

Homeschoolers on to College:



What Research Shows Us

Experience and anecdotes have led many people to believe that homeschool parents were either move-to-the-country anarchist goat-herders, or right-wing Bible-thumpers, and their children were either mathematically-limited, due to Mama's fear of math, or child prodigies in rocket-science who were unthinkable socially hindered. Although one can find statistical deviants in every group, homeschooling research tells a different story from the experience-based stereotypes and biases concerning those involved in home education.



Quick History and Demographics

Most people know that parent-led, home-based education is neither a new concept nor a new educational practice; it is millennia old. By the late 1970s, however, it was estimated that only 13,000 grades K-12 students were being homeschooled in the United States (Lines, 1991). The practice of homeschooling was specially rekindled during the 1980s, promoted by individualist parents and educational thinkers with a variety of backgrounds in pedagogical philosophies and religious worldviews. With 1.7– 2.1 million K-12 students home educated during the 2002– 2003 institutional school year, home-based education is now arguably the fastest-growing form of education, compared to public and private institutional schooling (Ray, 2003).

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Although measures of central tendency mask the variety of people involved in homeschooling, the following descriptions give a glimpse of the current homeschool population (c.f., Ray, 2004b for a more comprehensive list):

1. Both parents are actively involved in home-based education, with the mother/homemaker usually as the main academic teacher. Fathers do some of the formal academic teaching of the children and are engaged in other ways in their lives.
2. The learning program is flexible and highly individualized, involving both homemade and purchased curriculum materials.
3. Some families purchase complete curriculum packages for their children, while others approach homeschooling with only a small degree of preplanned structure: this is often called “lifestyle of learning” or “unschooling.”
4. As a rule, home-educated students have relatively little interaction with state schools or their services. A minority participate in public-school interscholastic activities such as sports and music ensembles, and some occasionally take an academic course in local schools.
5. Children study a wide range of conventional subjects, with an emphasis on reading, writing, math, and science.
6. Many students take advantage of the flexibility provided by home education to participate in special studies and events, such as volunteer community work, political internships, travel, missionary excursions, animal husbandry, gardening, and national competitions.
7. Most homeschool children are taught at home for at least four to five years. Most parents intend to home-educate their youths through the high school years.
8. They have larger-than-average families.
9. Male and female students are equally represented.
10. A married couple head at least 95 percent of homeschooling families.
11. The typical homeschooling parent has attended or graduated from college. About half of home educators have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher. However, significant numbers have only a high school education.
12. The total annual household income is under \$25,000 for about 18 percent of the families; \$25,000–\$49,000 for about 44 percent; \$50,000–\$74,000 for about 25 percent, and \$75,000 or more for about 13 percent. This is close to the median (typical) income for American families.



13. In terms of faith, a wide variety of parents and families homeschool. More than 75 percent regularly attend religious services. The majority are of the Christian faith and place a strong emphasis on orthodox and conservative biblical doctrine. However, an increasing proportion of agnostics, atheists, Buddhists, Jews, Mormons, Muslims, and New Agers are homeschooling their children.
14. In terms of racial/ethnic background, about 85 percent are white/non-Hispanic, but a rapidly increasing portion of minorities also are engaging in home-based education.

Homeschool Students' Academic Performance

One of the first questions researchers ask is, “Does homeschooling work, academically?” Many policy makers, educators, school administrators, and parents wonder whether ordinary mothers and fathers, who are not government-certified teachers, are capable of teaching their children after age five. Is it possible for adults without specialized, university-level training in teaching to help their children learn what they need to learn?

Many studies have been completed during the past 20 years that examine the academic achievement of the home-educated (Ray, 2004b). Dozens of researchers have executed these studies. Examples of these studies ranged from a multi-year study in Washington state, three nationwide studies across the United States, and a nationwide study in Canada (Ray, 1994, 1997, 2001c; Rudner, 1999; Wartes, 1991). In study after study, the homeschooled scored, on average, at the 65th to 80th percentile on standardized academic achievement tests in the United States and Canada, compared to the public school average of the 50th percentile.

