

HESIG WORKING PAPER #4

*Aligning Higher Education with
Citizens' Needs, Expectations
and a Promise of Success*

Higher Education Strategic Information and Governance (HESIG)

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Purpose

The purpose of this essay is to make some recommendations regarding state-level and campus policy change needed for NJ colleges and universities to fulfill the promise of educational opportunity for citizens and service to the broader public good and prosperity of the state.

A fundamental recommendation to the State of New Jersey is to build a rationale for supporting higher education, and what it expects from its colleges; and for colleges and universities individually and collectively to take a lead role in creating a vision to sustain public investment and support, and to account for educational outcomes. An underlying theme to accomplish this goal is a strong partnership between state government, business, labor and higher educators, and greater collaboration between the state's schools, senior and community colleges. A viable vision for higher education should be driven from the perspective of citizens' and state economic and civic needs, rather than the institutions alone.

Higher education cannot fix all of New Jersey's social and economic problems; but it is extremely important to the hopes of a diverse state population that will consist of a larger share of racial minorities and new immigrants, seeking work in a state where about two-thirds of new jobs will require some college study, and 30 percent will require at least a college degree. In short, college opportunity and completion should be an important factor in aligning the needs of an educated population with state needs, long-term economic equity and prosperity, and protection of civic liberty in a democratic society through deeper understanding of American governmental institutions, service to the broader public good, and the importance of civic participation, through voting and other means.

HESIG survey research strongly indicates that the single most important reason for citizens to attend college is to get a better job. Also, location and program offerings together are more important in choosing a college than cost alone. Furthermore, getting a good job and starting a good career is viewed as the single most important college outcome. Research shows clearly that top abilities expected from college by students and employers are higher order writing, speaking and problem solving abilities.

Studies reinforce, too, that colleges need to change business and educational practices to increase value to students, principally by offering more practical experiences tied to studies that provide the skills, abilities and values needed to succeed academically and in the workplace. Unfortunately, civic learning, important to students understanding of how to participate in a democratic society, is viewed by citizens as one of the least expected college outcomes.

The paper summarizes findings, observations and policy recommendations following four years of HESIG consultation and analysis, suggests some priority strategies for the state and colleges to increase college value, and concludes by offering four suggestions to enhance students' success in college, the workplace, and increase civic awareness.

HESIG Mission

In 2012, the HESIG project, supported by Stockton leaders and colleagues and a top-notch group of state and national advisors, adopted its mission: to serve as an agent for constructive higher education policy change, by recommending strategic policy action, aligned with a public agenda to serve the public good. Guiding principles include: enhancing college access, affordability, completion, productivity, accountability and public trust.

As indicated in HESIG's 2014 grant report to ETS," **Finding Solutions, and Building Public Trust in an Era of Change:"**

"Put simply, what is at stake strikes at the heart of the promise of individual liberty, equality and American economic prosperity in the 21st century. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) research, released in 2013, clearly indicates the positive link between postsecondary educational opportunity, better lives and stronger communities, globally. College was a driving force during the latter half of the 20th century for achieving the "American Dream" of broad participation in a prosperous and civil society. But without prompt and significant change, public higher education will fail its principal purpose of providing a broad college opportunity, especially to low- and middle-income students and an emerging population of new Americans. Without such change, we put at risk a critical element in sustaining the American democratic experience through education.

A fundamental HESIG assumption is that beyond the broad public benefits of publicly supported colleges, these institutions also provide important private benefits to individuals related to aspirations for jobs and immediate and intergenerational economic prosperity.

Accordingly, public colleges can achieve the dual goals of public and private benefits only by: demonstrating equity and fairness regarding who goes to college; justifying who pays and how; and showing the public responsibility for effective delivery of educational value and outcomes, by sustaining public trust."

HESIG started with a commitment to track trends driving change in participation and delivery of higher education in New Jersey. This activity required keeping up with many national and state policy and data centers, as well as the ongoing work of numerous policy analysts. Fortunately, the HESIG Policy Steering Council has provided outstanding guidance, consisting of policy advocates from leading national and state organizations. HESIG benefits, too, from its partnership with the Office of the NJ Secretary of Higher Education, ETS and others.

