Life Trajectories of Palo Alto Alumni Based on College Tier Attended

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INTRODUCTION

"The name or prestige of a school is not what makes one successful. It is the work one puts in, the love one has for what they are studying, and the opportunities one seeks out that leads to success."

- 2009, Gunn High School Graduate

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

It is commonly believed by students and parents that where one goes to college will directly impact the rest of their life, which places a great deal of pressure on which college one attends. If someone is looking for a bright future, it is automatic for many, especially in Palo Alto, to think they should apply to one of the "top colleges" in the country. Highly ranked colleges such as the Ivy League Schools, have a prestigious reputation that many believe correlate directly to success. **However, does one's overall trajectory in life greatly differ based upon which college tier level they attend, specifically if they are a Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD) graduate?**

This question holds importance because as the competition to get admitted into a "top school" increases, the age at which a student begins to prepare for college decreases. If the data show that students who attended top tier colleges have similar trajectories in life as students who attended lower tier colleges, then the years of intense preparation to get into a highly ranked university may be deemed as unnecessary.

Figure 1: College Tier Levels/Number of Responses

Tier	Ranking	Examples of Schools	Responses
1	University, Liberal Arts College 1-20	Harvard, Stanford	165
2	University, Liberal Arts College 21-50	USC, University of Michigan	190
3	University, Liberal Arts College 51-100	Pepperdine, Purdue	67
4	University, Liberal Arts College 100+	University of Oregon, University of SF	33
5	Regional University/College, Arts, Business	Santa Clara University, High Point University	95
6	Community College, City College, International, Unranked	Foothill College, Santa Barbara City College	25
7	Unclear, No Response	X	43

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

A written survey was conducted via Google Forms which collected both quantitative and qualitative data. The survey reached alumni through public Facebook pages, Palo Alto community websites, and by word of mouth starting from December 17, 2016 to February 5, 2017.

The minimum sample size needed in order for the data to be statistically significant was 372 respondents. The online survey consisted of Henry M. Gunn High School and Palo Alto High School graduates from the years 2004 to 2014. This graduate range was chosen because it extends far enough so that alumni have had a chance to experience life post college. In addition, the Palo Alto environment then, was similar to how it is today, which may have influenced graduates' post high school decisions. To see the number of alumni who responded to the survey with corresponding tier level, see **Figure 1**.

CAREER PATHS AND SATISFACTION LEVELS

Figure 2: Career Paths and Professions by Tier Level

Tier	Medical, Life Sciences, Public Health	Business, Econ, Banking, Finance	Engineer Tech	Lib Arts, Social Sciences Politics, Policy	Visual Performing Arts	Law	Education	Hospitality	Other
1	23%	25%	26%	6%	2%	4%	2%	0.6%	Military
2	18%	16%	26%	7%	8%	3%	6%	0%	Real Estate, Prop Mngt, Journ/Media, Apparel Industry
3	18%	9%	21%	16%	7%	1%	12%	3%	Environmental Policy, Journalism/Media
4	30%	9%	6%	15%	3%	0%	18%	3%	Pilot, Homemaker
5	15%	16%	21%	10%	14%	2%	6%	5%	Cosmetology, Firefighter, Gunsmith, Military, Prof Football
6	14%	14%	14%	5%	10%	0%	0%	0%	Firefighter, Real Estate, Prop Mngt, Urban Plan

Figure 3: Life Satisfaction

Figure 3: Overall life satisfaction of PAUSD alumni by tier level.

