Access to Democracy Project

Community Report on Attitudes Regarding Educational Attainment

Grand Rapids (Michigan) Surrounding Communities

Sponsored by
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Executive Summary

Community Report on Attitudes Regarding Educational Attainment
Grand Rapids (Michigan) Surrounding Communities

For most of the last century we saw an expansion in the numbers of individuals receiving education after high school. Policies that promoted greater college participation often were formed at the federal or state level and significant investments were made in higher education facilities and student aid, especially in the period from World War II to the late 1990's.

Our framing of higher education as a national and state priority may have obscured the connection between educational attainment and a complex set of factors that influence aspiration, preparation and support that operate within communities. In fact, as our concerns about educational access focused on gender, racial and economic barriers, we may have been underestimating the importance of an equally important constellation of related influences, those that originate within community life. These factors are reflected in, and in large part determine such things as public support for schools, teacher salaries, curriculum decisions, church and organizational support structures, and other variables that define the community intellectual and social environment.

There is a second issue that concerns us, one of critical importance to higher education and public policy. The steady rise in student and family aspirations over the last two decades may have masked a shift in the ways in which the public at large has come to view higher education and to judge its public benefits. Survey research confirms that the public sees college attendance as a path to economic opportunity, but this has not translated into general support for public investment in colleges and universities, nor do families always make the connection between high standards of preparation in the high school, family savings plans, a child's willingness to temporarily relocate for education, or to forego lifestyle purchases to pay for college. In the words of David Mathews at the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, educational attainment is shaped by a complex set of "conflicting values" about the purposes and ends of education.

A Project to Engage Communities in Nurturing Educational Attainment

The *Access to Democracy* project has two broad goals. It is an effort to understand community beliefs, attitudes and conditions that shape educational outcomes for community youth, and it is a way to focus community discussions on efforts that support higher educational attainment for residents.

Our decision to undertake this project was inspired by a paradox that operates within many communities. On one hand, more students than ever before aspire to college and more job opportunities require it. On the other hand, the cost of college is far outpacing students' ability to pay for it and financial aid programs at the federal and state levels are unable to keep pace. Our research and that of others confirms that people have a great deal of faith in colleges and universities and value the roles they play, yet not enough young people are put in a position to take advantage of college opportunities. Some "self-select" out of college for reasons that are inconsistent with the goals they express, or they underestimate their ability to pay for college, or they question the benefits of attendance or completion. As a nation, only a third of adults have at least an Associate's degree, and Michigan falls below that mark.

For these reasons, under the aegis of the "Access to Democracy" project we organized community discussions in which people came together to share their beliefs about *"Who is college for?"* We were interested in hearing, from the community perceptive what people thought about a set of important questions: Is there a belief that college is good (and even essential), but only for particular people? Do people believe that institutions or states have been forced to make choices (limit opportunities) because there are limited resources? Are there other reasons that explain why we collectively believe in education in the abstract, but yet relatively few young people go on to earn a degree?

In the fall of 2004, the *National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good* engaged communities in conversations on these very questions across the state of Michigan. We – as part of the National Forum and as members of local communities throughout the state – know that the answers to these questions are complex and that they differ for different people and in different community settings. There are no right and wrong answers. But our research confirms that there are observable directions that fit within particular community contexts given the assets and challenges they face.

This report focuses on the lessons learned in the City of Grand Rapids, Michigan and the four contiguous counties of Allegan, Kent, Muskegon, and Ottawa. Over the course of 6 months, more than 400 educators, students, neighbors, community members, business, and political leaders participated in one of 40 dialogues held throughout the region to discuss the question ***"Who college is for?"***

In our report, we begin by presenting an economic and educational summary of the assets and challenges present in the region. Some of the news is very good. For example, this four-county region is attracting more residents from other parts of the state and beyond at a time when Michigan as a whole is losing people. In addition, within 50 miles of Grand Rapids there are 30 colleges serving more than 100,000 students. This creates a robust environment for current and potential employers. Unemployment rates are currently lower than most areas in the state.

However there are challenges to address. Nearly one in three ninth graders fail to complete their high school diploma within four years and more than 23% of adults in the area have attended some college but have not completed a degree. Of course, even within this region, there are profound differences. For example, Kent and Allegan counties have nearly 10% more residents with degrees than either Ottawa or Muskegon. Our research includes detailed maps of educational attainment covering the region to help explicate patterns and show differences by census tracts.

The full report focuses on the lessons we learned from people across the region as they discussed the general issue of access to college, and specifically the question of *who is college for*. Throughout the course of the dialogues we heard a number of valuable perspectives, but the following points provide a brief summary of the community's main priorities.

- ***The Cost of College*** – people were concerned about the rising cost of college and their ability to pay for it. Many participants were students themselves or parents of students, and they were struggling to figure out how to pay the bill.

- ***The Role of Family*** – A number of participants underscored the important role family plays in a student's ability to go to college. Some spoke of the social capital – networks and

connections with others who are familiar with college – necessary to figure out the process of applying to and attending college while others spoke of a parents' ability to model what success in high school and college looks like. Some parents saw their own continuing education as a way to motivate their sons and daughters to continue in school.

- ***Matters of Class versus Race*** – Race was a more prevalent point of discussion among students than it was among other groups of community members but for the most part, dialogue participants focused on issues of economic class. And when they spoke of it, there was recognition that some groups have not been treated fairly, but there was no consensus on the value of affirmative action or intervention programs designed to help those disadvantaged. In general, participants were more broadly sympathetic toward providing access to students who came from poverty, rather than provide preferences based on race or gender.

- ***Level of Preparation*** – A number of participants spoke of enrolling in college but then leaving because they found they were not sufficiently prepared for college at the time. For some this meant the types of courses students had available to them and those that students chose to take, but for others this referred to how well they were prepared in terms of knowledge and maturity to apply to college and make the adjustment to a new life style. A number of students had returned to school and found that time away was necessary for their own development. Underlying these themes was the belief that K-12 education and higher education were not well aligned to move many students from one level to the next.

- ***Disconnect Between the College Curriculum and Workforce Demands*** – Business leaders in particular were concerned that colleges were not preparing students with the skills they required for the workforce and some of that had to do with course requirements that were restrictive and burdensome. Those affiliated with colleges and universities believed just the opposite, suggesting that colleges do much more than job training; they are preparing students for active engagement as citizens.

This effort was not organized as traditional "focus group" research. These were structured dialogues through which community members were exchanging views with one another, not merely providing information to a research team. The conversations were not intended to systematically sample public opinion, but to increase awareness, understanding and commitment at the community level. We all learned by listening, but the exercise was for the benefit of the community, not for intellectual purposes.

The dialogues suggest that residents of these communities care deeply about education and value it for themselves and their sons and daughters, but they differ in terms of who should have access and how to provide it. Based upon the dialogues organized within these communities, it was found that people's opinions become better informed by engaging others in the issues. Finally, when people viewed the dialogue as an opportunity for their voices to be heard by policy makers, they were eager to participate. Frequently people indicated they were disengaged from politics, but upon further discussion it is possible that this reflects a lack of appropriate opportunities to participate in political activity, and a resulting sense of powerlessness over key public decisions.

These dialogues created an opportunity for the people of Allegan, Kent, Muskegon and Ottawa to consider the issues related to college access for themselves and their families. It is their insights that serve as the body of this report.

Introduction

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power.

– Thomas Jefferson

Today there is a growing belief that everyone who wants access to college can have it. College enrollments have continued to grow for over half a century and now most American family's dream of a college education for their children. According to national surveys, over 80% of eighth graders aspire to education beyond high school. In addition, nearly 75% of high school graduates attend some level of college within two years of graduation. These numbers are promising until you consider that, by some estimates, nearly a third of high school students drop out before graduation.[1] Opinion polls report that Americans have great regard for colleges and universities, but in the last several years, there is some indication that our national commitment to higher education is fading. States currently struggle with budget difficulties and have chosen to cut support for public colleges; the result is higher tuition for students. A number of states, including California and Florida, have limited access to community colleges, which until now have had open enrollment policies, because they lack the capacity to serve all students who apply. So while Jefferson underscores our long held belief in the power of education, the power to access it may not be a reality for all Americans.

