

College Attendance Among Jews in Lewiston, Maine, During the Interwar Period

By Andrea Birnbaum '12¹

When I first began researching educational patterns among Jews from Maine during the time between the two World Wars, I did not consider it exceptional that Jewish students had high rates of college attendance. But then I realized I was coming from a high school where the majority of people went to college after graduation. In fact, going to college is not a given across American society. In the 1920s and 1930s, it was even less common for people to go to college. So it is truly unusual that so many Jews did go to college!

This study can be viewed as simply proving the already accepted fact that Jewish people value education. More importantly, however, it provides a quantitative understanding of this pattern of educational attainment. This study shows more specifically the extent to which Jews in Lewiston valued higher education.

There have been a total of three other studies of interwar college attendance: Johnstown, Pennsylvania (Morawska 1996); Providence, Rhode Island (Perlmann 1988); and Waterville, Maine (Freidenreich and Shayer 2010). The Lewiston study significantly contributes to knowledge of college attendance among Jews from small towns; of the studied towns, only Waterville and Lewiston meet Weissbach's (2005) definition of a small Jewish community (100-999 Jews). A thorough study of Lewiston also enhances our understanding of Jews in Maine and will prove to be a useful comparison with Waterville and other towns. This report focuses on Lewiston because the town library has an almost complete set of yearbooks, which include almost every student's specific plans after graduating.

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The first step in researching this topic was to compile a complete list of the Jewish people who lived in Lewiston in 1930, using the 1930 census. Identifying Jewish people took practice. Religion was not included in the census, but the census did list country of origin and language for those born abroad. In most cases, the Jews were from Russia, Poland, Lithuania or Germany. The census-takers often describe their language as Yiddish or Hebrew, but sometimes they recorded the language as Russian or Polish. When the languages is denoted as such, it is possible that the people were Russian or Polish Christian immigrants, so to discern between the Jews and non-Jews, I also look at first names and occupation listed in the census. I then examined Lewiston High School yearbooks from the interwar period, housed in the Lewiston Public Library. I collected information about the post-graduation plans of every student who graduated between 1927 and 1940, the period for which the library's yearbook collection was comprehensive.

Figure 1 is a representation of the college attendance rates of these Lewiston High School graduates, Jewish and non-Jewish, male and female. This figure introduces the disparity in educational tendencies among Jewish and non-Jewish students.

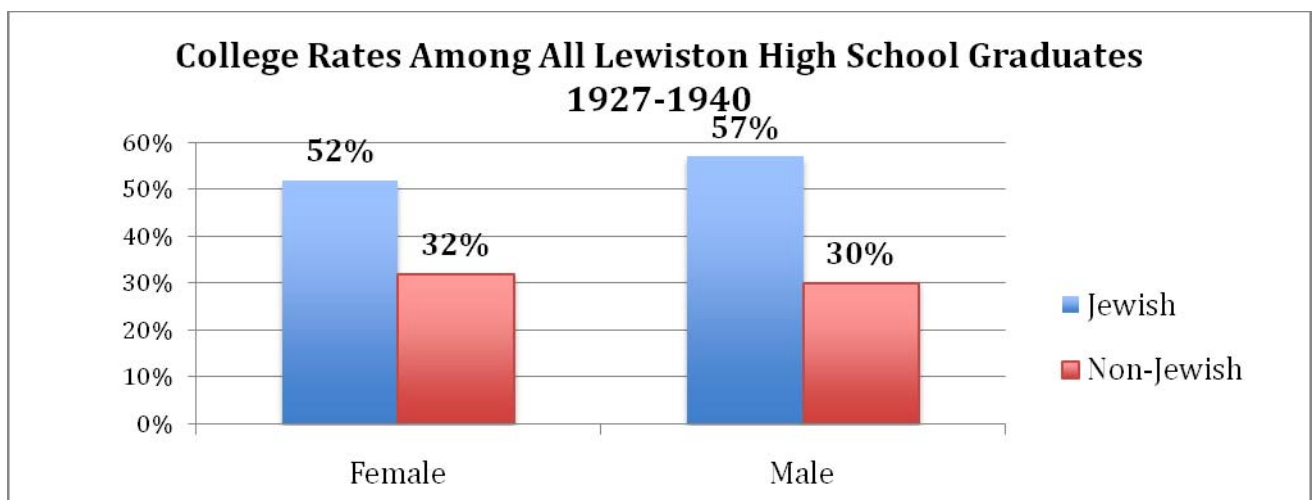


Figure 1. Source: Lewiston High School yearbooks. Out of a sample of 2,300 students, 73 were Jewish; Jews comprised 3.2% of the student population.

