When citizens gather on campuses and in their communities to talk about the mission of higher education today, their conversations are different from those of policymakers. How do college students, parents, professors, employers, and others describe their hopes for—and concerns about—higher education? What do they value? What changes do they need to think about and deliberate?

DIVIDED WE FAIL

Why It's Time for a Broader, More Inclusive Conversation on the Future of Higher Education

A Final Report on the 2013 National Issues Forums
Prepared for the Kettering Foundation by Public Agenda

Acknowledgments

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Collaborating Institutions

Kettering Foundation, established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, is a nonprofit operating foundation that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. Kettering's primary research question is: what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. More information may be found on www.kettering.org.

Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization that helps diverse leaders and citizens navigate divisive, complex issues. Through nonpartisan research and engagement, it provides people with the insights and support they need to arrive at workable solutions on critical issues, regardless of their differences. Since 1975, Public Agenda has helped foster progress on K-12 and higher education reform, health care, federal and local budgets, energy, and immigration. Find Public Agenda online at PublicAgenda.org, on Facebook at facebook.com/Public Agenda, and on Twitter at @Public Agenda.

National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) is a nonpartisan, nationwide network of locally sponsored public forums for the consideration of public policy issues. Based on the belief that "democracy requires an ongoing deliberative public dialogue," the NIF forums bring people together to think about, discuss, and consider solutions to problems that face our nation.

The American Commonwealth Partnership (ACP) is an alliance of community colleges, colleges and universities, P-12 schools, and others dedicated to building "democracy colleges" throughout higher education. ACP uses the concept of democracy colleges from land-grant and community college history. Democracy colleges convey the idea of colleges and universities deeply connected to their communities, which makes education for citizenship a signature identity.

The Democracy Commitment (TDC) is a national initiative providing a platform for development and expansion of community college programs, projects, and curricula aimed at engaging students in civic learning and democratic practice across the country. TDC's goal is to ensure that every graduate of an American community college has an education in democracy.

Introduction

It's not unusual for people to talk about higher education. Alums talk about the time they spent in college. High school students talk about their college plans. Families talk about how to pay for college. Employers ask applicants if they've been to college and what they studied. During bowl season and March Madness, the names of colleges and universities around the country are the stuff of everyday conversation. But most citizens don't spend nearly as much time talking about the mission of the nation's higher education system as a whole and the pivotal role it plays in the country's economic, political, and social progress. Nor do most have a chance to consider the choices and trade-offs the country faces if we want to strengthen higher education for the future.

This report describes the thinking of college students, parents, professors, employers, retirees, and others who have gathered in more than 115 public forums around the country to deliberate on the future of higher education. Held under the auspices of the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI), in collaboration with the American Commonwealth Partnership (ACP), and The Democracy Commitment (TDC), these deliberative forums began in summer 2012 and will continue through summer 2014. All three convenors are nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations.

From the Morrill Act to MOOCs

These citizen forums are taking place against the backdrop of important and far-reaching policy discussions among leaders in government, business, philanthropy, and higher education itself. The National Conference of State Legislators, for instance, has advised its members that "the importance of post-secondary education has increased significantly in the last decade." The organization describes "the many challenges state lawmakers face in relation to post-secondary education, including funding, access, accountability, the role of alternative providers in the marketplace, and the changing needs of a more diverse student population."[1]

In articles and op-eds, at seminars and conferences, leadership discussions about reforming the nation's system of nearly 7,000[2] colleges, universities, community colleges, and technical and for-profit post-secondary schools are often detailed and urgent. In many respects, leaders are divided. Some see the current system as an extraordinary accomplishment—a public good deserving much stronger support and protection. Others worry that too many colleges and universities have become bastions of conventional thinking, focused mainly on self-perpetuation. Some leaders concentrate on preserving the liberal arts, others on the research mission at flagship universities, and still others

1 http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/higher-education.aspx

2 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2012). *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2011 (NCES 2012-001), Table 5. http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11_005.asp, Accessed May 9, 2013.

on developing new programs for a more diverse group of students looking for skills in demand in the workforce.[3]

This discussion increasingly revolves around specific policies, and leaders often use their own jargon and reference points—productivity, MOOCs (massive open online courses), for-profits, competency-based education, the Morrill Act (which created land-grant colleges). Particularly at the state and institutional levels, leaders are enacting policy changes that could shape the future of higher education for decades—especially public higher education.

But to what degree are other Americans following these developments? How do their values and concerns intersect with the arguments and ideas leaders are putting forward?

Here we summarize the aspirations, observations, and sometimes conflicted feelings voiced by citizens in forums around the country. If there is a single take-away from these forums, it is that the country needs and could benefit from more public deliberation on the future of higher education, bringing leaders together with students, faculty, and citizens in the broader community.

At the early stages of the learning curve

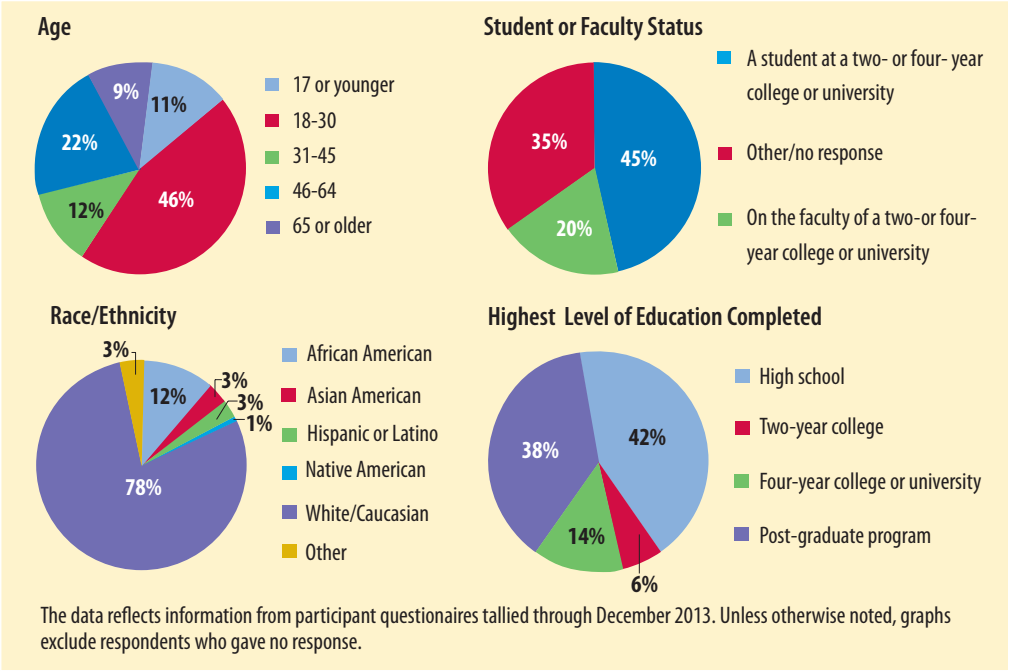
Not surprisingly, the NIF forums attracted many citizens with an interest in higher education—that's why they wanted to attend a forum to think and talk about it with others. Even so, many participants were barely aware of the trends and proposals that pepper leaders' discussions of higher education. By their own admission, many NIF participants were at a very early stage of their thinking on this issue. At the same time, they spoke from their own life experiences and those of their children. Many worried that their vision of higher education is in jeopardy from changes sweeping through the country's economy, government, and colleges and universities themselves.

Throughout US history, higher education has helped shape the country's future, bolstering our democracy and underpinning our economy. It often plays an anchoring role in communities, developing civic leaders and propelling regional development. It is the primary path we offer individuals to improve their social and financial prospects—to pursue their own vision of the American Dream.

Whether or not people go to college, they share in providing the resources to support it, and they benefit from its impact on our society. That means a debate exclusively among leaders isn't adequate. At the most fundamental level, decisions about higher education affect every one of us. This is the reason we hope these forums pave the way for a broader and more inclusive discussion in communities around the nation.

[3] See for example the range of issues and views captured in these special series by the two leading higher education periodicals, *Inside Higher Ed* at https://www.insidehighered.com/audio/multimedia and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* at https://chronicle-store.com/ProductDetails.aspx?ID=80282&WG=350.

Who Comes to the Forums?



The data reflects information from participant questionaires tallied through December 2013. Unless otherwise noted, graphs exclude respondents who gave no response.

The NIF forums have attracted individuals of all ages from around the country who took the opportunity to weigh different missions for higher education and exchange views on ways to address its challenges. As might be expected, most of those who opted to come to the forums have an expressed interest in higher education—either as students, faculty, parents, or simply adults who believe their own college education played a central role in shaping their lives and expanding their opportunities. Consequently, the reflections captured here should not be read as a formal or systematic survey of broad public opinion.