In accomplishing its mission HESIG conducted focus group sessions with opinion leaders (executive roundtables); held a statewide symposium on student outcomes involving 200 individuals from 32 NJ colleges and universities, and other organizations; presented at numerous forums on trends, and conducted surveys of citizens and students regarding college value, expected outcomes and needed change. Before making some concrete recommendations regarding what NJ colleges and universities, state government and others need to consider to improve delivery of postsecondary education, it is useful to review briefly what HESIG has learned from these initiatives.

The Paradox of High Demand and Value, but Low Policy Priority

Long-term trends indicate that the state suffers from several paradoxes. New Jersey has one of the nation's highest rankings in number of high school graduates headed to college, and percentage of citizens with college degrees, yet leads the nation in net loss of college-bound freshmen (NJ loses 36,000 students annually to other states, bringing in only about 6,000 making it #1 nationally in net-out migration). The state outperforms most states in availability of student financial aid for low-income students, but ranks among top

tier states regarding cost of attending college. While the state ranks among the top five in degree productivity for all educational expenditures, higher education appropriations as a share of total state spending has continued to fall for two decades (see for example, **New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities, Sourcebook, 2016**). As a result of state disinvestment, students pay about 65 percent of public college cost, turning the definition of “public college” on its head.

The state’s ambivalence about higher education investment is visible in many ways beyond higher education’s relative low priority for state funding, which cannot be attributed principally to an outcome of the “Great Recession” of 2008, or to governance structure, which has strongly favored institutional autonomy over state/system centralized control since the 1980s. For example, the state never built its own public research university, acquiring Rutgers, an independent university founded in 1766, as such in the 1950s. Also, the high price of public college in NJ cannot be explained by the relative freedom from state control of tuition, as indicated by a **SHEEO** report (**State Higher Education Funding, FY2015**), wherein tuition, established by independent boards of trustees rather than system boards or legislatures, has been more moderate (4th lowest increase 2011-2016) than states with more centralized systems.

According to HESIG polls 2013-2016, college in NJ is highly valued by citizens, taking into account its relatively high cost, (70-90 percent respond that the value is “worth the cost”). Still, college is a relatively low priority for Trenton policy makers. Policy issues such as taxation, pensions, health care, K-12 education, transportation and the environment tend to outrank consistently the importance of higher education.

Remarkably, the state has no explicit rationale for funding its colleges and universities, beyond spending what it can afford annually, making the majority of its investment in state- mandated contractual costs for labor (including faculty), student financial aid and amortization of capital spending (“**The Financing of Higher Education in New Jersey, NCHEMS, March 2016; and “Strategic Priorities for New Jersey Higher Education, Governor’s Advisory Council on Higher Education, 2015**”).

New Jersey’s somewhat myopic approach to higher education as a policy matter is an innate part of its history, not a recent phenomenon, evidenced by relatively late integration of Rutgers as a unified health science center and research university, but also developing reluctantly broader residential and programmatic capacity for its regional public four-year colleges in the 1980s. Currently, the state faces a significant policy challenge in re-examining college and university missions and inter-institutional cooperation, as several community colleges create new partnerships across regions and seek baccalaureate degree granting status.

In many respects this absence of a sustained vision for public higher education helps to explain not only the state’s declining financial investment, compared to its wealth, but also the state’s significant net loss of college- bound students, and continuing ambiguity between the capitol and campus regarding educational outcomes.

On a positive note, NJ outperforms 40 other states, in providing college opportunity/affordability programs for underserved populations according to a recent study, (“**2016 College Affordability Diagnosis, Institute for Research on Higher Education, University of Pennsylvania**”). Yet, the study indicates that more needs to be done to narrow the educational skills/completion gap for low-income and minority students entering NJ colleges.

As a policy matter, it remains an open question whether this long-standing commitment to broad college access can be sustained in an era of strained fiscal resources and significant competition from other public sector funding needs such as K-12 education, transportation, and pensions. The ability of higher education to compete with other public goods as a funding priority is problematic given a downturn in the college-bound population during the next decade, which provides colleges with a smaller student market and potential political constituency.