While Figure 1 represents students who graduated Lewiston High, Figure 2 demonstrates educational patterns among the general population in Lewiston. It is possible to study the percent of the population that is in school because the 1930 census-takers made note of every person who had been enrolled in school since September 1929. Only about half of all Lewiston citizens of age 16-17 in 1930 attended school. School was only mandatory until age 16, and many of these young people went to work in the mills instead of finishing high school. Although Joel Perlmann (1988) studied various ethnic groups in Providence, Rhode Island, he offers an explanation for the reason the Lewiston students went to work in the mills. Perlmann describes how Italian immigrants did not see the value in sending their children to public school for longer than necessary when the children could be earning money for the family (84). A similar value system may have shaped the decisions of Lewiston's large ethnic communities. Jewish young adults also often worked, but education was their families' priority. As shown in Figure 2, all Jewish 16 and 17-year-olds in Lewiston in 1930 were in school, reflecting how Jewish families placed value on finishing high school.

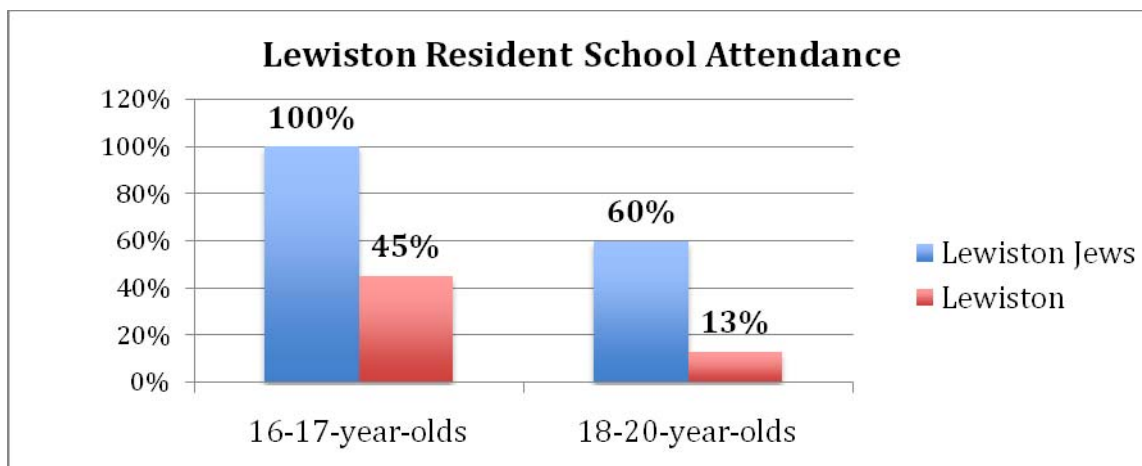


Figure 2. A statistical summary of the 1930 census gave the Lewiston school attendance rates for age categories 16-17 and 18-20, and I was able to calculate the equivalent rate using census data on Lewiston's Jews.

Figure 2 also indicates that Jewish residents ages 18-20 were four times more likely to be students than their non-Jewish counterparts. When drawing conclusions from this data, it is

important to acknowledge that in 1930, some students graduated high school at age 18, while many others graduated at ages 16 and 17. Therefore, school attendance rate among 18-20-year-olds does not directly correlate with the college attendance rates. Although the data is indeterminate, the school attendance rates of Jews and non-Jews ages 18-20 are sufficiently different to provide evidence of major differences in the educational patterns within these populations.

Figure 3 shows that in the time between 1927 and 1940 there was little variance in the Jewish college attendance rate. The overall average attendance rate of 62% is almost equivalent to the trend line, or the linear approximation. It is interesting that the college attendance rate did not increase as time progressed, as this is what might have been expected. Because the variance in college attendance rate is not a function of the progressing years, it is appropriate that this study analyzes all of the students from this time period in a single data set.