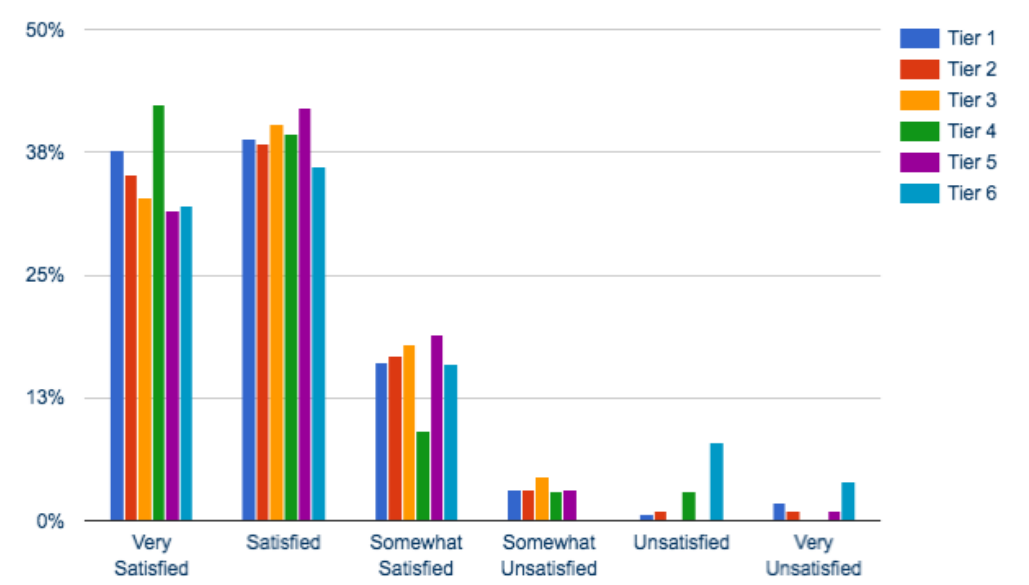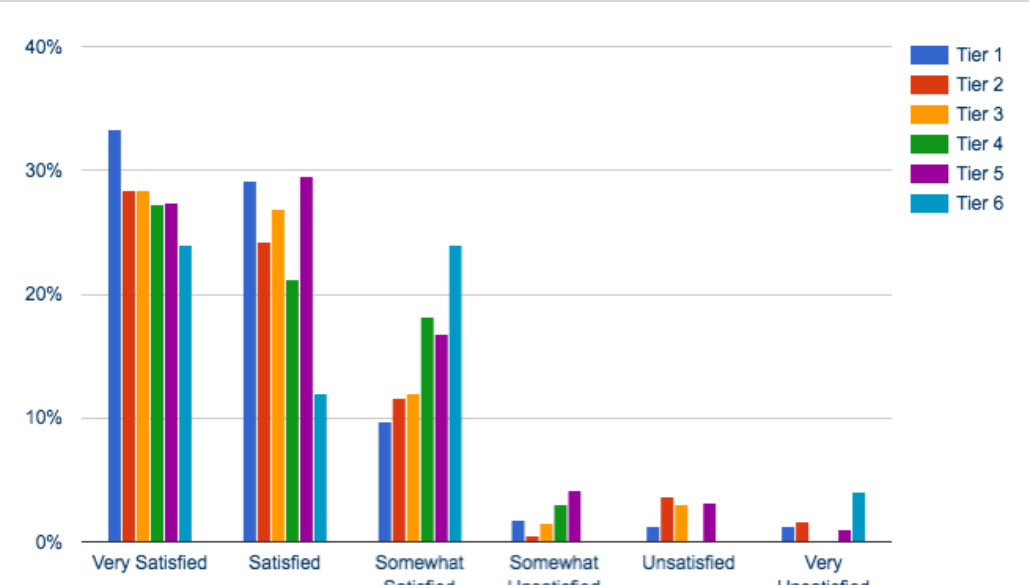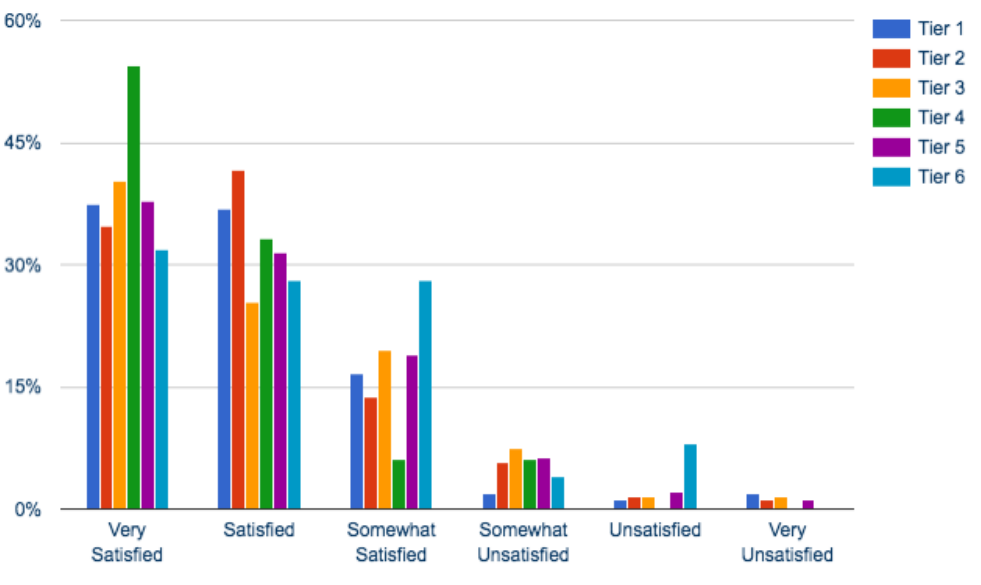### Figure 4: Relationships Satisfaction