Access in Michigan

Currently, access to higher education is a critical issue in the state of Michigan, brought to light by the Supreme Court cases regarding admission to the University of Michigan, the declining access to a number of community colleges across the state, an increase in tuition costs, and the formation of a statewide commission on higher education and the economy. It is an issue that people care deeply about, but a topic on which many people may lack adequate information. The National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good believes that by framing this issue in public terms, and engaging in deliberative dialogue, we may better inform public opinion and positively influence civic engagement. The *Access to Democracy* project is a statewide initiative intended to engage community members, students, and civic leaders in dialogues on higher education. The overarching purpose of this initiative is to increase awareness around access to higher education recognizing that for change to take root we must have movement at the individual, community, and policy levels. If we as a nation are committed to education and believe an educated citizenry benefits both the individual and society as a whole, then it is critical for us as citizens to consider who college is for and how much we are willing to contribute. The dialogues hosted in the Grand Rapids and greater four-county area of Kent, Allegan, Ottawa, and Muskegon are a part of an effort to understand how citizens value college education, who they believe should go to college, and how the state of Michigan should address the changing nature of college access (See Appendix A for a summary of each approach in the discussion guide).

[1] See for example, One-Third of a Nation: *Rising Dropout Rates and Declining Opportunities (ETS Report 2005)* at http://www.ets.org/research/pic/onethird.pdf

In its simplest form, Deliberative Democracy refers to a conception of democratic government that secures a place for reasoned discussion in political life.
– Maeve Cook (author), University College Dublin

Access to Democracy

The Access to Democracy project was modeled after the deliberative dialogue process pioneered by the National Issues Forum more than 20 years ago. Deliberation means to think about or discuss issues and decisions carefully – weighing the pros and cons of the available options and evaluating different perspectives. The purpose of deliberation is to engage the public in conversations about important issues relevant to their lives – issues where multiple public perspectives exist. Making decisions on such complex issues requires consideration of the costs, benefits, and tradeoffs associated with the options available to us.

Deliberative Dialogue

The goal of deliberation in the context of Access to Democracy is twofold. First, it is to deepen an individual's understanding of an issue by examining multiple perspectives. The process highlights the complexity of an issue to clarify an individual's stance on the subject. In dialogue, participants face tough questions, and possibly deep differences of beliefs. The deliberative dialogue process is not meant to end with resolution. There is no right or wrong answer. There are elements of each approach that resonate with participants and others that do not. We have attempted to capture different ways of thinking about the issue in each of the approaches, but the three approaches presented are not mutually exclusive.

Deliberation v. Debate

Deliberation is in stark contrast to our more conventional system of debate, where issues are polarized and people take a "pro" or "con" position. In debates, there are winners and losers. The only information brought to light is what either side regards as relevant. For deliberation, we must keep in mind that all situations, ideas, and solutions should be a part of the conversation and they all have upsides and downsides. Debate and deliberation are usually easily differentiated. Both have their uses. The critical point is to understand which problem situations are best addressed by debate and which are best addressed by deliberation.

The second goal was to take what is learned in communities throughout the state and use it to inform the policy process. All communities understand the role of higher education differently and as such, any policy should be informed by the thoughts and opinions of the citizens likely to be affected. Toward this end, we will look at what participants said about access to college, discuss the implications of these dialogues for policymakers, and summarize the process by which what was learned over the past year was infused into the work and conversations of the Lt. Governor's Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth convened in Michigan – a body charged with the task of considering how to get more people to earn college degrees and to understand higher education as the catalyst for economic growth.

Overview of the Report

Over the past 10 months and with strong leadership from Julie Cowie, Pat Parker, Liz Keegan and Britany Affolter-Caine and the support of countless education, community and business leaders from throughout the four-county region, the citizens of the greater Grand Rapids area and surrounding counties were able to discuss with one another the role higher education plays in their

communities and who they believe college is for. The remainder of this document is devoted to taking what was learned from such deliberation and reporting it back to the larger community. As described earlier, communities understand the role of higher education differently depending upon the assets they possess and the challenges they face. The next section discusses the current educational and economic context in the region. The community portrait illuminates those assets and challenges to provide a lens through which to view the thoughts, meanings, and suggestions heard throughout the dialogues.

The next three sections consider what was learned throughout the course of the dialogues. We begin by considering the results of the pre- and post-surveys filled out by dialogue participants, which illustrate how people thought about college before the dialogue and how their attitudes and opinions may have changed as a result (A summary of the dialogue discussion guide is available in Appendix A). Next we consider the actual words of participants. Many of the dialogues were taped and transcribed in order that the lessons learned were recorded as accurately as possible. Through these words we are able to glean what participants perceive as most important when it comes to college access and how various groups within the community think they should act in terms of providing such opportunities.

The fifth and sixth sections of this report consider the changes in people's perspectives and the differences among groups with respect to the issue of access to college. Change is a particularly interesting notion because, when asked, most participants expressed that they had not changed the way they thought about access; however, when we consider how people actually answered the questions before and after the session, there was in fact change, albeit subtle. It appears that while people may not move from agree to disagree on a particular item, they do in fact begin to challenge their own opinions and either take a more moderate stance or strengthen prior beliefs. Both outcomes are valuable and demonstrate the power of deliberation.

The final two sections summarize a series of suggestions that arise from the dialogues, potential policy directions the community may consider given how members of the community talk about higher education, and how the initial findings and this report are part of a continuing dialogue with state leaders and policy makers. It is important to remember that transformation must happen at multiple levels simultaneously. State policy formed absent of community voices is likely to meet resistance from the people it is intended to benefit, and community initiatives designed without considering the political context will find it difficult to generate the resources and support they need. This report is but one stanza in that ongoing conversation among residents, communities, and state political leaders. Our hope is that the citizens of Grand Rapids and the larger multi-county region will continue to engage in this dialogue, inform one another's opinions, and infuse their voices into the policy process.

Community Portrait: Educational and Economic Factors

Kent, Allegan, Ottawa, and Muskegon counties are located in the West Central portion of Michigan and are home to nearly 1.1 million people, or more than 10% of the entire state population. This area of the state is among the fastest growing regions in Michigan. In a state that has experienced relatively little growth over the past 10 or more years, this area grew by more than 16% from 1990 to 2000. The area is predominantly White, but the city of Grand Rapids is more than 20% African American and 13% Hispanic, creating a diverse and vibrant community. The outlying areas may be

more ethnically homogeneous, but they are rich in religious, socio-economic, and vocational diversity.

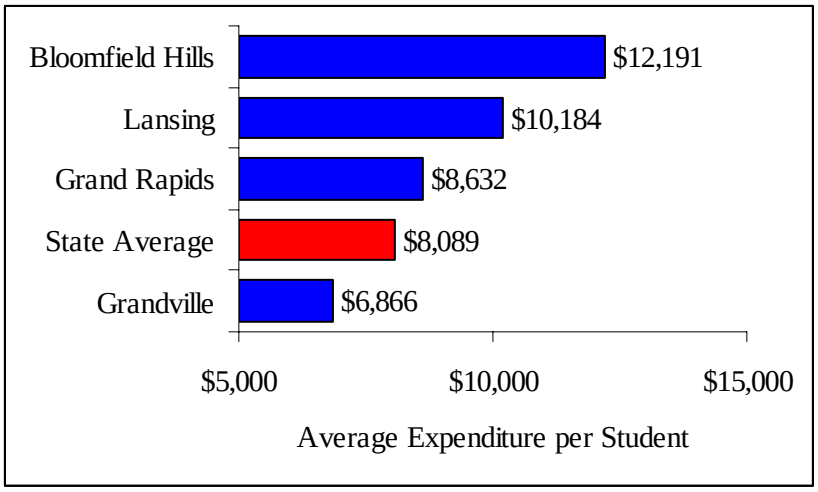
K-12 Education

There are more than 200,000 school age children in the four-county area, of which 64,000 are in high school. One of the central challenges is getting students through their first critical hurdle in education: high school graduation. One way of approximating how many students successfully complete high school is to consider how many 9th grade students finish a high school diploma or equivalent within four years. This number underestimates the total number of students that eventually complete their diplomas, but it does represent the group most likely to pursue education beyond high school. The four-year completion rate of students in these four Western counties is slightly less than 67%, meaning that if there were 16,000 ninth graders in 2001, less than 11,000 will have completed their diplomas in 2005. This is slightly lower than the state average of 70%. One common reason cited for low four-year completion rates is out-migration, where students leave the county before they graduate. However because this is one of the high growth areas in the state, it is less likely that students were lost by leaving. This means that almost 1/3 of high school students face a greater hurdle than most if they hope to attend college.