However, the NIF forums do provide another kind of insight. The students, alums, professors, business people, community organizers, retirees, and others who attended the forums are especially attentive to higher education issues. They typically spent 90 minutes or more in the forums talking with colleagues, classmates, and neighbors about higher education's mission and challenges.[4] Because of this, the ideas and themes emerging from the forums often provide deeper insights than typical survey data. They show how citizens might think about higher education when given an opportunity for serious discussion about it with their peers.

This analysis of the NIF forums on higher education is based on several sources: observations of forums in Alabama, Kansas, Maryland, Mississippi, New Mexico, and North Carolina; transcripts of more than a dozen forums; and post-forum questionnaires returned by more than 1,200 of those attending. We have also separately reviewed recent public opinion and employer surveys to provide context for what we report here.

Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and engagement organization based in New York, prepared this analysis for the Kettering Foundation in collaboration with the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI). Public Agenda has worked with Kettering on research related to NIF since 1982. *Divided We Fail* is published by the Kettering Foundation, which conducts research on citizens and the citizen's role in democracy and develops the issue guides for NIF.

[4] See Page 17 for more details on the forums.

Executive Summary

In NIF forums around the country, participants considered different missions for higher education and deliberated on the role it should play in our society. They described their ideals for higher education, but many had just begun to think about the challenges and choices confronting the system as a whole. Compared to discussions among experts and leaders,[5] forum deliberations often started from a different set of concerns and premises, and to a certain extent, a different level of awareness. The table on Page 5 suggests some of the most important differences between leadership and participant starting points.

There is no reason to see these differences as irreconcilable. In fact, based on the NIF forums and similar engagement projects, there is good reason to expect that these differences would narrow considerably if more people had the chance to deliberate on the future of higher education and weigh in on how new ideas could be put into practice.[6]

The challenge for leaders, however, is that these differences aren't likely to disappear by themselves. If people don't understand the context behind reforms and innovations, they often push back against them. If they fear decisions are being made "at the top" without their involvement, they can become alienated and disengaged.

But there are challenges for typical citizens as well. Will they venture outside their identities as individuals and consider higher education's broader democratic, social, and economic roles? Can they move beyond the prevailing images of "college" as traditional campus-based programs and "college students" as 18-to-25 year olds? Will they face up to tough choices on higher education's mission and finances—choices that will affect them whether or not they ever set foot on a college campus?

And given higher education's impact on all of us, are leaders and members of the broader public both willing to take part in shaping its mission for the future?

[5] In this report, we use the term *leaders* as a kind of shorthand to describe officeholders, college and university administrators, business and foundation executives, journalists, and others who have, thus far, been charged with reforming higher education to better meet today's needs.

[6] See for example Public Agenda's Cutting Edge series at http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/index.php?qid=269.

Leaders and Experts	Participants in the NIF Forums
Both inside and outside higher education, innovation is the watchword. Facing a more competitive international economy and relentlessly rising college costs, many leaders say now is the moment for higher education to reinvent itself. Developing approaches that help a broader span of students acquire skills for today's workplace is a major thrust.	For most of those attending the forums, the benefit of a rich, varied college education was their starting point. Most saw enormous value in the classic four-year residential experience where, in their view, students have time to explore new ideas and diverse fields. For many, being able to take advantage of this experience is the key to becoming an educated person.
Business and government leaders have called for higher education to graduate more scientists, engineers, and technology innovators to bolster US competitiveness.	Most participants saw this as a laudable goal, but not a pressing one, or one that would improve the economy for most Americans. Many stressed that professionals in science and technology will be more creative with exposure to a broad course of study.
Leaders often voice deep concern about how governments and students can afford higher education's rising costs.	Most participants seemed to be at a very early stage of their thinking on this issue. Many were alarmed by student debt, but not the cost to government. There was little focused discussion about the difficult choices involved in containing costs in the system overall.
Many leaders see community colleges as an increasingly crucial part of the system overall, and they are advancing specific ideas—competency-based education, for example—that they believe will make higher education more affordable, more responsive to different kinds of students, and more in step with the needs of the job market.	For most participants, "college" meant a traditional four-year degree, and few initially talked about community colleges, even though discussion materials specifically referred to them. Only a handful of participants seemed to have thought much about innovations like competency-based education or the role of MOOCs. This was generally true even of faculty or college administrators attending the forums.
For leaders, degree completion is a top priority. Most say that it is imperative to increase the number of Americans attending and completing two-year and four-year degrees in a timely fashion in order to strengthen the economy.	Envisioning "college" almost exclusively as four-year degree programs, many participants asked whether the country has gone too far in encouraging students to pursue this type of education. At the same time, many worried about the lack of options for high school graduates who don't want or aren't ready for four-year programs. Many suggested the country is neglecting non-college-bound students.

NIF deliberative forums feature a number of distinctive elements that have been developed over its 32-year history to enhance discussion and encourage deliberation:

- Each is led by a trained, neutral moderator.
- Participants use a printed issue guide; accompanying video materials serve as the jumping-off point.
- The guides are designed to promote "choicework." They describe three or four alternative options for viewing an issue and detail some of the concrete actions the country, the community, or individuals could pursue to make desired changes. The guides also point to specific trade-offs for each of the choices, and moderators are trained to emphasize the costs, risks, and trade-offs of each action along with its benefits.
- The content is designed specifically to be understood by nonexperts and reflect a broad spectrum of ideas.
- At the conclusion of the meetings, participants complete a questionnaire that reflects their thinking after deliberating with other forum participants.
- Each year, NIF prepares a report, capturing the insights of the participants and conducts briefings for elected officials and other leaders. These reports differ from surveys because they reflect the views of participants who have weighed several options, wrestled with the choices and trade-offs each presents, and talked with others who bring different experiences and perspectives to the table.

"Shaping Our Future" Forum
Locations, 2012-2013

(THROUGH DECEMBER 2013)

Alaska

Apr 03, 2013	Fairbanks—Noel Wien Public Library (University of Alaska Fairbanks, Department of Sociology)
Apr 10, 2013	Fairbanks—Noel Wien Public Library (University of Alaska Fairbanks, Department of Sociology)

Alabama

Nov 15, 2012	Auburn—Auburn University
Jan 14, 2013	Birmingham—Heritage Hall (University of Alabama)
Jan 28, 2013	Birmingham—University of Alabama
Mar 07, 2013	Fairfield—Miles College
Mar 11, 2013	Fairfield—Miles College
Mar 27, 2013	Fairbanks—Wood Center (University of Alaska Fairbanks, Department of Sociology)

Colorado

Nov 12, 2012	Fort Collins—Council Tree Library (Colorado State University)

Florida

Sep 13, 2012	Panama City—Gulf Coast State College
Nov 15, 2012	Panama City—Community Life Center
Apr 04, 2013	Fort Myers—Florida Gulf Coast U.

Georgia

Sep 24, 2012	Albany—Albany State University
Oct 12, 2012	Milledgeville—Georgia College
Oct 18, 2012	Milledgeville—Georgia College
Oct 23, 2012	Milledgeville—Center for Engaged Learning (Georgia College)
Oct 25, 2012	Milledgeville—Digital Bridges (Georgia College)
Nov 07, 2012	Milledgeville—First Presbyterian Church (Georgia College)
Nov 09, 2012	Milledgeville—Georgia College
Dec 13, 2012	Milledgeville—Georgia College
Jan 28, 2013	Milledgeville—Digital Bridges (Georgia College)
Jan 29, 2013	Milledgeville—Georgia College
Feb 27, 2013	Milledgeville—Georgia College
Mar 01, 2013	Milledgeville—Georgia College
Mar 06, 2013	Milledgeville—Georgia College
Mar 07, 2013	Milledgeville—Georgia College
Mar 14, 2013	Milledgeville—Georgia College
Apr 15, 2013	Milledgeville—Georgia College
Apr 17, 2013	Atlanta—Perimeter College
Apr 17, 2013	Atlanta (Mississippi State University)
Apr 20, 2013	Porterville—Porterville College (Mississippi State University)
May 09, 2013	Milledgeville—First Presbyterian Church (Georgia College)

Illinois

Mar 29, 2013	Normal—Heartland Community College (HCC Humanities Department)

Indiana

Nov 15-16, 2013	Indianapolis (Tau Kappa Epsilon Grand Council and TKE Educational Foundation)

Iowa

Jul 09, 2012	Des Moines—Iowa State Education Association
Nov 10, 2012	Des Moines— Franklin Avenue Library
Feb 09, 2013	Des Moines—Des Moines Public Library
Mar 01, 2013	Cedar Fall—Lang Hall (University of Northern Iowa)

Kansas

Mar 04, 2013	Manhattan—Kansas State University
May 13, 2013	Overland Park—Central Resource Library (Consensus)