Figure 4: Overall relationship satisfaction of PAUSD alumni by tier level.

Figure 5: Job Satisfaction

Figure 5: Overall job satisfaction of PAUSD alumni by tier level.

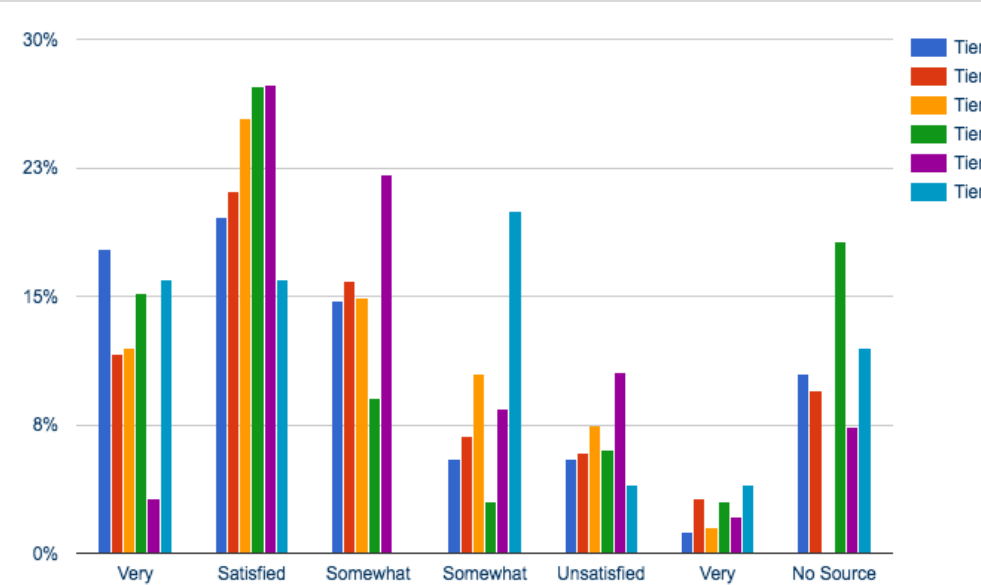### Figure 6: Income Satisfaction

Figure 6: Overall income satisfaction of PAUSD alumni by tier level.