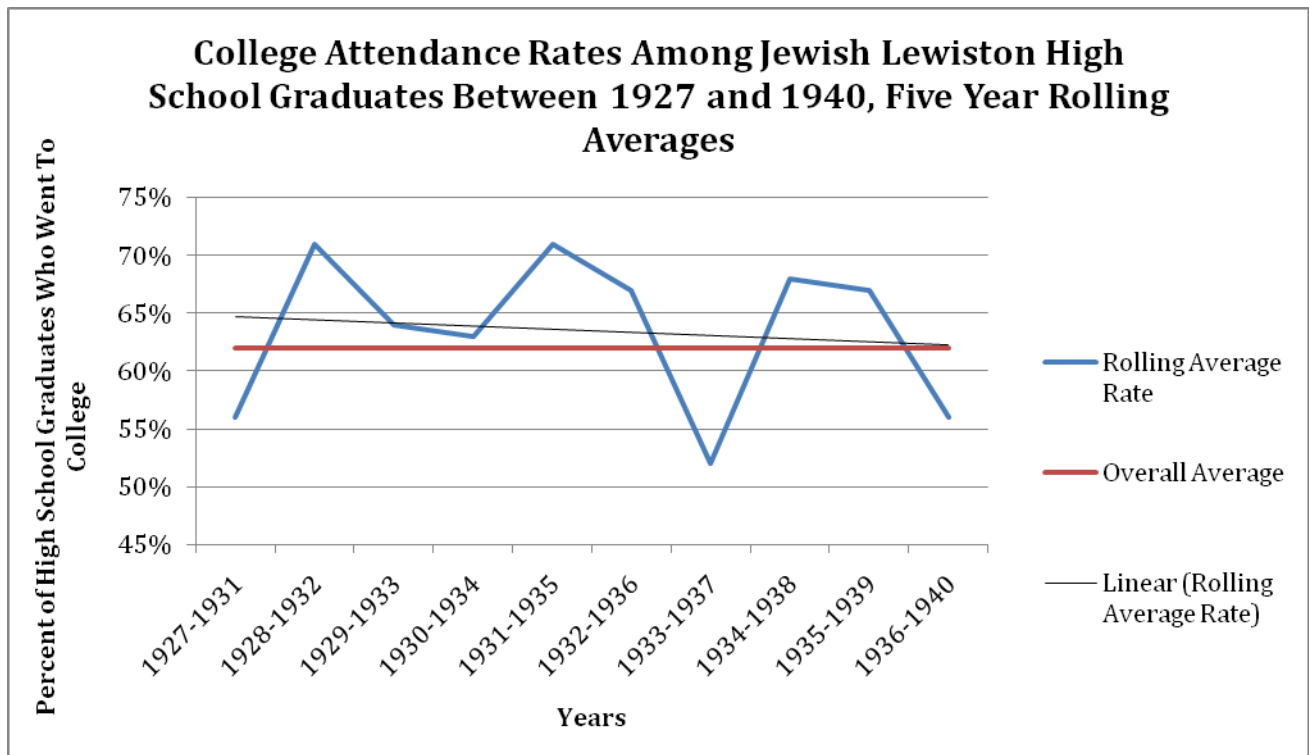


Figure 3. This data represents all of the Jewish students who graduated from 1927 through 1940 listed in the yearbooks. I did not, however, rely exclusively on the yearbooks to calculate college attendance rates: I also used Bates College enrollment records. The overall average rate of 62% is higher than the averages that were obtained

strictly from the yearbooks (see Figure 1) because some of the individuals who were not planning on attending college, according to the yearbooks, did in fact attend Bates.

Further depth is added to the college attendance rates when comparing the different types of schools that attracted different students. Jewish students had a proclivity towards 4-year liberal arts institutions such as Bates, Bowdoin, and the University of Maine. Figure 4 shows the percentage, out of all the students pursuing post-secondary education, who planned to attend 4-year institutions.

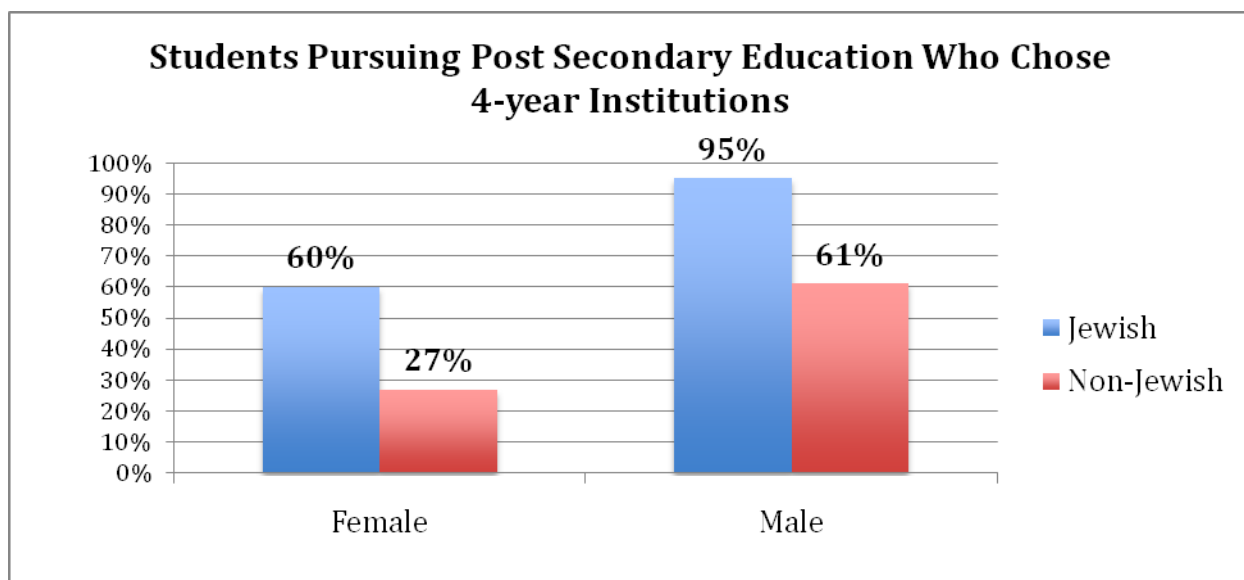


Figure 4. The yearbooks only listed specific colleges for 93% of the students planning on attending post-secondary education; for the other 7% the yearbooks simply stated that they would go to college. This graph reflects the 93% of students for whom we know their specific educational plans.