Maryland

Feb 09, 2013	College Park—UMD School of Public Health (University of Maryland)
Feb 19, 2013	Laurel—Victoria Falls (University of Maryland)
Mar 05, 2013	Bowie—Prince George's County Memorial Library (U. of Maryland)

Massachusetts

Jul 20, 2012	Boston—Frontiers of Democracy Conference

Michigan

Nov 23, 2012	Mt. Pleasant—Central Michigan University

Minnesota

Oct 23, 2012	St. Paul—Buenger Education Center, Concordia University—St. Paul (Community Action, Leadership, and Learning Center)
Oct 30, 2012	Mankato—Centennial Student Union, Minnesota State University (Center for Excellence and Innovation and Office of Community Engagement)
Oct 09, 2012	Minneapoli—Coffman Union, President's Room (University of Minnesota Twin Cities)
Oct 17, 2012	Rochester—Rochester Public Library Auditorium (University of Minnesota Rochester, Winona State University Rochester, Rochester Issues Forum, Rochester Public Library)
Oct 22, 2012	St. Paul—Koch Commons Fireside Room (University of St. Thomas)
Nov 07, 2012	Brooklyn Park—Center for Business and Technology, Room 209 (North Hennepin Community College)

Nov 12, 2012	Morris—Science 3610 (University of Minnesota Morris)
Nov 13, 2012	Moorhead—Knutson Campus Center, Jones Conference Center, Rooms A/B (Concordia College)
Nov 14, 2012	Bemidji—Hobson Memorial Union, Crying Wolf Room (Bemidji State University)
Nov 15, 2012	Duluth—Kirby Student Center, Griggs Center, University of Minnesota, Duluth (Office of Civic Engagement)
Nov 27, 2012	St. Cloud—Atwood Center, Glacier Room, St. Cloud State University (Department of Campus Involvement)

Mississippi

Apr 10, 2013	Philadelphia—West Side Community Center (Mississippi State University)
Apr 10, 2013	Jackson (Mississippi State University)
Apr 11, 2013	Jackson (Mississippi State University)
Apr 11, 2013	Perkinston (Mississippi State U.)
Apr 13, 2013	Jackson (Mississippi State University)
Apr 15, 2013	Biloxi—Gulf Coast C.C. (Mississippi State University)
Apr 16, 2013	West Point (Mississippi State U.)
Apr 17, 2013	Quitman (Mississippi State University)
Apr 17, 2013	Waynesboro (Mississippi State U.)
Apr 18, 2013	Hattiesburg (Mississippi State U.)
Apr 18, 2013	Pontotoc (Mississippi State University)
Apr 20, 2013	Jackson (Mississippi State University)
Apr 21, 2013	Jackson (Mississippi State University)
Apr 22, 2013	Ashland (Mississippi State University)
Apr 23, 2013	Kosciusko (Mississippi State U.)
Oct 20-21, 2013	Jackson—Mississippi Association of Colleges and Universities

Missouri

Nov 27, 2012	Kansas City—Rockhurst University Community Center (Rockhurst U.)
May 09, 2013	Kansas City—Husch Blackwell (Consensus)

New Mexico

Oct 15, 2012	Albuquerque—University of New Mexico (UNM School of Continuing Education)
Mar 18, 2013	Las Vegas—United World College

New York

Sep 06, 2012	Syosset—Syosset Library (The Center for Civic Engagement of Hofstra U.)
Sep 27, 2012	Northport—Northport High School (The Center for Civic Engagement of Hofstra University)
Oct 01, 2012	Hempstead—Hofstra University (The Center for Civic Engagement of Hofstra University)
Oct 03, 2012	Northport—Northport Public Library (The Center for Civic Engagement of Hofstra University)
Fall 2012	Binghamton—Broome Comm. College
Fall 2012	Binghamton—Broome Comm. College
Nov 10, 2012	Binghamton—Broome Comm. College
Nov 27, 2012	Hempstead—Hofstra University (The Center for Civic Engagement of Hofstra University)
Dec 07, 2012	Vestal—Good Shepherd Village

Dec 10, 2012	Vestal—Good Shepherd Village
Dec 13, 2012	Malverne—Malverne High School (The Center for Civic Engagement of Hofstra University)
Dec 14, 2012	Malverne—Malverne High School (The Center for Civic Engagement of Hofstra University)
Feb 22, 2013	Hempstead—Hofstra University (The Center for Civic Engagement of Hofstra University)
Mar 08, 2013	Troy—Hudson Valley Comm. College
Mar 09, 2013	Troy—Hudson Valley Comm. College
Mar 19, 2013	Vestal—India Cultural Center (Binghamton Lyceum Program)
Apr 26, 2013	Binghamton—Broome Comm. College
May 02, 2013	Binghamton—Broome Comm. College

North Carolina

Feb 12, 2013	Elon—Elon University (Campus Compact)

Ohio

Sep 18, 2012	Ashland—Ashland University (Center for Civic Life at Ashland University)
Sep 29, 2012	Yellow Springs—Antioch University
Jan 15, 2013	Dayton—Kettering Foundation
Feb 01, 2013	Cincinnati—Open Stacks Book Club
Apr 08, 2013	Dayton—Sinclair C.C. (Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education)
Apr 17, 2013	Dayton—University of Dayton

South Carolina

Sep 25, 2012	Sumter—University of South Carolina
Feb 05, 2013	Clemson—Clemson University
Jun 17, 2013	Rembert—Wateree River Correctional Institution (Youthful Offender Program)
Jun 22, 2013	Columbia—St. John Baptist Church (Clemson's Institute for Economic & Community Development Laboratory for Deliberative Democracy)
Jul 18, 2013	Columbia—Greater Columbia Community Relations Committee (Clemson's Institute for Economic & Community Development Laboratory for Deliberative Democracy and the South Carolina Human Affairs Commission)

Texas

Jun 08, 2012	San Antonio—American Democracy Project (American Association of State Colleges and Universities)
Oct 03, 2012	Austin—Hilton DoubleTree Hotel (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board: Reinventing Instruction and Learning Conference)
Oct 12, 2012	Kingwood—Lonestar C.C.
Nov 05, 2012	San Antonio—CAO Annual Conference (Council of Independent Colleges)
Nov 06, 2013	Houston—UHD Commerce Street Building (University of Houston, Downtown)
Nov 13, 2013	Houston—UHD Commerce Street Building (University of Houston, Downtown)
Feb 25, 2013	Bellaire—Bellaire High School
Mar 30, 2013	Austin—St. Edward's University

Virginia

Oct 22, 2012	Blacksburg —Virginia Tech
Oct 29, 2012	Charlottesville—University of Virginia
Apr 29-30, 2013	Charlottesville—University of Virginia

Observations from the "Shaping Our Future" Forums

In the following pages, we summarize the deliberations and reflections of citizens attending NIF forums around the country from spring 2012 through December 2013. Forums attracted college students, parents, professors, employers, and members of the community. Typically, these citizens spent 90 minutes or more deliberating on alternative missions for higher education and talking about some specific options for change. We have organized our observations around five key ideas that emerged as people wrestled with choices and trade-offs.[7]

Idea No. 1: College should offer students a rich and diverse education, but . . .

In more than 115 forums held in communities and on campuses nationwide, participants repeatedly voiced a rich, expansive, vivid—perhaps even idealistic—view of what higher education should be. It should prepare students for careers of course, but participants continually pointed out that, in their view, it should also open students' thinking, introduce them to new ideas, and give them a sense and appreciation of the complexity and wonder of life. Yet many forum participants worried that this ideal is in jeopardy, that it may not be practical given today's tough economy and job market.

For most participants, the words *higher education* evoked the image of four-year, campus-based college programs, and many did not even mention the role of community colleges or technical schools until later in the discussions. Unlike most leaders, relatively few forum participants seemed to enter the deliberations with a crisp mental map of the different kinds of institutions in the nation's higher education network—Tier 1 research, four-year undergraduate institutions, community colleges, technical and career schools, and so on.

Participants rarely commented on these distinctions until they were deep into their deliberations, and even then, they typically talked only about traditional four-year and two-year schools. In fact, many participants spoke about higher education based mainly on their own experiences, either as current students or graduates who described its impact on their own lives. For most, the commitment to "college" as a time and space to explore new ideas and expand horizons was strong, personal, and keenly felt.

A woman attending a forum at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas, described her vision this way:

> Granted, I'm biased towards the liberal arts, but if you have a higher education background, period, you've had opportunity to be exposed to different cultures, different lifestyles, different religions, different belief systems, and you have a heart that is not—a heart and a mind that are both opened. . . . I think that's what education does for you.

[7] Participant quotations have been drawn from transcripts or direct observations of forums. Some have been slightly edited for clarity.

In Maryland, a senior citizen talked about the importance of a liberal arts education in developing the nation's leaders:

> It used to be the kind of thing that created our thinkers and our leaders and our managers, because they would have that broad array of courses and ideas and cultures. . . . The thinkers are the people [who] are going to do the kinds of things that build communities and make our lives.