MENTAL HEALTH

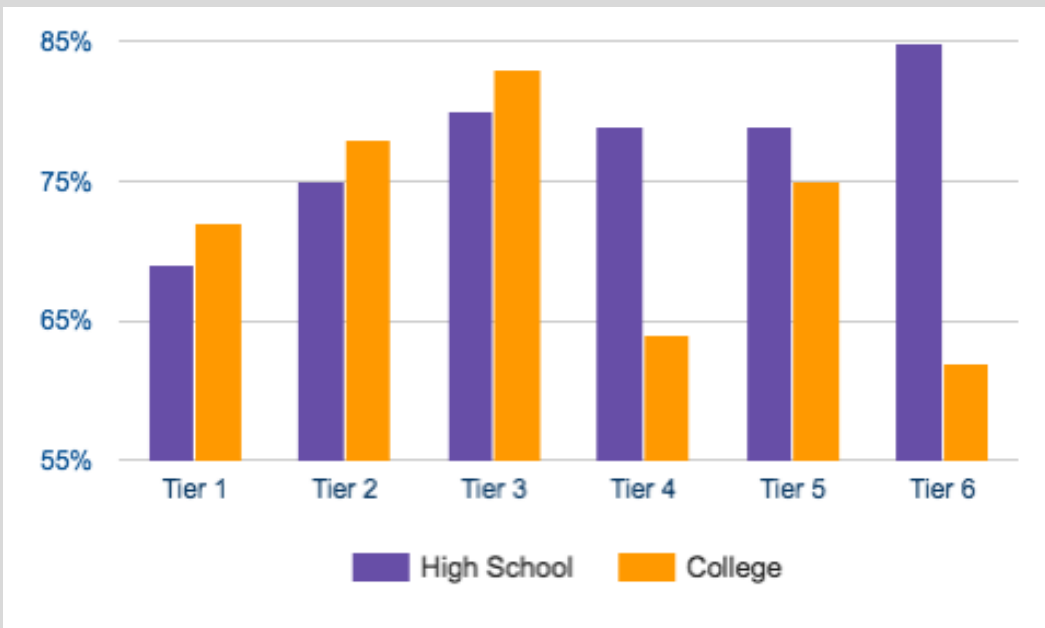### Figure 7: Developed Mental Health Condition

Figure 7: Percentage of PAUSD alumni who developed mental health conditions during their high school and college years.

Figure 8: MH Conditions From High School to College

	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tier 4	Tier 5	Tier 6
Developed	+3%	+3%	+3%	-15%	-4%	-23%
Anxiety	+1%	-2%	-10%	-13%	+1%	-5%
Depression	-2%	-4%	-7%	-21%	-5%	-8%
Burnt Out	+28%	-5%	-15%	-6%	+1%	-6%
Counseling	+9%	+2%	-1%	-26%	+1%	-40%

Figure 8: Percentage change of mental health conditions by tier level from high school to college years.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Figure 1 displays the breakdown of college tier levels by National University and Regional Universities/Liberal Arts Colleges, Specialty Colleges in Arts, Business, Community/Colleges, International, and Unranked schools. Each school reported was placed in a tier level according to its individual ranking in the 2017 US News and World Report. 618 responses were received with tier level representations of 27%, 31%, 11%, 5%, 16%, 4%, 7% respectively.

Figure 2 displays career paths/professions across tier levels 1-6. Alumni careers from the top 5 paths (1. Medical/Life Science 2. Business/Econ, Banking, Finance, 3. Engineering/Tech, 4. Liberal Arts, Social/Political Science, 5. VPA) show representation across all tier levels.

Figures 3-6 show overall alumni satisfactions with respect to life, relationships, job and income. With respect to life, relationships, and job satisfaction the overwhelming majority of responses were in the range of "Somewhat Satisfied" to "Very Satisfied". Income satisfaction, however, showed a larger distribution across all responses, particularly "Satisfied" to "Very Unsatisfied."

Figures 7 reports the overall mental health of PAUSD alumni from high school to college, followed by **Figure 8** which breaks down the data by tier level and specific condition. Tiers 1-3 reveal progressively increasing levels of mental health conditions in college when compared to high school whereas tiers 4-6 show significant reductions post high school years. When looking at specific mental health conditions by tier levels, tier 1 showed a +28% and +9% increase during college years in terms of feeling burnt out and needing/seeking counseling. Tier levels 4 and 6 on the other hand, showed striking reductions in college years across all conditions when compared to their mental health condition in high school.

In conclusion, the data display the idea that similar life trajectories may be possible regardless of tier level in terms of career paths and satisfaction levels with overall life, relationship, and job. With regards to mental health however, tier levels 1-3 specifically show even higher percentages of mental health issues during college years and heightened levels of students burning out and requiring counseling in tier 1 schools specifically.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND REFERENCES

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