Findings on College Value, Expected Outcomes and Needed Change

Given the confluence of many factors, such as changing demographics, increasing cost of paying for college, state disinvestment but greater demand for accountability for outcomes, it is no surprise that public policy nationally is focusing squarely on the issue of college value. This search involves reexamination and redefinition of the ends of postsecondary education as well as the means by which it is accomplished. Big questions surrounding the search for value take us back to the 1970s paradigm of asking who goes to college; who pays, for what; and who is held accountable for outcomes? Related questions include:

1. How to sort out shared responsibilities for financing colleges in an era of dramatic economic change?
2. How to keep college affordable for low and middle-income students?
3. How to assure equity and fairness in college participation and completion?
4. What are the expected college outcomes, and what skills and abilities are needed to succeed in the workplace, and to participate as citizens?
5. How are skills and outcomes to be assessed, and by whom?
6. How will colleges work with others to sustain public accountability and trust?

To help answer these questions, HESIG held two executive roundtables in 2014 at Stockton University and New Jersey City University, consisting of executives from business, higher education, K-12 education, media and government, and conducted four surveys 2013-2016 of citizens and students. Meeting summaries and survey instruments are at: www.stockton.edu/hughescenter/hesig . In brief summary, HESIG findings are as follows:

Executive Roundtables

- Help students develop effective interpersonal abilities such as, tolerance of diversity of opinion; openness to multiple approaches to problem solving; and application of high ethical standards; as important outcomes for a college education.
- Create more co-op/intern experiences for students which would move them sooner from the classroom to practical workplace experiences.
- Higher order skills should begin early, through school collaboration, with greater awareness of the needs of non-college bound students, and in partnership with business to expose students to needs and values of a workplace environment and for participation in a democratic society.
- Dual enrollment programs with schools to earn college credit should be more widely offered. There should be strong transfer collaboration between two-year and four-year colleges, recognizing the special role of community colleges in open access to education, training, and community service.
- Involve business and nonprofit organizations more to help develop educational content, internship experiences, and to structure expectations about desired outcomes.
- Involve community leaders to help define standards for community engagement and responsible citizenship in a democratic society as a measure of value and return on investment.
- Colleges should view jobs and economic prosperity as an important outcome linked to degree completion. Colleges should focus more on how they help to spur economic development and job growth, and should recognize community engagement and development as a core mission focus to improve the quality of life for individuals in the region, whether or not they attend college.

Polls on College Value and Expected Outcomes

HESIG in collaboration with the Stockton Polling Institute conducted a March 2013 survey of 1000 citizens, and a May 2014 statewide poll of 800 adult residents, supported by an ETS grant; a November 2014 survey of nearly 5000 undergraduates at 32 NJ colleges and universities, and a February 2016 survey of over 700 recent

college graduates. The survey of undergraduate students was commissioned by the Secretary of Higher Education, and may be unprecedented nationally in its scope of focus on academic advising and career counseling. Each survey was informed by contemporary national studies (see for example, **HESIG Working Paper #2 “Troubled Waters;” Report to ETS; Report to the Secretary; and HESIG Newsletters**)

These surveys followed three major themes: college affordability and value for the cost; skills and abilities gained in college; and changes needed to make college more valuable. Survey findings about policy changes needed to increase college value and completion closely mirrored the advice of participants in the roundtables. In brief summary, poll findings include:

- Citizens continue to worry about college affordability (over 40% believe college is unaffordable).
- Citizens and students perceive New Jersey’s colleges as having good quality, and high value for the cost.
- A majority of citizens and students believe that colleges need to change both educational and business practices to increase value.
- Citizens have ideas about who should be responsible for such change (colleges in partnership with businesses) and what can be done to reduce time to degree completion (easier credit transfer, and credit-by examination for knowledge and skills gained outside of college).
- Students and recent graduates concur with roundtable advice regarding top skills and abilities gained from college (writing, speaking and problem solving).
- They consistently view economic benefits of college (jobs) as paramount regarding the purpose for attending college and as a top college outcome of college.
- They have specific ideas about what needs to change to increase college value; for example, more practical experiences, such as internships, related to studies. While internships are seen as important to job success, relatively few students (20 percent of current undergraduates and 50 percent of graduates, including post-graduate professional fields) find these experiences, even though three-fourths are working, with 40% working at least 30 hours per week, annually while in college, including seasonal and summer breaks.
- Roughly 30 percent of recent graduates view academic advising and career counseling as **not** important to job/career success.
- Citizens continue to trust colleges to make needed changes by a margin of up to 4to-1 over state government.
- Only about 5 percent of college graduates report citizenship as a top expected outcome that colleges help to develop.