Consider these numbers from a slightly different perspective. In Grand Rapids, there are 16 high schools, technical and vocational schools, and alternative high school programs serving 12,400 students. Imagine that there are 3,500 students enrolled in 9th grade in the fall of 2001. Nearly 1,200 of those students will not finish high school on time and an appreciable number of those will not earn a high school diploma at all. That is a challenge to any community, particularly as the workforce is quickly demanding a greater level of education to earn a decent living. Of course, there is a great deal of variability depending upon the school. Consider for example, Union High School in Grand Rapids. The school has a four year completion rate of 45% meaning less than one of every two students in the 9th grade completes high school at the same school four years later. At this level, it is quite possible that students change schools within the city, but compared with a school like Kenowa Hills High School that has a four-year completion rate of 94%, something is different that either leads to higher dropout rates or more frequent cases of students leaving the district or school: either should be a red flag for any community.

Very often, when gaps of this magnitude exist, people expect that the problem can be found in the amount of money spent per student across districts. For example, Grand Rapids School District, which is one of the largest in the state with 23,774 students. It spends only slightly above the state average per student and boasts the third highest rate of students passing the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) in Kent County at 76.5%. By contrast, Godwin Heights, which is one third the size, spends $150 less per student and has the lowest MEAP pass rate in the county. In this case, money could be a factor, but it appears that something more is going on. Since Proposal A passed in 1994, effectively shifting much of the cost of K-12 education away from property tax to the state sales tax, gaps in funding levels have narrowed but have not been eliminated. Consider graph 1 as an illustration.

Figure 1.
Expenditures per Student for Selected Michigan High Schools in 2002-03



Source: Standard and Poor School Evaluation Services

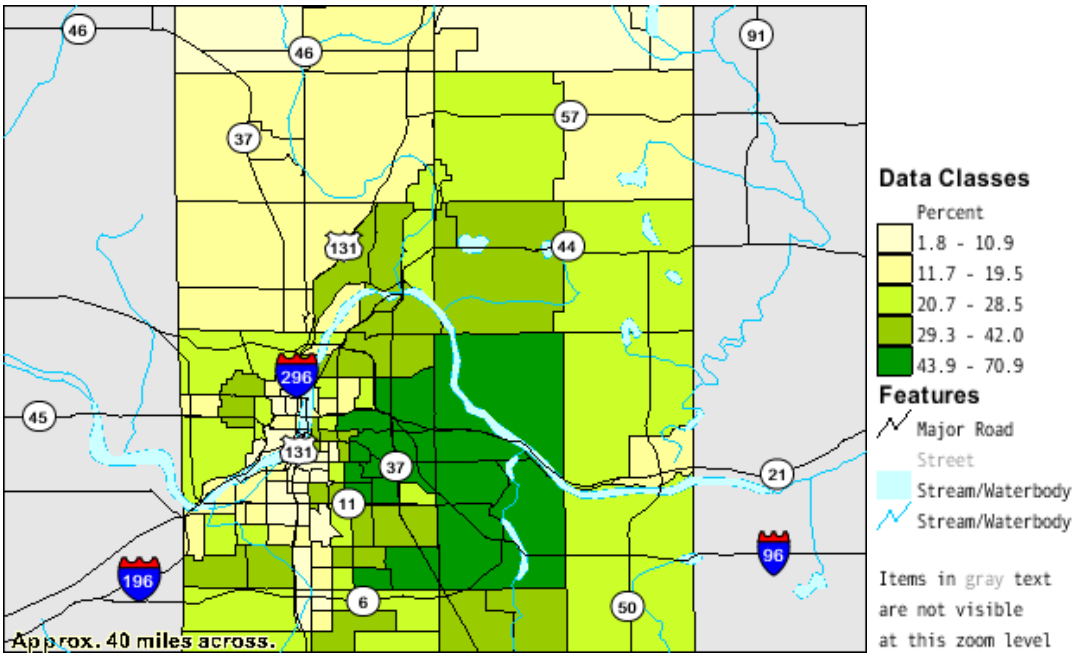
Grand Rapids school district is slightly above the state average in terms of average expenditures per student, but they spend $2000 more than Grandville school district and $3500 less than Bloomfield Hills. The amount of money spent per student, however, can be misleading because it does not cost the same amount to educate each child. For example, students who require special education instruction are more costly than most students, and it happens that more special education students attend schools in urban communities.

Colleges and Universities

The four-county region is home to a number of colleges and universities of all varieties. More than 106,000 students were enrolled last year in 30 institutions within 50 miles of Grand Rapids. Perhaps more than anywhere in the state, there is a strong presence of private liberal arts colleges – including Aquinas, Calvin, and Hope Colleges – serving nearly 14,000 students. Of course, the two largest providers in the area are Grand Valley State and Western Michigan University who enroll more than 50,000 students combined. The rest of students are enrolled in four community colleges and a host of vocational, technical, seminary, and proprietary institutions.

While there appears to be an adequate number of institutions to serve a variety of educational needs in the area, there is a considerable difference in levels of college educated citizens by county. As a point of reference, the state of Michigan rates slightly below the national average of citizens over age 25 with at least an Associate's degree or above, with 28.8% (30.7% nationally). More than 33% of residents above 25 in Kent and Ottawa counties have at least an Associate's degree whereas Allegan and Muskegon are both below 23%. That is a considerable difference among four contiguous counties. Consider the map in Figure 2 as an illustration of the disparities in educational attainment across Kent County alone. The darker areas on the map represent higher percentages of adults over age 25 with at least a Bachelor's degree.

Figure 2.
Bachelor's Degree Attainment in Kent County, MI



Source: US Census Bureau Factfinder

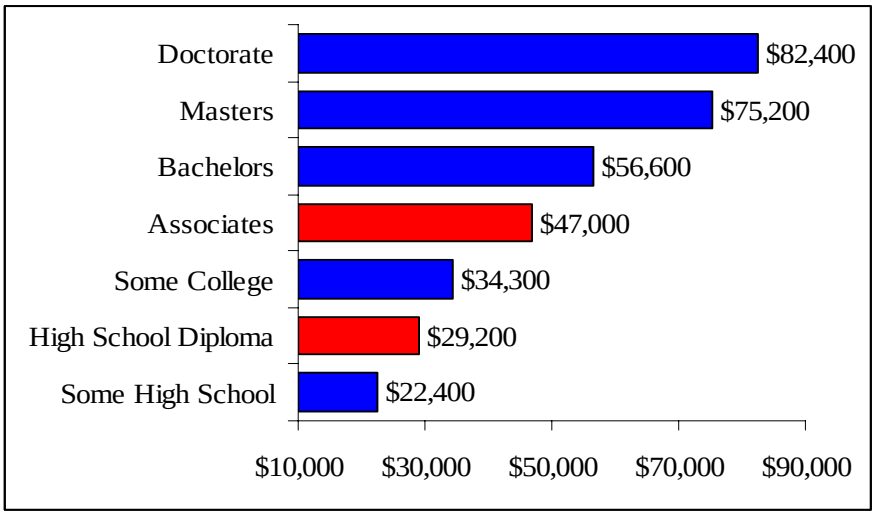
In the state of Michigan, college graduation rates are lower than the national averages for all types of colleges and universities. The common method of calculating graduation rates is to allow 150% of the time you would normally expect to complete a given degree. For example, community college graduation rates for Associate's degrees allow for 3 years to completion whereas 6 years are given to complete a Bachelor's. Graduation rates are notoriously difficult to report and interpret so no single institution should be judged based upon this number. However comparisons to other states are a useful barometer to gauge how well an entire state is serving its students relative to others.

Michigan's community colleges rank among the lowest in terms of graduating with an Associate's degree within three years. The national average is just above 30%, while in Michigan only 15% complete an Associate's degree in three years. Michigan's six year Bachelor's degree completion rate is right at the national average of 54%, which is more than 11% lower than the top performing states. Now consider that Grand Valley and Western have graduation rates of 48% and 53%, respectively, and Grand Rapids Community College graduates about 18% in three years. The private institutions are traditionally more successful graduating students in these allotted times, as both Hope and Calvin Colleges demonstrate with rates above 85%. These numbers above are sobering but not surprising given that, according to census figures, more than 23% of the state's residents over the age of 25 have completed some college, but have not earned a degree.

Economic Indicators

The economy drives the decisions of policy makers and citizens alike. The past several years have been economically challenging for the nation, and Michigan has been particularly hard hit. It is not surprising that Governor Jennifer Granholm identified the important link between educational success and economic growth in her creation of the Cherry Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth.[2] Consider Figure 3 from the Bureau of Labor Statistics as an illustration.

