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Healthy Skepticism about Polls on College Value



By Darryl Greer

The November 7, 2016 *Hechinger Report* featured a story [“Polls: Americans increasingly mistrustful of college costs, leadership and value,”](#) citing reputable research by Public Agenda, Gallup and others. But as with our recent national election polling experience, there is room to question some of poll findings.

For example, Stockton University survey research on New Jersey that drills down into college value and expected outcomes indicates that students and citizens strongly value college. When asked as a straight forward question to NJ citizens and to recent college grads: Is college worth the cost (rather than needed to succeed), responses are consistently in the 70–90% positive range.

Even though national and state polls indicate that about one-half of citizens surveyed view college as unaffordable and about two-thirds see

cost as a major barrier to access, cost is not the single most important factor in choosing a college according to Stockton research. Location and program offering are equally important factors, and more important than cost taken together.

Furthermore, the finding in recent national polls that fewer first-time students get into colleges of first choice may be somewhat misleading. Historically, 70–80 percent of all students get into college of first or second choice. Not only are most colleges and universities non-selective, but also, as recent University of Wisconsin research confirms, most students go to college very close to home, locally and regionally. It is unlikely that the “first-choice” finding has much significance within this context.

On the question of needed change and trust, a majority of citizens clearly think that colleges need to change business and educational practices to increase value. Yet in our NJ research, when asked who should be responsible for such change, a majority of citizens choose colleges themselves, and strongly favor colleges with support from businesses. College presidents and boards of trustees are trusted to make needed changes by a margin of up to 4–1 over state government leaders.

Finally, regarding college outcomes, national and state research strongly indicate that the top reason for choosing a college and top expected outcome is getting a good job and career start. Top expected skills that colleges should help develop are higher order writing, speaking and problem solving skills and abilities. Graduates tell us in NJ that a major needed change is more practical experience (internships) tied to academic studies to add value by reducing time to complete and cost of a degree, thereby helping to achieve the top expected outcome of getting a good job. Employers agree; but only about 20 percent of current NJ undergraduates (including freshmen), and 50 percent of NJ college graduates (including professional fields) say they have had such experience. This finding is especially troublesome, given that three-fourths of current students are already working while in college, and 40 percent of these are working over 30 hours per week.

Finally, even though in our 2014 survey of about 5000 undergraduates at over 30 colleges indicates that a major desired change to add value is

more intensive advising and counseling, with both colleges and students taking more responsibility, our 2016 NJ survey of recent college graduates indicates that about 30 percent of respondents say that academic advising and career counseling are unimportant to career success. Read together, closing the disconnect among colleges and students on shared responsibility for providing and seeking internship opportunities, as well as providing and taking advantage of intensive advising and counseling services may be a constructive means of achieving highly valued college outcomes.

The four Stockton University Polling Institute studies on college cost, value and outcomes 2013–16, focus groups summaries and reports are at: www.stockton.edu/hughescenter/hesig

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