

Public opinion in Minnesota on college readiness

Prepared by the College Readiness Consortium at the University of Minnesota
and the Minnesota Private College Council

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The importance of higher education for individuals and society continues to grow. Minnesotans see the impact of pursuing education after high school in how they are able to build careers and support their families. And the whole state benefits from the impact of a well-educated workforce, given the benefits for Minnesota's economy. The need for a well-educated workforce is projected to increase. While 68% of Minnesotans current have some postsecondary education, the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce estimates that postsecondary education will be required for 85 percent of new jobs that are created over the next five years.

More must be done to ensure that our children succeed in school — and even before school — so they graduate from high school and are prepared to succeed in higher education. Global competition requires it; 11 nations have a greater share of 25-34-year-olds with an associate degree or higher than Minnesota. And changing demographics pose new challenges, as students are increasingly from groups where college attendance and completion rates have historically been lower than the state average. As State Economist Tom Stinson was quoted saying in a recent Pioneer Press editorial, "we're not refilling the labor pool with the same level of skill that's leaving it."

A shared interest in this area led the College Readiness Consortium at the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Private College Council to jointly commission public opinion research on public attitudes toward higher education and college readiness. Given how important success in college is to our state's future, we wanted to better understand the public's views.

1. KEY RESULTS

- **Minnesotans say college readiness is a top priority.**

When asked if "the number one goal of high schools should be preparing almost all students to enter and succeed at some type of education after high school," 89% of respondents either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed, while only 11% somewhat disagreed or strongly disagreed.

The strength of conviction was notable, with 55% of respondents strongly agreeing that preparation for college should be a top priority, compared to 34% somewhat agreeing. Among those who disagreed, 8% somewhat disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed. And it is worth noting that the respondent's level of education did not affect their response to this question — respondents from all education levels believed that preparation for education after high school should be the number one priority of schools.

Clearly, Minnesotans want high school graduates to be prepared for more education. But for too many students, that's not the case. Based on current 4 year graduation rates, , 23.1% of today's 9th graders aren't expected to graduate from high schoolⁱ and of those who do and have taken ACT tests, 64% are found to not be ready academically in all four subject matter ACT test benchmarks.ⁱⁱ The question is how policymakers and education leaders can use the near-universal public support for the college readiness goal in high school to turn this consensus public aspiration into a reality.

- **Minnesotans are nearly evenly divided in their views about whether in the future a high school education alone will enable people to earn a decent living.**

When asked if “there will always be plenty of ways for people with only a high school education to make a decent living in Minnesota,” a majority of respondents (56%) disagreed. However, 44% of respondents either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

Interestingly, attitudes on this question are much less strongly held than on the question about the top priority of a high school education, with a far smaller share of respondents choosing the most committed responses — either strongly agreeing (11%) or strongly disagreeing (22%). In fact, the largest majority for this question can be found when the two middle options are combined; 67% of respondents chose a “somewhat” response, with 33% somewhat agreeing and 34% somewhat disagreeing.

Agreement with this statement varied with the education levels of the respondents. Among those respondents whose highest degree was a high school degree and those who did not graduate from high school, more than half (54%) *agreed* with the statement that there would always be plenty of ways for people with only a high school education to make a decent living in Minnesota, and 46% disagreed with this statement. Among respondents with some college, a college degree, or a graduate or professional degree, a majority (60%) disagreed with the statement. Looking just at those respondents with at least some graduate level education, 67% disagreed with the statement that there would always be plenty of ways for people with only a high school education to make a decent living.

These results indicate that a significant share of Minnesotans hold perceptions about future employment opportunities and wage earnings that are inconsistent with widely accepted

economic facts. The economic benefits of a postsecondary education are well-documented: compared to those with only a high school degree, people with some form of higher education have significantly higher lifetime earnings, substantially lower rates of unemployment, less reliance on public benefit programs, and healthier lifestyles.ⁱⁱⁱ As referenced above, a recent study from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce forecasts that 85% of all new jobs created in Minnesota in the next five years will require some form of higher education, and more than 70% of all jobs will require some form of higher education. In the 21st century, a high school degree will generally no longer be enough to provide a middle-class income;^{iv} the odds are high that those with only a high school degree or less will likely live in economic circumstances near the poverty level.^v

Given the undisputed economic benefits of higher education, it is troubling that a substantial share of Minnesotans hold perceptions about the value of higher education that seem to be, to some significant degree, out of alignment with economic realities of the 21st century economy.

- **Minnesotans think they know what high school students need to do to be ready for postsecondary education.**

When asked if “you are knowledgeable about the classes and tests that high schools students need to take today to be prepared for more education after high school,” 39% of respondents strongly agreed and another 44% somewhat agreed, while only 12% somewhat disagreed and 6% strongly disagreed.

