academy of Natural Sciences (MeANS), and Maine Virtual Academy (MeVA). Cornville Regional Charter School will have its first class of graduates in 2021, and the newest charter, the Ecology Learning Center, plans to graduate its first class in 2023.

Student Characteristics

Last year our study focused on 2018 public charter school graduates. This year, we add the class of 2019 to our analysis of transcripts and college enrollment. We collected transcripts and demographic information for as many graduates as possible from each of the schools, but our study does not include every 2018 and 2019 public charter graduate. This report includes 517 graduates in the transcript analysis and 493 graduates in the college enrollment tracking.

Student demographic characteristics are key factors that contribute to their outcomes, and these vary considerably across charter schools, as shown in the following table. Across the U.S., family economic status is one of the factors most strongly correlated with school quality, educational achievement, graduation, and college access and success. In Maine schools, economic disadvantage is defined as eligibility for subsidized school meals, with a threshold of family income below 185% of the poverty rate, or \$48,470 for a family of four.

The proportion of economically disadvantaged graduates of Maine's charter schools varies from 21% at Baxter Academy to 84% at MeVA, with an average of 57% across the six schools. The 57% charter average is well above the state public school average of 42% economically disadvantaged students (see the following chart). The proportion of charter school graduates with disabilities is 25%, higher than the state average of 19% of students with disabilities. The proportions of graduates with disabilities range from 19% at MeAA to 36% at MeANS. These characteristics should be considered when interpreting school and student outcomes. For example, statewide, the on-time graduation rate for economically disadvantaged students is about 78%, compared with 95% among non-disadvantaged peers. 74% of Maine students with disabilities graduate in four years.

Maine charter schools have experienced varying amounts of student mobility, another important factor in student performance and graduation. 2018 and 2019 graduates were enrolled at MeVA for an average of only two years, while Baxter's graduates were enrolled for nearly all four years on average. The average length of enrollment across the six schools was 3.1 years, as shown in the table below. Our transcript analysis shows that, at charter schools with shorter average enrollment periods, many graduates transferred in after one or more years of study at other Maine public

schools, and often entered charter school behind grade level. This is another factor that affects student achievement, graduation, and postsecondary options.

Maine Charter School Student Characteristics: 2018 and 2019 Graduates

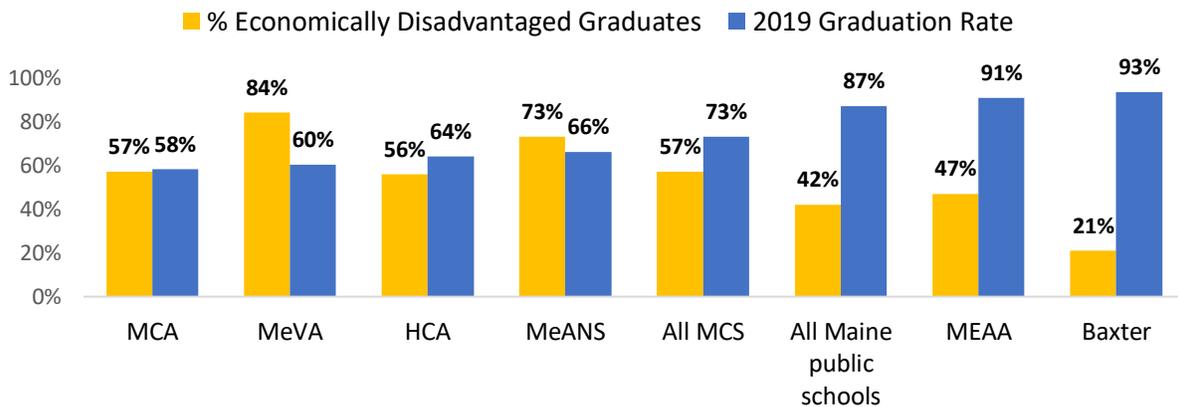
School	Economically Disadvantaged	Students with Disabilities	Graduates' Average Years Enrolled
Baxter	21%	30%	3.8
HCA	56%	32%	2.9
MeAA	47%	19%	2.5
MCA	57%	22%	3.0
MeANS	73%	36%	3.2
MeVA	84%	22%	2.1
6 Maine Charters ("All MCS")	57%	25%	3.1
Maine public school average	42%	19%	

Fall 2019 enrollment from Maine DOE, www.maine.gov/doe/data-reporting/reporting/warehouse/enrollment
 Average years enrolled is from this study's sample transcript analysis

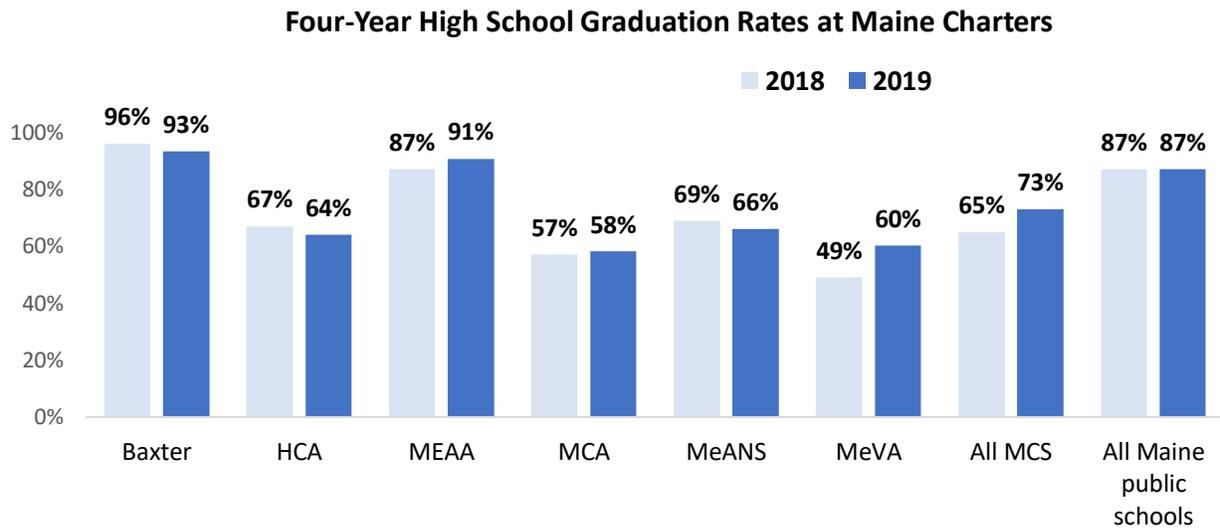
Graduation Rates

High school graduation rates tend to show an inverse relationship with the proportion of economically disadvantaged students. The chart below compares the Maine charters' 2019 four-year graduation rates with the Maine average, side by side with the proportions of economically disadvantaged graduates. For the most part, higher rates of economic disadvantage are associated with lower graduation rates.

Inverse Relationship between Graduation Rates and % Economically Disadvantaged Graduates



The MCSC has set an ambitious goal of 90% of entering high school students graduating within four years, three percentage points above the Maine public school average of 87%. Baxter Academy is the only school that met the graduation rate goal in both 2018 and 2019, and Maine Arts Academy met the goal in 2019, as shown below. Maine Virtual Academy showed the greatest improvement in graduation rates from 49% in 2018 to 60% in 2019. Overall, graduation rates at the six schools increased from 65% in 2018 to 73% in 2019.



I. Transcript Analysis

This study compares the transcripts of Maine charter school graduates to a comprehensive, rigorous definition of college- and career-readiness developed by the national group Education Trust. For simplicity of analysis, they looked only at courses students complete during high school, although they acknowledge the important role of less tangible elements like cognitive strategies, learning skills, and specialized content knowledge, which are essential to career and college readiness.

Maine Graduation Requirements Compared with Curriculum Definitions

The Education Trust characterize a “career- and college-ready” course of study as having several elements not included in Maine state graduation requirements, as shown in the following table. They define “college-ready” as including three credits of math, science, and social studies, while Maine requires only two credits of each for graduation. Maine requires one credit in fine arts, which is not included in the Education Trust’s list. Finally, the Education Trust defines “college-ready” as requiring two credits in the same foreign language. “Career-readiness” means three credits of career and technical education (CTE) concentrated in the same field. Maine’s statutory graduation requirements do not address CTE.

