

Higher Education in Michigan: Overcoming Challenges to Expand Access

BY ALISA F. CUNNINGHAM, WENDY ERISMAN, PH.D., AND SHANNON M. LOONEY

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Executive Summary

Access to higher education has been an important element of policy discussions in Michigan in recent years and was highlighted as a key priority in the 2004 final report of the Lieutenant Governor's Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth. Since that report's release, significant progress has been made on many of its recommendations; however, an important aspect of the remaining agenda concerns access to baccalaureate institutions and degrees, particularly in counties and communities where such access remains challenging.

To examine access to higher education in underserved regions of Michigan, the Institute for Higher Education Policy undertook an independent study of specific concerns about postsecondary education in selected Michigan communities. This study focuses on three geographically diverse areas of the state: suburban Macomb County; the city of Saginaw; and six rural counties in the northeastern Lower Peninsula: Alpena, Alcona, Crawford, Montmorency, Oscoda, and Presque Isle. The report provides a summary of findings regarding access to higher education in each of the three areas and proposes broad recommendations and policy alternatives to address the challenges of access to postsecondary degrees and institutions statewide.

While findings from the three areas varied due to their different demographic and geographic situations, some consistent patterns were found. Throughout the state, as manufacturing has declined as an employment leader, Michigan residents have found it increasingly difficult to succeed without a college degree. High unemployment rates, particularly in Saginaw and the rural northeastern counties, combined with the need to attract new industries to promote economic growth, highlight the importance of expanded access to postsecondary education for Michigan's economic future.

However, in all three areas examined in this report, barriers make it difficult for residents, especially low-income and minority residents, to earn a college degree. Among the key challenges identified in the research are a lack of easily accessible four-year institutions, particularly in Macomb County and the rural counties; inadequate partnerships and articulation agreements between two- and four-year colleges and universities; poor public transportation systems; the need to develop new and innovative programs to train workers in growth industries; concerns about the affordability of a college education; and, above all, the need to develop a college-going culture among Michigan residents. To address these concerns, the report makes the following recommendations:

1. Address college access issues at the state level.

- Establish a state higher education agency or statewide board of regents with the authority to design policies and initiatives to increase college enrollment and degree attainment rates across the state.
- Establish an initiative to address rural college access issues, with particular emphasis on involvement by rural community colleges.

2. Establish better working relationships among and new roles for the state’s two- and four-year postsecondary institutions.

- Develop a uniform articulation agreement between public two- and four-year institutions.
- Allow selected community colleges in regions with insufficient higher education access to confer baccalaureate degrees in high-need fields.
- Help the major four-year institutions in the state, especially Michigan State University, develop more branch or satellite campuses.
- Improve the existing University Center system in which degrees are offered by four-year institutions in partnership with local community colleges.


3. Establish or expand healthcare and medical training programs to position Michigan as a leader in the healthcare industry.

4. Develop better public transportation systems, especially in areas where residents must travel to reach a postsecondary institution.

5. Invest in long-term financial support for college students and in programs that encourage college attendance.

- Support passage of proposed legislation to create “Promise Zones” in areas of the state with high youth poverty. In these zones, high school graduates would be guaranteed last-dollar scholarships to in-state institutions funded by a combination of public and private dollars.

- Create a statewide program that improves college financing literacy for families and students.
- Work with the Michigan Department of Education to develop policies that support college access for high school students, including offering more opportunities for Advanced Placement, dual-enrollment, and middle college programs that allow students to experience college-level work while still in high school.

Michigan’s higher education access challenges should be considered opportunities. The recommendations above are possible directions for change based on the three regional analyses. For serious changes to occur, however, considerable political and financial commitment must be made by the state and its communities. The road to increased higher education access and higher baccalaureate degree attainment rates will be a long one, but investments now will pay off in a more educated workforce and sustainable economic prosperity. Michigan has the capacity and the desire to increase postsecondary access. The findings and recommendations in this report can inform the decision-making process and serve as a catalyst for change. 

Introduction

Access to higher education has been an important element of policy discussions in Michigan in recent years and was highlighted as a key priority in the final report of the Lieutenant Governor's Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth, also known as the Cherry Commission report (Cherry Commission 2004). Since the report's release, significant progress has been made on many of its recommendations; however, an important aspect of the remaining agenda concerns access to baccalaureate institutions and degrees, particularly in counties and communities where such access remains challenging.

To examine access to higher education in underserved regions of Michigan, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) undertook an independent study of specific concerns about postsecondary education in selected Michigan communities. This study focuses on three geographically diverse areas of the state: suburban Macomb County; the city of Saginaw; and six rural counties in the northeastern Lower Peninsula: Alpena, Alcona, Crawford, Montmorency, Oscoda, and Presque Isle. The report provides a summary of findings regarding access to higher education in each of the three areas and proposes broad recommendations and policy alternatives to address the challenges of access to postsecondary degrees and institutions statewide.

The following are among the questions explored in the study:

- What do we know about the higher education gaps that exist in specific Michigan communities, especially gaps related to enrollment in higher education and eventual baccalaureate degree attainment?
- What types and quality of higher education are available in these communities?

- What barriers exist in these communities that are preventing young people from enrolling in college and earning degrees?
- To what extent can limited higher education access in these communities be attributed to structural factors rather than economic, social, or cultural factors?
- What role can community leaders play in improving higher education opportunities in their communities? What role can state leaders play?

The findings in this report are drawn from a detailed analysis of state and local data from the U.S. Census Bureau. The research also included interviews with government and college officials, K-12 leaders, students, parents, and other interested parties from the three regions. For the Macomb analysis, the study also draws from hearings conducted in fall 2006 by the Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth in Macomb County and from previous analyses conducted under the auspices of the 12th District Congressional Advisory Committee on Higher Education in Macomb County.

To provide a broader context for the findings presented in this report, we compare the three Michigan regions with similar localities in Ohio and Illinois. These regional comparison sites were selected on the basis of demographic and economic similarities. The resulting comparisons provide a context for Michigan's performance in terms of higher education access and inform the policy recommendations, which are intended to offer suggestions for shaping the future of higher education in the state.

The Michigan Higher Education Context

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Michigan's population was close to 10 million in 2005. The primary industries in the state's economy as measured by the number of people employed are education and healthcare, retail trade, and manufacturing.¹ Michigan is host to several major players in automotive technology, serving as a home base for Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler. As a result of changes in the automotive industry and the trend to outsource manufacturing, Michigan residents have found it increasingly difficult to succeed without a college degree. The state's unemployment rate stood at 7.6 percent as of December 2007, well above the national rate of 5.0 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS] 2007). These economic changes highlight the importance of expanded access to postsecondary education for Michigan's economic future.

As of 2005, about a quarter of Michigan residents age 25 or older held a bachelor's or graduate degree, slightly less than the national rate of 27 percent. Additionally, Michigan residents were more likely than residents of the United States as a whole to have only a high school diploma. However, bachelor's degree attainment rates in the state vary by demographics—minority residents, specifically those who are Black or Hispanic, have lower rates of degree attainment.

In 2005, 9 percent of Michigan's population was of the traditional age (18–24) to enroll in higher education. Of this group, 39 percent was enrolled in college or graduate school, slightly higher than the national percentage (35 percent). College enrollment for 18- to 24-year-olds in the state also varies by race and ethnicity—46 percent of the state's White residents age 18–24 were enrolled in college in 2005, compared with 36 percent of Black residents and only 24 percent of Hispanic residents. Overall, the Michigan residents age 18–24 who are least likely to be enrolled in college are those who are low income, minority, and working full time.

Access to higher education is a significant issue for the state and its communities. The benefits of investing in higher education are enormous, and the payoff from earning a baccalaureate degree is substantial for both the individual and the state. Michigan residents with a bachelor's degree earn nearly twice as much on average as

high school graduates; have much lower rates of unemployment (less than one-third the rate of their high school-educated peers); and volunteer and vote at much higher rates (IHEP 2005). These are all indicators of the many individual and societal benefits that result from an investment in higher education.

Michigan currently has 104 colleges and universities, of which 15 are public four-year institutions and 30 are public two-year institutions (Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac 2007). For historical and other reasons, Michigan lacks a centralized coordinating or governing office for higher education—one of the few states in the nation where this is the case. Rather, information for the higher education system is primarily located in the Department of Labor and Economic Growth's Office of Postsecondary Services, reflecting the state's interest in using higher education to build a capable and functioning workforce (Michigan.gov 2007). Without a central coordinating office, higher education governance in Michigan tends to occur at the system and institutional level; for example, the University of Michigan system has an independent board of regents, and the Michigan State University system has an independent board of trustees (University of Michigan 2007; Michigan State University 2007).

State policies concerning affirmative action are an important factor in Michigan's college access discussion. Recently, the state passed Proposal 2, which eliminated the use of race and gender as factors in higher education admission procedures and may affect scholarship qualifications and postsecondary outreach programs. Changes in college enrollment patterns for minority youth resulting from this legislation are already evident, particularly at the University of Michigan, whose admission procedures had been under scrutiny before its passage. Before Proposal 2, the University of Michigan admitted 76 percent of underrepresented minority undergraduate applicants; after the law was passed, the university admitted only 33 percent of minority applicants (Nowinski 2007).

To better assess Michigan higher education access policies, a clear picture of state barriers to college access needs is required. Given the state's size, challenges and resources inevitably differ from one locality to another, which is why this analysis looks at examples of suburban, urban, and rural areas. Throughout the regional analyses, current state policies and state-level trends in college enrollment and degree attainment will serve as a comparison point, allowing us to pinpoint high-risk areas and local or statewide barriers and to make recommendations to address Michigan's higher education access challenges. ❧

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the data used throughout this report are derived from the 2005 *American Community Survey* (U.S. Census Bureau 2005).

Macomb County

Located in the southeastern part of Michigan near Detroit, Macomb County ranks third among all state counties in population, with more than 820,000 residents. Overall, Macomb County's demographic patterns are typical for a middle-class suburban area: the median household income in 2005 was \$53,321 (compared with \$46,039 for the state as a whole), and about 88 percent of the population was White (compared with 78 percent for the state). About 8 percent of Macomb residents were 18–24 years old—the traditional age for enrollment in college.

At the same time, the county is changing. The population is aging, and Macomb already has a somewhat higher proportion of older residents than Michigan as a whole. Household structures are diversifying, with more people living alone and an increase in single-parent families. Traditional families account for less than a quarter of all households. Meanwhile, the county has seen an increase in racial and ethnic diversity, including an increase in immigrants, who are providing a substantial proportion of regional growth (Macomb Community College [MCC] 2007).