Very few participants discounted the role having a college degree plays in the job market, but many worried that career preparation is becoming the be-all and end-all of higher education: "Thinking about college solely [as career preparation]," a New Mexico woman said, "just makes you a resource to be optimized by society, rather than to be a real person and a free thinker." A college dean in Mississippi said that based on his long experience in higher education, the emphasis on jobs and career preparation was a recent phenomenon—not something he had encountered in his earlier years.

Some pushed back on what they saw as pressure from government and business to reshape higher education to serve the country's workforce needs, particularly demands for science and technology expertise. "Who's to say," one Iowa woman remarked, "that we don't want kids going in the direction of humanities or literature or things other than that? There's no right that the government has to steer that just for our competition on the global scale."

At the same time, many participants struggled to reconcile their ideal vision of higher education with what they saw as practical today, given the cost of college and the nature of the job market. Parents and college students especially sometimes feared that employers are looking for very specific jobs skills and that graduates who don't have them will lose out.

In Kansas, a father talked about the trade-offs he considered in thinking about his 12-year-old daughter's education:

> She's a singer, she's in band, she does drama, but she's also gifted, so she does math, she does science. . . . We've already steered her towards [STEM]. She's got multi talents, but . . . I'm a pragmatist. Money makes a difference, and sometimes these science things pay a little bit better or [offer] more stability than some other career. It's just the reality at the moment.

Another father, this one in Tennessee, described advising his son to study electrical engineering: "What I've been trying to tell him is what [I heard during a tour] at Nissan last week . . . that any kind of degree like that—I said, 'You're going to be so marketable.'"

One student seemed to regret the time he had spent studying subjects that may not be useful in helping him get a job: "I got an education in economics, I got an education in philosophy, and I thought I enjoyed every single one of [my classes]." But the worry about what he saw as the realities of the job market was close to the surface: "You [could] end up with just liberal arts—waiting tables or something."

But others reiterated the value of a broader course of study. Another Tennessee father said:

> I've got two in college right now, and they're not in the STEM world, but they're learning what excites their passion. I may regret this, but I'm not as concerned about the kind of job they get as to whether, when they get out, they have something that they're excited about and that they can enjoy the rest of their lives. I think there is a place for the marketplace and filling jobs, but there's also a place for creating people who are the whole person and ready to move on in the world.

Some participants suggested that the broader society has lost sight of the benefits of a rich, wide-ranging education. "When people are worried about going to school to get the job, to get a job, to make money, . . . "one Colorado man said, "I think at that point, we're putting price tags on education. As soon as we do that, then education, in and of itself, is no longer sacred."

A North Carolina participant worried that only students from affluent families can take the risk of pursuing a broader, richer college education in today's economy:

> I value a little arts education . . . , but what does that mean for people who don't come from a place of privilege. . . ? Degrees that give all these wonderful, rich skills? . . . [They] might find it more challenging to get jobs, and [they] have to acquire debt. I don't know. It's something I wrestle with.

As is evident from the quotes here, forum participants often struggled with tensions between the idea of college as career preparation versus college as an opportunity for intellectual and personal growth. But their ideal vision leaps out strongly in the post-forum questionnaires. Nearly 9 in 10 of those returning questionnaires strongly or somewhat agreed that college should be "where students learn to develop the ability to think critically by studying a rich curriculum that includes history, art and literature, government, economics, and philosophy." More than half said they "strongly" agreed with this idea. In Tennessee, an employer explained that while she was certainly looking for employees skilled in technology and engineering, that by itself wasn't enough: "We're really looking for people in the shop who are well-trained and can think logically."

Even in a question emphasizing the possibility that a broad education might not be useful in the workplace, participants veered toward something akin to the liberal arts. Seven in ten said colleges and universities should encourage all students to take a range of diverse courses, even if many would have little bearing on jobs students might be pursuing. These results may be surprising to some readers, but they were widely shared among participants from many walks of life—and not just those teaching or studying on campuses. Many participants whose college days were long past and whose careers were in business or government spoke with conviction about the value of college as a time of exploration and exposure to new ideas. Moreover, a review of recent public opinion surveys shows that this line of thinking is shared by many other Americans. Opinion surveys confirm that strong majorities of Americans view college as a time for students to become critical thinkers and meet people from diverse backgrounds (see Pages 23-25).

But the ideal depicted in the forums was hardly a narrow or "bookish" view of higher education. More than 9 in 10 of those returning questionnaires agreed that "colleges should require courses that incorporate hands-on learning experiences, such as internships, community service, and campus projects that teach problem-solving skills."

Finally, there is evidence that some participants saw a different role for community colleges as opposed to four-year colleges and universities. Four in ten of those returning questionnaires said "community colleges should gear

their class offerings to the needs of local employers, EVEN IF narrower, job-focused programs may limit students' abilities to move on to four-year colleges." And, as we discuss in the following pages, many participants saw an urgent need to develop robust, effective job preparation programs for young people who do not go to college.

Idea No. 2: Science and technology are crucial to the country's future, but . . .

Across the country, forum participants repeatedly emphasized the important role advanced science and technology play in the country's future, and nearly two-thirds of those returning post-forum questionnaires strongly or somewhat agreed that "our country's long-term prosperity heavily depends on educating more students in the fields of science, engineering, and math." Forum participants with business backgrounds often described well-paying jobs going unfilled because not enough applicants have the requisite technical and scientific skills. In a forum at Miles College in Alabama, for example, retired IBM executives talked with students about the potential in these fields.

Yet despite an impressive number of leadership reports calling for the United States to quickly increase the number of American-born college students completing degrees in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM),[8] relatively few forum participants saw this as an especially urgent goal. Some said it was "already happening." Some said that if the country needs more STEM professionals, the most important solution is to improve math and science teaching in elementary and high school. A woman in Kansas was typical of those who saw improving K-12 math and science teaching as the top priority: "People don't decide [whether] they like math or not like math at grade 13," she pointed out. "To me, the issue is [a] pipeline issue."

But forum participants also raised other questions and concerns as they weighed the idea that promoting excellence in science and technology should be a central focus of higher education. At one level, many participants seemed skeptical of the idea that increasing STEM know-how would genuinely improve the US economy—at least the economic problems facing the broad majority of Americans. More than 8 in 10 of the participants returning post-forum questionnaires strongly or somewhat agreed that "even if the United States is a world leader in science and technology," it won't help "most Americans unless we have an economy that supports a strong middle class and offers more opportunity."

Even those who endorsed the economic benefits of promoting advanced study in the STEM fields often emphasized that this should not be too tightly job-focused, especially in four-year degree college programs. "Innovation is the strength of the United States in science and technology," one woman explained. "That means a broadly educated and experienced person. . . . They need to be very good at their technology or science, but [they need more than that] or we're going to be another China. They're very good at technology. They're not very good at innovation. That's why they send their students here."

Leaders concerned about the country's STEM education policies often worry that Americans may not realize just how adept and energetic countries like China are in educating professionals in these fields. But in the forums, many people were well aware of China's track record in STEM education. Many specifically referred to it as an example the United States should not follow. "I don't think it is our job to follow China technologically," a Colorado woman said.

I've read . . . that the Chinese are never looked to

[8] See for example: Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy, and National Academy of Sciences, "Rising Above the Gathering Storm Two Years Later: Accelerating Progress Toward a Brighter Economic Future - Summary of a Convocation," 2009, http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12537.

> for their creativity—that it is still Americans [who] end up giving a company its impulse and its vision. . . . These are huge generalizations, but . . . [maybe we shouldn't aim for] as much science and tech knowledge as they're known for.

The idea that a broad college education will strengthen, rather than undermine, the United States' ability to be a world leader in science and technology innovation was widely held in the forums. "I think we ought to be a little careful about putting all of our emphasis on . . . science and math," another Colorado participant said. "Science-oriented people gain a huge amount as well from humanities education and a broader education, and that is where I would like to see the focus. . . . Everybody gets a broad education." A Kansas professor made a similar point:

> I think it's great to encourage mathematical and science education, and I think we need more of it, and if there's stuff we can do, I'm all for it. [But I have] always thought [that] higher education—whether you majored in chemistry or art history or business or whatever—it taught you how to learn, and so if there were shifts in the economy, you learned how to learn the new thing. . . . Science [and] math [are] super important. We should encourage more of it, not less of it. . . . People in the arts should learn how to do calculus. . . . But if higher education becomes job training, we're all in trouble.

For many, the idea of pushing students toward the STEM fields would be both unwise—because they won't do well—and wrong—because students deserve a chance to explore the subjects that fascinate them. One woman commented:

> I know so many kids who came up to Kansas State as . . . engineering major[s] because that's where the scholarships were. Then they got into it and absolutely hated it, and then went into something else. How much time and money did they waste in courses that won't do any good?