What Needs to Be Done, by Whom, to Fulfill the Promise of College Opportunity

With the benefit of prior and ongoing analysis by others about NJ higher education, HESIG suggests several strategies and policy initiatives by the state, colleges, schools, business and labor, and citizens themselves, that can help to increase the value of college. These strategies include:

➤ *For the State*

- Work with the colleges to create a predictable funding rationale for higher education that supports access to high quality instruction and service, affordability, and degree completion. The state has not had such a budget policy since about 1990, and has been a disinvesting partner for two decades. Loss of state funding is the single biggest reason for rising tuition. New Jersey’s public colleges are supported principally by tuition and fees paid by students and families, not by state appropriations. Still, the state is an important partner that needs to define what it wants from its colleges, and to provide a predictable means of sustaining state investment.

- Reexamine the structure of the state’s generous student financial aid programs, and increase funding for year- round and part-time students. New Jersey has many strong grant and loan programs to help students afford college. The problem is that its core need-based grant program (Tuition Assistance Grants-TAG) created decades ago to help low-income students, and newer aid programs that have been added, need restructuring in light of different populations attending college, changes in attendance, graduation patterns, and cost. TAG continues to be underfunded for the growing population it should serve; and middle-income families, fewer of whom receive TAG grants, must depend more on loans to pay for college, creating greater personal debt. Good programs need to be made better. But this can’t happen without diligent analysis of state, federal and campus student financial aid programs in a different era.
- Get the state’s personnel and labor contract policy in order. While the public colleges and universities have great freedom to manage their own business affairs, state policy affecting labor contracts, fringe and retirement benefits significantly affect colleges’ budgets and future spending obligations. Reexamination and reform of personnel and labor policy (e.g. collective bargaining and civil service pay increases for employees), and granting colleges more freedom to act, not tied to state practice, would give colleges a stronger hand in cost control, and more accountability for spending on personnel, their largest single budget item. (Note: Rutgers University and 19 Community Colleges have lawful authority to negotiate labor contracts. The nine state colleges and universities lack this authority.)

➤ *For Colleges and Universities*

- Redesign business and educational delivery practices where most of the money is spent, not at the margins. 70-80 percent of college budgets are spent on people, and the facilities and technology that they use to conduct teaching and research. The institutions, like other businesses have done much to cut energy and administrative costs. But the big savings will come from prudent planning on hiring and deployment of highly skilled faculty and staff to deliver a quality educational product. Colleges working together with labor can do more on long-term strategies to reduce costs and to increase productivity, to benefit college affordability, without sacrificing quality.
- Restructure the curricula to tie together both academic and practical skills and abilities needed to achieve in college and the workplace. One of HESIG’s strongest findings from surveys and executive focus groups is the desire of both students and employers to have colleges focus on specific, highly-valued college outcomes, including clear writing, speaking, and problem solving. Surveys indicate clearly the citizens desire to control costs by reducing time to degree completion. Implicitly, this suggests more competency-based credit, and close reexamination and reform of general education courses in relation to needed skills and expected outcomes. Also, it means reining in some programmatic growth ambition in favor of stronger inter-institutional cooperation on programs.
- Provide better academic advising and career counseling to help students make better academic choices, and to help prepare students for the workplace. To accomplish this goal, colleges need to build stronger partnerships with businesses, to introduce practical workplace experiences and skill building during college, and to create more internships for students. Both students and employers view these steps as critical to increasing the value of college in New Jersey.

Note: The essay focuses principally on traditional colleges and universities, but recognizes the important partnership role of Thomas Edison State University, the state's leading non-traditional institution serving adult learners.

➤ *For Students and Families*

- Make better choices regarding which college to attend, what to study, and available student financial aid. Fortunately, New Jersey has many good colleges. But not all colleges are the same, and not every college is a good fit for every student. Especially in light of growing dependence on disposable family income and personal debt to finance a college education, students and families should actively seek counseling from schools, colleges and others.
- Once in college, students have a responsibility to make good choices about their educations. National and HESIG research indicate that a large portion of recent college graduates wish they had made better academic choices and studied harder to gain the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to succeed after college. Recent research on New Jersey undergraduates indicates that they need to seek out academic and career counseling more frequently, and internships more often while in college, even as many already work to help pay for college.