Researchers, wondering if only certain families—in which the parents have a high educational attainment or family income—are able to homeschool such that their children score high on achievement tests, show that children in homeschool families with low income and in which the parents have little education are scoring, on average, above state-school averages (Ray, 2000, 2004b, ch. 4). In addition, research shows that the parents’ teacher-certification has little to no relationship with their children’s academic achievement, and that the degree of state control of homeschooling (i.e., regulations) has no relationship with academic achievement (Ray, 2004b).

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Homeschool Students' Social and Emotional Development

Socialization questions are asked of nearly every homeschool parent and every homeschool teenager. Some of them tire of the questions; others receive them as an opportunity to spread the word about one of their favorite topics. These questions arise mainly in societies in which the institutionalization of children is the norm for children during the ages of six to 18.

More specifically, the first question usually asks if the child will experience healthy social, emotional and psychological development. Numerous studies, employing various psychological constructs and measures, show the home-educated are developing at least as well, and often better than, those who attend institutional schools (Medlin, 2000; Ray, 2004b, ch. 4). No research contravenes this evidence. For example, regarding aspect of self-concept in the psychological development of children, several studies have revealed that the self-concept of homeschooled students is significantly higher than that of public school students. As another example, Shyers (1992) found the only significant childhood social-interaction difference between the institutionally-schooled and homeschoolers was that the institutionally-schooled had higher problem behavior scores.

The second question related to socialization is how the homeschooled child will do in the “real world.”

Homeschoolers in the “Real World”

Many define the “real world” as the world of adulthood, in which one is responsible for obtaining one’s own food, shelter and clothing. For some college students, the “real world” is four years away. Others are already in the “real world,” because, in addition to taking classes, they work to provide their own food and shelter. To simplify the matter for this article, the “real world” is defined as life after secondary school.

Linda Montgomery (1989), a principal of a private high school, was one of the first to look to the future and adulthood of the home-educated. She investigated the extent to which homeschooled students were experiencing conditions that foster leadership in children and adolescents who attend institutional schools. Her findings on 10- to 21-year-olds showed that the home-educated were certainly not isolated from social and group activities with other youth and adults. They were quite involved in youth group and other church activities, jobs, sports, summer camps, music lessons, and recitals. She concluded that homeschooling nurtured leadership at least as well as does the conventional system.

Susannah Sheffer (1995) talked with homeschooled adolescent girls moving into adulthood. Sheffer began her report by citing the work of Carol Gilligan and her colleagues in the Harvard Project on Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development who, lamenting, “have written about girls’ ‘loss of voice’ and increasing distrust of their own perceptions.” Sheffer suggested that the great difference in structure and function—the way things work, the relationships people have, expected behaviors, and the roles people play—between homeschooling and conventional schooling may have explained why she found so many of these home-educated adolescents to have not lost their voice and sense of identity. Meredith, a 14-year-old in Sheffer’s study, said, “I was worried that I would become a typical teenager if I went to school” and “I think some people would have seen [school] as my opportunity to ‘be like everybody else.’ But I didn’t want to be like everybody else.” Sheffer concluded, “Throughout this book the homeschooled girls I’ve interviewed have echoed these statements. They have talked about trusting themselves, pursuing their own goals, maintaining friendships even when their friends differ from them or disagree with them.” Finally, these home-educated girls maintain their self-confidence as they pass into womanhood.

Sheffer’s findings regarding adolescent girls might explain some of the successes that other researchers have found, regarding young adults who were homeschooled. In a study that categorized college students as either home, public or private schooled, and examined their aptitude for achievement in college English, Galloway and Sutton (1995) found that homeschooled students demonstrated similar academic preparedness for college and similar academic achievement in college as students who had attended conventional schools. In a similar vein, Oliveira, Watson and Sutton (1994) found that home-educated college students had a slightly higher overall mean critical thinking score than did students from public schools, Christian schools, and ACE [private] schools but the differences were not statistically significant.

