

PERSPECTIVES

COMMUNITY EDITION

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Understanding Michigan's Attitudes about Educational Attainment: Results from Community Dialogues and Public Opinion Surveys

There is a great deal of discussion across the state of Michigan about education and the economy. It is no surprise to state residents that the U.S. economy is transitioning from a traditional manufacturing-based system, in which Michigan was a world powerhouse, to a knowledge-based structure. Likewise, the loss of manufacturing jobs has hit Michigan residents especially hard. Education is fundamental to this new economy; promoting college attendance and graduation is especially critical in this state. Since the Lt. Governor's Commission on Higher Education and the Economy in 2004, both have been the focus of news reports, opinion polls, community dialogues, policy initiatives, and state-level dialogues. The level of attention given to education and its impact on the economy is a positive indication that the issue is not going away, particularly among policy makers, educators, and business leaders; but there is a great deal more to be done.

In this brief – and as part of a continuing effort to effectively connect the conversations at the state

policy level with the action at the community level – we share with you some of the important discussions that are happening at a policy level. Many of these conversations are framed in terms of “culture” or invoke the notion of “a culture of education.” It may be more useful to think of culture and education as separate and distinct ideas, where the intersection of the two is of primary interest. The term “culture” has itself become a catch phrase intended to stimulate a collective sense of commitment to improving educational outcomes. However, culture is a complex notion with no consensus regarding what it means or how it operates. Education is certainly an important aspect of many cultures, but it is not a culture itself, except perhaps with respect to the shared experience of educators. We suggest that the conversations and initiatives discussed below reflect the intersection of education and culture at the state level, and communities play a critical role in the creation and transmission of culture at the local level. We also recognize that individual communities possess different assets, face unique challenges and understand culture differently. This perspective will be useful as we consider what has been addressed at the policy level across the state and the implications of these discussions for communities.

The Lt. Governor's Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth

(<http://www.cherrycommission.org/>)

Governor Jennifer M. Granholm convened a commission in 2004 to consider ways to double the number of college credentials earned in the state and to better align education with the economic needs of the state. By most measures, the Commission has had considerable impact over the



past two years. It has certainly provoked discussion. Within the first year of the Commission's report, it was a topic of conversation in more than 100 articles and news reports as well as countless statewide talk shows. Equally, a number of its recommendations have been acted upon over the past 18 months – the adoption of a statewide set of high school graduation requirements is the most recent of those acted upon at the state level, and it has real implications for communities.

Implications – The legislature and the Governor agreed upon the passage of a more rigorous high school curriculum for all students. In fact, Michigan is the 46th state to adopt statewide standards for graduation. Though a state-level initiative, its success or failure depends largely upon what happens at the community level. Currently, teachers are hired at the local district-level, and students have been prepared for high school work in those same communities. In order for the state-level requirements to be successful, additional staffing will be necessary, veteran teachers may need continued training, and elementary and middle schools will need to increase their expectations. The focus is on course requirements in the core academic subjects of English, math, science, social studies and foreign language. The 16 required courses limit the choices students make and are designed to ensure students are prepared for either work or for post-secondary education. Though the rationale makes sense, it affects the work of schools in very real ways. (1) Teacher quality – less choice means that more teachers need to be trained in the core subject areas. In math and science this is a particular challenge and is likely to affect your schools. (2) Initial declines – education is cumulative, so it is likely that the first groups of students subjected to the new standards will graduate high school at lower rates and may be retained in a given grade more frequently. A number of students will simply not be prepared in K-8 to be successful under the new standards. (3) Middle school squeeze – with higher standards at the high school, more fingers will point to the preparation students receive in middle school. As such, middle schools will need to re-think their work to better prepare students to be successful in high school.

While parents and teachers are challenged by time constraints and limited resources, both identify the same goal: to work together to better educate their students.

~Your Child Campaign

Your Child Campaign

(<http://www.mea.org/yourchild/>)

There may be no more important element in the intersection of culture and education than the relationship between parents and teachers. In 2004, a coalition of education organizations in the state of Michigan launched the *Your Child Campaign* as an effort to study how teachers and parents understand one another and to facilitate communities in

discourse about how both groups can be more actively engaged with one another and subsequently with their children and students. The coalition has issued a series of studies which generally find that both parents and teachers want the same thing: to work together to better educate their students. However, teachers are challenged by the high number of students they serve, and parents find it difficult to find time in their work schedules to participate actively in their child's education. In the third survey, results are framed in the con-

text of the culture of education and parents are asked about the importance of college. The report suggests that fewer than 50% of parents think all kids should go to college, but at the same time most indicate that they want their own children to attend. The culture of education in this case is framed as an economic issue – in order to get a good job, one must go to college.