In New Mexico, one man went further: "It seems to take away some of the freedom of choice by trying to push more and more money in the STEM area," he said. "My question is, what happens to the liberal arts and what happens to the options for the liberal arts when many people don't have the skills or the interest in going into STEM. I would like to protect those people's interests."

And China, fairly or not, emerged repeatedly as a cautionary tale:

> In other countries like China, they start teaching them at a young age to be software engineers, and that's all they do. They're brilliant at it, but they don't have that freedom of choice. It's pushed on them. . . I think that goes against our core values as a nation of freedom—freedom to do what we want and freedom to excel.

In Tennessee, a businesswoman talked about the importance of building a society and a workforce that value

people's different skills, talents, and interests. "Can you imagine what this discussion just this morning would be like if everyone in here had only a technology background or if everyone in here had an art degree? Let's continue to value that diversity."

In the end, many participants pushed back against the idea that STEM fields should have a predominant or privileged place in higher education—especially if funding is going to be transferred to STEM fields from other areas. In the post-forum questionnaires, only about one in five strongly or somewhat agreed that colleges should gear "scholarships and student loans . . . to the highest achieving students in scientific and technical fields that most benefit the economy, EVEN IF this means cutting aid to students in other fields."

Idea No. 3: College is too costly, but . . .

With student debt and college costs in the headlines almost daily, it's no surprise that people in the forums talked at length about the subject. Yet as participants began exchanging views on the problem, the deliberations showed clear differences of opinion on the extent of the problem and its seriousness. Participants often wrestled with this question: Are there qualified, motivated students who are completely and unfairly shut out of higher education, or is it still true that anyone who really wants to go to college can find a way to do it? Moreover, despite strong concerns about costs—since 1989, college costs have consistently increased faster than inflation[9]—few participants seemed to have thought deeply about why costs are rising or looked carefully at alternatives for addressing the problem.

In this respect, the NIF deliberations were distinctly different—and miles apart from—the detailed, often discordant, debate among leaders and experts. As many observers have noted, leaders often fall into one of two camps—some seeing higher education as "a public good" and calling for more public investment, and others calling for more "productivity" and cost-cutting by institutions themselves. Leaders are often quite firm in their views, and many have endorsed specific policy changes that reflect their point of view.[10] In the forums, participants were not sharply divided or inflexible, but neither were they particularly realistic, focused, or well informed.

That's not to say that many participants weren't genuinely alarmed by the impact of rising costs. At a forum at Miles College in Birmingham—one that brought current students together with professors, deans, community leaders, and several retired corporate executives—some of the older participants were surprised at the amount of debt some young graduates were accumulating while completing their degrees. In Maryland, an older woman commented on how much college costs had risen in her lifetime: "How many people in this country can afford to pay $30,000 and $40,000 a year—one year? I can't even wrap my brain around that. I think there is something really, really, very, very wrong about that."

And in a North Carolina forum, a student reported on the deliberations in a breakout group: "One of the things . . . we agreed [on is] . . . making sure that we get cost under control. . . . The rising cost of higher ed is really a deterrent to access." What's more, many participants had personal anecdotes to

[9] For BLS report on higher education, see: Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Back to College," Sept 2010, http://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2010/college. For more up-to-date information, see http://www.bls.gov/cpi/#data "College tuition and fees" data from "All Urban Consumers (Consumer Price Index)" database, Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor.

[10] See for example, Gary Fethke, "Why Does Tuition Go Up? Because Taxpayer Support Goes Down." *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* April 1, 2012, http://chronicle.com/article/Why-Does-Tuition-Go-Up-/131372/ and Richard Vedder, "How to Sash College Costs," CNN.com, August 23, 2013, http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/23/opinion/vedder-college-costs/index.html.

share. A Kansas woman told this story:

> In the past, when I went [to college], you . . . could get off track and not necessarily hit yourself too hard in the pocketbook. . . . Right now [it's different]. I have a niece that veered off and came back. . . . She'll have almost $70,000 in debt because it cost her—that year of veering—almost $15,000.

But there were also differences in the participants' assessments about how acute the problem really is. A woman in Kansas maintained that it is still possible for a motivated, qualified young person to get a degree, even though the path may not always be easy:

> I believe in the United States there [already] is universal access to higher education. Every person has an opportunity to go to college. They may not be able to go where they think they want to go, but they have access to begin. I don't think there's any high school graduate who does not have access to higher education in the United States.

But another woman in the same forum questioned whether this opportunity really exists for young people starting their lives in very poor or troubled circumstances:

> You know, I [don't think we can] deny that there are disadvantaged populations out there, though . . . that there are some people [who] have situations beyond their control. . . . Even I have been guilty of saying "You know what? I had a hard life, but I was able to make it." Well, that's not true for everyone.

These differing perspectives in the forums echo some of the ambivalence and mixed messages that surface in national public opinion surveys as well (see Pages 23-25).

More about the National Issues Forums and "Shaping Our Future"

The NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS is a network of locally sponsored, public meetings that have invited people to deliberate on pressing policy problems for more than 30 years. The network includes schools, libraries, community groups, community colleges, colleges and universities, and civic organizations. In past years, NIF forums have addressed issues ranging from the federal debt to immigration to curbing crime and violence.

For its 2012-2013 forums, two other organizations joined with the NIF network to conduct forums on higher education in a project called "Shaping Our Future: How Can Higher Education Help Us Create the Society That We Want?" These are the American Commonwealth Partnership (ACP), a national effort to advance the civic mission of higher education, and The Democracy Commitment (TDC), a national initiative that works to engage students in civic learning and democratic practice.

To support the forums, the Kettering Foundation collaborates with the National Issues Forums Institute, NIF's national coordinating body, in preparing print and video materials to encourage deliberation and reports on reflectons of citizens participating in the forums. For 2012-2013, Kettering published a short issue guide outlining three alternative options for higher education:

1. Emphasizing science and technology education to help the economy;
2. Offering students a rich, broad education and emphasizing principles such as responsibility, integrity, and working together;
3. Expanding opportunity by helping more students attend college and graduate.

The guide also suggests the rationale behind each approach and policy actions that might accompany each, emphasizing both the advantages and drawbacks of these ideas. In many forums, participants also completed short questionnaires capturing their reflections following the deliberations.

The "Shaping Our Future" forums began in summer 2012 and will continue through summer 2014. Forums were held in locations as diverse as Milledgeville, Georgia; Manhattan, Kansas; and Boston, Massachusetts. NIF forums are typically open, public meetings that attract people with an interest in the topic—in this case higher education—and a desire to talk about it with others. Just as important, people who come to the forums are asked to consider different viewpoints on the issue in sessions usually lasting 90 minutes or more.

Very few people in the forums offered any specific explanations for why college costs keep going up—explanations that might lead them to call for specific changes or solutions. Some talked about the value of higher education to society as a whole and called for more taxpayer support, while others worried that cost-cutting at colleges and universities might undermine quality. But exchanges among participants on these questions were typically quite general, sometimes even meandering.

A few of the participants used the forums as an opportunity to muse about what might happen in an ideal world. A North Carolina woman reporting on the deliberations during a breakout session said this:

> At our table, we were dreaming big. We were passionate about creating competent and creative students. We had really hoped that the government could reprioritize funding around education, research and technology transfer, and at the same time [we're] having conversations about higher education, it's essential to have conversations about K through 12 and pre-K education as well, and reinvesting in that.

The post-forum questionnaires capture a desire among many participants to help students who have trouble paying for college, even when presented with trade-offs. Nearly two-thirds strongly or somewhat agreed that "financial aid . . . should be expanded for lower—and middle-income students, EVEN IF that places more emphasis on family income than on academic merit."

But the results also suggest considerable unease about the prospect of cutting college budgets to keep costs affordable. Most of those responding said that "colleges should provide education of the highest possible academic quality, EVEN IF that means costs will continue to rise." Far fewer thought that "colleges should adopt cost-cutting measures such as online learning, EVEN IF this doesn't provide the educational enrichment of classroom exchanges."[11]

To the degree that participants zeroed in on solutions, they tended to focus on more practical, individual, and granular ones such as helping students find more scholarship money or reducing the likelihood that students change majors, which generally drives up their college bill.

At Miles College the forum participants did more than talk about the problem of college costs. Right after the session, the local AmeriCorps director who had participated in the deliberations signed up two students who also attended, thus giving them immediate access to tuition help.

Idea No. 4: Everyone should have the chance to go to college, but . . .

Time and time again, forum participants stressed their strong belief that everyone should have a chance to go to college—that this is an essential part of the American Dream. And they worried that the high cost of college is putting that dream out of reach for too many.

But many participants also raised questions about whether it's a good idea to encourage all high school students to continue on to college, especially traditional four-year college programs, even if the money were easily available to pay for all of them to go. Many forums participants pointed to a tension between making college more broadly available and maintaining high academic standards at the college and university level.