Similarly, Jones and Gloeckner (2004) cited three studies (Gray, 1998; Jenkins, 1998; Mexcur, 1993) as showing the home-educated to be performing as well or better than institutional-school graduates at the college level. Jones and Gloeckner, in their own study, concluded, “The academic performance analyses indicate that home school graduates are as ready for college as traditional high school graduates and that they perform as well on national college assessment tests as traditional high school graduates” (20).

ACTs and SATs are the best-known test predictors of success in university or college in America. Both the SAT and ACT publishers have reported for several years that the scores of the homeschooled are higher, on average, than those from public schools. For example, for the 1999–2000 school year, the home-educated scored an average of 568 in verbal while the state-school (i.e., public-school) average was 501, and 532 in math while the state-school average was 510 (Barber, 2001).

Galloway and Sutton (1997) used academic, cognitive, spiritual, affective-social, and psychomotor criteria for measuring success at a private university. Among other things, they found that homeschooled students held significantly more positions of appointed and spiritual leadership, and had more semesters of leadership service than did those from private schools, and were statistically similar to the public school graduates.

Although some college and university personnel have shown animosity toward the homeschooling process, it appears that most are now interested in welcoming the home-educated. A recent survey asked many questions of 34 college admission officers in Ohio, who averaged 10 years of experience in college admission work and of whom 88 percent had personal experience working with homeschooled students (Ray, 2001b). For example, they were asked how homeschooled students at their institution compared to their general student population in terms of academic success. About nine percent said “far more academically successful,” 22 percent reported “somewhat more academically successful,” 38 percent said “academically about average,” zero percent reported “somewhat less academically successful,” zero percent said “far less academically successful,” and 31 percent said “don’t know.” On a five-point, strongly agree–strongly disagree scale, the admission officers were nearly symmetrical in their responses to the statement, “As the primary instructors, parents should be recognized as capable of evaluating their student’s academic competence in letters of recommendation” (i.e., 32 percent agree, 24 percent neither, and 32 percent disagree). To the item, “The majority of homeschooled students are at least as socially well adjusted as are public schooled students,” 44 percent agreed or strongly agreed, 35 percent responded “neither,” and 21 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. Likewise, Irene Prue’s (1997, 62) nationwide study of college admission personnel revealed that “... homeschooled students are academically, emotionally, and socially prepared to succeed in college.”

Several colleges think so well of home-educated students that they have been actively recruiting them for several years (e.g., Boston University, Nyack College). Christopher Klicka’s (1998, 3) survey of college admission officers found a Dartmouth College admission officer saying, “The applications [from homeschoolers] I’ve come across are outstanding.



Homeschoolers have a distinct advantage because of the individualized instruction they have received.” This individualized instruction, combined with homeschooled students’ experience in studying and pursuing goals on their own, may be showing long-lasting effects. Admission officers at Stanford University think they are seeing an unusually high occurrence of a key ingredient, which they term “intellectual vitality,” in homeschool graduates (Foster, 2000). They link it to the practice of self-teaching prevalent in these young people, as a result of their homeschool environment.

A few researchers have examined adults who were home-educated without necessarily linking them to the college scene. J. Gary Knowles (Knowles & de Olivares, 1991; Knowles & Muchmore, 1995) was the first to focus research on adults who were home-educated, collecting extensive data from a group who were home-educated an average of about six years before they were 17 years old. He found that they tended to be involved in entrepreneurial and professional occupations, were fiercely independent, and strongly emphasized the importance of family. Furthermore, they were glad they had been home-educated, would recommend homeschooling to others, and had no grossly negative perceptions of living in a pluralistic society.