Students pursuing post-secondary education who did not enroll in 4-year schools would enroll in briefer professional programs; in addition, non-Jewish boys would often enter college-prep schools. Figures 5 and 6 show a breakdown of the different types of schools that female students attended.² Unlike their Jewish counterparts, most non-Jewish women went to teachers colleges, secretarial schools, and nursing schools. Even though Jewish women did not have high attendance rates at teachers colleges and secretarial schools, they did pursue these careers; they often went to 4-year colleges to prepare for these occupations. Consider, for example, Libby

² I chose to assess female students because almost all male Jewish students went to 4-year schools.

Goldman, who grew up in Lewiston’s neighboring town of Auburn. “I always planned on being a teacher,” she recounted. Goldman, however, did not enroll in a teachers college like many of her non-Jewish peers but instead attended Bates College, graduating in 1929 (Goldman 2010). Goldman’s experience reflects the fact that Jews from the Lewiston area were genuinely attracted to 4-year college because they valued the opportunities associated with a liberal arts education, even while the trend among Lewiston’s non-Jewish students was to enroll in professional programs.

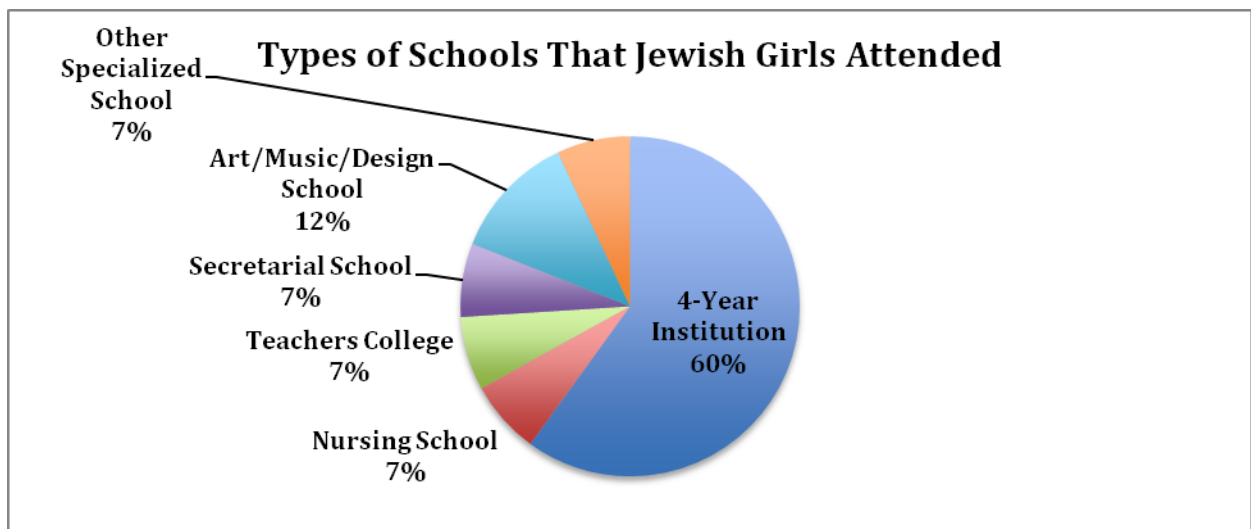


Figure 5. Representative of 15 Jewish girls from Lewiston for whom the yearbooks provided a specific type of college. Just as the yearbooks included specific types of schools for 93% of the students, the yearbooks also listed specific schools for 93% (15 out of 16) of the girls pursuing higher education. Jews constitute 3.8% of all girls who pursued post-secondary education. Also note that the current version of Excel can not create pie graphs using percentages with decimal points, and each pie graph must add to 100%; as a result, the accurate percent of girls attending art/music/design schools is 13%, or 2/15 girls.

