

PERSPECTIVES

POLICY EDITION

JULY 2006

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

There has been a great deal of policy discussion about improving educational attainment in the state of Michigan. In 2004, Governor Granholm set a goal to double the number of Michigan residents with a college degree or other postsecondary credential. Subsequently, the Lt. Governor's Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth convened legislators, businesspeople, community leaders, higher education administrators, and others to create a plan to enact this vision. The Commission made nineteen recommendations, and a great deal of progress has been made toward implementing policy and solutions at the community level (www.cherrycommission.org). The underlying themes that have driven much of the policy discussion are that Michigan trails the national average in educational attainment, and that educational attainment is positively associated with economic prosperity at the individual and state levels.

The most successful policy solutions are those that reflect the needs, desires, and expectations of constituents. Without appropriate "buy-in" from the public, any policy solution becomes much more likely to fail; therefore, it is crucial to ascertain public preferences to craft the most effective policies possible. The most common approach for gaining an understanding of people's views is through public opinion polling; however, another useful method, which can provide a more nuanced understanding of people's opinions, is the community dialogue. This policy brief provides a snapshot of recent public opinion surveys, as well as key findings from a large-scale community dialogue effort. When appropriate, the results from these two approaches will be compared and contrasted.

National and State Survey Data

The strength of public opinion polls is that they are relatively easy to conduct and often yield representative samples of a given population. A series of national telephone surveys on higher education have been conducted by Public Agenda, the National Center on Public Policy in Higher Education, and the American Council on Education. These surveys have consistently found that the public (a) endorses the value of college, (b) thinks that a college education is too expensive, and (c) feels that higher education should be accessible for all. However, these polls also suggest that the public greatly overestimates the cost of college and that people disagree about how to promote increased access, especially for traditionally underserved groups (see Callan, 1996; Doyle, 2005; Ikenberry & Hartle, 1998; Immerwahr, 1998, 2004).

In addition, a number of statewide polls have been conducted in the past two years by the Your Child coalition, a group of education and family organizations that includes the Michigan Education Asso-



ciation. According to Your Child, these surveys suggest that the “culture of education” in Michigan is lacking; in other words, the public does not place a strong enough emphasis on the importance of education. For example, only 27% of parents think college is “essential” for getting ahead in life, and 46% of parents do not agree that everybody should have a college education (Your Child, 2005). However, the suggestion that parents and other Michigan residents simply do not value education is oversimplified. For example, in the same survey cited above, 95% of parents wanted their child to go to college. Thus, it seems that parents value college for their own children, but do not think it is necessary for everyone else’s children to go to college. In addition, 78% of parents report that having a good education is “very important” or “essential” for getting ahead in life, and 95% of parents agree that there is a strong relationship between parents’ attitudes toward education and children’s success in school (EPIC-MRA & Your Child, 2005). It appears, then, that parents do recognize their role in promoting educational attainment and are aware of (at least some of) the benefits of attending college.

Another paradox appears in a poll conducted for WXYZ-TV by EPIC-MRA in 2006. When asked about whether the quality of their local public school district has changed in the past few years, people were more likely to say that the quality has improved rather than declined. However, when asked about the quality of Michigan public schools in general, people were somewhat more likely to say that it has declined rather than improved. In other words, people think their own schools are getting better, but that other schools are going downhill. Once again, this contradiction highlights the complicated nature of people’s attitudes and conceptions about education in Michigan. For this reason, it is useful to turn to another perspective reflecting the thoughts and opinions of the public at large.

Community Dialogues across Michigan

Ideally, public opinion surveys would be complemented by an open-ended discussion of what is

important about educational attainment and college access. People could then express their own views and focus on the issues that they think are relevant. The conceptions and values revealed in these dialogues might be very different from those that a survey designer would have in mind a priori. In addition, dialogues provide people an opportunity to think about an issue in more detail over a short period of time than they otherwise would. In a sense, this approach can simulate what people would think (and how they might respond to a public opinion poll) after extended public debate.

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~Your Child Coalition Survey

Fortunately, over the last two years, there has been an extended statewide effort to conduct widespread community dialogues. The Access to Democracy initiative, which is organized by the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good at the University of Michigan and various community leaders across the state, has engaged over 1,000 Michigan residents in 90 dialogues across 12 counties. Participants fill out questionnaires before and after the dialogue about their attitudes toward access to higher education. In addition, many of the dialogues are audiotaped and transcribed, and these detailed accounts of participants’ views are used to provide a more sophisticated understanding of public perceptions. There have been several findings from this project that are particularly relevant to policy discussions, and each will be discussed below.

Teachers who participated in the dialogues were less likely than others to support widespread access to four-year colleges and universities. We found that Michigan teachers were surprisingly reluctant to endorse plans to substantially increase the number of bachelor’s degree recipients. When comparing the survey responses of 208 K-12 teachers with those of other participants, teachers were significantly less likely to agree that “it is important for people to go to college”; specifically, on the post-dialogue survey, 33% of teachers strongly agree with this statement, compared with 49% of non-teachers. In addition, teachers who participated were also less likely to believe that high schools have “a lot” of responsibility for improving

access to college (61% of teachers vs. 77% of non-teachers). Dialogue transcripts suggest that teachers feel many people would benefit by receiving technical training from community colleges or vocational schools. Their comments also suggest that substantially increasing the number of four-year college graduates is not necessary for the establishment of a healthy state economy (instead citing the need for electricians, plumbers, and carpenters) or for individuals to achieve financial success (instead citing counterexamples of successful entrepreneurs). Given teachers' direct and crucial role in preparing young people for their future careers and educational pursuits, these findings merit further attention.