More than 427,000 residents of Macomb County participated in the labor force in 2005, representing about two-thirds of the county's population age 16 years and older. The county's predominant industries are manufacturing and services, employing nearly two-thirds of the workforce (**FIGURE 1**). Major employers are General Motors (including the GM Technology Center), Chrysler Corp., Ford Motor Co., TACOM/TARDEC, St. John Health System, and St. Joseph Hospital (Michigan Economic Development Corporation

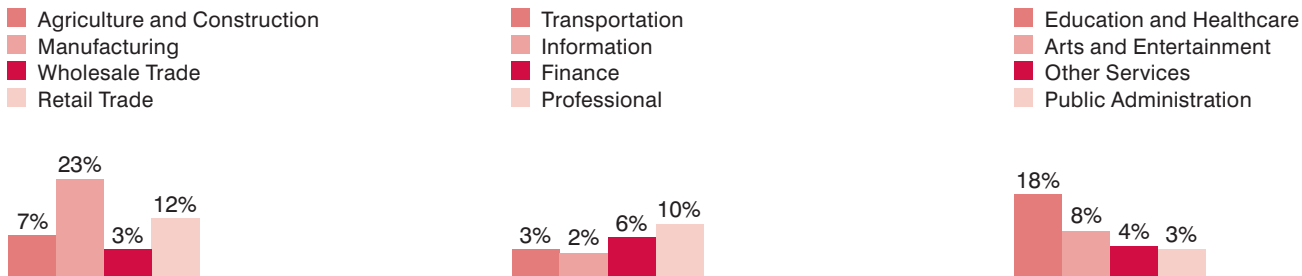
[MEDC] 2007). Policymakers in Macomb County hope to stimulate economic growth by targeting industries such as defense and advanced automotive manufacturing, life sciences and biotechnology, and alternative energy.

As of November 2007, the unemployment rate in the county was 7.2 percent, similar to that of the state as a whole, and over the past 10 years, Macomb has experienced a substantial increase in unemployment (BLS 2007). The county's unemployment rate is likely to worsen if the economy continues to rely primarily on auto manufacturing and related industries. As recently as February 2007, one of the county's top employers, Chrysler, announced a cut of 13,000 jobs. Part of this downsizing is scheduled to occur at the Warren Plant, in Macomb County's largest community (Associated Press 2007).

To combat economic decline and increase employment in growth industries, additional participation in higher education will be

FIGURE 1

Distribution of Employment by Industry for Macomb County, 2005



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

necessary for Macomb residents. Although Macomb County does not have a public four-year university, a variety of colleges and educational facilities are located there. For example, MCC awards associate's degrees and certification in a number of fields. MCC also offers additional higher education opportunities through the Macomb University Center. This partnership allows students to pursue a bachelor's or master's degree through one of eight four-year institutions around the state. Many students take classes at the University Center after completing a two-year program at MCC (Macomb County 2007).

Macomb County is also host to the Clinton Township campus of Baker College, a private nonprofit institution with 15 campuses across the state of Michigan, which offers a variety of associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees in high-demand fields such as business, technology, education, and health sciences (Baker College 2007). Oakland and Wayne State universities—public institutions offering baccalaureate and graduate degrees—are located in counties adjacent to Macomb.

In 2005–06, postsecondary education institutions in Macomb County conferred 172 bachelor's degrees, 2,445 associate's degrees, and 1,163 certificates.² This is a relatively low number of degrees and certificates for a county of this size, and about 26 percent of the degrees and certificates were awarded in business fields. MCC enrolled the highest proportion of students—more than 21,000 students in 2005–06—and awarded the majority of degrees and certificates (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 2007).

In 2005, the population of Macomb County included about 53,000 college students, of whom almost 8,900 were enrolled in graduate programs.³ More than half of these students (53 percent) were 25 years or older. Of the traditional college-going age group of 18- to 24-year-olds, about 38 percent were enrolled in college, primarily as undergraduates, a proportion similar to the state as a whole.

² The data do not include degrees awarded by partner institutions through the University Center, so total degrees awarded may be higher. However, some of the degrees awarded by colleges in the county could have been to non-Macomb residents, so it is not clear what the net effect would be.

³ College enrollment and educational attainment figures pertain to county residents, regardless of where they attend or attended college.

The educational attainment of Macomb County residents age 25 or older is similar to that of the state—about 45 percent of county residents have earned a high school diploma or less; 34 percent have completed an associate's degree or have at least earned some college credit; and 21 percent have attained a bachelor's degree or higher. The percentage of county residents with a bachelor's degree or higher is lower than that of the state (25 percent for the state, 21 percent for Macomb County), while the percentage having earned associate's degrees or having at least some college credit is slightly higher.

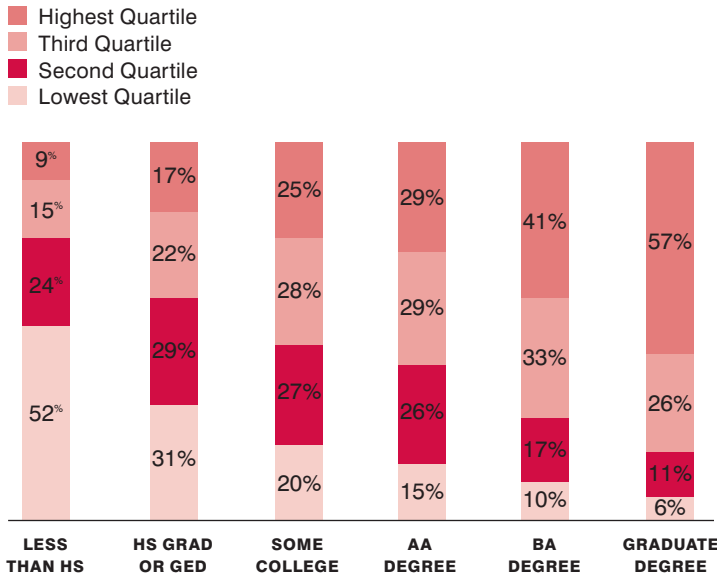
Within these overall figures, there are some major gaps in both college enrollment and educational attainment of Macomb residents on the basis of income. In 2005, 58 percent of traditional college-age residents in the highest family income quartile were enrolled in higher education at the undergraduate or graduate level. This is in marked contrast to college-age residents in the lowest-income quartile, roughly 83 percent of whom were not enrolled in higher education. Macomb County residents age 18–24 who fell below 150 percent of the federal poverty line were also substantially less likely to enroll in college than more affluent residents.

Family income also correlates with educational attainment. Overall, a college degree is indicative of a higher family income for Macomb residents. Within the population of 25 years and older, more than half (57 percent) of those with a graduate degree are in the highest-income quartile. Nearly the same proportion (52 percent) of county residents age 25 and older who have yet to earn a high school degree are in the lowest-income quartile (FIGURE 2).

These findings suggest that county residents from disadvantaged backgrounds may not be able to afford college or may be limited in their access to higher education by factors such as the lack of a four-year institution in the county. Macomb's historic reliance on manufacturing may have affected some residents' decision not to attend college if they believed that college was not necessary for stable employment. Higher education access and college enrollment trends are a question of affordability and availability, and they reflect the range of employment options available to county residents.

FIGURE 2

Distribution of Educational Attainment for Macomb County Residents Age 25 and Older, by Family Income Quartile, 2005



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

Comparisons with Other Suburban Counties

An examination of two comparison counties—DuPage County, Illinois, and Lorain County, Ohio—creates a clearer picture of how Macomb County is performing relative to some midwestern counterparts.⁴ There are, of course, differences in demographics among these counties that should be noted. Both Lorain and DuPage have larger Hispanic populations than Macomb, and DuPage also has a higher median household income, a lower percentage of residents employed in manufacturing, and a much lower unemployment rate.

Each county relies on manufacturing as a prime industry in its economy. However, while manufacturing employs over one-fifth of the workforce in both Macomb and Lorain counties, the economy in DuPage has become more diversified. In fact, this is true for all of Illinois, because of the state's transition since the 1950s from reliance on manufacturing to a focus on the service industry (Podmolik 2007). As a result of this transition, hard hits to the manufacturing industry are buffered by a relatively wide range of other industries. The unemployment rate in DuPage County in November 2007 was 3.6 percent—lower than that of Macomb or Lorain (BLS 2007).

⁴ These counties were chosen based on demographic and economic similarities to Macomb County and have been cited by other authors as urban-core county benchmarks for Michigan (Erickoek and Watts 2003).

Across all three counties, residents who have a college degree of any kind tend to fare better financially, but the counties differ in terms of college enrollment and educational attainment. Among residents age 18–24, Macomb County had a higher college enrollment rate in 2005 (38 percent) than Lorain (34 percent) but a substantially lower rate than DuPage (43 percent).

In both Lorain and Macomb, higher income residents were most likely to enroll in college. About 58 percent of Macomb and 56 percent of Lorain residents, age 18–24 in the highest-income quartile, were enrolled in college. At the other end of the economic spectrum, about 17 percent in the lowest-income quartile in Macomb were enrolled in college, compared with 12 percent in Lorain. The stratification of educational enrollment by income is also present in DuPage County. For example, 38 percent of the lowest-income quartile and 66 percent of the highest quartile were enrolled in college. However, DuPage residents at every income level were much more likely to be enrolled in postsecondary education than were equivalent residents of Macomb and Lorain.

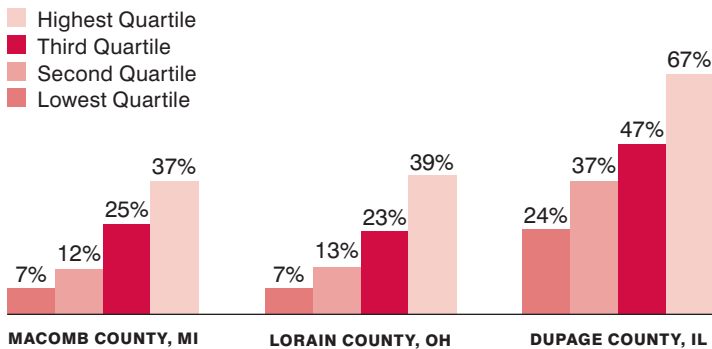
Educational attainment for county residents age 25 and older also showed different patterns. Overall, Macomb and Lorain counties had similar percentages of persons who had attained bachelor's degrees or higher, with Macomb having a slightly higher proportion of those with some college or an associate's degree. However, like college enrollment for 18- to 24-year olds, overall degree attainment in DuPage was significantly higher—43 percent of county residents age 25 and older had a bachelor's degree or higher, more than double the 21 percent in Macomb.