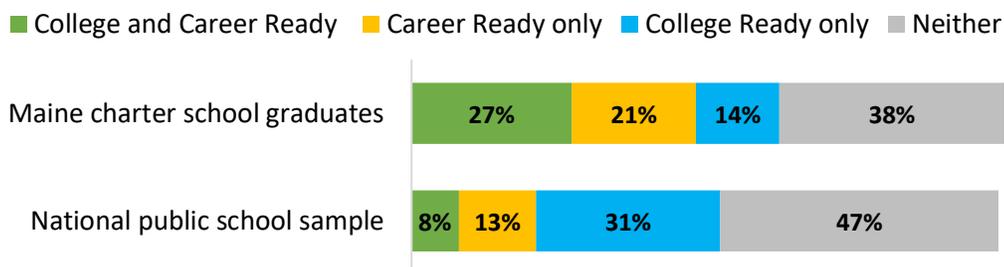
High School Graduation Requirements Compared with Curriculum Definitions

Subject	Education Trust: College-Ready Curriculum		State of Maine High School Graduation Requirements	
	Credits	Specific Courses	Credits	Specific Courses
English	4		4	
Math	3	Algebra 2	2	
Science	3	Biology and Chemistry or Physics	2	1 year of laboratory study
Social Studies	3	U.S. or World History	2	American History, Government, Civics and Personal Finance
Foreign Language	2	In the same language	0	
Fine Arts	0		1	Art, Music, Forensics or Drama
Career-Ready Curriculum				
	Credits	Specific Courses		
Career and Technical Education	3	In the same field	Not addressed	

One reason we use the Education Trust definitions to frame our transcript analysis is that they conducted a transcript analysis of a national sample of 2013 public high school graduates that gives us a point of comparison. Among 2018 and 2019 Maine charter graduates, 27% completed all the features of a career- and college-ready high school course of study. 21% completed the career-ready

criteria only, and 14% completed the college-ready elements only. That leaves 38% not meeting either the career- or college-ready definition offered by the Education Trust (see the following chart).

Maine Charter Graduate Transcripts & National Comparison



Maine’s charter schools outperform the national comparison sample, as shown above.

- Maine charter graduates completed college- and career-ready elements at more than twice the national rate, 27% compared with 8% in the national sample.
- Another 21% of Maine charter graduates met the career-ready criteria only, compared with 13% in the national study.
- 14% of Maine charter graduates completed the college-ready elements only, only about one-half the national rate of 31%.
- Graduates in the national sample were more likely to miss both the career- and the college-ready transcript elements (47%) than were Maine charter graduates (38%).

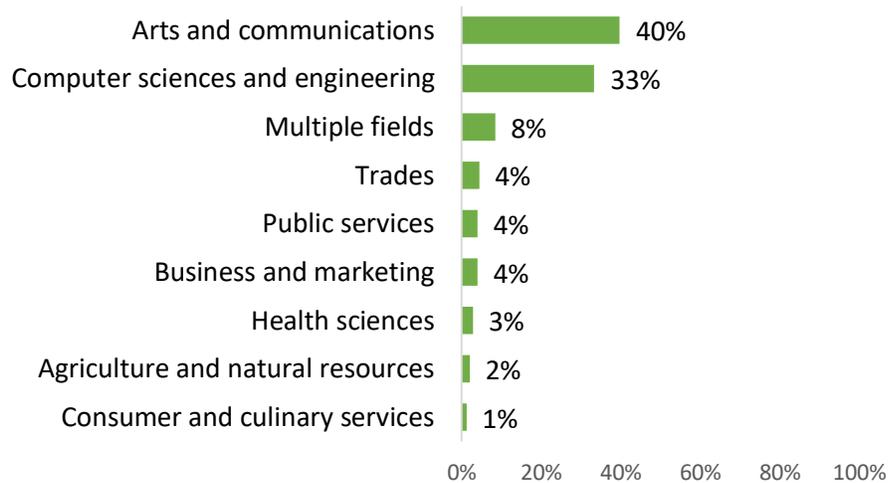
Career Readiness

Nearly one-half (48%) of Maine charter graduates met The Education Trust’s “career-ready” benchmark of completing a three-credit concentration in one of eight career areas. The study categorizes the career and technical areas of study in high school as:

- Agriculture and natural resources
- Arts and communications
- Business and marketing
- Computer science and engineering
- Consumer and culinary services
- Health sciences
- Public services (including corrections, education, and law)
- Trades

Of Maine charter school graduates who completed a career-ready course of study, Arts and communications (40%) and Computer sciences and Engineering (33%) are the most common career fields (see the following chart). 8% of graduates in the study met the “career-ready” benchmark in more than one field, completing at least six CTE credits.

Career Fields of Career-Ready Graduates



Internships and Work Experiences

Another element of career readiness is engaging in career-related work experiences like internships. 35 graduate transcripts (7%) indicate that students completed internships or other work experiences as part of their high school education.

College Readiness

Overall, 41% of graduates in this study met the “college-ready” standards. Looking at each element of the Education Trust’s “college-ready” definition, Maine charter graduates performed as follows:

- 100% completed the equivalent of four English course credits.
- 90% completed three social studies credits including U.S. or World History
- 85% completed three math credits, including at least Algebra 2
- 75% completed three science credits including Biology and Chemistry or Physics
- 48% completed two course credits of study in the same foreign language.

The majority of 2018 and 2019 graduates in our study (59%) did *not* complete a college-ready curriculum. Of these 307 students:

- 100% met the English standard of at least four credits.
- 90% met the social studies standard.
- 71% met the math standard.
- 52% met the science standard.
- 14% met the foreign language standard.

In addition, among “non-college-ready” graduates, 45% met all criteria except for the Foreign Language standard; 20% completed at least one dual enrollment college course during high school; and 3% participated in an internship or work experience as part of their high school studies.

School Level Results

Maine's public charter schools have very different specialty areas, goals, and student bodies. This is reflected in the transcript patterns by school, as shown below. At Baxter, HCA, and MeAA, most graduates met the "career-ready" benchmark, the "college-ready" standards, or both. At MCA, MeVA, and MeANS, most graduates did not meet either the career- or college-ready standards. A closer look at the transcripts shows both strengths and weaknesses at all the schools.

Baxter Academy

Two-thirds (67%) of Baxter graduates completed high school "career- and college-ready", another 18% graduated "career-ready," and 13% graduated "college-ready." Only 2% graduated meeting neither definition.

Baxter specializes in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) studies.

- Baxter offers a range of career and technical education courses on site, in both the "communications and design" and "computer and information sciences and engineering" fields. Students do not have to commit to an off-site regional CTE center. This helps many students complete three or more CTE courses in the same field to hit the "career-ready" target, and some hit that target in two areas.
- Baxter is also located in Portland, which has higher college-going rates than any other part of Maine. Many graduates spoke of pressure from parents to prepare for and enroll in college.
- Baxter has the lowest rate of economically disadvantaged students of the public charters.

Harpwell Coastal Academy

More than one-quarter (27%) of HCA graduates completed high school "career- and college-ready", another 35% graduated "career-ready," and 27% graduated "college-ready." 12% graduated meeting neither definition.

HCA offers hands-on, standards-based learning centered around career pathways in communications and new media, coastal studies, caring and public service, and entrepreneurial education.

- One-half (50%) of HCA graduates completed at least one college course, and 23% engaged in work experiences as part of their high school transcript.
- Many HCA graduates spoke of meeting learning standards through project work, often combining standards in multiple curricula areas.
- Most of HCA's career-ready graduates concentrated in arts/communications fields.
- The most common reasons HCA graduates did not meet the college-ready benchmark were not completing the equivalent of Algebra 2 (38%) and not completing two foreign language credits (20%).