Figure 3.
Median Earnings by Level of Degree Attainment



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004

It should come as no surprise that the higher degree a person attains, the higher their potential income. This has become a staple of college admissions' advertising campaigns, and it suggests the key to financial independence is a college degree. Therefore, it makes sense that the Commission should consider the linkages of education and the economy and make recommendations to improve one for the sake of the other. However, despite the fact that the average Bachelor's degree recipient earns almost twice as much as a high school graduate, the high school diploma remains the most common terminal education level in the state of Michigan.

Michigan also happens to have one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. As of March, 2005, the national unemployment rate was down to 5.2% but the Michigan rate has only barely fallen below 7.0%. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Grand Rapids Wyoming area was still experiencing an unemployment rate of 6.6%, Muskegon was at the high of 7.4% for the region and Holland/Grand Haven was well below the state average at 5.8%. All of these figures have dropped considerably in the past six months, but all three metro areas are still above the national averages.

[2] The Lt. Governor's Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth was convened by Governor Jennifer Granholm in March of 2004. She set forth two primary goals for the state of Michigan to double the number of college graduates in the state by 2015 and to more closely align higher education with the economic growth of the state. The Commission spent six months considering the education systems in Michigan and issued a series of 19 recommendations is their final report to the Governor. For the complete document, see http://www.cherrycommission.org.

Kent County is the home of Grand Rapids and in many respects is the most economically vibrant of the four counties. According to the Indiana Business Research Center who has created profiles for more than 3,100 counties in the United States, Kent County ranks in the top 10% in terms of average wages per job across most sectors and in the top 20% for the percent of Bachelor's degree holders, per capita personal and median household income, and population growth. So despite the higher than average unemployment rate, Kent appears to be doing well relative to others in the nation and, not surprisingly, is one of the strongest counties in the state of Michigan. Ottawa County however, appears to have the highest growth rate at 32% since 1990, comparable per capita income as Kent, and a much higher than average median household income, which may suggest more two income homes. Ottawa also happens to have the third lowest unemployment rate in the state. Clearly, while the state as a whole is behind the rest of the nation, the counties in this area of the state are doing relatively well.

Employment Opportunities

The top employers in the area are Spectrum Health, Meijer Foods, Steelcase, and Haworth, Inc. If all of the schools and colleges were combined, they would comprise the single largest employer in the four-county region. In each of these areas, there are employment opportunities along a range of educational attainment levels; however, these major companies are increasingly requiring some level of postsecondary education. The healthcare industry is a good example. Spectrum employs 14,000 people in Kent County alone, and when hospital work across the region is included, more than 20,000 people are employed in the healthcare industry. Doctors, nurses, and technicians all require some level of college, and it happens that we are not training an adequate number of professionals in some of these fields. Warehouse and manufacturing work still offers opportunities for high school graduates, but even in those positions, technology is advancing in ways that make some college training nearly imperative. Finally, most positions in K-12 or higher education require some level of training beyond high school, considering that the bulk of their labor force consist of teachers, professors, and administrators.

What Was Learned in the Four County Area?

As was mentioned in the introduction to this report, there were a number of ways in which residents of the four-county area spoke about what access to college meant to them. The following sections attempt to identify themes, consider responses, and articulate the common positions held. In some respects, this section relies on a number of research and analytic methods, but makes every attempt to minimize the academic jargon and highlight the important points relevant to the communities involved. For those with a greater interest in the methods employed and the validity and reliability of the findings, additional information is available from the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good. However, it should be recognized that this is merely a snapshot or a series of snapshots that may or may not generalize to all of the residents of Allegan, Kent, Muskegon, and Ottawa counties. Rather, the intent is to initiate an important dialogue, capture the lessons learned in the process, and return those findings to the community in an effort to keep the conversation both alive and informed. In some cases, the results may resonate with many individual's experiences, while in other cases, that may not be the case. Let these examples serve as incentive to continue the dialogue within the community.

The following sections address the three major sources of data gathered as part of this project. The pre- and post-surveys give a sense of how people entered into the dialogues and how they organize their thoughts both as they come in and as they leave. The dialogue transcripts themselves are rich sources of data that tell a complex story of *who college is for* in the western portion of Michigan and how people reconcile the tensions and contradictions in some of the approaches outlined in the discussion guide. Finally, the themes emerging from the open-ended responses to the post-dialogue survey give a sense of how people see themselves and their evolution in the dialogue relative to how they actually answered the multiple choice questions. These three sources of data, in combination with the profile articulated above, give a rich sense of how the four-county area thinks specifically about the issue of access to college and more broadly about how they view the relationship between higher education and the communities they serve.

Survey Responses

Before outlining what people said and how they responded, it is important to know something about the citizens with whom dialogues were held. Over the course of six months, more than 25 people were trained as dialogue moderators of the dialogues (a point to be discussed in greater detail later) and more than 40 dialogues were held across the region, with a larger number occurring in the Greater Metropolitan area of Grand Rapids than any other area. During the course of those dialogues, nearly 400 people deliberated at libraries, schools, universities, businesses, and in households. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to above 65 and collectively these groups reflected the racial and ethnic diversity of the region with 20% African American and 66% White. The one area where participants were less representative of the region is in terms of the highest level of education attained. Typically between 4-8% of a state's population will hold an advanced degree, where nearly 25% of the participants completed this high level of education.

Overwhelmingly, participants agreed that college is important and that institutions play an important role in training people to be active and engaged citizens (see Appendix B for the surveys). They also agreed in most cases that high tuition was a barrier preventing some from attending college. This is not a surprising result given that Michigan has among the highest state tuition rates in the country. Participants additionally disagreed with the statement that only the best and brightest should go to college. However, there were mixed results on two important issues: who should get scholarships and whether race and ethnicity should be considered in admissions. The question of scholarship money is timely because the state is considering a change in the Merit scholarship program. The survey results indicate that slightly more than half of participants initially believed that merit was the appropriate way to grant scholarships to students, but these numbers decreased after participating in the deliberative dialogue process. The same is true on the issue of affirmative action – an issue that has been prominent in state policy conversations and is likely to return in 2006 as a ballot initiative. The average scores indicated that people were split on the issue with a few more believing race and ethnicity should not be considered in the admissions process. Those numbers change slightly by the end, with an increase in people believing race and ethnicity should be considered in the process.

From these dialogues, there are 260 sets of complete pre- and post-surveys, which give us a sense of how people thought about the issue of access to college. One of the early beliefs was that people's attitudes would not change in a single one hour session. However the data tell a slightly different story. Changes in two subtle but very important ways were evident in the dialogues. First, when people entered the dialogues, their responses did not group in consistent ways. For example, we asked participants about the role of tuition and financial aid in the decisions students make about going to college. One would expect that if you are concerned about the cost of college, then you

may also be concerned about the availability of financial aid. On the pre-dialogue surveys, this was not always the case, but by the end of the dialogue, this is what we found. This finding is important because it suggests that as a result of the dialogue, the connections between seemingly separate issues are more clearly made in people's minds.

We asked participants seven questions common to both the pre-test and post-test and found that their responses changed significantly on 5 out of the 7 items. It is important to remember that this does not suggest that everyone changed or that everyone who changed moved in the same direction, but it does suggest that as a group, their average responses changed from pre- to post-surveys. At first glance, these changes do not seem to follow any logical pattern. Responses on two of the questions moved toward more extreme viewpoints, whereas three of the items move toward more neutral perspectives. In addition, three of the items move toward egalitarian beliefs, whereas two of the items move in the opposite direction.

Dialogues at a Glance

1. There is consistent support for the notion that students should have to work for a college education as articulated in approach 1.
2. The cost of college matters a great deal to students and this is the source of the greatest conflict for students.
3. Teachers do not believe everyone should go to college generally. A number of them also believe that the best students are not the students with A's but rather those with B's who are involved and who work to support themselves.
4. Students tend to support the third approach with some minor revisions on the issue of race. They indicate that the state investment in higher education for all is really worth it in the long run.
5. Student choices about which colleges to attend are affected by the cost of college and their need to take out loans to pay.
6. College students indicated that a tougher high school curriculum may have prepared them better, whereas teachers were opposed to a higher standard because not all students would be able to succeed.