Both Macomb and Lorain also show large gaps in attainment of a bachelor's degree or higher by income—less than 10 percent of those in the lowest-income quartile in each county had attained a degree, compared with 37 percent in the highest-income quartile in Macomb and 39 percent in Lorain. DuPage had substantially higher educational attainment rates in all income quartiles but still showed a gap in attainment between the highest and lowest quartiles (FIGURE 3).

Overall, Macomb County's rates of college enrollment and educational attainment are similar to those in Lorain but far lower than those in DuPage. Part of the difference between the counties is that the median household income in DuPage is almost a third higher than that in Macomb, and the correlation between income and education is strong. However, the gaps in college enrollment and educational attainment that exist among specific groups of residents exist in all three counties to a similar extent. It is likely that similar gaps would be found in many, if not most, of the counties in the Midwest that are facing demographic and economic change.

FIGURE 3

Percentage of Residents Age 25 and Older Holding a Bachelor's Degree or Higher, by Family Income Quartile and County, 2005



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

One obvious difference among these counties is the variation in postsecondary options. Each county has a community college as well as a number of vocational or technical schools. However, Lorain and DuPage each also has at least one four-year institution. Lorain County is home to the nationally regarded Oberlin College, and DuPage has several small, private nonprofit colleges and universities, as well as an off-campus outreach center of a public university. On the surface, the greater number of postsecondary options in those counties would support the argument that having a four-year institution close by facilitates higher educational attainment rates. Although this may be true for DuPage (whose residents have higher educational attainment rates than residents of Macomb), it is not necessarily the case for Lorain—Lorain’s college enrollment and educational attainment patterns are similar to those in Macomb. But Lorain County’s only four-year institution is Oberlin, whose conservatory program draws students from across the nation and around the world, while DuPage County has more four-year institutions and a wider range of institutional types and programs.

Without a four-year institution in the county, facilitating the transfer from community college to four-year school is more important. Macomb relies on the University Center to facilitate partnerships with state four-year institutions, but some residents see it as an imperfect option for a variety of reasons. Lorain also benefits from its University Partnership program (housed at Lorain County Community College), which partners with eight four-year colleges throughout the state. DuPage, in addition to a number of private four-year institutions, has an outreach center at Northern Illinois University, one of the state’s many public four-year schools. The center was designed to serve the western suburbs of Chicago but is primarily geared to recruiting students who are in the later stages of their degree attainment or adults who are pursuing accelerated training programs.

Goals and Challenges: Community Perspectives

Macomb residents, as well as policymakers, see a compelling need for improvement in college access in the county. However, the best path toward improvement is not always clear. Site visits and structured interviews with nearly 40 government and college officials, K–12 leaders, students, parents, and other interested parties revealed a number of different—and sometimes conflicting—perspectives on how to address the issue of baccalaureate degree attainment in Macomb County. These perspectives can be grouped into several themes: (1) lack of satisfaction with current postsecondary education opportunities; (2) lack of a public four-year institution, in particular; (3) suggestions for alternative options; and (4) potential obstacles to change.

First, almost all of those interviewed agreed that the postsecondary education options currently available in Macomb are not sufficient. Interviewees generally believed that MCC is doing a good job at the associate’s degree and technical certificate levels. In fact, to address the growing need for postsecondary education in the county, MCC has begun to explore the idea of offering four-year degrees in selected fields where high workforce demand exists (an idea that would require both state approval and the consent of accreditors). However, many interviewees suggested that this could put a strain on the institution, and potentially reduce its effectiveness in serving students who are ready for the workforce or ready to transfer to a four-year college.

The Macomb University Center houses programs from various Michigan universities, with the goal of enabling Macomb County residents to obtain a four-year degree. Most of those interviewed appreciated the presence of the University Center. In addition, a recent University Center survey showed that 97 percent of students would recommend the center to others, and 82 percent believed the quality of their programs is better than their previous college experiences (MCC 2005). However, most of those interviewed said that the University Center has not fully addressed the educational needs of the Macomb population. Several interviewees said that the center does not provide adequate student guidance services and that completing a BA degree is very difficult for many students because course sequences, scheduling options, and access to professors are inadequate. For example, during public hearings held by the Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth in Macomb County (2006), a county resident testified that although she had tried to complete her degree through the University Center, she was unable to take all the necessary classes there and had to drive to the main campus of her degree-granting institution four times a week.

Oakland and Wayne State universities are within 20 miles of most of the northern and southern parts, respectively, of Macomb County. Nonetheless, interviewees did not see either as a good option, especially for people with work and family

responsibilities or those without cars. Michigan in general and Macomb County in particular do not have an adequate public transportation system. One person interviewed had considerable problems trying to shuttle between the University Center and Wayne State University. Some of the people interviewed also mentioned that the Wayne State campus is in a decaying urban area, and they or their relatives did not feel comfortable driving there by themselves or after dark.

Many Macomb County residents said that the county should have its own four-year institution—very few counties the size of Macomb in the United States do not have a four-year institution. In addition, Macomb County has almost 10 percent of the population of Michigan; other areas of the state have far fewer residents but more public higher education. Many of those interviewed said that the taxes paid by Macomb residents go to support state universities located elsewhere and that this imbalance should be corrected.

Several interviewees suggested that a four-year institution is key to the county's economic development. Numerous research studies (e.g., Duhart 2002) have suggested that the presence of a public four-year institution has economic benefits for the surrounding communities. Macomb has been falling behind the rest of the state and the nation, in part because of the downward slide of the automotive industry. In years past, a college degree was not a prerequisite for a good job in Macomb, because the auto industry was strong, but that is no longer the case, and those interviewed recognized that the county will continue to fall behind if its young people leave to get a degree elsewhere or stay and fail to get a degree. The absence of a university also means that Macomb is not getting research grants or other state and federal dollars associated with a university presence.

Some interviewees noted that the lack of a four-year university nearby has an impact on residents' educational aspirations. According to one resident, many high school students never even considered enrolling in college, despite the fact that most high schools offer information and counseling on college planning. This perception is confirmed by research that indicates that aspirations are based in part on the availability of educational choices. The more students are exposed to higher education in their communities and see it as a reasonable option for their lives, the more likely they are to aspire to and eventually enroll in college (Carter 2001). The demographics of many schools in Macomb include students whose parents have not gone to college themselves; for these students, a local four-year institution would provide a concrete opportunity to pursue a college degree. Some of those interviewed noted that the students most in need of being steered toward college are in the blue-collar (southern) part of the county and that any new institution should be located in that area. Most of the students in that area, if they do enroll in college, tend to enroll at community colleges such as MCC.

When asked to visualize what a four-year institution in Macomb might look like, some citizens offered eloquent speeches about the value and merit of a liberal arts education as the best preparation for a changing world. Others thought Macomb should build on its strengths and develop high-tech programs based on the following:

1. The county's links and experience with the automotive industry, in which advanced manufacturing and green technologies are becoming increasingly important;
2. Its proximity to the Great Lakes; and
3. The military research work under way at the Selfridge Air National Guard Base, where some of the equipment used in Iraq is developed and tested.

Some interviewees pointed out that Macomb County has educational and public health needs that require training of teachers and medical personnel at the baccalaureate and graduate levels. Reference was made to the possible establishment of a center for osteopathic medicine in Macomb. A number of those interviewed emphasized that Macomb students should receive a quality education, because for many of them the university would be the only opportunity to discover bodies of knowledge and areas of inquiry beyond the familiar.

Although almost all Macomb residents interviewed agreed that a four-year institution was needed, they also agreed that cost was a major consideration. There was a general consensus that it was not realistic to start from scratch. Many of those interviewed suggested lower cost methods to create an institution. For example, some people believed that existing infrastructure could be used to house a new campus or branch of a university. The site most often mentioned was Selfridge Air National Guard Base, a military base near Lake St. Clair that has ample land, buildings, and other facilities.⁵ Other options mentioned less often were the MCC south campus or the facility that currently houses the University Center.

Still, some level of funding would be required if a four-year institution were to be located in Macomb. Most people interviewed did not believe that major funds for this purpose would be available from the state, given the severe fiscal restraints in the state budget. Raising taxes to pay for a new campus was not viewed as politically feasible. Some suggested that the Michigan congressional delegation look into federal funding; other possible sponsors mentioned were the auto industry, the business community, and other counties in southeastern Michigan. Local elected officials

⁵ While the Selfridge base has been included in the federal base closure discussions over the past several years, using the base as a university campus would be a substantial investment. For example, when Fort Ord in California was closed in the 1990s, a new California State University campus (CSU-Monterey Bay) was built on part of the former base. A significant part of the initial construction costs for the CSU-Monterey Bay campus came from federal funds, with the state of California paying for much of the subsequent growth and development.

Many Macomb County residents said that the county should have its own four-year institution—very few counties the size of Macomb in the United States do not have a four-year institution.

underscored the need for an ambitious, big-picture regional development vision that would bring together leaders from the public and private sectors to integrate their efforts to transform the economic model and standard of living for the region. Higher education would be a key part, but not the only part, of this model.

Several of those interviewed believed that a four-year institution in Macomb would not be economically viable under any foreseeable circumstances. In addition, they believed the higher education establishment in the state might not be supportive of a new four-year institution, especially given cuts in the higher education budget over the past few years. In fact, any attempt to fund a new four-year institution was considered likely to draw strong criticism.

Many of those who believed that a four-year institution would be impossible mentioned two other options within driving distance—Oakland and Wayne State universities—or suggested overhauling the University Center. Both the University Center partners and Oakland and Wayne State would need to make a greater commitment to Macomb than they have so far, according to a number of interviewees, but this might be easier to accomplish, in their view, than developing a four-year institution from scratch.

One caveat was that MCC runs the danger of becoming over-extended if it keeps adding programs and BAs to its offerings; it should continue to concentrate on what it does best. In addition, some concern was expressed that if MCC were expanded to a full-blown four-year institution, it could lose its local funding and be entirely dependent on the state for financial support.

Conclusions

Macomb County has a clear set of challenges that can only be addressed through both short- and long-term solutions. Our analysis of the county's college enrollment and degree attainment trends can help to inform policymakers and concerned parties about what steps need to be taken to address these challenges. In terms of increasing college enrollment, policymakers need to consider the county's insufficient access to baccalaureate opportunities. Additionally, new policies need to specifically focus on low-income Macomb residents, who have the hardest time accessing college. Increases in college enrollment and degree attainment for this group will help create a more educated workforce and a more prosperous Macomb County. ❧

Saginaw

The city of Saginaw is located in Saginaw County, in the central portion of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. As of 2000, the city's population was approximately 61,800, and the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that this population had dropped by around 7 percent as of 2006, to just over 57,500 (U.S. Census Bureau 2000; U.S. Census Bureau 2007).⁶ As with most cities in Michigan, Saginaw's urban landscape and demographics are changing in response to an increasingly global society.