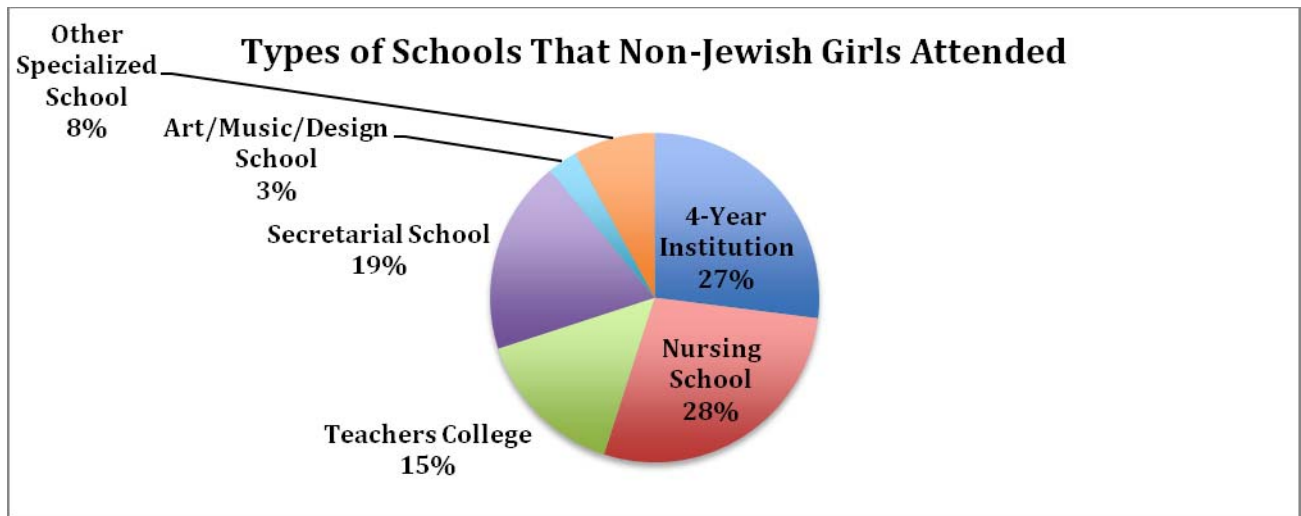


Figure 6. Representative of 377 non-Jewish girls from Lewiston for whom the yearbooks provided a specific type of college.

More than a quarter of all non-Jewish girls pursuing higher education went into nursing, while only one Jewish girl went into that field. This trend in Lewiston might be explained with the knowledge that many hospitals in the United States in the early 20th century were Christian and would limit their acceptance of Jewish students into their nursing programs (Mayer 2009). It also was very difficult for Jewish nurses and doctors to find employment in these hospitals.

A clear explanation for the striking college attendance rates among Lewiston Jews is that the Lewiston Jews valued education, but it is also important to consider how family wealth might account for some of the differences in educational attainment. To view Jewish college attendance within the context of Lewiston, it is important to compare the Jews and non-Jews economically. Figures 7 and 8, which show the median value of owned homes and the median monthly rent, suggest that Jewish households in Lewiston were significantly more well off than the general population in that city.

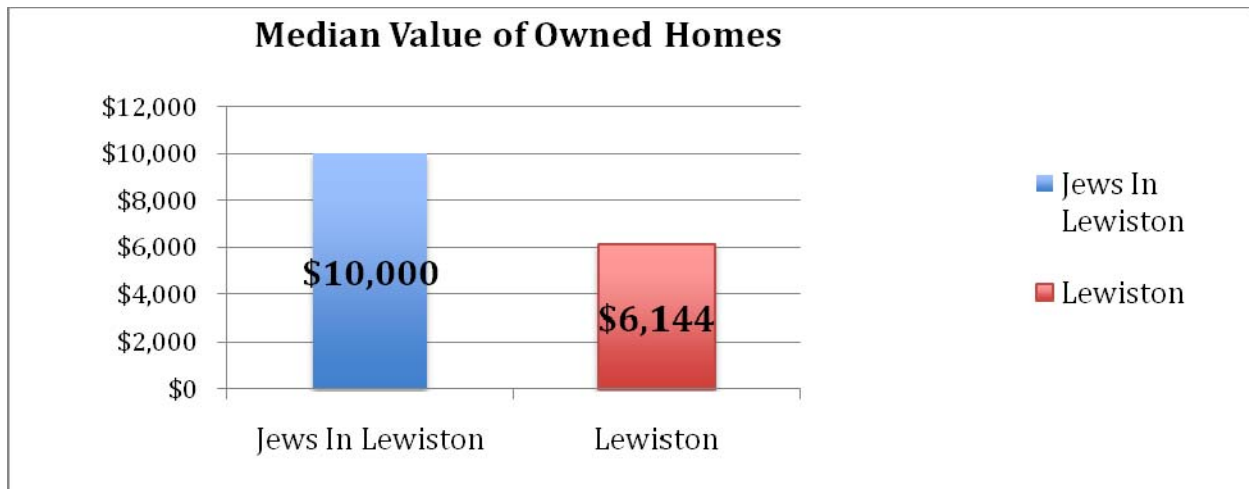


Figure 7. The Jewish median was calculated using information on all Jewish families listed in the 1930 census. The summary of the census provided the Lewiston median.