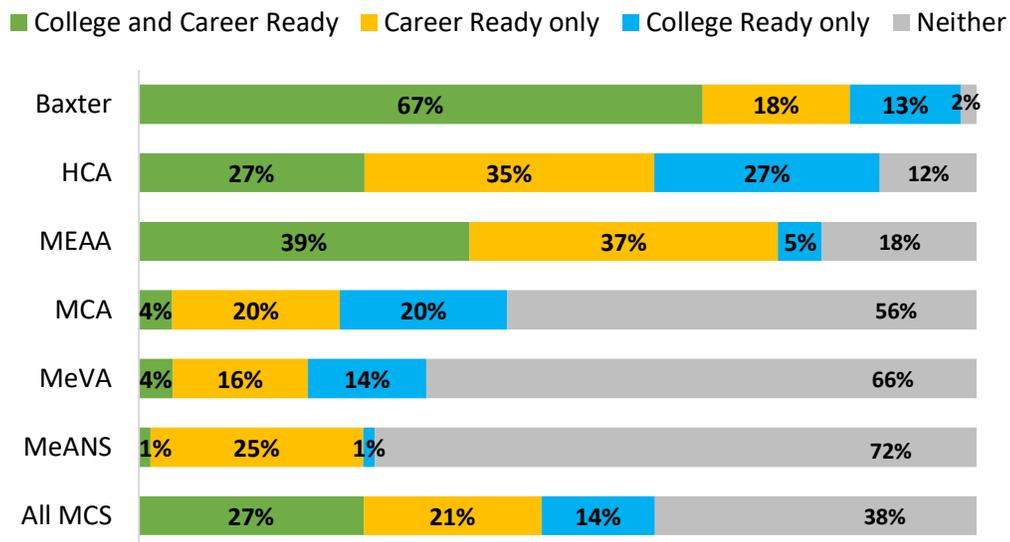
Maine Arts Academy

Almost two in five MeAA graduates (39%) completed "career- and college-ready" transcripts, 37% met the "college-ready" standards, and 27% met career-ready benchmark, leaving 12% of graduates with transcripts that did not meet either benchmark.

MeAA offers an art-based curriculum that balances visual and performing arts with challenging college-preparatory academics and professional mentorship.

- All of the “career-ready” MeAA graduates concentrated in arts/communications.
- The most common reasons MeAA graduates did not meet the “college-ready” standards were not completing two foreign language credits (45%) and not completing the equivalent of Algebra 2 (13%).

Transcript Analysis Results by School



Maine Connections Academy

At MCA, one-fifth (20%) of graduates completed either the “career-ready” or “college-ready” benchmarks, and 4% completed both. Just over half (56%) of graduates did not meet either standard.

MCA is a fully accredited online school that gives students the flexibility to pursue a challenging high school curriculum from home.

- MCA graduates completed “career-ready” concentrations in six different areas. The most common career fields were computer science/engineering (8 graduates), business (6), and public services/education (6).
- The most common reasons MCA graduates were not “college-ready” are missing the foreign language requirement (52%) and not completing Algebra 2 (21%).

Maine Virtual Academy

16% of MeVA graduates met the “college-ready” benchmark, 14% met the “career-ready” benchmark only, and “4% had “career- and college-ready” transcripts. Nearly two-thirds (66%) of graduates did not meet either benchmark.

MeVA is an online school offering the combination of deeply individualized learning and flexible scheduling.

- MeVA has the highest proportion of economically disadvantaged students of the Maine charters.

- “Career-ready” MeVA graduates concentrated in a total of seven career areas. The most common concentration at MeVA is arts/communications. Several MeVA graduates completed concentrations in agriculture, business, computer/engineering, culinary arts, health sciences, and trades credits.
- The most common reasons MeVA graduates did not meet the “college-ready” standards are missing the foreign language requirement (74%) and missing the science benchmark (57%).
- 16% of MeVA graduates met all the “college-ready” benchmarks except foreign language.

Maine Academy of Natural Sciences

One-quarter of MeANS graduates met the “career-ready” benchmark, but only 1% each met all of the “college-ready” and “career- and college-ready” standards. 72% graduated meeting neither definition.

MeANS introduces students to careers in farming, forestry, sustainability, alternative energy and other related fields. Students gain knowledge and skills through hands-on projects, internships, targeted courses, and real-world experiences.

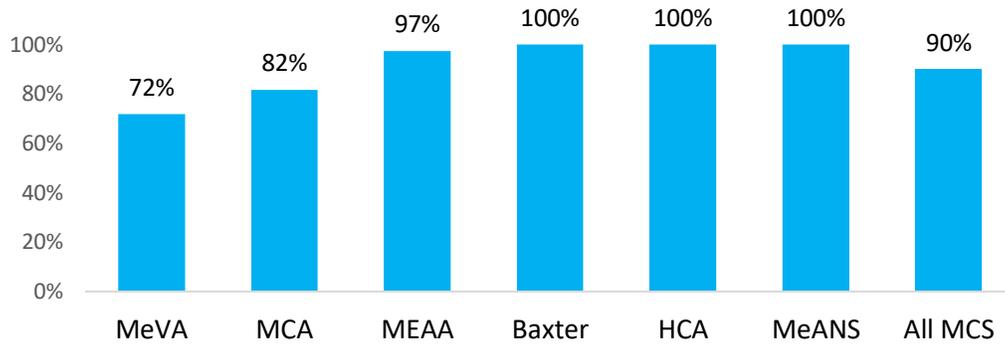
- 96% of MeANS graduates completed all elements of the college-readiness definition except the foreign language credit requirement. MeANS does not offer foreign language courses, although students have the option of studying Spanish or American Sign Language at nearby Kennebec Valley Community College.
- 46% of MeANS graduates earned college credits during high school, and 13% completed formal internships or work experiences.
- Although it focuses on natural sciences, MeANS “career-ready” graduates concentrated in seven different career areas, including arts/communications, business, trades, computer science/engineering, and agriculture/natural resources.

Mastery

To be truly college- and or career-ready, students need to not only complete the recommended courses, but to demonstrate mastery of the material. In the context of the high school transcript, The Education Trust defines mastery as earning a cumulative GPA of 2.5 on a 4.0 scale (about a B-) or higher.

- In its study, the Education Trust found that 86% of 2013 U.S. graduates who completed a college- or career-ready curriculum also demonstrated mastery.
- We find that 90% of 2018 and 2019 Maine charter school graduates achieved mastery, slightly outperforming the national average (see the following chart).
- At the three charter schools that are proficiency-based or standards-based—Baxter, HCA, and MEANS—all graduates achieve mastery, because students do not earn credit for courses until they meet the standards. At these schools, some students meet the standards for graduation in less than the typical time; for example, students may meet the standards for four English credits without studying English for four full years. Proficiency, or meeting the standard, roughly translates to a 3.0 on a 4.0 scale, above the Education Trust benchmark for mastery.

Graduate Mastery Rate by Charter School



II. College Enrollment

We use the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) to track charter graduates' college enrollment and persistence, and completion. The Clearinghouse's college enrollment database includes 99% of students enrolled in U.S. degree-granting two-year and four-year colleges and universities, and all of Maine's degree-granting postsecondary institutions participate in the service. NSC enrollment records allow for detailed analysis of enrollment gaps and transfer patterns. For Year Two, 493 graduates were included in the National Student Clearinghouse college enrollment study.

Initial College Enrollment

Nationally, 55% of graduates from low-income high schools and 69% from higher income schools enrolled in college in Fall 2019. 62% of rural school graduates enrolled in college, compared with 67% of suburban school graduates. In Maine, just over 60% of all public high school graduates enrolled immediately in college.

54% of graduates from Maine charter schools (268 students) have enrolled in college, very close to the national average and about five percentage points below the Maine average.

- 65% enrolled in a Maine college, and 35% enrolled in college in another state.
- The top colleges among Maine charter graduates are SMCC, UMaine, USM, and UMA, as shown below.

Maine Charter Graduates: Top Colleges

Institution	Number Enrolled
Southern Maine Community College	34
University of Maine	29
University of Southern Maine	24
University of Maine at Augusta	20
Kennebec Valley Community College	12
University of Maine at Farmington	12
Central Maine Community College	7
Husson University	7
Thomas College	6
Eastern Maine Community College	5
Wentworth Institute of Technology	5
Worcester Polytechnic Institute	4
York County Community College	4
Berklee College of Music	3
Southern New Hampshire University	3
Unity College	3
University of Maine at Fort Kent	3
University of Maine at Presque Isle	3

Delayed Enrollment

Ten students, or 4% of all college enrollers, did not enroll immediately after graduation. Seven students took a traditional “gap year,” one enrolled after a one-semester gap, and two students enrolled in college two years after high school graduation.