Saginaw is a melting pot of races and ethnicities; it is one of the most racially diverse urban areas in the state of Michigan. As of 2000, the city's population included similar percentages of both White and Black residents (43 percent) along with just under 12 percent Hispanic residents. Much of this diversity stems from early 20th century migration of African Americans from the agricultural South to the increasingly industrialized North, mainly to fill the labor needs of the booming manufacturing industry, as well as from more recent immigration from Latin America.

Historically, Saginaw has been an industrial and agricultural epicenter in the state. The city boasts innovation and leadership in the healthcare industry, and the surrounding county continues to produce several major crops that are distributed at the national level (approximately 64 percent of the county's land is used for agricultural production). The economy of the Saginaw urban area is relatively diverse, with the greatest employment in education and healthcare services, double that of the next largest industries (**FIGURE 4**). Manufacturing and retail trade are the next largest influences on the city's economy. Major industry employers include three branches of General Motors Corp., Delphi/Saginaw

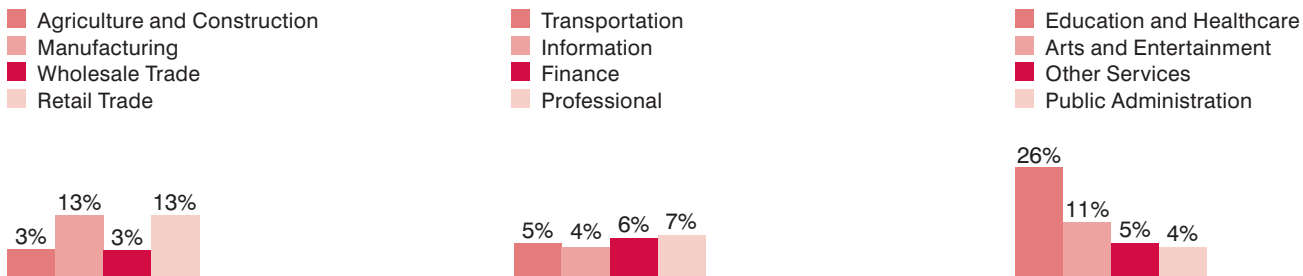
Steering Systems, Michigan Sugar Co., and Saginaw Control and Engineering (MEDC 2007).

The area's economy would be less diverse if it were not for the work of Saginaw Future, Inc. (SFI). An alliance of private and public organizations, local businesses, and individuals, SFI is the economic development agency responsible for economic change in Saginaw and the surrounding county over the past 15 years. As a result of its diversification efforts, the organization attracted more than \$54 million for industrial and urban planning improvements and an additional \$2.6 billion for investment in the region, which contributed to the growth in the industries that are now primary employers, such as advanced manufacturing and medical and other professional services. The development agency has created about 6,000 jobs and retained slightly over 4,000 jobs (SFI 2007). Despite these efforts, however, the economic situation in Saginaw remains challenging.

⁶ Detailed information on the city of Saginaw is not available from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2005 *American Community Survey* because the city's population is less than 65,000. As a result, most of the data used for this analysis comes from the 2000 Census. In some instances, 2005 data were used that refer to the urbanized area of Saginaw, which includes both the city proper and the densely populated areas around the city.

FIGURE 4

Distribution of Employment by Industry for Saginaw Urbanized Area, 2005



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

The statewide demise of the automotive industry is acutely manifested in local unemployment rates and income levels. The unemployment rate is high in the city of Saginaw, estimated to be at 12.3 percent as of November 2007, well above the average unemployment rate for the state as a whole (BLS 2007). Moreover, the median household income for the Saginaw urban area in 2005 was approximately \$35,000, significantly less than the statewide median income (\$46,039) and lower than the median incomes in other urban areas such as Lansing (\$40,541) and Flint (\$40,507).⁷

For years, cities like Saginaw relied on employment opportunities in manufacturing, which yielded lucrative returns while requiring little or no college education. Education and healthcare services now trump manufacturing as employment leaders in the city. This economic shift requires an educational shift that will help to reduce unemployment and allow residents to maintain financial security. The need for skilled labor is on the rise. Manufacturing in the area has been concentrated in the automotive industry. As the automotive sector loses leverage in the global economy, Saginaw's new range of industries can serve as a buffer, but these industries require an increasingly well-educated population.

A number of different postsecondary options are available locally for Saginaw residents. The top three choices for high school graduates are Delta College, Michigan State University, and Saginaw Valley State University (Claus 2002). Delta College is a community college with its main campus in the town of University Center, about 10 miles from Saginaw, and off-campus centers in Saginaw, Bay City, and Midland. As of fall 2006, more than 10,000 students in the tri-county area attended Delta College. Two-thirds of Delta's students are between the ages of 20 and 24, and Saginaw County residents comprise 42 percent of the student body. The student body is relatively homogenous in terms of race and ethnicity compared with the city—83 percent

of the students who attend Delta College are White. More than half of students at Delta are pursuing an associate's degree or a certification in a career education program. The college has articulation agreements with four-year institutions across the state (Delta Community College 2007).

The Saginaw area also has a public four-year university—Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU), located in the town of University Center. As of fall 2003, 52 percent of the approximately 9,500 students at SVSU came from the four counties of Saginaw, Bay, Midland, and Tuscola (SVSU 2004). In Saginaw itself, an off-campus center associated with Central Michigan University offers selected bachelor's and master's degrees. In addition, several private for-profit institutions in the city specialize in vocational training.

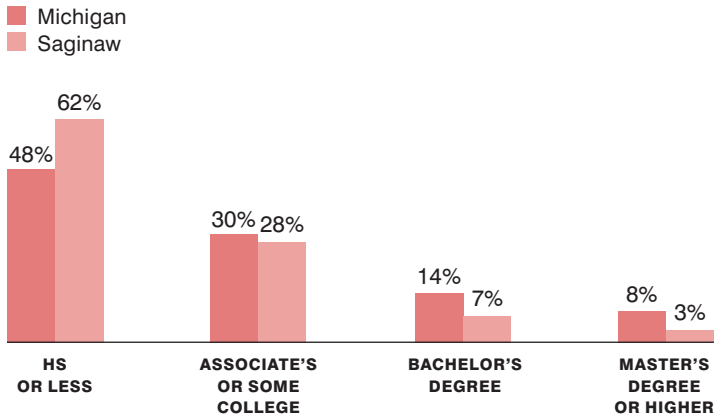
College enrollment rates in Saginaw reflect some postsecondary access challenges. In 2000, about 10 percent of the city's population was of the traditional college age (18–24 years old); of this group, only 20 percent were enrolled in college or graduate school, a substantially lower percentage than in the state of Michigan as a whole (39 percent in 2005). College enrollment rates in Saginaw also vary by race and ethnicity. While almost a quarter of White city residents ages 18 to 24 were enrolled in college in 2000, only 17 percent of Black city residents and 14 percent of Hispanic residents in this age group were enrolled.

Postsecondary enrollment of traditional-age students may be influenced by the general environment of educational attainment in the area. Educational attainment among Saginaw residents 25 years and older falls considerably behind the state as a whole. As of 2000, just over 10 percent of city residents 25 years or older held a bachelor's degree or higher. In Michigan in the same year, almost 22 percent of residents 25 years and older had earned a bachelor's degree or higher, twice the postsecondary attainment rate for Saginaw (FIGURE 5).

⁷ This median income is derived from the urbanized area of Saginaw. Given the high unemployment rate in the city of Saginaw, it is likely that the median household income for the city proper is lower still.

FIGURE 5

Distribution of Highest Educational Attainment for Michigan and Saginaw Residents Age 25 and Older, 2000



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2000 CENSUS

As in the case of college enrollment for traditional-age students, educational attainment rates for Saginaw residents age 25 and older vary by race and ethnicity. For example, about 14 percent of White Saginaw residents had attained a bachelor's or graduate degree as of 2000, compared with only 7 percent of Black residents and 4 percent of Hispanics. At the other end of the spectrum, 36 percent of Black and 39 percent of Hispanic residents had not completed high school as of 2000, compared to 18 percent of White Saginaw residents. Given that Blacks and Hispanics make up a substantial proportion of Saginaw's population, their grim postsecondary attainment rates are a warning sign for future economic growth.

Comparisons with Other Urban Areas

To develop a better sense of how the city of Saginaw is performing relative to other urban areas, two other midwestern cities were evaluated. The two cities—Peoria, Illinois, and Springfield, Ohio—provide a context for Saginaw's college enrollment and educational attainment patterns.⁸ There are some differences in demographics among the three urban areas, as it is very difficult to directly match certain regional traits. In particular, Peoria has a population almost double that of Saginaw. In addition, both Peoria and Springfield have substantially higher proportions of White residents—neither city is majority minority as Saginaw is—and Peoria has a higher median household income—\$43,664 compared with \$35,005 in Saginaw and \$34,106 in Springfield.⁹

⁸ These areas were chosen based on demographic and economic similarities to Saginaw and have been cited by other authors as urban-core county benchmarks for Michigan (Erickcek and Watts 2003). Due to limitations in available data and to match the analysis conducted for Saginaw, most of the data in this section come from the 2000 Census.

⁹ Median incomes are based on the Peoria and Springfield urbanized areas. As with Saginaw, it is likely that the median household income for the cities themselves are somewhat lower.

The top two industries in all three urban areas are education and healthcare and manufacturing. In Saginaw and Springfield, education and healthcare services employ slightly more than a quarter of the population; in Peoria, these industries account for over a fifth of the jobs. As is the case with most midwestern states, manufacturing has had a long and influential history on employment and the economy. It is no surprise that this sector still accounts for a substantial percentage of employment.

Unemployment rates for Saginaw and Springfield are higher than the national rate, while Peoria's 4.4 percent unemployment rate in November 2007 was slightly below the national rate. Saginaw had the highest unemployment rate of the three areas—at 12.3 percent as of November 2007, this rate was well above Springfield's 6.6 percent rate (BLS 2007). Saginaw's high unemployment rate may be due to larger contractions in local manufacturing industries or to other factors. Nonetheless, to keep pace with the demands of skilled labor positions, residents in all three cities will likely have to pursue a college education.