[11] In this instance, the forum participants' responses echo what emerges in formal surveys. According to Northeastern University's 2012 "Innovation in Higher Education" survey, only half of Americans believed that an online college degree provides a "similar quality of education as compared to traditional colleges or universities," although people under 30 had more positive views of online learning.

This comment from an Iowa woman crystallizes an ideal voiced by a number of participants. "What makes us different from other countries," she said, "is that everyone has an opportunity for an education here. In other countries, not everyone has an opportunity for education." Recent international studies suggest that this participant's view of educational opportunity in the United States versus that in other countries is probably much too rosy.[12] But her belief in the vision—the goal—was heartfelt nevertheless.

As participants talked more, however, it was clear that there were tensions and misgivings beneath the surface—many of them rooted in the tendency of participants to define "going to college" almost exclusively as studying for a four-year academic degree. Given this assumption, many began to ask whether the country has gone too far in encouraging all high school students to aim for this type of education. "If you're qualified to go to a university, you should have the chance," a woman in Colorado said. "I think [that] is a public good. But if you're not ready, the university should not lower their standards to suck in more students. You should go to the community college and get your remedial classes, or somewhere else."

A Kansas professor voiced a similar ambivalence: "Giving more people a chance to get a higher education is important," he said. "I don't have [any] criticism about this. [But] if you agree with that, I think it creates this really tough dilemma, which is that one approach is [to] . . . water down higher education. Well then, why even bother, right? That's not a solution at all."

Although most forum participants centered their deliberations on traditional, four-year college programs at the outset, concerns about maintaining standards often generated discussion about the benefits of alternatives, such as community colleges or technical certificate programs. "Not everybody is well-suited even for a four-year degree," a North Carolina man said. "How do we value those other options, those other avenues, and how do we remove the kinds of obstacles to access that aren't just financial?"

Some participants also suggested putting more emphasis on non-college pathways for some high school students—pathways that would prepare them for decent jobs without a post-secondary degree. "We're so driven toward [the idea that] everybody is going to graduate and go to college," a Colorado woman said. "And we're leaving a lot of kids behind [who] are not academically inclined and don't have the skills—[who] need more hands-on classes—and we have nothing for them. They are dying in our high schools." A Maryland man made the same point: "I think college has been very good," he said, "but . . . we cannot forget the people who did not want to go to college. What do we do about vocational education? "

At the same time, some participants worried about the implications of sorting students into discrete vocational versus college categories. "Maybe somebody coming as a machinist might want to be the president of the company," a Maryland woman said, "but where does he get that skill and how does he move along? Maybe that is a component of

[12] See for example Anthony Carnevale and Jeff Strohl at http://www.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/Separate%26Unequal.FR.pdf.

higher education that, right now, we're missing or we're not focusing on. It should be continuing education for everybody."

Anyone familiar with what's happening in community colleges and technical training institutions today could rightfully point out that distinction between "college" and "vocational education" is vastly oversimplified and probably obsolete. Even so, many NIF participants still operated with that mind-set. Their seeming lack of awareness about the diverse array of post-secondary options now being developed in communities nationwide led many of them into a frustrating "college or nothing" dilemma.

The forums also captured concerns that academic standards are being lowered—or are in danger of being lowered—because some students are not adequately prepared or not mature enough to take advantage of what higher education offers. "Being fair is one thing," one woman commented. "The entitlement is another issue, and I think we've watered down high school for that issue right there. If we transfer that over into post-secondary education, we're in a world of trouble."

Faculty members attending the forums were often convinced that this is already the case. A dean in Mississippi who had completed his degree in English some years earlier said that his son had recently completed the same program. The "English courses are not as challenging," he said, and the comprehensive exam was "nothing like" it was for him. Concerns about quality weren't always confined to professors, however. A Maryland retiree worried that higher education has moved away from teaching solid intellectual skills which is undermining society overall: "There is no critical thinking any more. . . . These are people who are educated, who've got the money, but their critical thinking skills . . . I don't care if you're talking about the far left or the far right—you see they are very, very stubborn. They don't think."

Results from the NIF questionnaires show mixed views on the tension between maintaining standards and broadening access, not to mention the tension between raising standards and still meeting the needs of students who are not necessarily academic superstars. Those returning questionnaires were divided about whether "continually pushing for more students to graduate from college will end up weakening academic standards—college is not for everyone." Participants were also divided on whether "creating a higher education system that puts a lot more emphasis on excellence and high standards could mean we'll end up neglecting the needs of students who aren't as accomplished or ambitious." In the deliberations, many participants were still wrestling with these tensions.

Idea No. 5: Higher education can't succeed unless families and K-12 education do their part.

In forums nationwide, participants frequently said that higher education cannot solve all the problems it faces alone—some need to be tackled in K-12 schooling, in communities, and in the home. Whether the issue was strengthening STEM education, maintaining high academic standards, or improving college completion rates, participants said that what happens in elementary and secondary education and in the family can be more powerful than anything colleges and universities could do later.

"I think college is really too late to be trying to talk kids into the STEM stuff," a Kansas woman said. "I mean if it's truly important that we have more mathematicians, scientists, engineers, technology people . . . college is not the place to start that. You've got to get kids turned on in elementary school, middle school."

A Tennessee man offered a similar comment: "One thing that concerns me about the science and technology aspect is what we do to children to make them not like those

subjects. They weren't born hating math. Somewhere in our system we convinced them to dislike math."

A Birmingham woman offered this anecdote from her own family which persuaded her of the advantages of an early emphasis on rigorous math and science education. Her older children, now facing higher standards in high school, were nervous about math, didn't like it, and were struggling. A younger child who has grown up with the higher math standards loves the subject, doesn't see it as difficult, and is now poised to build on her early math prowess.

Some participants worried that American K-12 education is inadequate in many areas—not just in science and math, especially compared to what is happening in other countries. In Mississippi, the forums included faculty and administrators from community colleges throughout the state, and many voiced concerns about problems in the state's K-12 schools—what one participant called "pitiful, struggling schools where children are being lost."

In Iowa, a woman said: "Maybe our higher education isn't so bad. . . . Maybe what we need to focus on is our elementary education. How can we improve our elementary education so that our students can be as good as these foreign students that are coming over here to go to school?" A participant in New Mexico made a similar point: "I think it starts with low expectations [in] primary education. They need to be raised if you want to compete globally with all the other countries. [Their] primary education standards are so much higher than ours here."

Many also said that higher education is simply too late to address the educational hurdles facing students who are poorly prepared for college and at risk of dropping out of school. "Getting a fair shot . . . [at] a degree from a university—it doesn't start here," a Colorado man said.

> So many kids—they will never get the chance. I had the opportunity to teach in the inner city of Chicago. . . . It really sheds light on what we need to do throughout our whole educational process, so that when a student comes of age to go to college, they will actually be prepared to do it. . . . So many people will never even get to the point where they'll be able to enjoy a college education.

The need to start early also emerged in deliberations on whether higher education should do more to reinforce principles like integrity and responsibility. A Maryland woman's comment was typical in this respect: "You get a person in college, if they haven't thought [about] and learned integrity and honesty and a work ethic by then, it is like—you are a day late and have gone short by that time. A Kansas

Forums are "AWESOME"

For many participants in the NIF forums, the chance to think and talk about the future of higher education and its role in our society was a new experience—even for those who teach or study on campus. And many found the experience both challenging and illuminating. About 4 in 10 of those completing questionnaires after the forums said they heard ideas in the deliberations that were new to them. Some commented that the forums helped them, as one Iowa woman put it, to see that "this is something that I need to be concerned about. This is a public issue."

A Kansas student went even further: "This is my first time at something like this—in politics or whatever. I stay far, far [away] from that, but I really enjoyed it. I really enjoyed putting [in] my opinion, being able to think about this stuff. It was awesome."

woman also questioned whether colleges and universities could really do much on the values front by the time a child becomes a young adult. "How do you teach integrity to a person that's been raised to cheat?" she asked.

But in the end, most people in the forums seemed to reject the idea that higher education has no role whatsoever in reinforcing broadly held American values. More than 6 in 10 of those returning questionnaires rejected the idea that "teaching young people to be more socially concerned and responsible should be left to families and communities—this is not what college is for."

"Ideas I hadn't really considered until now"

At the close of many NIF forums, participants complete questionnaires that include this question: "In your forum, did you talk about aspects of issues you hadn't considered before?" About 4 in 10 of those completing questionnaires said, "yes." Here are some of the ideas and opinions the forums led them to ponder for the first time, in their own words:

"I did not know the US lagged so far behind in STEM fields. Maybe we should address this by creating incentives for those who want to pursue this later on (tuition breaks)."

"[I considered] the issue of higher ed no longer being run as a 'public good.' What might be a way to address that?"