At this point, we have two explanations that may account for some of these changes. First, we believe that these shifts in opinion result from more informed judgments. For example, it is probably a statement of fact that "high tuition prevents many people from going to college." Therefore, if participants increase their knowledge about access to higher education, it makes sense that they are more likely to agree with this statement after the dialogue than they were before. Second, engaging in deliberative dialogue enables participants to align their opinions with their deeply held values. For instance, in the vast majority of our dialogues, participants have insisted on the importance of individuals' *free will* in deciding what they want to do with their lives. More specifically, they believe that no one should be forced to attend college, but that access to college should be available for people who want a degree. This realization, along with an acknowledgement that some non-college-educated workers are necessary in our economy, can explain participants' decreased support for the importance of attending college. In another example, participants strongly insist on the importance of *fairness* in college admissions and financial aid. After learning about some of the obstacles that people face, participants became more likely to support the use of race, ethnicity, and gender in college admissions and less likely to agree that grades and test scores should be the primary criteria for awarding scholarships.

Despite such evident changes in people's responses from the pre- to the post-dialogue survey items, people insisted that they did not change their opinions during the dialogue. However we found that on almost every item, the average numbers did change in significant ways. Why the discrepancy? There are a number of possibilities. First, it is possible that people defined "changing their views" as

a major swing in opinions (for example, moving from disagree to strongly agree); indeed, this happened for very few people. Second, it is possible that the opinions that people perceived to be important were different from the opinions that the questionnaires measured. As a result, people did not change much on those strongly held beliefs, but they changed on some of the questions that we asked. Finally, it is also possible that people were simply not aware of how much their opinions had changed or that they had changed at all. A fair number of psychology studies suggest that people do not always know when they change their opinions, and these may be happening at these dialogues.

Themes from a Dialogue

It is important to recognize that each dialogue can differ in important ways and the themes described here reflect the thoughts and insights of a particular group of 50 General Equivalency Diploma (GED) students at a local college in the Grand Rapids area. We chose this dialogue in particular because the participants represent a group of community members facing directly the challenge of access to college. It would be impossible to report specifically on each of the 40 dialogues, so instead, we chose to give special attention to a transcript from the largest and one of the richest of the dialogues hosted in the area.

The shaded box on the previous page provides a quick summary of the dialogue comments. It is important to recognize that some of these trends are different depending upon the group. For example, groups of teachers have different perspectives than groups of college students, who also hold views different than groups who participate in dialogues held in public libraries. So while some of these trends may be true for people in the geographic area, they might be more indicative of the groups they represent.

The Cost of College. When it comes to the cost of college, there are several categories of comments. The first is a concern over the need to take out loans and the potential risk of not being able to pay back the debt. Consider this comment from a traditional age female student:

> She [her mother] just now got done paying off her loans and she's just now using her degree and she graduated in 1987. I'm motivated anyway but that's still affected me: you're just now using your degree and it's over 10 years later and you're just paying off thousands and thousands of dollars of loans. I've got loans already. I'm only 20 and I've got major loans. That's not motivating at all, to think that when I graduate I may not be able to get the job that I want within a couple of years so I may not be able to support myself to pay the loans back.

In this case, the student was able to take the chance despite her concerns. She makes the statement that she is motivated anyway which is suggestive that she feels a sense of control over her own outcomes despite the challenges presented. Researchers have noted that this sense of internal control can be critical in determining whether students will overcome personal challenges on the road toward college completion. A second set of comments on the cost of college seem to dismiss the argument that there are not enough tax dollars to make college accessible and affordable for everyone.

> And as far as the money, they have toilet seats in the White House that are lined with gold and they spend millions and trillions of dollars in space so I think that the money is there and I think that college should be accessible to any and everyone.

The challenge with public opinion, particularly on issues where opinions are not yet fully formed, is that the information people use to support their responses can be inaccurate or overstated. The point being made with this line of comments is that the government does not spend its money efficiently and if it did, there would be ample resources for all public priorities. There may be truth to the suggestion that efficiencies could yet be realized, but this comment also implies that this person feels they are paying quite enough into the system and may not be willing to put additional tax dollars into the money pit of the state or federal government. A final line of comments regarding the cost of college emphasizes the broader economic and public benefits of higher education. Consider this comment made by a male student older than the traditional 18-24 year old college student.

> And another thing is, if you [invest in] a higher education system and get people the advanced education that they need, more money will be coming into the community and you'll be able to get everything that everybody needs but you have to take that chance.

This sense of otherness may be a function of age or experience, but it suggests an ability to consider implications broader and more far reaching than those of the other two comments. It also suggests a recognition that cost is important, but it is worth the long term investment not only for the individual but for the community as well.

The Role of Family. There is a common recognition that the role of the family matters in the way students think about access to college. Researchers think of this as social capital, assuming parents who have education or are aware of how the system works, pass that knowledge on to their children. There are three ways comments have been framed in this particular dialogue that address the role of the family. The first suggests the social capital perspective in the sense that students learn from and are motivated by parents to attend college.

> A lot of our children don't have opportunity but a lot of it starts at home. If you don't have parents motivating you, telling you that you can do it, you're not going to do it. You're not going to feel like you're able to do it because your self-confidence [isn't good] so you'll get out there and you will feel like you'll fail. So I think it's got to start at home. If you get what you need at home, it helps you to gain confidence in yourself.

It is important to consider this comment in the proper context. The student making this statement is speaking from the experience of growing up in a household where this sort of capital did not exist. She is an example of a student who overcame those obstacles so in a sense she is a success story. But it might also suggest that she would have attended another sort of institution, perhaps a four year college, if she had that sort of family support. It is not possible from this conversation to tell, but it is one way to think about what she is saying. The second perspective acknowledges a set of experiences or negative stressors in the home that can have an effect on the likelihood a student will pursue college.

> You know, maybe you had a kid that was struggling one year or two years and maybe they have something change in their life where they're now motivated to do better. Like with Michelle, she's older now, she understands the opportunity, she's here every day, she's motivated now. If you've got a kid that the parents went through a divorce or something their senior year and then his grades slip, now he doesn't qualify for any of this.

The danger in these two sets of comments is that they could be used to blame parents' lack of education for the persistent under-enrollment of low income and minority children in higher education. It is not simply their lack of education that is the problem. Rather, it is the lack of knowledge and understanding of the entire educational process that gradually makes it difficult for students to make the change, even if they figure out the system. The final type of comment builds upon the social capital perspective in a way we might describe as a sense of urgency.

> People will learn differently, they have different learning styles. Intelligence levels are measured differently now; it's not based on an IQ because we all are smart in different areas based on our cultural background. I think it should be accessible to any and everyone. I'm 37 and I have a drug problem and I have two children—I have a 17 year old son—and one of the reasons that I came back was to show him that college is for everyone because I don't want him to go through half of the stuff that I went through. I don't know if he would make it through. I think college is for everyone and I think that if you put it in their minds…I think it should be accessible to everyone. I think that people learn differently but I don't think that college would be wasted on anyone.

In a sense, this non-traditional age student is pursuing education less for his own benefit and more for the benefit of his children. One local community foundation officer suggests that 90% of parents in his community understand that college is the ticket to a better life but few of them know how to put their children on the right track. The despair in this comment demonstrates a similar level of recognition, except he has figured out a way to create the capital for his two children.

Matters of Race. Along with the cost of college and the role of family, race was a topic of considerable conversation among the students in this particular dialogue. Interestingly, it was more a topic of conversation for this group than most others in the area, which may be a function of the group membership or the fact that the participants are currently students. Affirmative action remains very much an issue in the state of Michigan and people have separate and overlapping opinions on race and access to college. The two responses we saw most frequently in this dialogue had to do with either acknowledging race as an issue, typically with the sharing of personal experience, or the color blind perspective believing that race should not be an issue. It is possible participants had more negative perceptions of the role of race in admissions, but it was not seen directly in the dialogues hosted. The first quote is an example of a student illustrating that race still matters in the context of a high school.

> To go with what she said about racist teachers, in my school, there was a teacher's lounge on each floor but it was a white teacher's lounge where the white people were eating on the second and third floors and there was a black one on the first floor and every [black] teacher from the other floors would go to that one. So basically it was pretty much separated and the black teachers, they would be the ones trying to push you and say, "You've got to do this and you've got to do that," but the white ones—a few of them, I'm not saying all—were like, "Well, since I know you're not going to do this I'm just going to give you this grade, just because."

The second comment is one made by a female student that demonstrates the desire for color blinded ness.

> I get frustrated with people wanting to have it pushed in their face and have it given to them. I'm the one who said, "Suck it up. If you want it, you'll get it." But I've kind of changed here because I agree that everyone should be able to go to school no matter what. The whole race thing? I don't even think that should be asked because it makes no difference.