Differences exist in college enrollment patterns among the three cities. In 2000, 20 percent of Saginaw's 18- to 24-year-old population was enrolled in college. The rate in Peoria was 46 percent; in Springfield, 35 percent. College enrollment rates also vary by race in all three cities. In Springfield, 23 percent of Black residents ages 18 to 24 were enrolled in college, compared to 38 percent of White residents. In Peoria the disparity was more dramatic, with 19 percent of Black residents ages 18 to 24 enrolled in college versus 56 percent of White residents.¹⁰ Nonetheless, college enrollment rates for traditional-age students in both Peoria and Springfield surpassed those in Saginaw for all racial and ethnic groups.

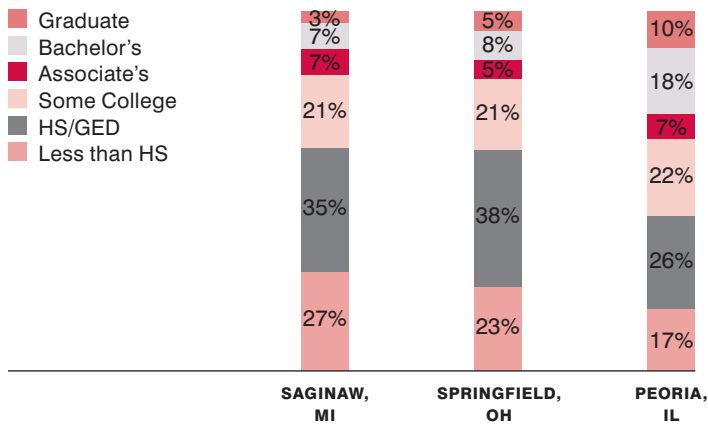
Looking at educational attainment for the entire adult population in each city creates a context for these findings. In 2005, Saginaw and Springfield residents age 25 and older had substantially lower rates of attainment of bachelor's or advanced degrees (10 percent and 13 percent, respectively) than the same age group in Peoria (28 percent). Saginaw and Springfield also had far more residents than Peoria who had earned only a high school diploma or less (FIGURE 6).

Educational attainment patterns also vary by race and ethnicity. As of 2000, 31 percent of White residents in Peoria earned a bachelor's degree or higher; the figures were 14 percent for Saginaw and 13 percent for Springfield. Black residents fared more similarly in the three cities: 7 percent of Black residents in Saginaw, 10 percent of those in Peoria, and 9 percent of those in Springfield had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. These percentages suggest that educational attainment rates for Saginaw's minority residents, although low, are comparable to those in other urban populations.

¹⁰ The Hispanic population of both Peoria and Springfield is too small to produce any meaningful analysis of college enrollment rates or postsecondary degree attainment rates.

FIGURE 6

Distribution of Educational Attainment for Residents Age 25 and Older by City, 2000



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2000 CENSUS

Overall, comparisons among the cities suggest that traditional-age college students' enrollment in Saginaw is lower than that in both Springfield and Peoria while unemployment is higher than in either comparison city. In terms of educational attainment, residents of Saginaw and Springfield have lower rates of postsecondary degree attainment than do residents of Peoria, and these lower attainment rates are particularly pronounced for minority residents of these cities.

In terms of postsecondary options, the cities vary in educational options and resources. While all three have a variety of colleges, Peoria and Springfield have more private non-profit four-year options than does Saginaw. Peoria is home to Bradley University and Midstate College, and Springfield has Wittenberg University.

One difference worth noting is the higher number of medical training institutions in Peoria compared with Saginaw and Springfield. The medical industry is an important part of each city's local economy. Peoria accommodates this aspect of its economy by providing multiple institutional programs to increase skills needed for occupations in the healthcare and medical fields. Saginaw has the Ross Medical Center and programs at some of its public institutions. However, interviews with people in Saginaw suggest that local colleges could improve programs and curricula in this area.

Goals and Challenges: Community Perceptions

Site visits and interviews demonstrate that Saginaw leaders and citizens have a range of opinions on college access and higher education offerings in the region. Some believe that Saginaw has a variety of access challenges, while others are content with existing opportunities. These diverse perceptions make it

difficult for local policymakers to decide how to target policies for improvement. The perspectives of Saginaw residents expressed in interviews can be grouped as follows: (1) belief that physical access to postsecondary institutions is good; (2) recognition of the lack of a college-bound culture, particularly among minority residents; (3) desire to enhance preexisting programs; and (4) concerns about affordability.

First, there was general consensus that geographic access to postsecondary institutions is good. Many of those interviewed spoke highly of the area's access to SVSU and Delta College, and the articulation agreements with major four-year universities in the state. However, some noted that even though physical access to these institutions is good, program offerings could be better.

Geographic access to postsecondary institutions also may not be equally good for all Saginaw residents. A few of those interviewed mentioned that Saginaw's poorer residents struggle with high gas prices and a public transportation system with limited hours of operation, which creates problems in physical access to college for this demographically significant group. Some residents have been known to commute for one to two hours by bus to get to Delta College's main campus, which is approximately 25 miles away. Some of those interviewed viewed this as particularly difficult for poorer Saginaw residents, especially those who hold a job and have children. The commute takes time away from the job, and paying for extra child care is an additional burden that should be considered in access policies.

The large number of Hispanic and Black residents in Saginaw was frequently mentioned as a point of consideration for access policies. Many students in these racial groups are economically disadvantaged and attend high schools that may have inadequate resources and may use models of instruction that are not well suited to the needs of low-income youth. Additionally, some think these groups feel socially isolated from the college-going culture and from local postsecondary institutions. One interviewee said that although minority students have no problem traveling around the area to churches and stores, when it comes to college, they seem to have a mental barrier. Another suggested that Black students may shy away from Delta College's main campus because of perceived racism but do attend classes at the college's off-campus centers in the city of Saginaw.

Low college aspirations are manifested in the general population after years of reliance on a now-failing auto industry. A commonly held view is that Saginaw residents are still operating under blue-collar traditions and a "union ethic," which assumes that good jobs will be available even to those with only a high school education. Several of those interviewed cited the negative influence of the automotive industry on postsecondary aspirations. Even with high poverty and unemployment rates, many suggested that city residents remain unaware of the demand for increased skills and an advanced degree.

The city has a high percentage of low-income, minority, and single-parent families, placing many children at risk for low educational aspirations. Some of those interviewed commented that Saginaw's at-risk youth do not have access to basic educational resources and may have parents who do not know how to encourage college aspirations. Intervention programs—such as the King-Chavez-Parks (KCP) initiative and Birth to Five—aim to help Saginaw parents set their children on track for college, but years of financial instability and state budget cuts leave some of those interviewed concerned about program effectiveness.

Some interviewees commended local postsecondary institutions on their outreach efforts to high school students. Delta College, in particular, has a dual-enrollment agreement with many local area high schools. Under this agreement, the high schools use a portion of the per-student monies received from the state to pay the college for its instructional services. This arrangement has, however, led to some concern that school districts may be unable to maintain their services to students if they are sending a significant number of students to take college courses through the dual enrollment program.

Many of those interviewed suggested building on existing programs to help with college access. Most interviewees agreed that current program offerings are strong but could be better. Many were worried that postsecondary programs have been slow to modify in response to the changes in specific workforce areas, which threatens Saginaw's economic future. A number of

those interviewed believed, for example, that more vocational-technical programs could be added. One person cited the recent \$1 billion expansion of the Hemlock Semiconductor factory, which will require a better trained and more skilled workforce than the city currently offers. On the other hand, Delta College was praised for attempting to keep pace with the changing economy and trying to attract more businesses to the area. Specifically, the college is building its technical programs with help from the Dow Corning and Dow Chemical companies. This effort enables the college to build on current programs in order to entice businesses to an area whose economy has been on a slippery slope.

Some interviewees noted that Saginaw's burgeoning healthcare industry is crucial to the region's economic development and that four-year colleges have been slow to change their curricular offerings in response to the needs of this industry. Nursing programs exist, but the high volume of applications indicates a need for more comprehensive programs that can handle the growing interest in the field. Some interviewees suggested that a medical school be built in the area as a collaborative effort between the state and a major four-year university. However, limited state funding has made the development of programs in this high-need area more challenging. For example, in an effort to control costs under severe fiscal constraints, the governor in 2007 vetoed her own administration's capital investment bill, which would have provided funding for new buildings at SVSU and Delta, to be used for nursing and medical training.

Affordability is a key concern for area residents, as Saginaw ranks high in poverty and unemployment compared with other Michigan cities and with the state.

Finally, many of those interviewed referred to college financing as an access challenge. Affordability is a key concern for area residents, as Saginaw ranks high in poverty and unemployment compared with other Michigan cities and with the state. Some interviewees said that Saginaw residents have high levels of debt aversion. For many local residents, access to a college education requires taking out loans. Some low-income residents are electing not to enroll in college or are working while enrolled, thus lengthening their degree track. In addition to loan aversion, one interviewee said that middle-income families are “falling through the cracks” and must struggle to pay for college. With the decline in high-paying unskilled jobs and increased layoffs, once financially secure families are now living paycheck to paycheck and are unable to afford the out-of-pocket costs of tuition and fees.

Conclusions

Residents of the city of Saginaw and the surrounding county face some challenges in gaining access to postsecondary education. In addition to very low educational attainments for the city’s adult residents, Saginaw has low rates of postsecondary enrollment among traditional-age students, particularly among Black and Hispanic residents. This is a crucial factor for Saginaw, which has a majority minority population.

As in other parts of Michigan, the Saginaw area has been affected by the economic move away from manufacturing. There seems to be a general sense of direction in the area about how to shift the economy, toward the healthcare industry in particular, but

local colleges need to catch up. Postsecondary institutions in Saginaw and nearby should be able to help build a stronger workforce, but more attention must be paid to access challenges for low-income and minority residents. ❧

Alpena and Surrounding Counties

The northeastern portion of Michigan's Lower Peninsula is one of the state's more rural areas. Particular counties of interest for this report are Alpena, Alcona, Crawford, Montmorency, Oscoda, and Presque Isle. Collectively, the population of the six counties was about 91,000 in 2000, with the highest concentration of residents—roughly 31,000—in Alpena County (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). The Huron National Forest covers much of these counties, resulting in relatively low population densities. The region is known for its rustic appeal—it offers many lodgings and activities for visitors. Almost half of the homes in the majority of these counties are used by seasonal residents.¹¹

The area is relatively homogenous in terms of race and ethnicity, with White residents comprising 97 percent of the population. Residents in this region of Michigan are disproportionately older than in other parts of the state—the average age is 44—and over 70 percent of the population is 25 and older. Nineteen percent of families with children under the age of 18 live below the federal poverty level, compared with 16 percent for the state. The median household income for the region is \$35,128, substantially lower than the statewide median of \$46,039.