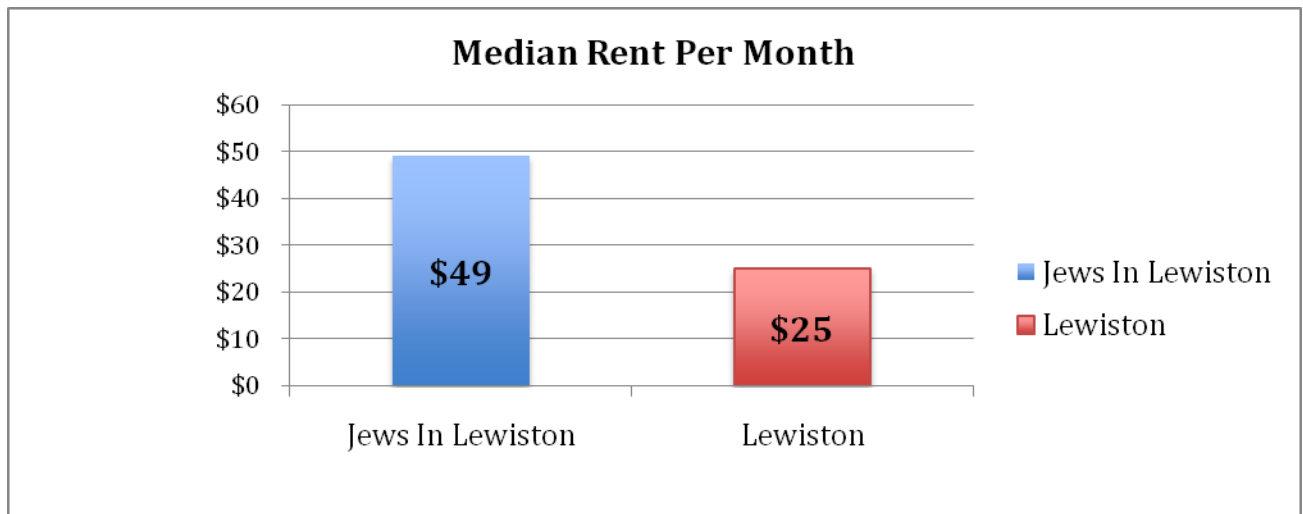


Figure 8. See note on Figure 7.

Given this disparity in wealth between the Jewish community in Lewiston and the Lewiston population at large, I sought to find the relationship between the values of owned and rented homes and the college attendance rate. In Figure 9, the Jewish students are separated into four categories: students whose families owned or rented their homes for above or below the median value of Jewish owned and rented homes in Lewiston. Jewish students whose families rented their homes for higher than the median monthly rent attended college more frequently than members of households whose rent is below the Jewish median. We do not know that Jewish families who paid a higher monthly rent were necessarily wealthier, but this statistic may

suggest a correlation between family wealth and college attendance. On the contrary to what might be expected, students whose families owned their homes for less than the Jewish median value of owned homes went to college at a higher rate than those students whose families own more costly homes. Again, value of owned homes may or may not have related directly to family wealth. It is possible that families which valued saving and investing in their children’s college education chose not to invest in expensive homes. No solid conclusions can be made using this data, but if family wealth did correlate with the market value of owned and rented homes, then the inconsistency in the relationship between college attendance and home values suggests that differences in wealth within the Jewish community did not greatly affect the rate of college attendance. Accepting this logic, the primary “push factor” influencing these students to go to college was not their family’s wealth.³

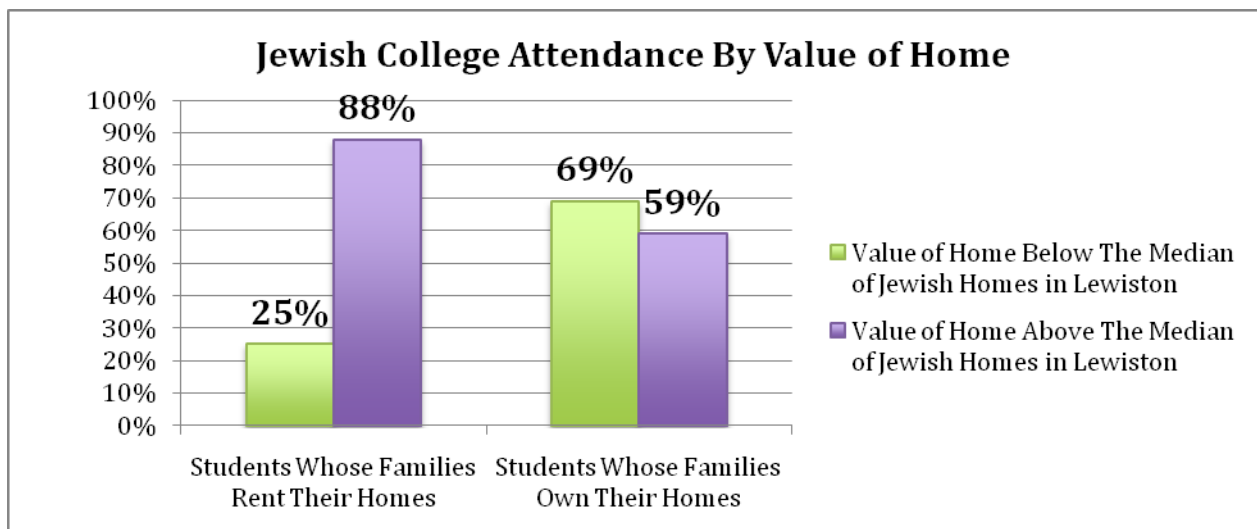


Figure 9. Dividing families using the Jewish median shows variance within the Jewish community and separates the families into four almost equally sized groups. If the sample size were larger, it would have been possible to separate the families using the Lewiston median, so as to show the families that were wealthy and poor relative to the city of Lewiston.