College Persistence

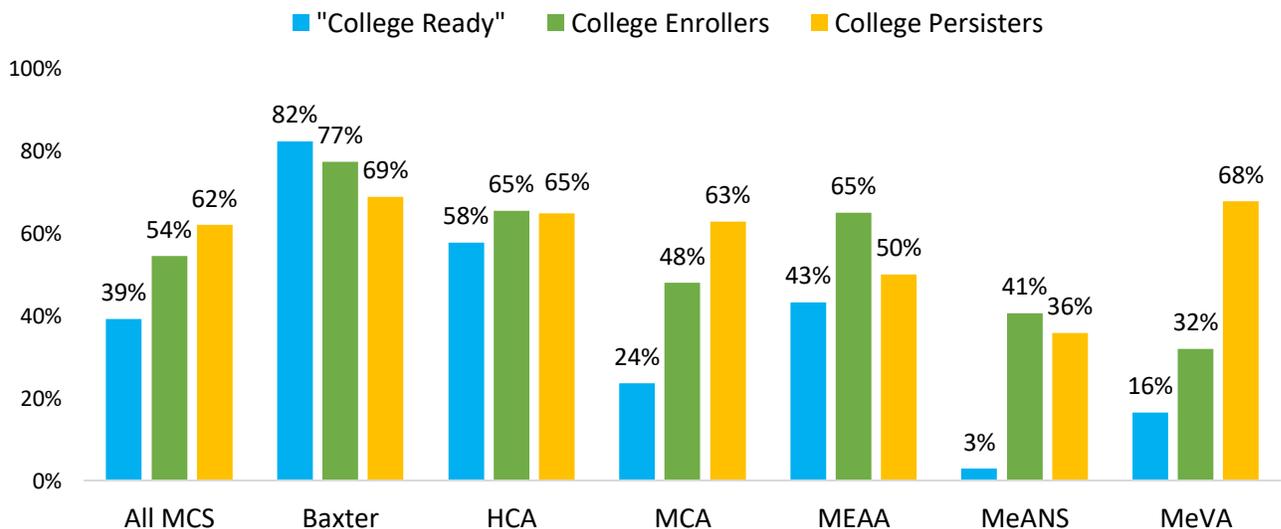
62% of college enrollers in our study returned to college for a second year (or a third semester). Nationally, the college persistence rate is higher at 76%. College persistence among the Maine graduating class of 2018 was 82%.

School Level Results

College enrollment patterns vary widely among the Maine charter schools, as shown in the chart below.

- Baxter (77%), HCA (65%), and MeAA (65%) graduates have college enrollment rates above the charter school average of 54%.
- Less than one-half of the graduating classes at MCA (48%), MeANS (41%), and MeVA (32%) have enrolled in college.
- Baxter (69%), MeVA (68%), HCA (65%), and MCA (63%) have college persistence rates above the charter school average of 62%.
- Among graduates who enrolled in college, only 50% at MeAA and 36% at MeANS continued for a second year of college.

College Outcomes by School



Certificates and Degrees

Nationally, 60% of entering college students complete a degree within six years. In Maine, 40% of community college students and 56% of four-year college students complete degrees. Degree completion rates are much lower for community college students and students from economically disadvantaged families.

- Four students in this study have earned associate degrees. Their degrees are in business administration, communications, early childhood education, and liberal studies. Three of these students are continuing their studies and are enrolled in college this fall.
- One student earned a certificate in composite manufacturing.

College Transfers

15% of Maine charter school graduates who enrolled in college have transferred to another college at least once. A look at a sample of enrollment summaries shows the wide variety of students' college transfer patterns. The number of semesters enrolled at each institution, if more than one, is in parentheses.

- CMCC (2) to Arizona State (2)
- CMCC (2) to USM (3)
- Curry College (2) to UMaine
- Johnson & Wales to YCCC to UNH
- Landmark College (1) to New Mexico State (2)
- Rochester Institute of Technology (2) to SMCC (2)
- Salem State (1) to UMaine (4)
- SMCC (2) to UMA (2)
- SMCC to UMFK to UMPI to UMA (2)
- Stonehill to SMCC to USM (2)
- U of Phoenix (1) to USM (1)
- U of Rochester (1) to UMA (5)
- UMaine to USM to SMCC
- UMaine to KVCC
- UMF to UMFK
- UMFK (2) to Thomas (2)
- UMPI to UMFK to UMA
- Unity (2) to KVCC
- USM to Thomas (3) to UMaine
- USM (2) to CMCC
- Wheaton (2) to SMCC
- YCCC (2) to Unity (3)

Fall 2020 College Enrollment

College enrollment records suggest that Fall 2020 is an atypical semester. In March 2020, many colleges shifted abruptly to online-only instruction and sent residential students home. Over the summer and into the fall, uncertainty and changing plans for in-person learning and living on campus have continued. Both entering and continuing college students have had to decide whether to enroll this fall without a clear sense of how or where they will be studying. An early report on fall

enrollment from the National Student Clearinghouse estimates that college enrollment is down by at least 2.5% from last fall.

In our study, the number of college students who did not withdraw or take a leave, but are not enrolled in Fall 2020, seems high compared with patterns in recent years. We conclude that given the disruption to higher education posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, an unusually high number of college students are on hiatus from college.

166 students in our study have enrolled and persisted in college for more than one year. Of these students:

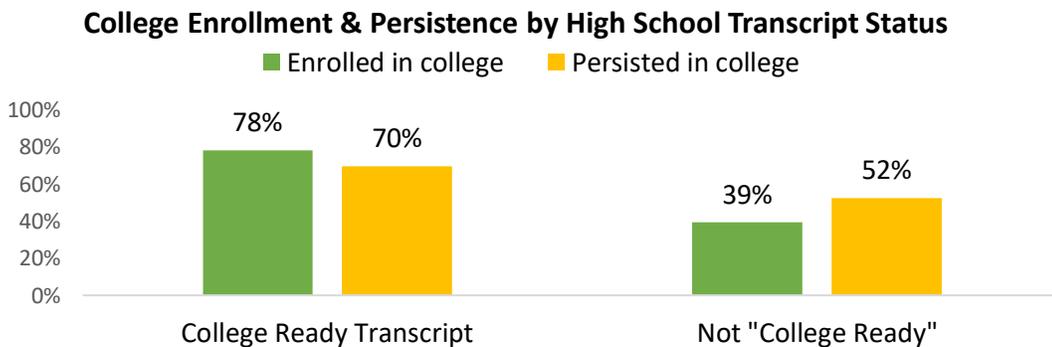
- 69% are enrolled in college in Fall 2020.
- 8% officially withdrew or took a leave of absence from college.
- Fully 23% are not enrolled this semester. It remains to be seen whether these students will return to college in the spring or extend their hiatus.

Nationally, NSC reports that college enrollment overall is down by 4% from fall 2019 to fall 2020, and that there are 16% fewer first-year students this year than last year.

The Relationship between College Enrollment and “College Readiness”

“College-readiness” standards and enrolling in college are related, but not perfectly correlated. At the school level, this is demonstrated in the chart on page 17. Overall, based on our high school transcript analysis and the Education Trust benchmark, 56% of college enrollers from Maine charter schools completed a “college-ready” high school curriculum, and 44% did not.

- “College-ready” graduates were about twice as likely to enroll in college as those whose transcripts did not meet the standards, 78% compared with 39% (see the following chart).
- “College-ready” students also persisted in college at a higher than average rate of 70%, although most (52%) of those who did not complete a “college-ready” transcript did persist into a second year of college.



Improving College Outcomes

College enrollment and persistence are not solely determined by academic preparation. Financial and personal factors also play important roles. The growing financial burden of college has been well-documented. Efforts aimed at addressing low college persistence and completion rates around the nation and in Maine have focused on:

1. Financial challenges like meeting students’ basic needs, providing emergency grants for unexpected expenses, and retention grants to help with ongoing tuition costs;

2. Social and emotional strategies such as helping students develop perseverance and addressing mental health challenges; and

3. Academic support like peer tutoring, and development of study skills and work habits.

The discussions from our interviews, described in the next section, suggest that all these forms of assistance could be helpful to Maine charter graduates.

III. Graduate Interviews

This year we added an interview component to the study to learn more about student experiences during and after high school. Our Year One study raised questions that could not be answered by examining transcripts and college enrollment records, particularly about the pursuits of students who did not enroll in college.

We conducted interviews with 37 charter school graduates in spring 2020. The 30-minute discussions covered reasons for enrolling in a charter school, the aspects of high school prepared them well for life after graduation, areas where they weren't as well prepared, their experiences with work and school, and advice for school staff and students. (See the appendix for a list of our interview questions.)