Some policy and practice recommendations that flow from these strategies include:

- The state should set long-range goals for higher education tied to a state strategic agenda, and regularly report progress, including continuing improvement in educational achievement among different segments of the population, with particular attention to low- income, adults and other underrepresented groups.
- The state's funding rationale should include new models for affordability, degree completion and workforce preparation, based on inter-institutional and business collaboration.
- Restructure student financial aid by type of institution to reduce gaps in funding that force students with financial need to delay or halt their educational progress. Prioritize college success programs for financially needy students.
- Build into the funding of higher education, by type of institution, rewards for students to complete their degree on time, with special emphasis on the academic progress of low income, first-generation and under-represented groups.
- Encourage the expansion of dual enrollment programs that allow high school students to earn college credit.
- Build into, and measure explicitly, academic outcome expectations at both high school and college levels, and certify the array of skills sought by employers (e.g. teamwork, punctuality, problem solving, business writing, public speaking, and interpersonal communication).
- Make transfer of credits from two-year to four-year colleges easier; and promote partnerships with those institutions that conduct prior-learning assessment and provide credit-by-examination for transfer and adult students.
- Offer more students internships supporting the connection between classroom learning, real-world expectations, and problem solving.
- Counsel students to take courses rich in discipline-based content and conceptual frameworks that are directly applicable to a major field of study, and limit, or at least caution students about, the number of elective and general education courses they take.
- Colleges should collectively communicate clearly and consistently with the public about the importance of a college degree to individuals' lives, to communities, to the State, and their leadership in accounting for outcomes.

Placing Student Success at the Center

On June 15, 2016, approximately 200 higher education academic and student support professionals and individuals from industry, state and local government, and non-profit organizations attended a day-long HESIG symposium on Student Success and College Outcomes. The purpose of the event, in cooperation with the Secretary's Student Success Collaborative, was two-fold: to bring together a diverse set of individuals to share information about how to help students gain the needed skills and abilities to succeed in college, the workplace, and to become active citizens.

Additionally, its purpose was to explore innovation in policy and practice needed to achieve these objectives. Symposium participants recorded recommendations in small group working sessions on three issue areas: perception of use, coherence and value of counseling and advising services; best practices and priorities for change; and resources needed to achieve change.

Perception of Advising and Counseling Services

Overall, participants perceived statewide advising and counseling services as being of high value, but lacking coherence in relationship to one another and in usage. Approximately 70 percent of the group discussion summaries viewed these services as fair to good, in the aggregate, with many fewer suggesting that they are excellent or poor.

Plenary discussion focused on several broad issues, including making counseling and advising a requirement of graduation; whether or not to make internships a requirement for all students; how to strengthen the availability of internships (for example by engaging employers and alumni more in academic and advising/counseling activities); reaching out more assertively to students regarding career opportunities, as early as first-year orientation; the role of faculty in mentoring and classroom advising regarding career opportunities in fields and disciplines; and innovating and streamlining some services to fit better the needs of students, using social media and other information technologies.

In work session reports, participants stressed especially the lack of intra-institutional coherence for advising and counseling services, citing that too often these offices are "siloes" within the university, receive too little policy attention, and too few resources for innovation. Many reported that these services have a relative low priority, and need greater attention from presidents and provosts in order to be more effective. Some cited policy or procedure as inconsistent, or unsupportive of student success, such as not emphasizing career choices early in the college experience, and weakness in information systems to follow up with students.

Several stressed that more inter-institutional cooperation is needed among two-year and four-year colleges to facilitate student transfer, evaluation, guidance and achievement. Furthermore, many reported that advising and counseling should be better integrated into academic and student affairs planning and evaluation of outcomes. Many reported that faculty collaboration on service innovation and delivery should be enhanced.