The main industries in Alpena and the surrounding counties are education, healthcare, manufacturing, agriculture, and retail trade (**FIGURE 7**). The economy has diversified since the early 1990s as a result of the efforts of local communities (Northeast Michigan Council of Governments [NEMCOG] 2007). Alpena County's port on Lake Huron makes this part of the region a hub for much of the industrial trade in the area. Major employers

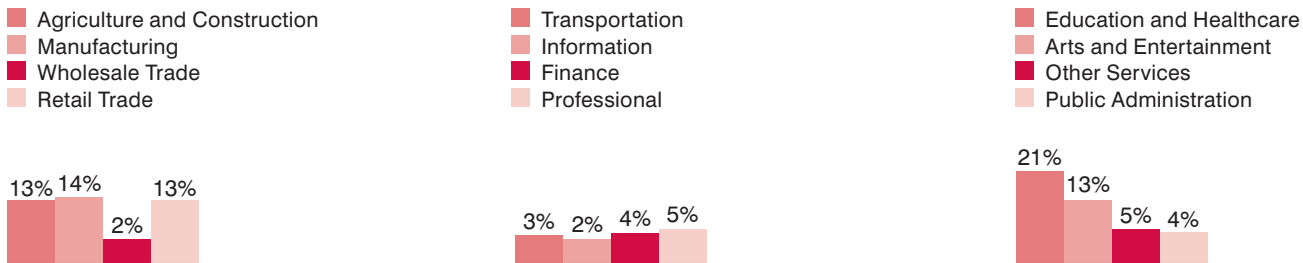
across the area include hospitals, school districts, retail giants such as Wal-Mart and Kmart, and manufacturers such as Seibe Automotive, Weyerhaeuser Co., Georgia Pacific, and Cadillac Products (MEDC 2007).

Nonetheless, each county's unemployment rate is higher than the statewide rate. The average for the six counties as of November 2007 was 10.1 percent, which is higher than the statewide rate of 7.4 percent in that same month and double the national unemployment rate. Unemployment in the region was highest in Montmorency County at 13.0 percent and lowest in Alpena and Crawford Counties at 7.9 percent. Monthly unemployment

¹¹ Data from the 2005 *American Community Survey* used in this chapter are based on Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA) 0500, Michigan, which includes Alpena, Alcona, Crawford, Cheboygan, Montmorency, Oscoda, Ostego, and Presque Isle counties. The two counties that are not the focus of this report (Cheboygan and Ostego) could not be separated from the others, so all analyses refer to the eight-county area unless otherwise noted. When 2000 Census data are used, they reflect only the six focal counties.

FIGURE 7

Distribution of Employment by Industry for Alpena and Surrounding Counties, 2005



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

rates over the past 10 years show a consistent trend in which the region's unemployment rate peaks during the winter months and declines throughout the summer (BLS 2007). The rise and fall of the unemployment rate is an indicator of the region's reliance on tourism and seasonal jobs.

Higher education opportunity is crucial to the future growth of the area. Given the sparse population, which reflects the challenges of education in rural areas generally (BOX 1), Alpena and the surrounding counties provide relatively few higher education options. Alpena Community College (ACC) is the main postsecondary institution in the area and offers a selection of associate's degrees. The college includes a University Center that offers accredited degrees from four-year institutions such as Spring Arbor University, Central Michigan University, and Northwood University. ACC also partners with fellow community colleges to extend specialization and certification opportunities (ACC 2007). ACC offers one particularly well-established vocational program: the World Center for Concrete Technology. The program offers training certificates, associate's degrees, and research experience, all of which equip graduates with skills that can lead to jobs with high wages (World Center for Concrete Technology 2007).

ACC is crucial to the postsecondary education options of local residents, but the college often feels the pinch from state budget reductions. In 2007, Michigan's legislature was forced to defer one of the 11 annual payments made to various colleges and universities. ACC was one of the harder hit colleges, with a deferred payment of \$613,000. As a result, ACC had to rely on operating surpluses from previous years until the state could make the payment (Wenzel 2007). For a rural college that serves an at-risk population, the loss of resources from the state, even temporarily, can be a serious barrier to bringing new programs to an area that could greatly benefit from them.

An analysis of college enrollment and educational attainment in Alpena and the surrounding counties demonstrates some of the challenges of college access in a rural setting. A little more than

a quarter (26 percent) of the 18- to 24-year-olds in the region are enrolled in college or graduate school, which is substantially lower than the statewide rate of 39 percent. Fewer than 3,000 traditional-age students are enrolled in college each year in the region, making it difficult to build a base of highly skilled workers, a factor essential for promoting economic growth and diversity in the region.

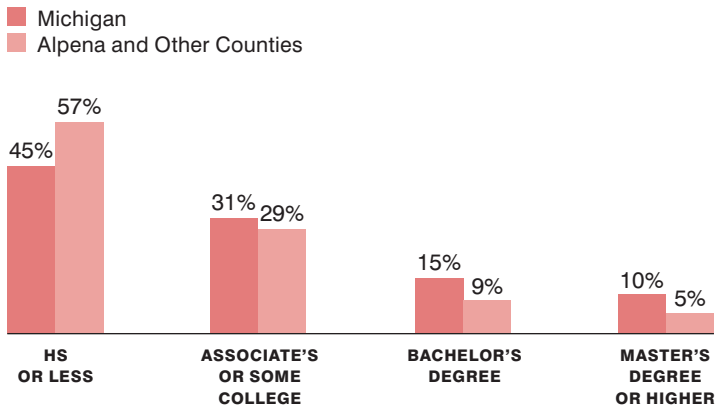
College enrollment rates for 18- to 24-year-olds in Alpena and the surrounding counties also vary by certain demographics, particularly income levels. Low-income residents ages 18 to 24 have significantly lower college enrollment rates (7 percent) than those of low-income residents at the state level. This suggests that, although access to college is difficult for low-income residents throughout the state, it is especially difficult in the Alpena region.

Alpena and the surrounding counties have educational attainment levels for residents 25 years and older that are considerably lower than statewide totals. As of 2005, only 9 percent of Alpena area residents in this age group had earned a bachelor's degree, compared with 15 percent for Michigan as a whole. The comparison is even more dramatic at the graduate level—the percentage of the population ages 25 and older holding graduate degrees in Alpena and the surrounding counties is half that of the state (5 percent versus 10 percent). Additionally, 57 percent of the residents in the region have only a high school education or less (FIGURE 8). This is not surprising, as low educational attainment is characteristic of rural regions.

As is the case with college enrollment rates for 18- to 24-year-olds, educational attainment levels for residents 25 and older in Alpena and the surrounding counties vary by income. For example, the percentage of residents ages 25 and older in the highest-income quartile who have earned a bachelor's degree or higher (28 percent) is substantially higher than the percentage of residents in the lowest-income quartile who have a bachelor's degree or higher (6 percent).

FIGURE 8

Distribution of Highest Educational Attainment for Residents of Michigan and of Alpena and Surrounding Counties Age 25 and Older, 2005



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

Comparisons with Other Rural Counties

To gauge how well Alpena and the surrounding counties are performing in terms of college enrollment and educational attainment, two rural areas in adjacent midwestern states were selected for comparison. These areas—Ohio’s Guernsey region¹² and Illinois’ Clark region¹³—have demographic characteristics similar to those of Alpena and the surrounding counties and of rural areas in general.¹⁴ All these rural regions are predominantly inhabited by White residents and have somewhat older populations than do the states in which they are located. The median household income is in the mid-\$30,000s in all three regions; the Guernsey region has a slightly higher household income than the others. The Alpena region’s unemployment rate is the highest at 10.1 percent as of November 2007, compared to 5.6 percent in the Guernsey region and 4.9 percent in the Clark region (BLS 2007).

Each region’s economy relies on the same industries: manufacturing, education, healthcare, agriculture, and construction. Education and healthcare supply a fifth of the jobs in each area. Manufacturing is another major industry, supplying about 20 percent of the jobs in both the Guernsey and Clark areas and 14 percent in the Alpena area. The lower percentage of manufacturing jobs in the Alpena region is likely due to the fact that the arts and entertainment industry (which includes tourism) is larger in Alpena and the surrounding counties than in the comparison regions. This could also account for at least part of the difference in unemployment rates, given the seasonal nature of the tourism industry.

¹² Data for this area were extracted from the 2005 American Community Survey, specifically from PUMA 2500, Ohio, which includes Guernsey, Harrison, and Tuscarawas counties.

¹³ Data for this area were extracted from the 2005 American Community Survey, specifically from PUMA 0700, Illinois, which includes Clark, Clay, Crawford, Jasper, Lawrence, Richland, and Wayne counties.

¹⁴ These counties were chosen based on demographic and economic similarities to the Alpena County area and have been cited by other authors as rural county benchmarks for Michigan (Erickcek and Watts 2003).

College enrollment and educational attainment rates vary across the three rural regions. In 2005, among residents age 18–24 years, the Alpena region had a somewhat higher college enrollment rate (26 percent) than the Guernsey region (24 percent) but a substantially lower rate (36 percent) than the Clark region. Across all three regions, residents in higher-income quartiles were most likely to enroll in college (FIGURE 9). However, residents in the lowest-income quartiles in both the Alpena region (7 percent) and the Guernsey region (15 percent) enrolled at much lower rates than the same residents in the Clark region (27 percent). The data suggest that the lowest-income residents in Alpena and Guernsey have a harder time accessing college than those in Clark, but the situation is different for the higher-income quartiles—18- to 24-year-olds in the Alpena and Clark regions enroll in college at much higher rates than those in the Guernsey region.

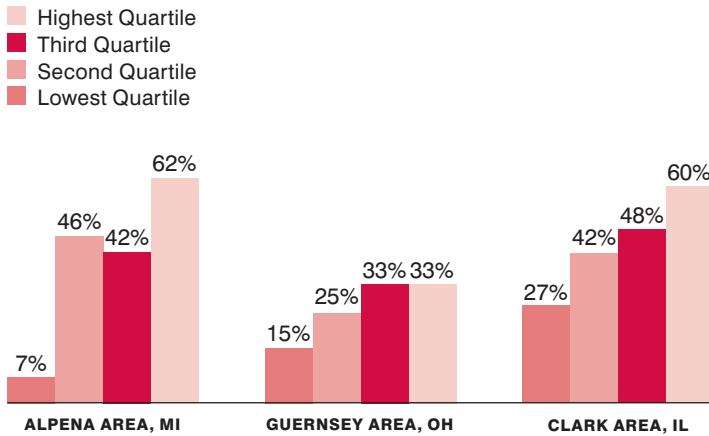
Alpena and the surrounding counties are similar to the comparison regions in terms of educational attainment. Residents of the Alpena region age 25 years and over attained at least an associate’s degree at similar rates (22 percent) to those in the Guernsey region (21 percent) but at a lower rate than those in the Clark region (26 percent). The differences among the three regions are slight; all three regions have rates of postsecondary degree attainment that are very low compared with state and national trends.