Interview Subject Characteristics

The 37 interview subjects represent all six public charter schools, as shown below. In many cases it was difficult to characterize the subjects as strictly college students or “non-college” enrollers. Some students started at college and quickly shifted to careers, and some are pursuing postsecondary courses while working at career-related jobs. We characterize 59% of the subjects as primarily college students; 41% as primarily working or looking for work; and three (8%) as concurrently studying and working.

Graduate Study Interview Subjects

	Number	%
Total	37	
<u>School</u>		
Baxter	8	22%
HCA	6	16%
MeAA	4	11%
MCA	7	19%
MeANS	7	19%
MeVA	5	14%
<u>Graduation Year</u>		
2015-2017	6	16%
2018	19	51%
2019	12	32%
<u>Gender</u>		
Female	22	59%
Male	15	41%
<u>Primary Activity</u>		
Enrolled in college	19	51%
Working or looking for work	15	41%
Combining college and career-related work	3	8%

Interview subjects' colleges include: SMCC (4), EMCC, UMaine System schools (7), Maine Maritime Academy, Emerson College, Endicott College, Goucher College, Hampshire College (2), Hobart and William Smith College, Smith College, and University of Ireland.

The interview subjects are working in and studying toward career fields that range widely: beekeeping, behavioral health, business, criminal justice, culinary arts, dog grooming, early childhood education, economics, engineering, finance, food science, information science security, law, logging, osteopathy, pharmacy technology, shipbuilding, sociology, teaching, theater, visual arts, and writing.

Themes and Excerpts

Reasons for Enrolling in Charter School

Many interview subjects expressed dissatisfaction with their local public schools, mentioning reasons like large class sizes, strict pacing of coursework, lack of individual attention and help, inflexible curriculum and schedules, and inadequate opportunities to pursue special interests. Several interview subjects were homeschooled prior to enrolling in charter school and wanted to enroll in a formal school other than their local public school. A few subjects mentioned social and behavioral issues such as bullying that made them want to leave traditional public school.

- “I struggled a lot because the teachers didn’t help me much. I had to figure out how to learn on my own. I really didn’t learn a lot. I’m really glad I had another option for high school.”
- “Middle school and high school were really hard. I was an outcast because I liked music and theater, and at public school it’s all about the jocks and sports. Cliques are a real thing, and it seems like the adults don’t pay attention to that. I was bullied, I wasn’t doing well, and no one was helping.”

Many graduates also explained that they proactively chose their charter school because of its special focus area or alternative educational approach. For example,

- “Standard schooling typically didn’t work for me. I wanted more freedom. I was homeschooled for middle school. The main thing was that I wanted to take college classes while in high school. Charter schools are pretty much the only places that allow that the way I wanted to do it.”
- “I thought projects and hands-on learning would be more helpful for my mind and how I learn. I wanted to try that learning style. I wanted to have the ability to go at my own pace. At HCA We usually had one big project each term.... My first year we designed a greenhouse, there was a play with a lot of history, and we designed a solar panel boat.””

Career and College Preparation: What Worked Well

1. Completing High School

All of the young people in this study are high school graduates. Several interview subjects expressed gratitude to staff at their schools for helping them graduate, inferring the importance of their high school diploma. Several feel that they wouldn’t have completed high school without the options of their charter school.

- “I’d say going to MCA worked out a lot better for me than going to public school would have. I’m not sure how I would’ve graduated without that option.”

- “When I started high school, I didn’t care, didn’t want to do anything. I didn’t put the effort into school. Once I switched schools, I started understanding things better, wanting to be a good student. Even after having my son, I stayed in school to have a better life for him and for me. I couldn’t graduate from MeAA in four years. I told them at MeAA, I want to graduate from here, even if I have to go another year. And that’s what I did.”

2. Tracking Progress to Graduation

Most graduates spoke of effective systems at their schools for choosing courses and keeping track of their progress toward meeting the graduation requirements within four years.

- “It was easy to keep track of the graduation requirements. We met with our guidance counselor every trimester to review where we were. At the end of the semester you would chart out what you needed to address the next trimester, which courses that were available to address those standards, and pick your classes that way.”
- “There was an online portal that kept track of all our standards. We had regular meetings with our core advisor to look at which standards we still had to meet, what classes we should take, and to map out the order of our classes. Like it’s hard to learn high level physics when you haven’t had the math you need. So they helped us keep track of the standards and to plan out our courses.”

3. Clearly Defined Learning Standards

Graduates of Baxter, HCA, and MeANS mentioned the learning standards approach as helpful to their preparation for life after high school:

- “I met with teachers, created projects, and assigned the standards and learning experiences that the projects would demonstrate. We would line up what standards I was working on, and how they aligned with what I was doing outside school. Projects we designed were all based on the standards required for graduation.”
- “All the standards that the school offered or required were helpful. That’s one thing the school is really good at, articulating exactly what skill or knowledge students are expected to learn and demonstrate.”

4. Rigorous Academic Courses

Many students said that, in retrospect, some of their most challenging academic experiences in high school were the most helpful things in preparing them for later success.

- “My junior and senior English courses really pushed me and made me grow my skills, more than any class ever has in my school career. Math comes naturally to me, but not English, and those teachers really helped me improve my reading and writing.”
- “My homeroom teacher pushed me to take AP Calculus and other advanced math. That took a lot of weight off my shoulders in college, and I tested out of entry-level college classes. That’s been super helpful.”
- “Once I got the hang of it ...I took more honors and AP courses. I would take eight or nine courses at a time. Because there were so many options, I could take computer science, JavaScript, business, entrepreneurship, classes in all sorts of subjects that interested me. I had so much fun with those! Going into college, I was ready, and so far, I’ve completed everything at college with a 4.0 GPA.”
- “They helped me get into SMCC, take classes there for two years during high school, and they made schedule accommodations and provided resources for me to do some of that class

work separately while I was on campus. They helped me get into the vocational school so I could take a welding course.”

5. Career and College Planning Courses

Reviews of the required career and college planning courses in high school were mixed. Helpful aspects graduates named include:

- “We did have one class the first semester of senior year that was a check-in every week. We did our college applications together. That was super helpful. It walked you through the steps you needed to do, whether you were doing college or career after high school. And it also gave you motivation.”
- “Career Prep class—that’s the only reason I have a resume now. They were awesome.”
- “We did a lot of planning, we had a whole class on career prep where we either did mock interviews, had people come to school, or did job shadows. There were different opportunities to visit businesses in the area. We would look into colleges or do a mock application, get recommendation letters.”
- “They had a semester course for college and careers, and that was very helpful. It was actually that class that helped me decide what I was going to do after graduation. The class had units that helped us choose where to apply to college, writing essays, and doing the applications.”
- “We had a college readiness class. The assignments give you a structured way to plan for the future. Even if you didn’t want to go to college, they helped you plan that out too. They didn’t pressure you to go to college; I liked that.”

6. Faculty and Staff Guidance

Most of the interview subjects spoke of at least one helpful teacher or staff member in high school who influenced their career or college plans.

- “Neither of my parents went to college, so it was a really daunting process. Having the teachers to walk me through the application and preparation process was so helpful. I don’t think I would have made it into the college I go to without MeVA. I wouldn’t have had the confidence to apply to any selective colleges... They helped me learn time management and study skills that have been the key to my success in college.”
- “They helped us look at different options. Teachers encouraged both college and trades. They would offer to reach out and get info for us if we were interested in something; they were on top of it. The staff and everybody at MeANS wanted to see us succeed, you could really feel that.”
- “Pretty much your entire end of junior year and senior year, your advisor is working with you to figure out where you want to go. They didn’t only push college, but also trades, and how to get into different fields students were interested in. They were really helpful. I decided to apply to college, and they helped me with that, and helped me get some scholarships. I got a lot of support.”

7. Hands-on Learning

Graduates of HCA, MeANS, and MeAA especially spoke of hands-on and project-based learning experiences that were helpful to their success during and after high school.

- “MeANS is a hands-on school and they want you outside and they want you trying different things. That made me not afraid to try things, go out and ask for an introduction or an

experience. That's a really big change from how I was before I went to school there. That practice gave me more curiosity to learn and made me not afraid to ask for help."