Implications – more than anything, the *Your Child* coalition has raised citizens' awareness about this important relationship between teachers and parents. The danger in these conversations is that in the absence of concrete solutions, there is a tendency to blame one group or another. Teachers are regularly blamed for the failures of students in the context of testing and the federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation. Meanwhile, educators have long argued that too little is happening at home to complement the education in the school. The challenge then for communities is to find ways to facilitate stronger parent-teacher relationships that recognize both sets of realities. When communities share a collective responsibility for making these connections between parents and teachers, there is less blame and greater opportunity for cooperation. Many communities have already begun ad-

addressing these issues by developing strategies which improve communication among parents and educators such as alternative meeting times, interacting through e-mail, and issuing more frequent progress reports. Communities of course are composed of more than parents and teachers, and they should look at ways to involve others who are invested in the success of future generations of students. Possibilities include engaging professionals as guest lecturers in the schools, civic leaders working with after school programs, or seniors assisting in the classrooms. There are creative opportunities yet to be discovered and only communities can find what will work best for them.

Access to Democracy

(http://www.thenationalforum.org/projects_atod.shtml)

While the *Your Child* campaign is focused on public opinion relative to teachers and parents, *Access to Democracy* focuses on how communities and members deal with the tension that exists within conversations of access to college. Daniel Yankelovich describes a process of moving people from opinion to public judgment, and the process of deliberation used for the *Access to Democracy* project is a method for doing just that. Over the course of nearly two years, the *Access to Democracy* project has yielded a number of important findings regarding the ways Michigan residents think about education and college access.

Michigan's economic future depends on higher levels of education and skills, creating a culture in which postsecondary attendance is considered to be basic.
~PCSUM/MHEC Roundtable

The experience students have in K-12 is important in any conversation of college access, but it is by no means the only one. High school students wrestle with the complex application process, an overwhelming amount of available information, rising costs, and in some cases a set of community factors that either promote education or suggest it is not necessary. Both of these types of communities – those which are supportive of higher education and those which are not – exist in Michigan, which is why dialogue in a community context is so important. There have been more than 120 dialogues hosted in a variety of communities from Grand Rapids and Jackson to Detroit and soon in

Sault Ste. Marie (for a discussion of findings see *Perspectives*, Policy Edition, July 2006).

Public *opinion*, particularly on new and emerging issues, tends to be under-informed and subject to change, while public *judgment* reflects a complex awareness of the tensions and tradeoffs of addressing challenges in a variety of ways. *Your Child* illustrates that parents and teachers agree on the goals of providing access to education but disagree on the facts. Deliberation is a way to bring both groups together in an effort to share the facts and develop a new collective understanding.

Implications – Communities on the one hand must recognize existing public opinion on education, while on the other pledge to moving community members toward commitment and action relative to the costs and benefits for their respective residents. For example, many people hold the opinion that college is not yet necessary to find a good job.

This assertion may be more or less true depending upon the community. In areas where manufacturing continues to thrive, college may not be the best option. For many communities where the opposite is true, college may be a viable alternative. Whatever the case may be, it is important for communities to work toward a collective judgment regarding what is best for the future of its residents. Deliberative dialogue is one tool, but there are other methods including the town hall meeting and the more involved study circle.

Creating a 21st Century Workforce: A State Roundtable

(<http://e2w.mhec.org/index.asp?pageID=130>)

Recently, the Presidents Council, State Universities of Michigan (PCSUM), in conjunction with the Midwest Higher Education Commission (MHEC) engaged more than 250 community, business, and education leaders in a conversation regarding the role of the public university in workforce development. Jobs are on the minds of nearly every Michigan resident. Our unemployment rates remain second highest in the nation, and the automotive industry continues to scale back and redefine itself.

This meeting was outwardly focused, recognizing both the national and regional contexts within which Michigan operates. In particular, there was a strong recognition that the entire Midwest region faces a similar set of challenges and also possesses a common set of assets – notably some of the strongest research institutions in the nation – which suggest regional cooperation may be the key to future economic growth.