Differences in educational attainment can also be seen by income level. Across all three regions, low-income residents age 25 and older were less likely to have a bachelor’s or graduate degree than those in higher-income quartiles, with a difference of 22 percentage points between the highest- and lowest-income quartiles in the Alpena and Guernsey regions and 26 percentage points in the Clark region. However, this gap is quite a bit lower than the gap in educational attainment between the highest- and lowest-income quartiles for the states in which these regions are located. In Michigan, for example, there is a 38 percentage point gap in attainment of a bachelor’s degree or higher between the highest- and lowest-income quartiles statewide. This finding suggests that the lack of access to postsecondary education affects all residents of these rural regions regardless of income.

Overall, in terms of enrollment of traditional-age students and educational attainment for adults 25 years and older, the Alpena region is similar to the Guernsey region, but both of these regions have lower rates of educational attainment and, most notably, postsecondary enrollment for traditional-age students than the Clark region. More detailed analysis shows that young people in the lowest-income quartile in all three rural regions enroll in college at lower rates than young people in the highest-income quartile and that postsecondary enrollment rates for the lowest-income traditional-age students in these regions are also much lower than in the states in which these areas are located. These

FIGURE 9

Percentage of Residents Ages 18–24 Enrolled in College, by Family Income Quartile and Rural Region, 2005



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

findings suggest that the poorest residents of Alpena and the surrounding counties, like rural residents in other states, face unusually challenging barriers to college access.

The Clark and Guernsey regions provide an interesting perspective on the potential barriers to higher education access in the Alpena region. Each of the comparison regions has a four-year institution as well as a choice of community colleges. In contrast, Alpena and the surrounding counties rely primarily on one community college as an access point for postsecondary education. It appears that the availability of a public university and a number of community colleges could be a factor in the other regions' levels of postsecondary education access.

However, the availability of postsecondary institutions in Guernsey and the surrounding counties suggests that proximity to a four-year institution is not the only factor that influences college enrollment and educational attainment trends, because that region's postsecondary educational attainment is relatively low and quite similar to that in the Alpena region. An interesting difference among the three rural area populations is the significant number of Amish residents in one of the Guernsey-area counties included in this analysis (Tuscarawas County). The fact that Amish people do not traditionally pursue postsecondary education may influence the college enrollment and educational attainment rates for the Guernsey area.

With ACC as the focus of access to college in the Alpena area, articulation agreements are crucial to enable students to earn a bachelor's degree. Alpena relies on its University Center to coordinate degree offerings with colleges around the state, and some residents of the area believe that the University Center is

not working as well as it could. In the Clark region, on the other hand, the various community colleges have strong individual articulation agreements with local universities. In fact, one role of the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) is to ensure such agreements among the state's postsecondary institutions (IBHE 2007). As a result, students in Illinois have an advantage in that transfer is more or less a guarantee, which may have a strong effect on college enrollment and educational attainment.

Goals and Challenges: Community Perceptions

There is general agreement about higher education access in Alpena and the surrounding counties: Access opportunities are inadequate. Site visits and interviews with educational and community leaders revealed various challenges that can be grouped as follows: (1) remote postsecondary access; (2) tenuous University Center partnership; (3) lack of state support; (4) lack of a college-bound culture; and (5) financial insecurity.

Though Michigan offers a range of postsecondary opportunities, some of those interviewed said these opportunities are unevenly located around the state, which poses a major access challenge for the Alpena area. Because of the rural nature of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, postsecondary institutions are few and far between. ACC is the only major postsecondary institution in a multiple county region, with the exception of several Michigan State University Extension program centers that offer predominantly adult education and training options. ACC serves a broad region; several of those interviewed cited the problem of students commuting long distances to school.

In addition to limited institutional access, several interviewees expressed concern about the ACC University Center's partnerships. Support from four-year institutions in the state is not strong. In fact, ACC's university partnerships are so shaky that one institution is planning to stop offering courses toward a four-year degree. In addition, many local students rely on Spring Arbor University's distance learning courses. This concerns one interviewee, who characterized the online coursework as "not as demanding in terms of standards as some of the others [institutions]." In addition to unstable agreements and the perception that some coursework is not of a high quality, the University Center is housed in an old garage on campus—some people said the location gives it an air of neglect.

Many of those interviewed cited insufficient communication with the state as another major barrier to higher education access in the area. Given the Alpena area's low population density and rural landscape, some interviewees believe the area is considered a low priority and funding is limited by budget cuts. In some interviews, there was a sense of resentment at the state's inability to provide financial support that could be extremely beneficial to the area. Before the interviews for this project, the state was forced to postpone one of its 11 annual payments to higher education institutions. While the funds were eventually made

available to the schools, ACC was one of many institutions that struggled to meet its financial obligations while waiting for the payment. The resentment over this action was best expressed by one interviewee, who said, “If the state is really interested in increasing the number of students going to college and improving access, then they need to give us the resources.”

Several of those interviewed said that Alpena residents do not see the value of higher education. Some interviewees said that in the past it was common for local high school graduates to either enlist in the armed forces or enter the workforce and that this attitude toward higher education persists. Many area residents are not convinced that a college education leads to a better life. One interviewee said, “Manufacturing only required a warm body and two hands. And you could have a six-pack of beer and a TV and be happy.” Manufacturing is long gone as an economic driver in the area, but local conditions still do not support and sustain a college-bound mentality.

Northeastern Michigan is extremely disadvantaged, with economic circumstances that add to the challenge of developing a college-bound culture. As one interviewee said, “We’re talking about poverty in the nature of outhouses—no electricity, no indoor plumbing, and dirt floors.” High poverty and unemployment rates in the area make it difficult for people to think about pursuing a college education. Additionally, as one interviewee suggested, families are often not keen on letting their child go to college, as few of those who complete a four-year degree return to the area.

As in other regions of Michigan, concerns about affordability are a challenge in the discussion of higher education access. For many families and students, the idea of accruing debt for a college education is hard to consider. In addition, ACC is virtually the only viable option for degree attainment in the area. Two-thirds

of ACC students are from Alpena County. The other third, who are considered out-of-district students, pay 50 percent more than their in-district counterparts, which adds to the challenge of affordability (ACC 2007). A few of those interviewed also noted that a considerable amount of land in Alpena County is state or national forest and exempt from property taxes; thus, tuition at ACC is higher than officials would prefer to make up for the lack of property tax revenue.

Conclusions

This analysis of rural counties has illustrated some of the major characteristics that affect postsecondary education access. The Alpena region depends on tourism, and the pattern of seasonal employment affects unemployment as well as students’ ability to enroll in college. Measures of higher education—both enrollment and attainment—in Alpena and the surrounding counties are considerably lower than in the state of Michigan as a whole. In the Alpena region, the lowest-income residents ages 18 to 24 have a particularly low college enrollment rate, especially in comparison with similar regions in other states.

Clearly, multiple barriers exist for students in the Alpena area—some are specific to the rural location; others have to do with affordability, especially for the poorest students. Other barriers are due to a lack of postsecondary options within easy commuting distance. For these challenges and barriers to be addressed, careful attention must be paid to the region’s geographic and economic status. Given the size of the region and its relatively dispersed population, it may be challenging to find leadership for new educational initiatives. ACC is perhaps best positioned to be the leader in this area, but it is constrained by limited resources. Of all the areas discussed in this report, Alpena and the neighboring counties offer the biggest challenge to overcoming barriers to higher education access. ❧

BOX 1

Rural Education Context

Michigan has a substantial population of rural students in the K–12 system. As of 2007, nearly 370,000 K–12 students in the state attended rural schools, the seventh largest rural student population in the nation (Johnson and Strange 2007). Alpena and the surrounding counties account for a portion of these students, which is essential to keep in mind in evaluating educational opportunities in the region. To appropriately target college access policies, it is also important to understand state and national rural educational trends.

Nationwide, rural residents have limited access to educational opportunities and resources, and rural areas typically have higher high school dropout rates and low levels of college enrollment and degree attainment (Sander 2006). Compared with urban and suburban public schools, rural public schools offer fewer Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses. Rural public school students tend to have similar access to dual-enrollment courses, but these courses are often vocational. Nationally, rural public schools also tend to spend more per student and rely more on sometimes inconsistent state funding (Provasnik et al. 2007).

Michigan's rural population faces many of the problems that plague rural residents in general, but some research suggests that the state's rural population is served reasonably well by K–12

education. National Assessment of Educational Progress (also known as NAEP) scores in math and reading for rural students in Michigan are above the national average for rural students, as is the state's rural high school graduation rate (Johnson and Strange 2007). A number of factors help explain these outcomes. Since 1994, funding for all public schools in Michigan has depended more heavily on state resources, including sales and income taxes, than on local property taxes. This model ensures a minimum per-pupil funding base, which may be especially beneficial to rural areas, where the property tax base may be lower (Michigan Department of Treasury 2002). Additionally, instructional expenditures per student in rural Michigan schools are slightly above the national average, and salary expenditures per full-time instructional staff member in rural schools are well above the national average (Johnson and Strange 2007). ❧

Increasing Access to Higher Education in Michigan

Each region analyzed in this report helps provide a better understanding of the college access issues that can be found throughout the state. The various localities display similarities and differences in terms of college access that can inform the policy development process. These similarities and differences have led us to propose a set of broad conclusions about higher education access in Michigan, along with associated recommendations that may improve higher education access in the state.

1. Address college access issues at the state level.

Recommendation: Establish a state higher education agency or statewide board of regents with the authority to design policies and initiatives to increase college enrollment and degree attainment rates across the state.

Michigan lacks a board of regents or a higher education commission that can serve as a central hub for higher education data and that has authority over the state's higher education policies. The benefits of having such an agency include the following:

- Streamlined higher education policies, such as universal protocols for articulation and state appropriations.
- Centralized tracking of student college enrollment, persistence, and completion patterns in the state, which can inform prospective higher education policies.
- Easily accessible, centrally located information for students and their families about postsecondary planning and financial aid.