- "I'm not good with lectures and sitting in classes. I had a hard time demonstrating what I knew in writing. It just didn't click with me. The hands-on experience was what I needed and what really made a difference for me... Being able to physically show teachers how I did something, what I know, and how I learned it was great for me."
- "I had the opportunity to go to small classes—some as small as four people. Small discussion-based classes really help you learn. I liked that we were doing things, not just sitting in lectures. We were putting on shows, actively writing, directing, figuring out what worked and what didn't."

8. Work Experiences

Interview subjects who had work experiences or earned certifications as part of their high school education valued those opportunities.

- While I was in high school...I interned for most of my time there with the Goodwill Hinckley development department. I mostly planned and executed fundraising events. It made me fall in love with event planning."
- "I've had two of my plays produced at theater companies. That's been amazing. One was produced at school, then at a theater in Portland. Another will be produced later this year."
- "I was able to get three different medical certifications before I turned 18. I'm the youngest one doing the work I'm doing now."
- "I got an internship at HCA middle school, I taught there for almost a whole year, taught a class and made my own assignments, did the grades, and learned all about teaching. That helped me decide to pursue a teaching career."
- "I explored a lot of careers through Flex Friday. I interned at a newspaper. I looked at schools for teaching and writing but realized I didn't want to do that. I wanted to do Tech Theater. Trying all those creative experiences really helped me figure that out."
- "I went to tech school as well. I took classes at the CTE near home. In my junior and senior years, I would attend one or two tech classes, either in the morning or afternoon, depending on the class. I went in person. I completed the whole two-year diesel mechanics course. Then I would work on my MCA classes in the afternoon or evening."

9. Financial Literacy

A surprising number of interview subjects from different schools mentioned financial math or personal finance class as the most useful course they took in high school.

- "Financial math class helped a lot. And we had a couple extracurricular classes that helped, I did woodworking and knitting. I still use those today."
- "I took a personal finance class that has really helped me budget and manage money. Now that I'm out there, working, saving for retirement, knowing all that strategy has really helped."
- "I took a Personal Finance class that was my favorite class. Taking math classes at Smith wasn't great for me. I was thinking about other subjects, and that Finance class experience made me think of taking an Econ class. I loved it, that helped me find my major."
- "Consumer math class was the most useful. That I use all the time. I learned budgeting, how to find housing you can afford, interest rates, when you apply for a credit card what will happen. We practiced how to take out a loan. That class was so useful, and it helps me pretty much every day."

Career and College Preparation: What Didn't Work

1. Changing School Practices and Policies

Many of the interview subjects enrolled in their charter school within the first few years of operation. A number of subjects mentioned the challenges of attending a new school, which for some created challenges in their progress to graduation.

- “For graduation, it was a little bit iffy. It was Baxter’s second year as a school, so things changed a lot each year while I was there. The requirements and the classes that could meet them switched around. The art classes changing around got complicated for me.”
- “Their grading system was nonexistent. They said they were tracking grades, but they couldn’t or wouldn’t show you your grades. As far my stance toward graduation, in sophomore and junior year, I had no idea.”
- “The grading changed a lot, and it was a really hard transition to standards grading. I was there for the school’s first three years. I could have gotten more AP, honors, and college classes at a public high school. I think I could have had a better transcript. That’s partly because I was there for MeAA’s first three years.”

2. Lack of Career Courses and Career Planning

Taken together, the interviews suggest a consensus that Maine’s public charters are offering adequate help with college planning and applications, but career planning is lacking at some of them.

- “When I did have room in my schedule for electives, I took photography and art classes, or just anything that interested me. The only negative is that there isn’t a whole lot of career-based education.”
- “They didn’t have a lot of longer-term career guidance at school, nothing focused on what you wanted to do for a career eventually. It was just, ‘We’ll help you fill out college applications.’ Not so much on figuring out what you wanted to do with your life.”
- “More staff who were experts on careers would have been nice. The advisors there helped you more with getting through high school, and also applying to college and how that works.”

3. Weak Academic Preparation and Work Habit Expectations

In some cases, graduates mentioned gaps in their academic preparation. Others spoke of schools having low expectations around student work habits and accountability for classwork.

- “There were some basic concepts they struggled to teach, for example basic algebra was an issue for me after I graduated.”
- “I didn’t feel prepared by high school for the amount of work ethic I needed for college. I had to cultivate a lot of work ethic my freshman year. The disciplined learning environment is not so great...But at Baxter I learned to love and care about learning.”
- “The homework part, I wasn’t so well prepared. I didn’t have that practice in high school... I didn’t learn much history. Sometimes little things like that, I didn’t get some of the basic fundamental information like at a comprehensive high school.”
- “I feel lacking in basic history and math knowledge. I have a specialized set of knowledge, geared towards educational and social studies, but my knowledge of world history is lacking. I feel like I need to catch up, learn on my own and take college classes...I missed out on consistency in expectations from classes, practice for taking tests, and being able to function in that typical style of learning.”

- “Because they were so focused on hands-on learning, they forgot how the rest of the world works. They didn’t prepare us for a real-world workload, what college is like. Classes were too easygoing. They did prepare us for life in general, though. Baxter students call teachers by first names and are treated respectfully by staff. That made us comfortable, helped us practice how to interact with adults as adults. But Baxter didn’t prepare us for the workload of college or a real-world job.”
- “The biggest thing I missed out on—I was never challenged quite enough. That reflects back on the grading system...Students that put in ten times more work, we’d get the same grade. It almost felt unfair—it encouraged doing the bare minimum rather than pushing yourself to get better and better.
- “If you don’t have that drive, some students would take advantage of that. Some students didn’t learn a whole lot. The school tried to encourage learning opportunities and exploration, but it relies on the students. You have to be responsible for your education tying to a future plan. If you weren’t super motivated, it might be better to be in a public school that’s more regimented.”
- “You went with the flow; it was not the most structured experience. But we all stayed on track. It almost felt like you couldn’t fail if you tried. Maybe that’s not always the best education experience...”

Developing a Career Path

Some of the most interesting interview excerpts are the discussions of different ways students developed their career interests and how they evolved during and after high school. About three-quarters of the interview subjects are engaged in career-related employment, are persisting in college, or both.

1. “Non-College” Subjects

Some students who are primarily working now knew that they wanted to focus on work after high school, but others didn’t initially think that they would not go to college. Some students did start college after graduation but have since left to focus on work.

- “I knew I wanted to do vocational school for the full day my senior year. So it worked really well for me to transfer to HCA and be able to finish regular high school requirements my junior year. The next year I went to Region 10 [CTE Center]. In the morning I studied Health Occupations, and I earned my CNA certificate. Afternoons I did early childhood education, and I earned an ECE Assistant certificate. After I finished, I was hired as a Personal Support Specialist. So I did CNA work for a while in elder care. That experience helped me decide to go back to teaching, and I got a great job at a preschool in Richmond. But after a while there, I was alone with too many kids. I switched jobs and now I’m a full-time nanny of a two-year-old and a six-year-old, and I have a 10-month old of my own. My ultimate goal is to own my own preschool eventually.”
- “I was planning to become a veterinary tech, then I changed to mechanics, and now I’ve applied to NMTC in Presque Isle for mechanized logging. I’m hoping to get involved in my dad’s logging company. At MeANS we did an intensive unit, a three-week project, on forestry. We went out and learned about the field and the jobs, we made our own forestry management plan. It made me think I’d like to do that.”
- “I was looking towards college, I went to college fairs, but I decided that wasn’t my thing. Before 10th grade I wanted to go into the military—that’s our family tradition. Then we had an intensive on beekeeping, we studied the characteristics of bees, the biology, visited a company, learned about employment options. We got two hives and made money for the

school producing honey for a while... By senior year, I couldn't think of anything else I wanted to do more than beekeeping. I'm a field manager for Swan's Honey now. I want to start my own bee business. I just got 40 hives of my own this year."

