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## Grads Head to College In Record Numbers

By [SARA MURRAY](#)

The share of new high-school graduates enrolled in college reached a record high last year, likely reflecting the weak job market they faced.

Some 70.1% of the 2.9 million new graduates between the ages of 16 and 24 headed to colleges and universities, the Labor Department said Tuesday, based on data from January through October 2009. That percentage was a historical high for the data series, which began in 1959.

College-enrollment rates have been rising gradually: In 2008, 68.6% of high-school graduates headed to college, up from 62.9% in 1999. But the poor economy, which has created a particularly tough labor market for young and uneducated workers, is amplifying the trend.

Cecilia Rouse, a member of the White House Council of Economic Advisers and an economics and public-affairs professor on leave from Princeton University, said that "if you weren't going to college, you wouldn't be working."

Most high-school graduates who didn't go on to college—70% of them—were either working or looking for work. Of those in college, 42.1% had a job or were searching for one.

Many of those searching for jobs were unsuccessful. The 2009 high-school graduates who didn't go on to college faced a 35% unemployment rate. Those in college had a jobless rate of 23.7%, also showing the effects of a labor market that hasn't vigorously begun adding jobs.

The outlook for high-school dropouts was even grimmer. Some 383,000 people dropped out of high school between October 2008 and October 2009, and their jobless rate was 55.1%.

Research also shows that the gap in wages between high-school dropouts and graduates on one hand, and college graduates on the other, is widening, regardless of the effects of the latest recession.

"The consequences of dropping out of high school are much more severe today than they were, say, 30 years ago," said Dan Bloom, an expert on barriers to employment at New York-based research organization MDRC, speaking at a Brookings Institution event Tuesday in Washington. "I think the main reason is that changes in the labor market...have dramatically decreased the availability of good-paying jobs for people who don't have any post-secondary education or training."

For instance, in 2007, men with college degrees working in entry-level jobs earned 79% more than men with a high-school degree or less. In 1973, that difference was 33%, according to a Princeton-Brookings report called "Transition to Adulthood," which was released Tuesday.

Kevin Oblinger, 19 years old, was among the 66% of last year's male high-school graduates to continue on to college; 73.8% of young women went on to college as well. For Mr. Oblinger, attending Butler University in Indianapolis was never in question. His parents encouraged him to get a degree, even though neither of them finished college.

That pursuit was made easier through the cross-country athletic scholarship and grants he received. His parents pay the difference.

The transition wasn't easy. "The beginning of the year was quite a shock to me, how much I needed to manage my time," Mr. Oblinger said, noting that "making the time to go to practice and meets and somehow fit homework in there and study" was particularly difficult. But he has gotten used to it now and said he hopes to go on to graduate school and become a physical therapist.

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