Finally, work sessions reported that counseling and advising centers need stronger reward systems, in order to increase perceived value and effectiveness. Also, a common suggestion is that these offices need more training, professional development and more technical support, tied into institutional research and management systems to be more effective. It follows that staff need, too, greater freedom to break from traditional routines to be able to innovate, and to reach out to faculty and other external constituencies to build the bridges needed to design practical experiences leading to student success.

Best Practices and Priorities for Change

Some specific ideas flowing from working groups include:

- Provide more information about practical experience tied to academic choices.
- Assist faculty in bringing practical experience into the classroom.
- Strengthen outreach to the larger community, especially alumni and potential employers to build internships.
- Create a system of benchmarks for students and advisors/counselors to measure performance.
- Create more integrated experiences for transfer students.
- Tie career services into first-year orientation, and redesign of the freshman experience.
- Require regular meetings of faculty, advisors/counselors and academic and student affairs directors, deans and provosts.
- Assign a career counselor, mentor to each entering student.
- Require practical experiences for all students by major or discipline.
- Realign resources to provide for more aggressive outreach and follow up to students, and better use of new media.
- Provide cross-training for advising/counseling staff.
- Make advising and counseling a requirement of graduation, integrated throughout the college experience.
- Tie civic learning directly to fields of study.
- Use more external mentors to provide students with career guidance.
- Integrate some services such as tutoring more closely with advising and counseling.
- Meet more often and coordinate more with school and two-year colleagues.
- Encourage presidents to make regular reports to boards of trustees on advising and counseling as an issue related strategically to mission accomplishment.

Some individuals stressed that students need to be “served where they are,” meaning to take into account that students are already working, and the opportunity to tie academic experiences directly to current work activity. Finally, several participants stressed that internships should not be required of every student, every year. However, there was a consensus that every student should have some integrated practical experience, and that civic education should be tied directly to fields of study and particular interests of students, as contrasted to only a general course requirement.

Four Ideas to Support Student Success

Accomplishing what needs to be done to make college more valuable to individuals and society may require taking a different perspective- one that is “student centered.” This means looking at the individual student, rather than the institution of higher learning, its structure and processes, as the key organizing principle.

Flowing from the symposium, HESIG suggests that colleges and universities consider the following ideas as a foundation for innovation in policy and practice centered on student success:

1. Upon matriculation, the university should assist every student prepare an explicit yet flexible **Plan for Success** for completing college. The plan will address not only academic success, but also the financial, social and physical needs of students. The plan, to be accomplished with support from faculty, advising and counseling staff, administrators, alumni, and other mentors and coaches, will be reviewed each semester, and updated annually, as a requirement of graduation.
2. Require paid internship experiences that generate academic credit for every student through stronger business/alumni partnerships. Beginning in the third year of study in a four- year sequence, every

student should be required to seek an appropriate internship or practical experience related to academic and career aspirations. The state, universities and businesses should create new **Regional Internship Centers**, to facilitate administration, coordination and certification of internships.

3. Help students demonstrate competence in attainment of communications abilities and workplace skills, and explore post-college plans. In the final year of study, each student should be assessed and counseled by the college regarding critical skill attainment, and should participate in an exit advising/counseling program regarding graduate/ professional study and career opportunity.
4. Prepare students for civic participation. Upper division students should take a course in his/her major degree program linking studies to components of civic responsibility.

These suggestions are not easy to implement, and in many cases would revolutionize financial and personnel resource management. But they should not diminish liberal learning, or make college more vocational. Instead they complement higher order abilities gained in college with real- world practical, workplace and problem solving skills, and provide students with pathways to succeed. They would help, too, in making college more affordable, by accelerating degree completion.

Excellent examples of strong academic and practical learning already exist in preparation of health professionals and teachers, none of whom can achieve a degree without hands-on experience. This especially makes good sense for so many students who are already working. Fortunately, student success initiatives are underway by the Secretary of Higher Education, Departments of Education and Labor, New Jersey Business and Industry Association, colleges and others to bridge this gap, but more needs to be done.

With a strong partnership among government, business and labor, and universities, New Jersey can make college more valuable to serve individuals aligned with the public good, by providing students with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in learning for a lifetime, to prepare for diverse jobs and careers, and to participate as citizens in a democratic society. Making NJ higher education a higher policy priority is an important step in helping to secure the blessings of liberty and equality in the Garden State.

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