"We discussed how each of us afforded our undergraduate and graduate degrees. It was interesting to learn what diverse means [were] utilized to pay for education."

"Do we devalue the significant [and] very effective members of our society who do not have a college degree if we push to ensure all have college experience?"

"I had not considered the role that high school plays in this discussion."

"[I saw the] importance of community support, buy-in, initiative taking."

"A possible more emphasis on science and math—I was not in favor, selfishly. I never considered the over-all impact."

"Global competition should include arts, languages, cultural competencies—not just science & technology."

"I had [not considered] the value of life lessons and human growth during college instead of simply earning a degree."

"As college enrollment increases, so will tuition and costs."

"Taxes will rise if we want every student to get a higher education."

"I was more aware than before of the trade-offs and tensions between higher education as an avenue for personal growth & fulfillment and higher education as a driver of a national economy by its job preparation choices."

"College may not be for all."

"We looked at alternate models of education (i.e.: more labor programs, expansion of work-study, etc.)."

"Colleges should offer more online classes in order to be more cost effective and available for more people."

"I never considered online classes or offering scholarships to lower income families."

"We talked about scholarships and loans to higher achieving students and I had not thought about this prior."

Are People Who Come to the Forums Typical?

This report captures the reflections of citizens who have done something fairly unusual—they've spent a good hour and a half or more talking with others in their communities about higher education's role in the United States and what its mission should be for the future. Even on college campuses, that's not a discussion that happens every day.

And in some respects, the participants in the NIF forums are distinctive. Based on post-discussion questionnaires collected in many of the forums, more than 4 in 10 participants are college students themselves, in either two-year or four-year programs. One-fifth are college faculty. As a group, the participants are very well educated, with more than 4 in 10 holding more than a four-year degree. These are citizens who have seen the benefits of higher education in their own lives. Since most are either students or faculty, they are arguably more familiar with what's happening on campuses today than someone who attended college long ago or who has never been to college.

Higher education—what opinion surveys show

So how different are the ideas and themes that emerged in the forums from the views of the public at large. At first blush, surveys do seem to suggest some differences. For example, many of those in the forums questioned the degree to which job preparation should be the explicit or primary purpose of college. According to surveys, 67 percent of Americans say getting a good job is a very important reason for continuing education beyond high school. Nearly as many (65 percent) say being able to earn more money is a very important reason.[13]

Although forum participants discussed their concerns about higher education today at some length, most were not especially skeptical of the way colleges and universities currently operate. In contrast, surveys often pick up considerable negativity. According to the Harris Poll, only around a third of Americans say they have a great deal of confidence in the people who run the nation's colleges and universities,[14] although higher education certainly does better on this score than many other contemporary institutions, including major corporations, the press, Congress, and Wall Street.

But a closer look at recent surveys shows that in some key respects, forum participants are enunciating and deliberating on ideas and values that have a strong resonance with the broader public. Even though majorities of Americans see jobs and income potential as very important reasons to go to college, more than 8 in 10 also say that college provides "important intellectual benefits like critical thinking" (88 percent) and an opportunity "for personal development, like meeting

[13] Gallup Organization for the Lumina Foundation, 2013, http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/Americas_Call_for_Higher_Education_Redesign.pdf.

[14] Harris Poll, April 2011. Retrieved June 27, 2013, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

new people from diverse backgrounds."(86 percent)[15] These are some of the same benefits repeatedly mentioned in the NIF forums.

What's more, when surveys ask people to choose between jobs and personal and intellectual growth as the main purpose of college, the public is more divided. According to a 2011 from Pew Research Center, nearly half of Americans (47 percent) say the main purpose of college should be to "teach specific skills and knowledge that can be used in the work place," with 39 percent saying the main purpose should be to "help an individual grow personally and intellectually."[16]

There are other areas where the forums seem to be capturing and expanding on concerns held by the broader public. Many forum participants struggled with what they saw as a tension between maintaining high academic standards and the equally important mission of giving more Americans the chance to graduate from college. But is this a major concern among people who didn't attend the forums?

Formal opinion research indicates that college faculty members are broadly worried about declining standards and lack of preparation and responsibility among students,[17] but it's not just the professors. When college-aged Americans are asked why so many students who start college don't finish, the majority of them say it is the students themselves who are most to blame for high college dropout rates, rather than parents or the institutions they attended.[18]

The forums also picked up some uncertainty on another crucial question: is it true that rising costs have put college out of reach for many qualified, motivated high school graduates, or can promising students still find a way to get a degree, perhaps by going to college part-time or attending less expensive public institutions? Since many of the people in the forums are in college or already have degrees, perhaps they don't understand the financial obstacles other people face in getting one.

But formal polling picks up a similar ambivalence on this question among the public at large. Some 7 in 10 Americans under 30 say there are many qualified young people who don't have the opportunity to go to college. At the same time, majorities also say that almost "anyone who needs financial help to go to college can get financial aid," and that "anyone who goes to college can complete their degree if they are willing to make sacri-

15 Northeastern University, Innovation in Higher Education Survey, 2012, http://www.northeastern.edu/innovationsurvey.

16 Pew Social Trends Poll, March 2011. Retrieved January 15, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

17 Public Agenda, "Campus Commons?," http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/campus-commons.

18 Public Agenda, "One Degree of Separation," http://www.publicagenda.org/files/one-degree-of-separation.pdf.

fices, such as going part-time."[19] In this case, people in the forums were of two minds on this issue, as are many other Americans.

And finally, with the increasing prominence of two-year and post-secondary certificate programs, it's becoming clear that the word *college* can mean different things to different people. Many forum participants initially used the term to signify traditional, four-year, residential degree programs. In many cases, references to other types of post-secondary education arose only when participants began deliberating about the educational needs of young people who don't go to college or who aren't well prepared for traditional four-year academic programs.

Polls show that many people give different answers about the importance of "college" depending on whether they're envisioning the traditional image or whether they're taking a broader view. Asked to choose what is more important for "young people to succeed today—earning a college degree from a well-respected university or obtaining the knowledge or skills needed to do a specific job"—only 47 percent of Americans pick the college degree.[20] But when Gallup asked a question that suggested a more expansive view of higher education, the results were quite different. Nearly all Americans (97 percent) say that it's important to have a degree or certificate beyond high school today, with 72 percent saying it's very important.[21]

Citizens who attended the forums and the public at large share a deep belief in the importance of higher education in today's world, but the most notable similarity between the two groups is that neither has spent enough time thinking seriously about what we should expect of higher education and what kinds of decisions leaders and citizens need to make together to ensure its future. People attending the forums have just started to have those conversations, but citizens in communities around the country need to join in these deliberations and carry them

19 See "One Degree of Separation: How Young Americans Who Don't Finish College See Their Chances for Success" (Public Agenda, 2011). Similar views are widespread among the general public as well. See Public Agenda's "Squeeze Play" reports (Public Agenda, 2007, 2008, 2009), at http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/our-library.

20 Gallup Poll, October 2013. Retrieved January 15, 2014, from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut http//www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data-access/poll/ipoll.html.

21 Lumina Foundation and Gallup, 2013, *America's Call for Higher Education Redesign*, http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/Americas_Call_for_Higher_Education_Redesign.pdf.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Many of the citizens in the forums had just begun to think about the mission and future of higher education, as they themselves frequently acknowledged. Nonetheless, their thinking was rarely simplistic or dogmatic. Many voiced their belief that higher education can and should have multiple goals including preparing students for careers, opening up their minds, teaching critical thinking, helping Americans work together, and giving promising low-income students the chance to change their lives.

Moreover, participants were often uncomfortable about taking a single mission to the extreme. Most wanted more students to excel in science, math, and technology, but they cautioned against higher education putting too narrow a focus on these fields alone. Most thought colleges should reinforce values like honesty and responsibility, but participants repeatedly cautioned against higher education trying to "teach morals"—both because it's too late and because this really isn't the business of colleges and universities. And while participants repeatedly voiced their belief that every American youngster deserves an equal chance to go to college, this did not mean, for most, that all will be equally motivated or qualified to do so. Yet, there was also a strong sense that every young person, even those who don't go to college, deserves society's help in getting a foothold in a tough job market.

Participants did struggle with tensions among different goals—most notably the tension between viewing college as a time of exploration versus college as a path to success in the workforce. Participants also wrestled with the tension between giving more people the chance to go to college and still maintaining a commitment to excellence. In the end, however, most forum participants did not accept the idea that colleges and universities have to choose just one mission—or that graduates have to emerge from college with limited abilities and confined visions.