This comment is particularly interesting because it illustrates two challenges we face when talking about access to college. The first is that race should not matter, but it is couched in the context of the 'pull yourself up from the bootstraps' ethic. The implication is that members of minority groups would succeed equally well if only they would 'pull themselves up.' Read differently, this could suggest that minority students are lazy or complacent, a common stereotype that belies the experiences of many minority students.

Academic Preparation. The final significant strand of comments found through the dialogues is an emphasis on the preparation of the student. This typically means the degree to which students have the academic skill sets to succeed in college, but this group of participants suggests that preparation may be a matter of maturity, experience, guidance, and conviction. Consider this comment from a traditional age student.

> When I was in the 9th grade, a couple of years ago, I did pretty good at school. I was about an average student and I tried college a couple of times before this and I just went right in and both times I would have failed miserably had I stuck around long enough to see it through. So if this was applied [approach 2: only the best and brightest], then I wouldn't be in school now. And now, due solely to being here at the Learning Corner [@Wealthy] and the way classes are structured, I'm making straight As. So now I would be considered a smart student but coming in I wouldn't have been, so you miss a whole bunch in the middle because you can't ever tell what a person can really do until you put them in the right environment and nurture them.

It is difficult to tell from this comment whether the student was not academically prepared for college or if she was simply not mature enough in her own mind to accept the personal responsibility for success at this level. The comment is cast as a retrospective assessment that is attained through the benefit of years of experience and wisdom that happened away from school. This final comment on preparation from the perspective of the student is similar to social capital, but speaks more directly to the role of strong guidance counseling.

> When I was going to a private college, I didn't even know about this program [The Learning Corner @ Wealthy] until the counselor down there told me about it when I was preparing for my classes. I've been here all my life, basically, and I didn't realize. So maybe there should be more advertising or people going out to the communities and letting people know.

There is an important point to be made about the role of guidance in a student's level of preparation for college. There are a number of critical decisions students and parents make about a child's education long before junior and senior year and the guidance counselor is central in those decisions. Often the counselors are cast as a sort of gatekeeper, but in reality, they may have too little time to consider all options for each student. Unfortunately, guidance is one of the secondary functions of schools that are sacrificed when budgets are cut. It is recommended for example, that one counselor be employed for every 100 students and yet the national average is closer to one for every 300. This is a very serious preparation issue that receives less attention than the typical

curriculum. It is important to note that while for this particular dialogue the quality of the curriculum offered in high school was not a central issue, it has been more of a focus for other groups, particularly for the teachers who teach it.

Process of Change

Finally, in the analysis of the transcript, it is important to consider how the process of changing or informing one's opinions might operate. It should be clear that there are numerous ways change could occur and this provides simply one illustration. It is through the exchange of opinions and ideas in the context of deliberation that the tradeoffs, consequences, and inconsistencies emerge in an individual's thinking. When ideas are challenged in a constructive way, participants are given the opportunity to think through, clarify, refine, and articulate positions that become a more informed version of their opinion. Consider the following exchange as one example.

> Person 1: And that sliding scale, I think it should cost the same for everyone. You know, because your family made money and made the right decisions and live a little better than the next person, I don't think they should be penalized. I think college should be affordable for everyone but everyone should pay the same amount…If my family did things to put us in a higher income bracket, then I shouldn't be penalized for that.
>
> Person 2: There's people who go to that school who can pay that, cash, and still have change in their pocket. My mom is not rich so our income level was not high so that's why I wanted to go to a prestigious college: to be able to afford to send my children to a college like that. So I don't agree that we should all have to pay the same. It may seem that way, but I can't afford it. That's why I went more than $10,000 into debt because they don't have enough programs for that whereas, like I said, there are people in my classes who can pay $22,000 for college and have change in their pocket. Over the years, that's like $100,000 whereas I'm going to be in debt for $50,000 when I graduate. So I don't think you should all have to pay the same if you don't have it.
>
> Person 1: No, I might not have said that right. What I was saying was that it should be the same amount. I'm on financial aid but it shouldn't be where you have to pay $20,000 and it's only $10,000 for me. It should be just one amount for everybody. What I mean is, I know some teenagers who can't go to school because their parents can't afford to send them. They make more money than financial aid allows for them to get financial aid, but they don't make enough money to send their kids to school. So financial aid should be available for every student age 17, because if you're not 18, you have to file with your parents. So I meant that once you've graduated from high school you should be allowed to be independent from your parents and get your own [financial aid]. If your mother can't work and you're 17, then you don't qualify for some of those grants. But they don't make enough money to pay for their house, their mortgage, and maintain their style of living and send you to school. That's what I was talking about.

In the first stanza, the student is taking a position based on a notion of fairness. His belief is that it is unfair to penalize a family for their economic success. Student 2 is raising several important points to counter the fairness argument pointing out that there are additional benefits to attending a prestigious institution but that privilege costs money. Student 1 then clarifies his position in a way that works toward conciliation with student 2 but demonstrates a limited understanding of tuition and financial aid. What he is beginning to wrestle with but has not done so fully is that financial aid

is a sort of tuition discount that effectively creates a sliding scale. So while the sliding scale of tuition "sticker price" appears patently unfair to him, he is now willing to accept differentiated financial aid to address income disparities. This is the sort of exchange that moves people ever so slightly on answers to questions about their opinions and beliefs. This student may express that they have not changed their opinion, but it is clear they have moved in a way that demonstrates their opinion is now more informed. That is the essence of deliberation and this is but one illustration of how deliberation may inform the way people think about complex issues.

Open-Ended Survey Responses

As part of each survey, participants are given the opportunity to give written comments based upon their experiences in the dialogue and upon the things that may have been left unsaid during the conversation. There were 260 surveys gathered and the majority had some written comments. This section is illuminating because while the transcript portion went into depth for a particular audience of students, the written comments provide a much broader perspective from more groups of people across the four counties. In addition to the comments from the community college students, we also have responses from business leaders, community leaders, college faculty and staff, teachers and administrators in the intermediate school district.

Participants were asked what they would like to share with their elected officials and their responses were shared with the Lt. Governor's Commission. In these comments several themes emerged. The first was to change the mission of the Commission from higher education to K-12 education with particular emphasis placed upon getting students up to standards by 6th grade. There was much more focus in these comments on the strength of the curriculum in high school and the role of community colleges in access. An important and sobering response from teachers is the suggestion that college is not for everyone and that not everyone is "college material." These comments are striking against a backdrop of federal legislation captured in No Child Left Behind; if teachers are wary of educating all students at a high level, it will be difficult to achieve the goals set forth at the federal level for K-12 education. There were also a number of messages, presumably from teachers, making pleas for additional help in primary and secondary education.

There is generally a current of support for the first approach, which suggests those students willing to work for college should be the priority. A number of individuals claim that the state should be fair but not too generous, because students have the ability to work their way through school. There is also a series of comments that is critical of the state's focus on four year colleges, noting there are a variety of postsecondary institutions that are all equally valuable. The implication in these comments is that much of the foundation of the approaches centers on issues faced primarily by four year colleges, which in turn places tremendous strain on high school teachers. An interesting strand of comments came from four-year college students. They were alarmed by the rising cost of tuition and the impact it has on the choices they make about continuing their educations. Several also commented on the state of K-12 education and suggested they would have benefited from a stronger high school curriculum.

A group of business leaders in the Grand Rapids area suggested that education should be more mindful of the business needs of the community. One said they do not need any more Bachelor's degrees, but rather need students trained in the trades. There were suggestions that college presidents were out of touch with their customers and should rethink curricular offerings and requirements. What's interesting in this set of comments, as contrasted with those of college faculty and administration, are the conflicting sets of goals and expectations for college education. The

business sector views the purpose of higher education as largely a tool for workforce development. In contrast, college leaders suggest that their role extends well beyond the job training. Colleges argue that they are training people to become active and engaged citizens who have the means to participate in the workforce and are equally equipped to become good parents, active voters, and community volunteers.

The final theme has to do with access to college for "non-traditional aged students." In the state of Michigan, more than 23% of adults have some college but no degree. Many of them are returning to school and have found that the campus community is geared toward the recent high school graduates. There are suggestions that we need to serve this population better and meet the unique challenges this population faces. This body of comments also suggests that the type of institution matters less than the availability of services, reasonable tuition, programs of interest, and job relevance.