Implications – the greatest ‘learnings’ from this meeting relative to communities is that there are opportunities for growth and workforce development in Michigan that have not been fully realized. Equally, state leaders recognized the dual nature of the challenge: to create an educated workforce AND to provide job opportunities for them. The healthcare industry may be the one shining example of where opportunities have not been fully tapped. There is a crisis in terms of the availability of healthcare professionals in the state, and communities are the best position, in conjunction with their two-year and four-year colleges, to address these needs. Workforce retraining programs for later career adults, in addition to degree programs for traditional students that provide incentives to enter these fields, may be one way to progress in this area. It may also be, in a regional context, that Michigan is positioned well to train teachers for other states. We are one of the few states not experiencing a teacher shortage (with the exception of a few communities and a handful of subjects) and we have some of the strongest education programs in the country.

University of Michigan Community College Initiative

(http://www.umich.edu/~urecord/0506/Jun12_06/00.shtml)

Community colleges have long been viewed as the gateway to college access and ultimately, the American dream. For many students today that continues to be the case. However, lower income students, even those prepared for four-year college work, are disproportionately attending two-year colleges if they attend college at all. And even when those students intend to continue their education beyond the community college, the majority does

not make the transition. Barriers to transfer include misunderstandings about credit transfers, affordability concerns, and worries about being able to succeed in the four-year environment. The University of Michigan, with the support of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, has recently taken up the challenge of better understanding and serving students who are less advantaged in terms of economic resources, including first generation, low income, and non-majority students. They have committed to partnering with statewide community colleges in an effort to open the doors of an elite public education to a group of students who could succeed but might not have otherwise considered it for sake of cost and the different social transitions frequently attributed to culture. During this meeting, community college presidents and representatives came together at the University of Michigan to share their thoughts and insights about the challenges and realities of trying to move more students from community colleges to the university. The University of Michigan has agreed to implement a number of the suggestions in order to improve their relationships with community colleges and better facilitate the transfer process.



Implications – more than any of the meetings discussed above, this dialogue may have immediate implications for communities. The University of Michigan has committed time and resources to recruiting and setting aside space for community col-

The conversations occurring across the state agree on at least one point: communities matter a great deal in the success of education and opportunities for college access.

lege transfers, which makes the community college a viable gateway. More important, the University is committing financial resources in the form of financial aid to make the transition easier for a number of students. Communities should look at ways to maximize this opportunity by supporting their community colleges and exploring ways of increasing collaboration between two-year and four-year colleges. One thing is clear: many Michigan public universities are working closely with community colleges to make the bachelor's degree more accessible. With better established pathways to postsecondary education success, communities can begin to re-think the value of college education to the futures of its traditional age students as well as its adult learners.

Conclusion

All of these meetings around the state suggest there is a cultural element to educational success and college access. What culture means in each context is not clear. For some it may be that the state is experiencing a “manufacturing hangover” that fuels a collective reluctance to embrace education and an emerging knowledge economy. For others, the culture of education is captured in the relationships between parents and teachers and perhaps even communities writ large. The bottom line is that these conversations have continued for almost two years since the Lt. Governor's Commission, which suggests a growing recognition that education is a priority for the state and for its residents. Equally, all of these conversations link back directly to the Commission. That a number of recommendations from the Commission have been implemented in one form or another may be less important than the awareness which the Commission raised among residents, resulting in sustained conversations. Indeed, this dialogue has continued much longer than is often the case with statewide conversations.

These conversations also underscore the limitations of the state's role in education. Communities mat-

ter a great deal in the success of education and opportunities for college access, but this is one of the recommendations of the Commission – the creation of community compacts – that has not yet been realized. The Kalamazoo Promise may be one example of an exciting initiative with possible immediate community results. Clearly, however, we can do more within communities when we recognize what conditions are being created at the state level and how community assets can be leveraged to maximize the benefits for its residents into the future.

This brief and future briefs are intended to help connect two important sets of conversations happening across the state. Those reflected here are happening at the state level and many equally important conversations are taking place at the community level. If you know of important efforts happening in your community or others with respect to education, please let us know.

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Please feel free to share this document with others. If you have not received it directly but would like to receive future issues, e-mail us at ndaunba@umich.edu. Additionally, we always welcome comments and suggestions as we continue to foster and facilitate the conversation about promoting educational success in Michigan.

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