I recently conducted the largest nationwide study of home-educated adults (Ray, 2004a). The target population was all homeschooled adults in the U.S. Most of my findings were consistent with what Knowles and his colleagues (Knowles & de Olivares, 1991; Knowles & Muchmore, 1995) found. Of 7,306 adults who had been homeschooled participated, 5,254 had been homeschooled for seven or more years during K-12. This subset of participants had several things in common:

1. Their average age was 21.
2. They were homeschooled for an average of 11 years.
3. Regarding the primary method of instruction used during their homeschool years (of nine listed in the survey), 34 percent selected “more than one of the above” nine methods, 25 percent chose “traditional textbooks and assignments,” and 22 percent responded “eclectic, directed by parent.”
4. A higher percent of them had taken some college courses than the general U.S. population of similar age, and a higher percent of the home-educated already had a baccalaureate.

In essence, the home-educated were very positive about their homeschool experiences, actively involved in their local communities, keeping abreast of current affairs, highly civically engaged, going on to college at a higher rate than the national average, tolerant of others' expressing their viewpoints, religiously active, but wide-ranging in their worldview beliefs, holding worldview beliefs similar to those of their parents, and largely home-educating their own children.

5. Less homeschoolers (61 percent) read a newspaper at least once a week than do U.S. adults of similar age (82 percent).
6. More of the home-educated (98 percent) read a book in the past six months than did the general population (69 percent).
7. More of the homeschooled (100 percent) read one or more magazines on a regular basis than the general population (89 percent).
8. Seventy-one percent of the homeschooled "...participate in any ongoing community service activity..." compared to 37 percent of the general population.
9. With the statement, "politics and government are too complicated to understand," four percent of the home-educated agree while 35 percent of the general population agree.
10. For those of age 18 to 24, 76 percent of the homeschooled voted in the past five years while 29 percent of the same-age general population in the U.S. voted.
11. Of those ages 18 to 24, 14 percent of the home-educated participated in a protest or boycott during the past 12 months while 7 percent of the general population did so.

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These home-educated adults' degree of community and civic involvement supports some ideas Patricia Lines, formerly a researcher with the U.S. Department of Education, expressed about homeschoolers a decade earlier (1994). She asked whether homeschooling parents and their children were withdrawing from the larger public debate about education and, more generally, from social discourse that was an integral part of a liberty-loving republic. In a sense, she addressed whether these children and youth were being prepared to be a significant part of society. Lines concluded:

"Although [homeschool parents] have turned their backs on a widespread and hallowed practice of sending children to a school located in a particular building, adhering to a particular schedule and program, they have not turned their backs on the broader social contract as understood at the time of the Founding [of the United States]... Like the Antifederalists, these homeschoolers are asserting their historic individual rights so that they may form more meaningful bonds with family and community. In doing so, they are not abdicating from the American agreement. To the contrary, they are affirming it."

The data on the degree of community involvement and civic engagement of adults who were homeschooled are not shocking. After all, researchers Smith and Sikkink (1999) found that homeschool parents, the main models for their children, were highly civically engaged. In a survey examining the rate at which parents were engaged in public civic activities, Smith and Sikkink used data from the 1996 National Household Education Survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, which differentiates between students educated in public, Catholic, non-Catholic church-related, and nonreligious private schools, and homeschool students. Parents were asked about the extent of family involvements in a variety of civic activities. The researchers concluded:

"Far from being privatized and isolated, home schooling families are typically very well networked and quite civically active. The empirical evidence is clear and decisive: private schoolers and home schoolers are considerably more civically involved in the public square than are public schoolers, even when the effects of differences in education, income, and other related factors are removed from the equation. Indeed, we have reason to believe that the organizations and practices involved in private and home schooling, in themselves, tend to foster public participation in civic affairs... the challenges, responsibilities, and practices that private schooling and home education normally entail for their participants may actually help reinvigorate America's civic culture and the participation of her citizens in the public square."

Findings on homeschoolers in New Mexico (Ray, 2001a) and Ohio (Ray, 2001b) are consistent with those of Smith and Sikkink. The aforementioned recent study of adults who were home-educated, therefore, implies that the modeling of their parents with respect to civic activity is having a long-lasting impact on homeschool children and youth.