Attempts to enhance college access should begin at the K-12 level.

Within the community dialogues, participants clearly agree that efforts to provide widespread access to college must begin with improvements in K-12 schools. Although there were no survey questions designed to capture this view, this theme occurred in dialogue sessions time and time again. A few people discussed a general lack of quality in public schools, but most comments focused on inequalities within and across schools. These concerns include early tracking systems that prevent many students from taking a college preparatory curriculum, an uneven distribution of teachers and funding levels across districts, and inadequate college counseling in less affluent schools and districts. Therefore, government programs or initiatives that are designed to improve educational attainment should explicitly address K-12 issues, or the public will likely see these initiatives as being incomplete.

Everyone should have the opportunity to go to college, but not everyone should have a college degree. This finding helps to reconcile some of the seeming contradictions in the statewide survey results. People support the idea of ensuring access for those who wanted to go to college and frequently mention the benefits that a college education would provide to individuals. Participants cited not only occupational and financial benefits of a college education, but also greater civic en-

agement and the ability to work well with others. For example, 78% of participants agree or strongly agree that "colleges play an important role in shaping responsible citizens." In contrast, when people talked about a society in which everyone was highly educated, it was often in a negative light. Specifically, people are concerned that if the majority of adults graduate from a four-year college, then the value of a bachelor's degree would be greatly diminished. In addition, some fear that college standards would have to be lowered substantially for universal higher education to be realized. Therefore, when communicating with the public, efforts to promote these policies should be described as promoting opportunity for college access, not as creating a college-educated society.

Women are more likely than men to perceive barriers to college.

These results are consistent on both the questionnaires and in the dialogues themselves. Specifically, women are less likely than men to agree or strongly agree that "those who work hard enough can graduate from college" (70% vs. 81% on the post-dialogue survey), more likely to agree or strongly agree that "high tuition prevents many people from going to college" (89% vs. 84%), and less likely to agree or strongly agree that "scholarships should generally be given to students with the highest grades and test scores" (14% vs. 25%). In the dialogue transcripts, women made more comments in support of increasing access and opportunity for all. Overall, women feel that attaining a college degree requires more than just hard work and that, given the financial barriers that many people face, traditional measures of academic achievement are not sufficient criteria for providing

financial support.

An improved Michigan economy is necessary to improve educational attainment.

At the beginning of each dialogue, a brief videotape introduces the issue and suggests that increasing educational attainment is necessary for Michigan's economy to thrive in the 21st century. This rationale has been repeated in many policy circles as the motivating force behind efforts to improve educational attainment. However, regardless of the veracity of the

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statement, people tend to reject this logic in the dialogues. In doing so, they argue that many well-educated people (some of whom they know personally) are either unable to find a job or are working in food service or retail positions for which they are highly overqualified. These people suggest that the availability of high-skilled jobs will cause Michigan residents to pursue higher levels of education, not vice-versa. Therefore, policy makers should use caution when using the “more education creates more jobs” logic, because it does not resonate well with many of the people who they are trying to convince.



Policy Implications

Policymakers in Michigan have recently taken bold action to reform the education system at all levels. The recently adopted high school graduation requirements, along with the implementation of many of the recommendations from the Cherry Commission, have placed Michigan on the road to improving the education expectations, standards, and outcomes for years to come. Still, based on the results of recent public opinion polls and the community dialogues, many issues remain. Below are four areas that policymakers should examine to continue the positive momentum of increasing access to a quality education beyond high school:

1) Provide incentives for teachers to promote postsecondary education. Teachers, along with parents and communities, play a crucial role in shaping the views and aspirations of their students, yet the community dialogues suggest that some teachers believe that many of their students should not pursue a postsecondary degree. Policymakers should consider the role teachers play in this regard and encourage all teachers to push their students toward additional education beyond high school.

2) Consider means of boosting need-based financial aid. Recent poll results and comments in community dialogues highlight the cost of attending college as a significant impediment to postsecondary access. To achieve the goal of increased educational attainment, college must become more affordable for low-income students who have limited financial resources and may not be eligible for

the Michigan Merit Award Program.

3) Promote all aspects of postsecondary education as part of the attainment goal. Comments from the community dialogues and recent polling suggest that the public makes a clear distinction between a four-year degree and a two-year degree or technical certification. There were also comments that “college” is not for everyone. While the state’s goal may be primarily to promote bachelor’s degree attainment, state leaders should also consider the opportunities that are created for individuals who work toward an associate’s degree or other credentials as part of the solution.

4) Develop K-16 connections. Many community members and policymakers suggest that college access begins at the K-12 level, yet these two systems remain quite separate. Policymakers should consider ways to create incentives for communities, schools, and universities to work together to (a) promote dual enrollment strategies, (b) ease transfer and articulation between postsecondary institutions, and (c) align college placement testing with the revised Michigan Merit Exams and the recently adopted core requirements for graduation.

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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.

Perspectives is produced with support from the **National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good**, which is affiliated with the **Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education** within the **School of Education** at the **University of Michigan**. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect those of others, except when specifically noted.