

# impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

## That's Life simulation goes big to address need of financial education in high schools

### AT A GLANCE

College students are taking on huge sums of debt without understanding how this act will affect their futures. The need for financial education and life skills training prior to college is staggering.

### The Situation

Imagine two college freshmen... one learned about financial management before college; the other did not. The first student excelled in classes and graduated with minimal student debt. The second student became overwhelmed in his first year, spent all his student loan money, dropped out of school with a pile of debt and no job prospects. Both are examples of students that I have worked with. The students that have a basis of financial education prior to coming to college are more resilient than the ones that have never balanced a checkbook, experienced large sums of money (like financial aid), managed their own budgets or learned how to be an "adult" before becoming an adult.

According to an EVERFI survey, "college students feel unprepared to manage finances and have already accumulated large amounts of debt. Including 30,000 college student participants from 440 institutions in 45 states, the survey found that six in 10 students have taken or intend to take loans out to cover their tuition bills. However, only 65% actually plan to pay off those loans on time and in full." Our students are taking on huge financial burdens without understanding how this act will affect their entire lives.



Students visit the "Bank of Life" at the Kendrick-Deary "That's Life" Simulation. Photo credit Kendrick Tigers Facebook.

### Our Response

Since 2015, University of Idaho Extension has offered "That's Life," a hands-on, real-world simulation where students are introduced to adult decisions in a risk-free environment. They are given a random "life" including a family, an education (or lack of education) and the income from an actual Idaho job. They must make financial decisions for their "family" from 20 different vendors in the room representing childcare, housing, transportation, utilities, credit card payments and more. This simulation shows that decisions make a difference not just for them but for the people they support.

## Program Outcomes

The pandemic changed our rotation schedule but it brought a new opportunity to experience the simulation through the eyes of seven different high schools. Normally, Latah County high schools stagger simulations every three years, so the students get two exposures to the event (one time in 7-9th grade and another in 10-12th grade) based on their age and experience in the world. All the schools asked for their simulations in spring 2022. Ten events, 140 volunteers and 656 students later, we met the goal.

Aggregate survey results show significant knowledge gained and projected behavior change:

I believe it is important and I plan to:	Yes/ Maybe	Already Do
Think about my needs & wants and prioritize which should get my attention & money first.	79.61%	15.70%
Create a livable spend-ing/savings plan just right for me.	87.46%	9.15%
Open a savings account in the near future and make it a priority in my spending plan.	72.56%	25.83%
Avoid impulse spending on things I won't have next week like food, magazines, coffee, etc.	80.76%	10.97%
Pay my bills on time or early.	90.78%	7.40%
Make smart career and education choices now.	85.54%	12.54%
Prepare for my family ahead of time – kids are expensive!	89.59%	6.42%
Stay in school and save for my future	83.45%	14.58%

Reviewing the varied answers through grade levels and school locations, students who received financial edu-

cation had higher percentages than schools with lower requirements for this subject. Plus, these students consistently had money remaining in their “bank accounts” after paying their bills.

This future glimpse provides a “shock” that teaches long after the event. A former participant said, “Every time I see you I think of that crappy job you give me in high school. I knew from that point on, college was not an option. I had to go and finish.” She graduated this last May with honors and is now working at her dream job making six figures. This simulation has been called the “launching pad” for many students.

The impact doesn't stop with our participants. Parents, financial partners, community leaders, the County Sheriff's office, and University of Idaho faculty and staff volunteered to make all these simulations possible. One volunteer shared “This forces kids to really think about factors and expenses that are going to affect their lives in the future. I really wish I'd had that sort of exposure when I was in high school.” Another was stunned that the kids were so “confused” as to what to do first. The simulation is about making choices and mistakes just like we do in real life. A parent wrote “I had no idea my kid didn't know how to budget and neither did his friends. How ill-prepared they are for budgeting and life skills. Only two of them that I worked with had any concept of saving for the future. We are having a talk tonight.”

To help begin planning for the future, all of the students received Joe Vandal backpacks including admissions information, college materials, swag from University of Idaho, Vandal Bookstore, Idaho Central Credit Union and Latah Credit Union.

Having the opportunity to meet with all the schools in two months was enlightening. Extension does help schools with this mission to financially educate our students before they become the statistic that is not able to pay back student loan debt. Teaching students about the basics of life in ways that are meaningful and impactful in a simulation stays with them long after they graduate.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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