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Community Capacity Building

The first goal of any community-based project should be to benefit the community. The *Access to Democracy* project was designed to meet this objective in a number of important ways. The first implication of this work for the community is that Grand Rapids has built a capacity for deliberation. In fact, Grand Rapids has a strong tradition of deliberative dialogue as members of the community have been involved with the National Issues Forums and deliberative dialogue for a number of years. For this specific issue of access to higher education, we tapped into this existing network, but we also trained an additional 25 moderators who have the tools to facilitate a dialogue in the tradition of deliberation and to frame issues for public discussion. At this moment, higher education is on the minds of people across the state. However other issues will arise, some of national and state significance and others specific to the community. The ability for a community to frame its own issues for deliberation is an asset when it comes to making future decisions. We believe that decisions are best made when people's voices are heard in the process, and deliberation gives communities a proven method by which to gather community participation and work toward effective action.

The Cherry Commission

When the Access to Democracy project was launched in the four-county region, the state was engaged in a conversation about the role of higher education in the economic future of the state. One of the goals was to learn from communities and take those lessons and infuse them into the policy making process. In December of 2004, the Commission was presented with some of the preliminary responses from communities including Grand Rapids. The initial results came from a number of the early dialogues. Those results were more rudimentary than what has been presented here, but the message was essentially the same. The people of Grand Rapids and the adjacent communities care deeply about higher education, they are conflicted about which approach or combination of approaches would be most effective, they generally support the notion that those who work hard deserve to go, and they believe that access to college should be available for everyone who wants it. In other words, everyone should have the choice to attend college. The words of business leaders were particularly illuminating to the Commission because of the emphasis on economic outcomes, which suggests a need to reconcile the multiple purposes of higher education and develop ways to value different programs and institutions for different roles and separate outcomes.

The Community Report

This report is not intended to close a chapter as much as it is to continue the dialogue. We have engaged 400 people in six months in this four-county region alone, but what we have learned does not represent the entire community population. More to the point, some of these issues are things we seldom think about collectively. This document is appropriate for those who were a part of the conversation and have had some time to think about the nature of the problem and the things they learned from others in the process and it is equally accessible for those new to the dialogue. We can only hope to make good decisions at the community and state levels when peoples' opinions are informed and their voices are heard.

Implications

Community Members

Some of the area's greatest assets can be found in its schools, colleges and universities. They serve as community centers, venues for cultural events, training grounds for future job opportunities, and sources of preparation for participation in civic life. Equally, educators make up a substantial proportion of the communities. Consider that 106,000 students were enrolled at those 30 colleges and universities; it is also true that thousands of people are employed as faculty and staff of those institutions. One of the recommendations of the Lt. Governor's Commission was to establish community compacts whereby citizens, community and business leaders, and educators come together and develop a plan for how best to meet the needs of the community. This plan may include specific partnerships between colleges and respective area high schools, and it might also include strengthening partnerships between colleges and the business community. In addition, it may include continuing this conversation with a variety of community members who are focused on improving education in the area.

Educators

This document suggests that educators are decidedly split on the issue of access to college, in part because not all believe that most students are college material. So while students aspire to college at higher rates than ever, regardless of race or socio-economic status, educators do not believe all should attend. At the same time, part of this problem is a limited understanding of what constitutes a college education. In many cases, participants suggest that the four-year college is what has been pushed when, in fact, some would be better served by other credentials of value, including the Associate's degree, certificate programs, and apprenticeships in the trades. If educators better understood and valued their multiple roles, there might be less resistance to the notion that everyone should be prepared to attend postsecondary education.

It is an unfortunate reality that tight financial circumstances pit one level of education in competition with the other for scarce resources. When educators are forced to vie for scarce resources, the very existence of their institutions becomes paramount over the goals and dreams of the students they serve. Educators must minimize the 'us versus them' ethic that blames K-12 educators for the under-preparation of high school graduates and college administrators for disengaging from the practical realities facing the community and for pricing college out of the reach of many. Instead, they should recognize the commonalities in the work and find ways to create a seamless system that allows students to choose college but does not suggest that college is necessary for all.

Policymakers

Governor Jennifer Granholm has proposed an ambitious plan to double the number of college graduates in the state within ten years and to more closely align higher education with the economic development of the state. Each community faces different challenges and is equipped with unique sets of assets. Policymakers as leaders in the community must find a way to meet the governor's goal and to do so in a way that fits within the goals and possibilities in this western region of the state. For the Grand Rapids area, the role of private colleges is important and policymakers should find ways to make them integral in the process of providing access to college. However they should not lose sight of the fact that 50% of the students in the region are served either by Grand Valley State University or Western Michigan University. One of the suggestions at the state level has been the creation of a credit amnesty system that essentially gives people credit for the coursework they

have completed in the past, regardless where that work was done or when. This gets to the issue of transfer articulation or agreement about acceptable credits among schools, and the region is in a position to provide leadership on this front. GVSU has already created a system of equating credits across different institutions across the state. In reality most people stay close to home, so a regional system may be optimal.

Policy matters a great deal at the local level when it comes to education in Michigan, because so many major decisions are made at this level. Local high school requirements should be aligned with the college expectations of the local colleges. Remember that while many of these institutions have essentially open admissions policies, they still expect a certain minimum level from their students.

Business Leaders

A number of successful educational reform efforts begin with the business community, and this may be a direction for the Western portion of the state to consider. Take for example, the *Straight A Plan for Education Reform: Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative* sponsored by the Frey Foundation, the Grand Rapids Community Foundation and the Steelcase Foundation in 2003. This effort brought business leaders, educators, and policy makers together for a common educational purpose. Business leaders have a vested interest in the quality of education students receive at all levels; an investment in education is an investment in the future workforce. It is in the best interest of the region to make sure schools have the resources and support to meet the growing needs of the community. Many schools and businesses establish partnerships to provide this sort of training and more can be done. It is important to recognize that knowledge is growing more rapidly than ever, and college or continuing training of some sort may become necessary simply to stay current in our work. This represents a change in the way many have thought about the role of higher education, but it is certainly on the horizon.

Developing programs and supportive environments for employees to continue learning and growing could be vital for our future success. Finally it is important to remember that there is value to be found in the broader liberal arts curriculum than what may be apparent on the surface. The better prepared citizens are for active participation in the community, the stronger they become as ambassadors for the businesses employing them. Training people for these roles is not the sole province of four-year colleges either. Most types of institutions provide opportunities to broaden students' horizons beyond the specific job training they seek, and employers need to value those courses and those sorts of competencies in their work environments.

Suggestions for Change

This section is devoted to the thoughts and suggestions made throughout the dialogue process. The people of Allegan, Kent, Muskegon, and Ottawa came together in various forums to talk about the role of education. The following are some of the suggestions in the words of the participants.

- Support education with not only lip service but money.
- Having good elementary (and 0-5) education will produce more students ready for college and a more diverse workforce.
- Build from the bottom up. Change the goal of the commission to getting 50% of 6th graders up to standards…then up the bar for 9th graders…and then focus on high school graduates.

- [To colleges and universities] be open to change. Provide opportunities for all types of learners.
- Work to coordinate high school graduation and college admissions standards.
- Work closely with community colleges to smooth transition of students and transfer of credits.
- Colleges need to understand that the programming they offer does not address all of the jobs that are needed by our workforce.
- Broaden the scope of what college means.
- Please help with tuition. It is getting too expensive for me!
- Although affirmative action [helps to] admit students, only the students can keep themselves here.
- Decrease the costs [of operating colleges]. Many classes for example, should not be required.
- Reduce merit based scholarship programs and increase need based scholarships. Provide assistance to families seeking funding (right now it is much too complicated).
- Access to some [form of] postsecondary education should be available for all who wish to partake.
- Help to level the playing field for ALL potential students.
- [Create] mentor programs for incoming freshmen. Make the college environment a supportive community.
- College is not for everyone, but access is!

Conclusion

Allegan, Kent, Muskegon, and Ottawa are like many communities throughout Michigan and the nation. Collectively, they have a number of valuable assets at their disposal: no less than 30 colleges and universities in the area, a positive pattern of migration into the areas, and a number of strong businesses and employers. They also face challenges similar to others including unemployment rates higher than the national averages disparities in the funding for, and outcomes of K-12 schools. And even within these areas, there is cause for hope. Unemployment rates are below state averages, and a number of high schools perform at a high level.