Recently, several academics have claimed that (a) homeschool parents are selfish for home-educating their children (Lubienski, 2000) and anti-state (Apple, 2000), (b) homeschool parents and children are removing themselves from basic and essential participation in the democratic processes of the U.S. republic (Lubienski, 2000; Reich, 2002), and (c) homeschoolers will be socially isolated and likely not learn to be decent, civil and respectful and to work with others (Evans, 2003; Reich, 2002).

Yet, to date, it appears that almost a dozen investigations address home-educated adults and the research shows that the home-educated are disproportionately involved in community life, civic activities and in democratic processes, decent, civil, respectful, and disproportionately exhibiting leadership traits. This is not to say, of course, that every homeschool graduate is brilliant, attractive, and destined for success. It simply means that, on average, they appear to be doing well in the “real world” because the environment in which they were educated—in the broad sense, academically, mentally, morally, and aesthetically—gave them sound academic skills, a solid and confident social and emotional nurturance, respect for others, a stable worldview, and a zest for learning.

How Colleges Approach the Home-Educated

Jennifer Sutton (2002) wrote in Brown University’s alumni magazine, “Although the number of homeschoolers applying to college is still small, it represents only the first wave. The next homeschooled generation—the real boom—is just hitting puberty.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* headlined another article, “Homeschooling: Growing Force in Higher Education” (Morgan, 2003). Sixty-two percent of college admission officers agreed “the homeschool movement is having or will have a significant impact on higher education” (Ray, 2001a). As the number of homeschooled college applicants increases, college admission officers should keep the following in mind:

Research and probability show that the home-educated college applicant is very likely to succeed in college, both academically and socially. Consider that the home-educated typically have strong self-discipline, motivation, and self-initiative. “These kids are the epitome of Brown students,” says Joyce Reed, who became an associate dean of the college twelve years ago. “They’ve learned to be self-directed, they take risks, they face challenges with total fervor, and they don’t back off” (Sutton, 2002).

As with any applicant, you will need to use your wisdom and experience to determine whether the individual person fits the particular ethos of your institution, if “fit” is of high importance to your college.

Recognize that you may hold biases and prejudices you do not recognize. After all, about five American generations have been attending age-segregated, institutional places of learning



for 12 years of our lives, and most reading this article spent at least 16 years in these institutions. Most Americans (and those in many other nations) have no idea of what it would be like to be home-educated and how we might be different, for better or worse, had we experienced this age-old practice.

Make sure your college has policies for receiving applications from and admitting the home-educated and make sure that your admission policies are reasonable, based on research and broad experience, and fair.

Here are some guidelines (some of which are from the Home School Legal Defense Association, 2004):

1. If your institution requires an SAT or ACT score in general, then simply also require that of the homeschooler.
2. Ask the home-educated to provide you with a transcript, but have flexible guidelines for these records and documentation of courses of study completed. They will not have the same look as those from institutional schools.
3. Ask the home-educated for a list of “extracurricular” activities.
4. Ask them for a bibliography of what they read during their secondary years. You might learn things about the breadth and depth of their education that you would have never known, especially if you only ask for a transcript.
5. Recognize the validity of homeschool high school completion or diplomas. Homeschooling is legal in all 50 states and, as explained in this article, the research shows that they are doing well academically.
6. For more information, contact the National Home Education Research Institute (www.nheri.org).

Homeschooling is growing and will continue to grow. Based on current information, there may be 3 million homeschool K-12 students living in the U.S. by 2010 (Ray, 2004a). Colleges and universities will soon see a sudden growth in the number applying for admission. Evidence to date points to a high success rate in adulthood in general, and in college in particular, for these individuals who have been raised and educated outside mainstream institutional schools. Perhaps they will bring, at a higher rate, some distinctive and positive traits to your college’s or university’s life that neither you nor professors have seen in awhile.

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