The two other states discussed in this report, Ohio and Illinois, have more centralized higher education systems and can serve as potential models for replication (**BOX 2**).

Recommendation: Establish an initiative to address rural college access issues, with particular emphasis on involvement by rural community colleges.

The state should heed the plight of its rural population, as the analysis in this report shows that this group has little access to four-year institutions and is very much at risk for not completing a college degree. The Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) is one example of an agency that develops rural policies at the state level. These policies cover improvements in rural community infrastructures, economies, and K–12 education systems; they could be expanded to include higher education access issues (MEDC 2007). However, any effort to expand higher education access in rural areas would require active participation by rural community colleges, as these colleges have the insight and administrative capacities needed to promote change in the communities they serve.

One alternative might be a rural initiative using the design of existing initiatives, such as the Ohio Appalachian Center for Higher Education (OACHE), a partnership between K–12 schools and public higher education institutions that is charged with increasing the region’s college-going rate. OACHE provides funding for access grants and programs geared specifically toward rural youth living in the 29 Appalachian counties in the eastern part of the state. OACHE also works with higher education institutions in the area to secure articulation agreements (OACHE 2007).

2. Establish better working relationships among and new roles for the state’s two- and four-year postsecondary institutions.

Recommendation: *Develop a uniform articulation agreement between public two- and four-year institutions.*

Michigan does not currently have a strong statewide system of articulation governing transfer from two-year to four-year colleges. Michigan should consider modeling a uniform articulation agreement after the policies established in Illinois and Ohio.

- The Illinois Articulation Initiative was established as a voluntary transfer agreement among 110 participating two- and four-year institutions in the state, both public and private (IBHE 2007).
- Ohio’s articulation policy streamlines transfer agreements and course equivalents to ease the transition between two- and four-year schools. The state has developed pathways for transfer such as the Ohio Transfer Module, a course-by-course equivalency model that allows the use of some general education courses under an associate’s degree to count toward general education requirements on a baccalaureate degree track (Ohio Board of Regents 2007).

Recommendation: *Allow selected community colleges in regions with insufficient higher education access to confer baccalaureate degrees in high-need fields.*

The Michigan Community College Association (MCCA) is lobbying for state support to develop more expansive nursing programs at state community colleges, including allowing community colleges to confer baccalaureate nursing degrees (MCCA 2007). Granting community colleges the right to confer baccalaureate degrees is not a new idea in the state, and one of the goals proposed by the Cherry Commission in 2004 was that the state legislature should pass a law defining when and how such degrees might be granted (Cherry Commission 2004). If Michigan’s two-year colleges could grant baccalaureate degrees in high-need fields, state residents would have more baccalaureate opportunities and industry workforce shortages would stabilize.

Recommendation: *Help the major four-year institutions in the state, especially Michigan State University, develop more branch or satellite campuses.*

Michigan has an assortment of excellent four-year institutions, and it might be possible to establish satellite campuses in regions of the state with lower access to higher education. The state should begin by bringing together officials from the 15 public four-year institutions with policymakers and educational leaders from underserved regions. This meeting would initiate an open dialogue on the feasibility of establishing one or more satellite campuses and creating more opportunities for baccalaureate access.

One way to approach this recommendation would be to build on the Michigan State University Extension (MSUE) program, which has offices in all 83 Michigan counties and offers educational programs in agricultural and natural resources; children, youth, and family; and community and economic development (MSUE 2007). As Michigan’s economy moves away from manufacturing and agriculture, MSUE has the potential to buttress postsecondary education in the state by developing credit-granting programs in new fields and by using local knowledge developed through years of educational service to the state to identify challenges and solutions relevant to local higher education access issues.

Recommendation: *Improve the existing University Center system.*

University Centers are an attractive option and a necessity for many residents who would like to pursue a bachelor’s or graduate degree but cannot attend a four-year institution. However, in several of the regions examined in this report, people expressed concern about the stability of University Center agreements. The success of a University Center relies on multiple factors:

- Effective and clear inter-institutional cooperation in program planning and delivery.
- A diverse range of programming appropriate to the needs of the local economy, often coordinated by an agency that works in partnership with the center’s institutions.
- Access to both public and private higher education.
- The opportunity for seamless transfer among a wide range of institutions.

To be a driver of higher education opportunity for its community, a University Center must be at the forefront of efforts to identify the emerging needs of local residents and employers. It should build dynamic relationships with the civic, business, educational, and social service communities in the areas it serves.

3. Establish or expand healthcare and medical training programs to position Michigan as a leader in the healthcare industry.

Healthcare is one of the state's leading industries. As manufacturing loses leverage, the state must consider investing more in other industries. Possibilities for expanding the state's investment in healthcare and medical training include the following:

- Providing more funding for nursing programs at community colleges, especially in areas with the highest demand.
- Using factories that have closed because of cuts in the automotive industry as new facilities for vocational degree training in healthcare fields.
- Proposing that a major four-year institution's medical school establish a satellite campus in an underserved area of the state specializing in community medicine.

4. Develop better public transportation systems, especially in areas where residents must travel to reach a postsecondary institution.

Postsecondary institutions and the areas they serve need to provide accessible modes of transportation for students and residents. The following are some strategies to improve public transportation for colleges and universities:

- Partner with local area transit systems to create package deals for students or free ridership for students paid for out of institutional fees.
- Request extended hours of operation for transit routes that serve a postsecondary institution.
- Build shelters at transit stops to improve the comfort for students who must wait for transportation.

It may also be possible to leverage state funding for local transportation initiatives to ensure that transportation agencies cooperate with nearby colleges and universities to better serve potential students.

5. Invest in long-term financial support for college students and in programs that encourage college attendance.

Recommendation: Support passage of proposed legislation to create "Promise Zones" in areas of the state with high youth poverty.

In her 2007 State of the State address, Governor Jennifer Granholm proposed the development of "Promise Zones," in which local governments in areas of the state with low educational attainment and high poverty and unemployment could use part of the growth in state property tax revenues, together with public

and private contributions, to fund scholarships for local youth. Modeled after the Kalamazoo Promise—a privately funded initiative begun in 2005—these scholarships would provide last-dollar funding to cover college tuition for local residents (Granholm 2007). Legislation based on this idea was introduced in the Michigan legislature in 2007 but had not yet been acted on when this report was written.

The Promise Zone model addresses higher education access in a number of different ways. First and foremost, the scholarships help make college more affordable for low-income families. The plan also addresses the low levels of economic development in certain areas of the state by attracting new businesses and their workforces, for whom Promise scholarships are an incentive to move to the area. Finally, by attempting to guarantee an affordable path to college for every student, the Promise scholarships will help develop the college-going culture missing from so many of the regions analyzed for this report.

Recommendation: Create a statewide program that improves college financing literacy for families and students.

This program could include partners from all sectors that benefit from the investment in higher education—business, philanthropy, government (both state and local), and postsecondary institutions. The program should include information on the total costs of education, savings plan options, tax credit programs, student grants and loans, and expectations for financial assistance programs.


Recommendation: Work with the Michigan Department of Education to develop policies that support college access for high school students.

In addition to outreach and early intervention efforts, the state must develop policies to ensure that high schools are offering support to help students who want to pursue college degrees after graduation. Strategies in this area include the following:

- Encouraging high schools to offer academic programs such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses, which have been shown to increase the likelihood of college enrollment.
- Ensuring that dual-enrollment programs are affordable to both students and school districts in economically disadvantaged areas.
- Working to reduce misconceptions about dual-enrollment programs and offering better support to high schools on how to handle such programs in a cost-efficient manner.
- Continuing to expand the governor's middle college high school initiative, which is providing funding for the development of six such schools in the state (Granholm 2007).

In middle college high schools, students can earn both a high school diploma and an associate's degree in five years, thus reducing the financial burden of college and the challenges of transitioning from secondary to postsecondary education.

- Encouraging school districts to build a postsecondary planning infrastructure that fosters a college-going culture in each district high school. One approach could be to emulate national models such as College Summit, which offers a postsecondary education planning course for all high school seniors (including hands-on support in negotiating the college application process) and provides teachers and counselors with professional development training to enable them to effectively lead the course.

Michigan's higher education access challenges should be considered opportunities. The recommendations above are possible directions for change based on the three regional analyses. For serious changes to occur, however, considerable political and financial commitment must be made by the state and its communities. The road to increased higher education access and higher baccalaureate degree attainment rates will be a long one, but investments now will pay off in a more educated workforce and sustainable economic prosperity. Michigan has the capacity and the desire to increase postsecondary access. The findings and recommendations in this report can inform the decision-making process and serve as a catalyst for change. 

BOX 2

Higher Education Governance in Ohio and Illinois


Ohio

Since 1963, Ohio's higher education system has been governed by a nine-member board of regents. The state's regents are responsible for assessing and developing policies that directly affect higher education throughout the education pipeline. The board supplies a range of services to students and their families, policymakers, state postsecondary institutions, and various business stakeholders invested in education. Additionally, the board provides a clearinghouse of institutional and state education performance reports, as well as information on legislation and programs related to higher education access. The Ohio Board of Regents Web site offers one-stop access to information on colleges and universities, financial aid, and transfer policies (Ohio Board of Regents 2007).

In 1997, the state of Ohio and its board of regents created the Joint Council of the State Department of Education. The new organization was the result of recommendations by the Secondary and Higher Education Remediation Advisory Commission to address high remediation rates in the state's higher education system. As a result, state leaders moved to restructure the K–16 system and set forth initiatives and competencies deemed necessary for postsecondary preparedness (Ohio Board of Regents 2007).

Illinois

Illinois has a nationally regarded higher education system and a centralized office that places higher education policy at the forefront of state legislation and initiatives. Since 1961, the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) has been the backbone of the state higher education system. The board oversees and evaluates public and private institutions, the development of new degree programs, and the dispersal of federal funding, as well as the creation of alternative forms of financial aid offered by the state for eligible residents. As a result of these efforts to regulate higher education policy, all Illinois postsecondary institutions have similar goals and standards (IBHE 2007).

Initiatives sponsored by the board reflect the state's commitment to higher education access. For example, IBHE sponsors and oversees the Illinois Commitment, a partnership among IBHE, the Illinois Community College Board, and the Illinois State Board of Education designed to improve access throughout the P–16 pipeline, with particular focus on minority and adult students (IBHE 2007). The state established the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) in 1957. ISAC's Web site allows students to find information about higher education opportunities, including grants, loans, and other programs and services (ISAC 2007). 

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