- "I had some bad financial issues that made me leave college. I'm working my way back to it now. It's slow...I went through a couple weird part-time jobs, I was a cashier, I worked in a cell phone store. I did some research on jobs that could turn into a career, and I found the field I'm in now. I work as a BHP—behavioral health professional. I work one-on-one with children with disabilities. Now my goal is to go back to school and become a teacher. I'm loving the work ... While I was in school, I didn't understand how much my teachers did for me... Helping young students discover the importance of school is really exciting and interesting for me."
- "I went to college for two years. I was majoring in education. I really enjoyed it in college, then I decided it wasn't for me. I found out BIW was hiring, my teachers said that was a good thing to do. Good pay and good experience, working toward national defense. I ended up getting a job. I've been working there a year and a half. I'm an insulator, that means I do all sorts of measurements and precision cuts to install on battle ships. I've thought about that I might eventually go back and finish my college degree."
- "I did apply to college, I got in, but I lost my father, so I got a job instead... I started out working at a Subway shop, to help my mother with money. While I was at work, the Program Director for Spurwink came in and we got to talking. I told her about my experience working with a boy who has autism. She interviewed me on the spot, and I got the job. I've been working there almost a year. I am a Direct Care Worker with youth... I found my dream job, and I was able to get that without any more education than a high school diploma. College is still something I want to continue in the future. My employer encourages that, and there are opportunities to move up at work if you take certain classes or programs. So I will enroll in college, and I'll be able to do that on my own thanks to the college prep class at MeVA."

2. College Students

Students enrolled in college have a wide variety of career interests and goals. Some of their interests have changed dramatically during and since high school. Several students are learning just as much in the workplace as they are in their courses.

- "I thought I wanted to be a Business major and do a Legal Studies minor. MeVA reinforced that. They gave me more confidence and knowledge about careers where I could apply that degree. My goals were influenced and supported by MeVA. So far, I love college and I feel very well prepared."
- "I've always known I wanted to go to college. Before I thought I'd go to a state school, but I ended up enrolling in Emerson College. Teachers encouraged me to go away, try different things, branch out. I applied to 10 colleges, and the school helped and supported me a lot. At the very beginning, I was thinking of studying occupational therapy because of my family's business—I would be able to go into that field easily. But at MeAA I discovered my love of writing and that there are careers in writing other than sitting alone all day. Now I'm going to school for publishing... I am so grateful for everything that school gave me. I think I'd been doing something completely different now if I hadn't gone there. It helped me explore different fields and things I loved to do, and how to make those into a career path. I really hope to have a book published, and to be working as a copy editor in publishing—I want to be an editor and a writer."
- "I went into high school with the mindset that I wanted to be a marine biologist. That completely changed during high school. I did initially go to Salem State with that major, and

I learned it wasn't for me as a career. I pretty much give all the credit to the Personal Finance class at Baxter. I am a Finance major at UMaine now, and that's what first got me interested in the field. I want to be an actuary. I hope I'll be out west working as an actuary for an insurance firm. I'm already applying for internships at insurance companies."

- "I just decided to go to college. I planned to go to SMCC and get at least an associate degree and now I've decided on my major. I started as Chemistry and then moved to Business. I am going to keep studying Business and I also plan to pursue the opportunity of Nursing. I'll probably go to USM for Nursing."
- "I enrolled in SMCC in fall 2017, and I've been going full time since then. I'm a Marine Science major. A lot of work I did in high school was built around the coast, and I've been more and more fascinated with it...I'd say my goals have become less defined. In high school you think of one career you want to do. As I learn more about the field and different jobs people do, I've been more open to opportunities in science, more excited about different possibilities. Actually doing a thing can lead to more interest."
- "I had always wanted to go to college. I always had that goal, even before high school, based on my passion for science. I enrolled in SMCC full-time after graduation. My major was composites engineering and materials manufacturing. I focused on building things out of carbon fiber, fiberglass and Kevlar. That's not precisely what I planned to do. I'm mainly interested in engineering, materials engineering. I'm trying to continue my education now, but I took a break for medical reasons. I hope to get a Chemical Engineering masters and a doctorate in theoretical physics."
- "I'm a sophomore at Maine Maritime Academy. I wanted to do engineering. I loved math at Baxter. That's always been one of my strong suits. Maine Maritime had such a good reputation for engineering and the maritime business, and I love boats. I grew up on the water. So marine engineering is an excellent career choice for me. I'm excited to become a third engineer; I think it's an awesome career path."
- "I wanted to be a mechanic since way back—I can't remember exactly when I first had that idea. Then when I started the classes at the tech school in 11th grade, that confirmed that I wanted to pursue that career. So I applied to the only college in my area that has a diesel program. I enrolled at EMCC right out of high school...I just finished the first year of the associate degree program, and I did well. I felt pretty well prepared for it, between high school and CTE classes. I recently got a job working at Casella Waste Systems garage, so now I'm already working in the field. My goal is to finish an associate degree in one more year. Then I'd like to find a job working in a construction company. Ultimately, I'd like to own my own mechanic business, in ten years or so."

3. Graduates Mixing College and Work

Three interview subjects could not be characterized as primarily pursuing college or work.

- "I planned to work part-time and go to college part- or full-time, depending on finances. I didn't want to take out loans, so I was balancing how much school I could afford. For the first year I was working two part-time jobs, trying to make money for tuition. I took classes at UMA part-time. I ended up getting a job at a medical research place. I was so lucky, I just fell into it. I am required to take some lab sciences classes with them. It pays really well, and they offer tuition reimbursement to go to college. Because I'm working full-time, I scaled back on college. This past year I've taken a few college classes and I'm finishing up the education required by my employer. I'm doing an online degree program at UMA, pursuing a bachelor's degree in Information Systems Security. In the lab setting I work in now, I've learned a lot. I didn't see myself working full-time and that has slowed my college progress. I

don't regret it. I have to complete an internship at my company, and they have an IT position waiting for me, once I'm ready."

- "I've been doing a good majority of working. I have used all of my certifications as a CNA, a phlebotomist, I was a really good at that. I ran my own lab by myself. Taking dual enrollment and career/technical courses gives you a head start. I worked as a dental assistant. I did start college and I plan to return next academic year... I was expecting to have more education by now, but because of the work experience, I can earn more than most people my age."
- "In high school, I really liked art. I thought I could become an animator. I studied art history as a sophomore. Then I took several languages and a linguistics course. I really liked that. I took more computer courses all through high school. Computer science is the tie between animation and languages. I wanted to double major in those. Now I'm studying Computer Information Systems at UMA with a concentration in Software, and a Health Informatics double major. I got a job working in a pharmacy. I like working in a health care setting, interacting with patients, learning about computer systems, how to program projects. It's a good mix of my two majors."

4. Stalled Graduates

There are ten interview subjects (about one-quarter) who seem to have stalled since high school and are genuinely struggling to define their career goals or to find an onramp to a viable career path. For three of the ten, health-related challenges are the main reason they are stalled. One became a parent and put education on hold while their child is very young. For the other five, it seems unclear what will help them gain direction and forward momentum.

- "Doing college online was a big thing for me. But after graduation I started to change my mind about what I wanted to study, so I decided to take a year off and look for work. I'm still looking for a job and contemplating applying to college again. There are not a lot of job opportunities in my town; it's very small. I envisioned myself being further along by now. After high school, everything just dropped off. It's weird not having anything you have to do every day."
- "I'm still really undecided. They helped me a lot at MeANS, but there are so many things out there that you can do. I get bored, I don't want to do the same job all my life. I'm going to go get my CNA, that will take about eight months... I wanted to be a veterinarian, but I don't want to go through all the schooling. I've thought about law. I might go trade school at Cianbro and see where that takes me."
- "I have pretty much had absolutely no plan for my whole life. I never had any interests or anything I gravitate towards. I took Career Prep and learned about writing a resume, cover letters. My teacher got me a lot of interviews I didn't end up going to. No one at the school can be blamed. I definitely got a lot of advice that I had a hard time taking. I just jumped into college at KVCC. I chose accounting, the most basic major. After one semester I decided not to do it. I want to wait and see what happens, figure out what I want to do with my career. If I find a nice 40-hour a week job, I'd like to take one class at a time at KVCC. I'm mostly focused on my career because I want to get to making money and stuff."
- "My biggest plans were cosmetology school or mortuary science. I was leaning more toward cosmetology school. I knew I didn't want to go to physical college. I decided to enter the workforce and see where it went. Now I'm mostly working and finding jobs, trying to reach financial goals, to become more independent and move out. I'm working in retail. I don't enjoy my job. I've definitely seen that things are more complicated and take more time than I thought. I've changed what I want to do. Now I'm pursuing dog grooming. Last year I was like, the cosmetology school tuition isn't that bad, I can get there. But I haven't gotten to

where I would be able to go through with it. I'm adjusting my plans as I go. If I end up not doing that, I'll find something I like along the way. In five years, I'd like to be continuing my education, and working in a job where I'm making progress toward a bigger, better goal."