Many Jewish families were considerably wealthy, but what I am learning through interviews is that even the Jewish families without much disposable income sent their children to

³ To explore this topic further, in the near future I will use the census to gather home ownership and rent values for the non-Jewish students who went to Lewiston High School.

college. For example, Libby Goldman, from Auburn, recounted that she and her brothers each saved 10 cents a week growing up for the purpose of paying for college. Then, since her father did not have much money, her brothers decided to give her their savings so that she could go to Bates because she was the smartest child (Goldman 2010). This is surprising: one might think that it would have been her father that paid for her education. It is also evident that her family had little economic means because she received financial aid. And like many of the Maine's Jewish students who attended college in-state, Libby lived at home and commuted because her family could not afford room and board.

Lester Jolovitz, who grew up in Winslow and graduated from Colby in 1939, reflects on his family's financial background:

I think my first semester was \$300. And I was able to live at home. My father was, you know, a simple grocer, had one store, we had three or four people working in the store, but my father made what we would call a sort of comfortable living compared with the people that were our customers, because all of our customers were mill workers, and, you know, in those days a mill worker would make \$25, \$30 a week, and raise a family... my father was in business and we were Jews, so we were always considered wealthy. (Jolovitz 2010)

Figure 8 indicates that Lewiston's Jews were better off than the average Lewiston residents, but as Goldman and Jolovitz describe, many Jews in Maine still lived humble lives. As Jolovitz implies, we must remember to abandon our baggage of Jewish stereotypes: the Jewish students in this study were not children of doctors and lawyers. If they were, these statistics would not be surprising. These students had immigrant parents who were shop owners and merchants. They were from middle class families. They lived more comfortably than the majority of the town, and their college attendance rates demonstrate elite values, but they were not the elite.

Clearly, economics alone cannot account for the disparity in post-secondary education patterns among Jews and non-Jews. Here we turn again to the notion that Jewish people valued education. Different people have different sets of values, and the value system held by Jews encouraged high rates of post-secondary education. An anecdote from an interview with Lester Jolovitz evokes this Jewish point of view. When Jolovitz was asked if he was expected to take over his father's grocery store, he replied:

First of all, I hated the business. From an early age, I decided this is not for me. And, I always, I don't know why, I just knew that I would not end up working in my father's store, or go into the mill, as 99% of my friends did, go into the factory. I always had an idea there was more to life...my parents instilled in me and my brother that there was more to... well, it was generally understood we'd go to college.

What Jolovitz is describing is a value related to upward mobility, one that was not a typical value for his time. Jolovitz was the only Jewish boy in his high school class, and he was one of the three in his graduating class of 60 to go to college because the majority of his classmates went to work in the factories and on the farms (Jolovitz 2010). In the context of his high school, Lester Jolovitz's educational expectations were extraordinary, but they appear to be typical for Jews in Maine.

We can learn about the extent to which Jewish people valued education by viewing how several factors influenced a Jewish student's probability of going to college. To begin, the number of children in the family was influential (Figure 10). Families with two children were the most likely to send their children to college. The college rate decreases continually with additional children in the family, although households of three and four children still display high college attendance rates. The decline in college attendance rates could be because the families with more children did not have the financial resources to support each child through

college. It also could be a matter of family planning, as it is possible that the families who had two children were more modern, planning for their children's post-secondary education just as they planned to have a family of four. Another speculation is that the more children there were in a family, the more likely it was that at least one of them would chose not to attend college. The college attendance rate among only-child students may be so low because of the small sample size (see caption).

Families with two children provide an interesting case study, as we can perhaps learn about how these families valued post-secondary education for each of their children. Out of the seven families for whom we know the post-secondary plans for both children, four of the families sent both children to college. Each of the remaining three families sent only the first child to college. On that note, Figure 11 shows that birth order has a slight but significant impact on college attendance. Of the seven families with two children, there were five families that had one child of each sex. Three of them sent both the son and the daughter to school, one sent the son but not the daughter, and the last sent the daughter but not the son. This admittedly small data set reflects the fact that Jewish parents often considered it important to send their daughters to college.