Over the course of six months, more than 400 people participated in dialogues on the question of *who is college for*. From those dialogues it was learned that members of these communities care deeply about higher education but are split on what access means and what should be done to ensure it. The more people wrestle with the complex issues related to accessing college, the more informed they will be on how to make change within their communities. This report will be forwarded, on behalf of the communities, to the office of the governor and other state-level senators and representatives, so that elected officials have a sense of how higher education is understood in these four western counties in Michigan. These findings may be useful as a means of continuing the dialogue on access to college. There are many opinions on this issue, and it is unlikely consensus will be achieved. By giving thoughtful consideration to the contested values underlying people's opinions, it becomes possible to develop a more thorough understanding of what community member's think, why they think it, and what can be done to address the challenges of access to college. Allegan, Kent, Muskegon, and Ottawa counties are well on the way and our hope is that this report will help continue the conversation.

Appendix A: **Who is College For?**

Comparing the Approaches

Approach One: Those Willing to Work For It

Supporters of Approach 1 believe that any student can attend college, regardless of their lot in life. They may need to take a longer, more difficult path, but their hard work will pay off in the end.

What Should be Done?

- ***Adopt alternatives to race-based affirmative action.*** Need-based alternatives are fairer than race-based plans.
- ***Expand guaranteed student loan programs.*** Federal support to pay for college while a student is in school is a wise investment in the nation's future human potential.
- ***Increase support for community colleges and extension programs through four year colleges.*** For many students, if college is not close to home or work, it is not a viable option.
- ***Place greater emphasis on career exploration and development in high school.***
- ***Recognize and give credit for the experience adult learners bring to the classroom.*** Adult learners do not need to replicate what they have already learned on the job.
- ***Offer course and college services beyond the traditional 8-5 workday.*** Do not penalize adult students who must maintain a job while attending college.

Opposing Voices:

A student who graduates from an elite private university is likely to make more money and find a better job than someone who attends a local community college. Minority students, who are more likely to be enrolled in community colleges, will likely not fare as well economically or professionally as their white counterparts.

Opponents would also argue that the definition of "qualified" is subjective. Advanced Placement (AP), honors courses, and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs are not available in all schools. These are not obstacles that can be overcome by simply working harder.

Costs and Consequences:

Cost can be prohibitive for poor students, however if everything is paid for them, students may lack the personal investment to finish. However, taking out loans to cover the cost of an education that exceeds a family's income can be a barrier even for the most dedicated young people.

Approach Two: The Most Academically Qualified

Supporters of Approach 2 believe that given our limited resources, the best investment for the country is in those students most likely to advance society and maintain America's competitive edge in the global marketplace.

What Should be Done?

- ***Admission to college should be based primarily on merit.*** Admissions policies should be race- and gender-neutral, and preferences for children of alumni should be eliminated.
- ***Increase merit-based scholarships.*** These scholarships emphasize academic achievement regardless of personal background.
- ***Implement a more demanding K-12 curriculum.*** Only the most successful youths will continue on to college.
- ***Improve standard measures of achievement.*** It is necessary to have a standard by which all students can be compared.
- ***Emphasize scientific literacy.*** Many of today's jobs require a high degree of technical competence.
- ***Provide additional support for private education.*** Highly capable students cannot always afford high tuitions.

Opposing Voices:

In this system, the rich get richer and the poor remain poor. While women and minorities have made significant progress in education since the 1960's, they are still largely underrepresented in the nation's political leadership and in the influential and high paying professions like medicine and law. Affirmative action must be maintained and protected.

Further, standardized tests discriminate against women and minority students. These measures also fail to account for potential, determination, civic engagement, and abilities in the arts, athletics and entertainment.

Costs and Consequences:

Merit-based admissions policies are vital in matching students to institutions for which they are properly prepared. However, this practice allows inequalities in K-12 to be compensated for rather than being addressed.

Approach Three: Everyone

Supporters of Approach 3 believe that college education doesn't merely serve individuals; it benefits everyone by strengthening society. Educated people are more engaged citizens and contribute more to society.

What Should be Done?

- ***Support race- and need-based affirmative action programs.*** We are highly segregated as a nation and need to actively work to eliminate inequality.
- ***Diversify the college faculties*** to reflect the racial, ethnic, gender, and physical ability differences of the incoming students.
- ***Create a sliding scale for cost of tuition.*** Students should be expected to pay a portion of the cost of their education, but it should be in proportion to their means.
- ***Increase system wide capacity.*** There needs to be enough seats in the classrooms to accommodate all interested students.
- ***Clearly align state high school graduation requirements with college admissions standards.***
- ***Make high quality education available to all students and all communities.*** High school graduates should not be forced to choose between leaving their community and attending college.

Opposing Voices:

We have limited resources that must be divided among important social priorities such as health care, social security, K-12 education, and new concerns for our personal security. It is too expensive to allow everyone to go to college. Further, a college education isn't even necessary for most jobs in this country when you take into account on-the-job training.

Also, accepting less qualified students in to college will water down the system and lower the overall quality of education.

Lastly, it is not the role of college to teach citizenship. That is the role of the family, faith, and the community.

Costs and Consequences:

There are significant benefits to a highly educated population where individuals are better educated and more engaged with the democratic process, but at what cost? Are the benefits of educating more of our citizens worth cutting funding for other priorities or increasing taxes to afford it?

Who is College for?

1. Do you agree or disagree with the statements below?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
a. It is important for people to go to college.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Those who work hard enough can graduate from college.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Only the best and the brightest high school students should go to college	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Colleges and universities play an important role in shaping responsible citizens.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Race, ethnicity, and gender should be considered in college admissions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. Scholarships should generally be given to students with the highest grades and test scores.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
g. High tuition prevents many people from going to college.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. How much responsibility does each of the following have for improving access to college?

	A lot	Some	A little	None	Not sure
a. High schools	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Colleges and universities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Federal government (e.g., President of the United States, etc.)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. State and local government (e.g., state governor, mayor, etc.)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Community organizations	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. Families	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
g. Students	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Transgender

4. Age: ☐ 17 or younger ☐ 18-24 ☐ 25-34 ☐ 35-49 ☐ 50-64 ☐ 65 or older

5. How much schooling have you completed?

☐ Less than 6th grade ☐ 6th-8th grade ☐ Some high school
☐ High school graduate ☐ Some college/trade school ☐ Associate's degree/certificate
☐ Bachelor's degree ☐ Some graduate school ☐ Graduate degree

6. Please check all that apply:

☐ African American ☐ Asian American/Pacific Islander ☐ Hispanic/Latino/Chicano
☐ Native American ☐ White/Caucasian ☐ Other (specify): _____

7. Have you attended a National Issues Forum before? ☐ Yes ☐ No

What is your zip code? _____

Who is College for?

We'd like to know what you are thinking after your participation in this discussion. Since we're also interested in whether you have changed your mind about certain aspects of the issue, a few of the questions will be the same as those you answered earlier.

1. Do you agree or disagree with the statements below?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
a. It is important for people to go to college.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Those who work hard enough can graduate from college.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Only the best and the brightest high school students should go to college	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Colleges and universities play an important role in shaping responsible citizens.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Race, ethnicity, and gender should be considered in college admissions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. Scholarships should generally be given to students with the highest grades and test scores.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
g. High tuition prevents many people from going to college.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. How much responsibility does each of the following have for improving access to college?

	A lot	Some	A little	None	Not sure
a. High schools	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Colleges and universities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Federal government (e.g., President of the United States, etc.)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. State and local government (e.g., state governor, mayor, etc.)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Community organizations	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. Families	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
g. Students	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. Have you ever attended a forum or discussion similar to this one? ☐ Yes ☐ No

4. Do you think differently about this issue after participating in this discussion? Please explain.

5. Based on today's discussion, what message would you like to send to government officials?

6. Based on today's discussion, what message would you like to send to college presidents?

7. Based on today's discussion, what message would you like to send to community leaders?

Appendix C: Community Partners

Moderators

Affolter-Caine, Brit

Anderson, Barry

Barber, Bob

Bowman, Nick

Brown, Mary

Cowie, Julie

Cuncannan, Katie

Forbes, Elizabeth

Gais, La Deidra

Harris, Tawanna

Keegan, Elizabeth

Marks, Pat

Oldt, Pat

Oliver-King, Lisa

Parker, Pat

Prieto, Sallee

Rienstra, Carol

Community Sponsoring Organizations

Alternative Directions

Community Foundation of Muskegon County (LEAD/Gear-up Advisory Committee and Youth Advisory Council)

Davenport University (Grand Rapids and Holland campuses)

Grand Rapids Community College

GRCC Learning Corner @ Wealthy

Grand Valley State University

Greater Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce (Business and Education Council)

Migrant Resource Council, Ottawa/Allegan

Ottawa Area Intermediate School District

Systemswork


National Forum
on Higher Education for the Public Good