- "I was hoping to go into either a trade or to work my way up in a job. I didn't really have a plan, I still don't know what I want to do exactly. But school gave me a lot of building blocks to work off. I definitely want to do something in the sciences, but I'm not sure what or how yet... None of my activities since graduation really match up to the learning, but I still want to go into science. I have a job and a place of my own right now, but I haven't gotten that much into science or a career I want to pursue yet. School showed me what I was good at and what I wanted to do. I'm still planning and wanting to do something in the science field."
- "I wanted to try online college. I was thinking about going into psychology, but I started to change what I wanted to study. Now I want to go into culinary arts. That was something I thought of as a hobby before, but now I'm thinking about it as a career. In five years hopefully I'll be working in a culinary career, and maybe enrolled in college."

Summary Observations

The sheer range of backgrounds, school experiences, goals, and postsecondary activities of the interview subjects demonstrates the importance of the different school experiences offered by Maine's public charters. Several subjects believe that they would not have finished high school without that option, and one even characterized his school as lifesaving. Having these unique options that allow students to focus on specific interests, attend school remotely, engage in project-based learning, and pursue college and career interests while still in high school is clearly valuable.

Career- and College-Readiness Cannot Be Separated

It is apparent from the quotes above that the distinction between college enrollers and "non college" young people is not clear-cut. One young man primarily pursuing his career has earned several college credits by pursuing individual classes in subjects that contribute to his professional development. Another was originally enrolled full-time in community college, but a good job opportunity in another field led him to discontinue college with no short-term plans to return. Three of the interview subjects are pursuing both career and college so seamlessly that we created a third category for them.

Guidance and Support after High School

Students enrolled in college have an institution to help them move forward with their career goals, and subjects working in career-trajectory jobs have support with developing marketable skills and, in some cases, furthering their education. But about one-quarter of the interview subjects—some of whom enrolled in college and some who did not—are now stalled without accessible onramps to career-related work or college. These young people need guidance and support, but since they are not enrolled in college and are either looking for work or working in low-wage jobs, it is unclear where that might come from.

One element that was noticeable in its absence from most of the interview discussions is the role and influence of parents, particularly after high school. Students thriving in college did not mention their parents' financial support, but that is likely playing a critical role. Instead, parental support after high school is invisible, except when it doesn't exist or is inadequate. Then, often, there is no substitute, and students are unable to fulfill, or even to define, their long-term goals and the steps to move in that direction.

Recommendations

Maine’s public charter schools are providing important alternatives for students. Many of these schools enroll high proportions of economically disadvantaged students and credit deficient transfer students, so it is logical that their graduation and college enrollment rates are lower than the Maine public school averages. But career and college readiness must be an explicit goal of graduation standards. It should be a shared goal to reduce the proportion of students completing high school without meeting either “career-ready” or “college-ready” standards.

The career-ready and college-ready transcript definitions used in this report, however, were developed at the national level more than five years ago. There may be valid arguments for revising these definitions for Maine students. We owe it to students to develop agreement and understanding across Maine charter—and district—public schools about the core courses and standards students should complete to graduate career-ready and college-ready.

Based on our transcript analysis and graduate interviews, two key areas for further development emerged:

- Set, maintain, and communicate high standards for graduation

Since Maine charter schools are relatively new, many graduates spoke of changing standards and policies in the first few years they were enrolled. In some cases, however, students experienced this as chaotic, and some had a difficult time knowing what they needed to graduate. All policy changes should include explicit to mitigate impacts on current students. Students should have a way to check their progress at all times.

Many graduate interview subjects expressed gratitude for challenging courses in high school that allowed them to explore their interests, but also for experiences that pushed them to develop skills in areas of weakness. Several subjects called out teachers who advised them to take difficult courses in fundamental areas like English, math, and science as key to their success. Students spoke highly of hands-on learning experiences, being able to meet standards in different curricular areas, and accountability for meeting deadlines and demonstrating proficiency. Many students named financial literacy courses as among the most valuable to life after high school.

Completing schoolwork outside of class, juggling multiple assignments and deadlines, and being rewarded for doing their best work helped young people prepare for success in college or at work. Interview subjects said that postsecondary expectations did not match up well with high school experiences where they did not learn fundamental concepts, did not have to do any work outside school, and were not held accountable for missed or late work.

- Expand career development curriculum and expertise at the state level

A number of our interview subjects completed the steps to enroll in college, but either never enrolled or stopped out. Reasons include financial concerns, health issues, and lack of clarity about whether their evolving goals match with the college option they chose. Some of these students, as well as graduates who planned to go directly into the workforce, were left without an onramp to employment or training that would lead toward their career goals. In the short term, schools should work to prevent these patterns from being repeated.

Rather than making increasing college enrollment a goal, Maine schools and educators should focus on helping students find postsecondary options that fit well with their interests and financial situations. Career development is a complex and rapidly changing field, requiring knowledge of postsecondary education and training options as well as partnerships with employers in the labor market. The main finding from our interviews is that career and college readiness cannot be separated. Career development cannot be an add-on for teachers or guidance counselors also tasked with academic teaching, school scheduling, and social work duties.

Maine needs a career development curriculum that begins in elementary school and is a fundamental part of every grade level. Partnerships with postsecondary institutions and employer organizations at the state and regional levels can inform and support these efforts. Districts and schools will need access to expertise and funding. Every Maine student should have access to career guidance after high school. Maine charter schools, supported by the Maine Charter School Commission, may be well positioned to lead the way in this work.

Appendix

This study includes graduates for whom the schools provided transcripts and demographic details like date of birth to allow for college enrollment tracking. For that reason, not all 2018 and 2019 charter school graduates are included in the study.

Graduate Study Subjects by School and Class

School	Class of 2018	Class of 2019	Total in Study
Baxter	70	88	158
HCA	18	8	26
MeAA	0	38	38
MCA	50	76	126
MeANS	29	42	71
MeVA	44	55	99
Total	210	307	517

Interview Questions

1. What grade were you in when you enrolled in [charter school]? Why did you decide to enroll in/transfer to [school]?
2. Please tell me a little bit about your school experiences before attending [school]. What were those experiences like?
3. How did you select courses each semester? What kind of advice on course selections did you get at school? Did you pay attention to your progress toward graduation requirements?
4. What was the career and college guidance like at school? Did you apply to college? How did you decide whether to apply, where to apply, which college to enroll in?
5. During high school, what did you plan to do after graduation? How well prepared would you say you were you for the college or career that you wanted to pursue?
6. Were there any classes or experiences at school that were particularly useful for college/work/in life since graduation? Tell me a little bit about them.
7. Now that you've been out of school for a while, how would you rate your education at [school]? What were the best things about it? Do you feel that you sacrificed anything because you attended [school] instead of a traditional public school?
8. Would you recommend that other students attend [school]? What type of student would you say will get the most out of studying there?
9. What has your primary activity been since graduation? [Probe for details on college, job, or training: employer, promotions, training/certifications, school major, enrollment/transfer, internships...] How has this compared with what you wanted or planned to do?
10. Have your goals for the future changed since high school? How and why? What would you like to see yourself doing five years from now?
11. What advice would you give to staff and teachers at [charter school]? What about for students?

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About Plimpton Research

Plimpton Research provides policy-oriented research and project management services. Based in Maine, we offer expertise in education and community, workforce, and youth development.

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About the Maine Charter School Commission

The Maine Charter School Commission was created by Public Law 2011, Chapter 414, to authorize and oversee public charter schools in Maine. A ten (10) school limit was placed on the number of schools the Commission could authorize in the first 10 years.

Maine's charter school law provides guidance for the Commission in the following areas:

- 1) Content of applications that must be filled by charter school founders;
- 2) Execution of charter school contracts with the charter school's governing boards;
- 3) Oversight of charter schools it has authorized, including academic and operational accountability;
- 4) Analysis of data provided to the Commission by the charter school; and
- 5) Monitoring to ensure legal compliance with all applicable state and federal laws, rules and regulations.

The Maine Charter School Commission consists of seven members: three members must be members of the State Board of Education, appointed for three-year terms, and the other four members are appointed by the Governor, subject to review by the joint standing committee of the Legislature having jurisdiction over education matters and to confirmation by the Senate, for four-year terms.

In addition to fulfilling its statutory obligations, the Maine Charter School Commission provides information to the public regarding charter schools in Maine.

www.maine.gov/csc/reports