Perhaps the principal take-away from the forums is the need for broader, more inclusive deliberations on the future of higher education, especially deliberations that bring often-divided groups together—policymakers and citizens, educators and employers, faculty and students, people on campuses and those in communities, Americans who are college-educated and those who are not. The NIF forums are a beginning, but there is much more that citizens need to talk about, including questions such as these:

1. **What does it mean to be well educated?** The forums suggest that some leaders may have underestimated the value many Americans place on college as a time and place where students receive a rich and broad education—something beyond specific job training or the ability to earn a high salary upon graduation. So what does it mean to be well educated in today's world? Is a liberal arts education a thing of the past, or is an updated version of it the very thing we need? Should we make a sharper distinction between different types

of post-secondary education—between broader, more exploratory four-year programs and more intense and job-specific programs in community colleges and technical schools?

2. **What does it mean to be prepared for a world of work that changes continually?** Many forum participants voiced an almost idealistic view of what education should be, but that didn't mean they weren't worried about students getting jobs. In fact, many were troubled by the idea that the kind of education that benefits a student over a lifetime may not be the kind of education that will help him or her get a job right out of college. Is higher education about educating people for the long-term, or do we assume that we'll all be "going back to school" throughout our lives? What do employers really want, and is it higher education's job to deliver it?

3. **How do we make higher education affordable—for governments and for students?** The cost challenges facing higher education are real, and the choices they present are not easy. But absent a better understanding of the options—and a wider participation in choosing the best ones—many Americans may be inclined to push back against needed change. How can we move this conversation out of state houses, legislatures, and expert seminars to include many more Americans? Can we control costs without jeopardizing the aspects of higher education citizens value most?

4. **What do we mean by "equal opportunity" in higher education?** Both the forums and public surveys show that the country is divided about whether our current higher education system really offers an equal chance for all, with many Americans believing that even low-income students can still graduate from college by going part-time and choosing less expensive public options. Moreover, statistics show a troubling divide on the kind of college education students are actually getting, with white students primarily entering the most selective four-year schools and minority students primarily entering two-year and four-year open access schools.[22] Is that really equal opportunity? Should we do more to avoid developing a two-tiered system where affluent youngsters can choose full-time, residential, liberal arts colleges, but lower-income students rarely have that option?

For more than two centuries, American higher education has evolved and reinvented itself to serve an ever-changing democracy and Americans' expanding aspirations. Now, the system faces an array of daunting challenges. The results of the NIF forums so far show that many citizens have just begun to think through and grapple with these challenges. Yet, these same citizens have ideals, values, and concerns that simply have to be weighed as part of the policymaking equation. The question we face going forward is whether higher education will be reshaped from the top down—adopting changes and solutions that skip over broader public values and concerns—or whether leaders and the citizenry will find ways to co-frame the solutions and share in the responsibilities for the changes to come.

[22] Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeff Strohl, "Separate and Unequal: How Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Racial Privilege" (2013).

Full Questionnaire Results as of December 2013

THE FOLLOWING RESULTS are based on questionnaires returned by 1,227 participants from 41 states and the District of Columbia, who attended NIF "Shaping Our Future" forums that took place between summer 2012 and December 2013. These results are not based on a random sample of the public. Rather they reflect the ideas and preferences of individuals who chose to attend NIF "Shaping Our Future"" forums to discuss the future of higher education and to complete and return post-forum questionnaires. Moreover, as our discussion of the forum exchanges suggests, these results should not be seen as definitive or "final" conclusions. Many forum participants left their meetings still pondering and deliberating on these ideas and others. The results here are best seen as suggesting areas of potential consensus and areas of broad concern.

OVERALL RESULTS

I. GENERAL INSIGHTS	Total (%) N=1227
Q.1a The primary purpose of a college education should be to help young people acquire skills that will enable them to get well-paying jobs.	
Strongly disagree	6%
Somewhat disagree	14%
Somewhat agree	44%
Strongly agree	35%
No response	1%
Q.1b Our country's long-term prosperity heavily depends on educating more students in the fields of science, engineering, and math.	
Strongly disagree	5%
Somewhat disagree	20%
Somewhat agree	50%
Strongly agree	22%
No response	3%
Q.1c College should be where students learn to develop the ability to think critically by studying a rich curriculum that includes history, art and literature, government, economics, and philosophy.	
Strongly disagree	2%
Somewhat disagree	7%
Somewhat agree	33%
Strongly agree	56%
No response	2%
Q.1d Teaching young people to be more socially concerned and responsible should be left to families and communities—this is not what college is for.	
Strongly disagree	31%
Somewhat disagree	33%
Somewhat agree	22%
Strongly agree	11%
No response	4%

(Chart continued on next page.)

		Total (%) N=1227
Q.1e	**Continually pushing for more students to graduate from college will end up weakening academic standards—college is not for everyone.**	
	Strongly disagree	15%
	Somewhat disagree	23%
	Somewhat agree	37%
	Strongly agree	21%
	No response	4%
Q.1f	**Even if the United States is a world leader in science and technology, it won't help most Americans unless we have an economy that supports a strong middle class and offers more opportunity.**	
	Strongly disagree	3%
	Somewhat disagree	9%
	Somewhat agree	41%
	Strongly agree	42%
	No response	5%
Q.1g	**Colleges should require courses that incorporate hands-on learning experiences, such as internships, community service and campus projects that teach community problem-solving skills.**	
	Strongly disagree	1%
	Somewhat disagree	4%
	Somewhat agree	29%
	Strongly agree	63%
	No response	2%
Q.1h	**Creating a higher education system that puts a lot more emphasis on excellence and high standards could mean we'll end up neglecting the needs of student who aren't as accomplished or ambitious.**	
	Strongly disagree	13%
	Somewhat disagree	31%
	Somewhat agree	37%
	Strongly agree	12%
	No response	7%
	II. VIEWS ON POSSIBLE ACTIONS	
Q.2a	**Financial aid, including scholarships and work study opportunities, should be expanded for lower-and middle-income students, EVEN IF that places more emphasis on family income than on academic merit.**	
	Strongly oppose	8%
	Somewhat oppose	21%
	Somewhat favor	39%
	Strongly favor	25%
	No response	6%

(Chart continued on next page.)

		Total (%) N=1227
Q.2b	**Colleges and universities should make greater efforts to diversify their student bodies by recruiting more students from other countries, EVEN IF this results in fewer slots for American students.**	
	Strongly oppose	20%
	Somewhat oppose	39%
	Somewhat favor	25%
	Strongly favor	10%
	No response	6%
Q.2c	**Colleges and universities should adopt cost-cutting measures, such as online learning, EVEN IF this teaching method does not provide the educational enrichment of classroom exchanges.**	
	Strongly oppose	22%
	Somewhat oppose	33%
	Somewhat favor	28%
	Strongly favor	8%
	No response	9%
Q.2d	**Community colleges should gear their class offerings to the needs of local employers, EVEN IF narrower job-focused programs may limit students' abilities to move on to four-year colleges.**	
	Strongly oppose	14%
	Somewhat oppose	35%
	Somewhat favor	34%
	Strongly favor	8%
	No response	10%
Q.2e	**College programs should require hands-on projects that teach collaborative and community problem solving, EVEN IF these activities reduce the time for academic learning.**	
	Strongly oppose	4%
	Somewhat oppose	14%
	Somewhat favor	47%
	Strongly favor	29%
	No response	5%
Q.2f	**Scholarships and student loans should be geared to the highest-achieving students in scientific and technical fields that most benefit the economy, EVEN IF this means cutting aid to students in other fields.**	
	Strongly oppose	37%
	Somewhat oppose	36%
	Somewhat favor	17%
	Strongly favor	5%
	No response	6%
Q.2g	**Colleges should provide education of the highest possible academic quality, EVEN IF that means costs will continue to rise.**	
	Strongly oppose	7%
	Somewhat oppose	23%
	Somewhat favor	43%
	Strongly favor	17%
	No response	9%

(Chart continued on next page.)

		Total (%) N=1227
Q.2h	Colleges and universities should encourage all students to take a diverse range of courses to better understand the world they live in, EVEN IF many such courses have little direct bearing on the jobs that will be available when students graduate.	
	Strongly oppose	5%
	Somewhat oppose	15%
	Somewhat favor	38%
	Strongly favor	36%
	No response	6%
DEMOGRAPHICS		
Gender		
	Male	42%
	Female	55%
	No response	3%
Age		
	17 or younger	11%
	18-30	44%
	31-45	11%
	46-64	21%
	65 or older	9%
	No response	3%
Ethnicity		
	African American	11%
	Asian American	3%
	Hispanic or Latino	3%
	Native American	1%
	White/Caucasian	75%
	Other	3%
	No response	4%
Highest level of education completed		
	High school	38%
	Two-year College	5%
	Four-year college	13%
	Post-graduate program	34%
	No response	10%
Student or faculty status		
	A student at a two- or four-year college or university	45%
	On the faculty of a two- or four-year college or university	20%
	Other/No response	35%
Home region		
	Northeast	19%
	Midwest	19%
	South	48%
	West	8%
	No response	7%

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