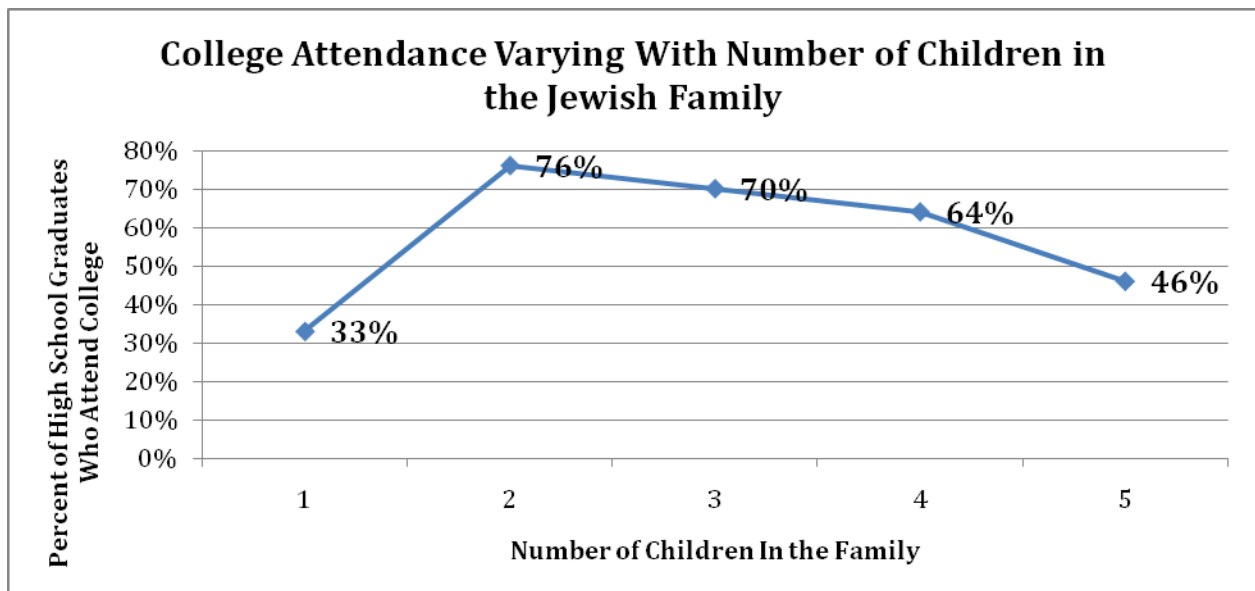


Figure 10. The students represented in this sample were all found in the 1927–1940 yearbooks and the census, and their college attendance was gathered using the yearbooks and Bates enrollment information. The census records listed the members of each household, and I used this information to determine the number of children in each family. (This calculation is subject to error because the oldest siblings might have moved away and future children might not have been born yet in 1930). Note that this chart does not represent all siblings in the each family, only those who graduated from 1927 to 1940. There were 6 students that were the only child, 17 who had 1 other sibling, 23 who had 2 other siblings, 11 who had 3 other siblings, and 13 who had 4 other siblings. This chart does not represent the 4 Jewish students in the yearbooks for whom there was no census information available.

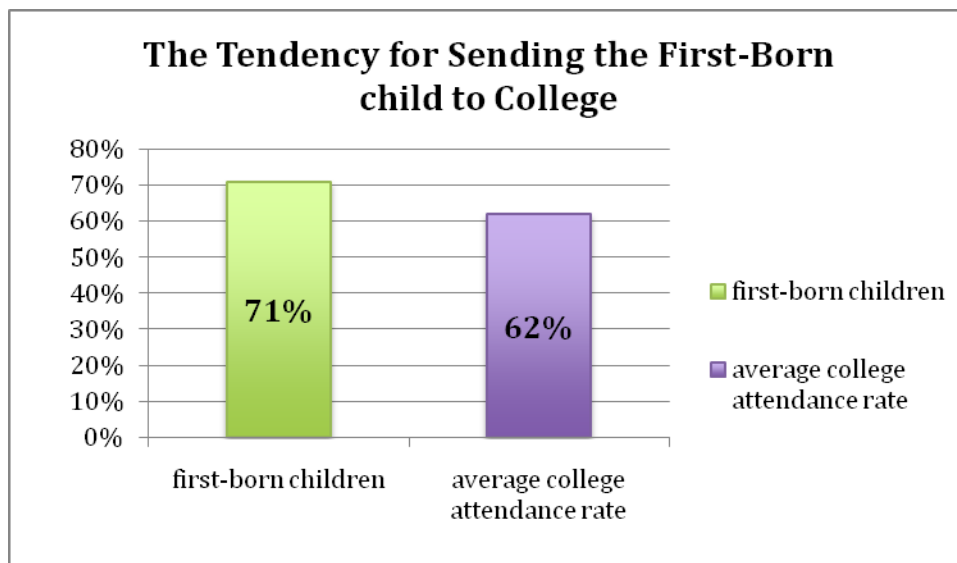


Figure 11. The sample includes all of the Jewish students identified in the yearbooks between 1927 and 1940, identified as first-born using the census. Again, the yearbook was not the sole indicator of post-secondary plans, the Bates enrollment records also contributed. .

This research sheds light upon the ways Maine Jews saw the relationship between gender and extended education. Looking back at Figure 1, Jewish boys had a college attendance rate of 57%, while Jewish girls went at a rate of 52%. These rates are very similar. As mentioned previously, Libby Goldman’s brothers gave her their childhood savings so that she may go to Bates. The way these brothers appropriated their resources shows that they value post-secondary education for girls. Jewish parents in Lewiston who sent their daughters to college must have seen the further education as a worthwhile investment.

This study is situated in an ongoing debate in the field of Jewish Studies over the extent to which Jews are exceptional and the reasons for such exceptionalism. Jewish college attendance in Maine during the interwar period is undoubtedly exceptional. Cultural differences are very real, and different ethnic groups respond to challenges, such as preparing one’s children

for the future, in different ways. Jews were wealthier than others, and this most certainly made it easier for them to sacrifice the financial resources and the time for further education. However, family wealth did not make Jewish parents decide to send their children to college; they did so because of a mindset. This ethos of valuing post-secondary education was sparse among the general population in Lewiston during this time; it was a worldview that came from within the Jewish community.

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