This result is surprising, given the complexity of graduation requirements and college entrance requirements. In addition, we know that 73% of our respondents do not have children under age 18, let alone high school-age children, so many are not likely to be familiar with class and test expectations as a result of helping one of their own children. We are curious about how this result can be compared with what counselors and college access program staff would report regarding actual adult ability to help high school students with the academic requirements and non-academic preparation necessary for postsecondary education. This may be a situation where adults are over-confident in their knowledge and ability.

- **Among parents, finances are seen as the biggest obstacle keeping students from earning more education.**

The 216 parent respondents were told that “of today’s 9th grade students, half will not get any more education after their high school graduation,” and then were asked “what do you think is the biggest obstacle that keeps them from getting more education? A large majority of parent respondents (61%) stated that the biggest obstacle to higher education is financial, whether stated generally or tied to a specific concern such as debt or lack of knowledge about applying for financial aid. As one respondent said, “higher education requires a lot of finances and if people had the money to do it, then I think the desire is there. But many can’t afford higher

education. They don't want to go into debt to get it." Other obstacles given included family reasons (10%), lack of drive (9%) and teachers (3%).

This question gets at the heart of one of the most important policy questions facing our state; how will we ensure that enough students can afford to continue to pursue post-secondary education? From the perspective of our parent respondents, there are a number of different obstacles, but the one that looms largest is a financial barrier.

- **Most parents intend to save for their children's post-high school education**

Parents of school-age children were asked, "when each of your children finishes high school, about how much money do you realistically expect to have saved to help pay for their education after high school?" In response, 13% of parents said nothing, 31% said less than \$10,000, 39% said between \$10,000 and \$50,000 and 17% said more than \$50,000.

This widespread intention to save, however, is not likely to come to fruition. Among the parent respondents, 87% said they expected to save money to pay for college. But we know this is highly unlikely: A national survey of parents of current college students finds that no more than 31% are using some form of savings to pay for college.^{vi} (14% of parents said they are using a College Savings Plan (529), 13% are using other savings or investments and the share withdrawing retirement savings is 4%.)

Looking for Minnesota-specific data, we don't have a similar source that breaks out savings so clearly. But there's a clear disconnect here as well. A recent Minnesota survey sponsored by the Minnesota Office of Higher Education that was conducted with Minnesota college students and their parents^{vii} found that 43% of their families hadn't planned financially for college. That contrasts with our survey of parents, where intent to save was so high, with only 13% predicting they wouldn't be saving for college.

2. RELATED RESULTS FROM THE MINNESOTA PRIVATE COLLEGE COUNCIL

Both the College Readiness Consortium at the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Private College Council have gathered other relevant research related to college readiness. Here is a recent example from the Council.

When it comes to building college knowledge, we know that families have a strong impulse to rely on colleges as sources of information, as we found in a proprietary Minnesota Private College Council public opinion survey conducted in 2009 by Strategic Resource Partners and Hardwick-Day. This research involved surveys conducted with a randomized selection of 400 Minnesota 12th graders, 404 parents of 12th graders and 403 parents of middle schoolers.

- We asked families about the “best sources” of information for learning how to make higher education affordable. We found that among parents of high school seniors in Minnesota, the strongest preference was for information from colleges: 43% preferred hearing from colleges compared to 30% from high school counselors, 18% from reference materials and 12% from government sources.
- We also heard from parents of middle school age students that they realize that they need to be thinking about college readiness early. When asked about the appropriateness of middle school as the time to start thinking about college plans, 52% said it was too late, with only 11% saying it was too early and 35% saying it was the right time.
- Another relevant result involved high school seniors. Between 21% and 28% did not believe that there are grants based on financial need to help make college affordable (21% didn’t believe that for public universities, 28% didn’t believe it for private colleges). When we over-sampled students from communities of color, both of those percentages grew — to 39% for publics and 42% for privates. This is particularly concerning, in light of the extensive national research documenting how a lack of knowledge about the available resources for financing college discourages students from pursuing college.

3. METHODOLOGY

The new public opinion research on college readiness was conducted by the Minnesota Center for Survey Research at the University of Minnesota, which surveyed of 804 Minnesota adults from October to December 2011. This was an omnibus survey in which the College Readiness Consortium and the Minnesota Private College Council (along with other organizations) provided questions to be included. The sample included both landline and cell phone interviews.

Respondents were told that “education after high school” was meant to include anything from attending a technical school to completing a four-year bachelor’s degree. Two questions were asked of all 804 respondents and two questions were asked only of the 216 respondents who had children currently under age 18. The question regarding the reasons why many 9th graders do not pursue post-high school education was open-ended, with the results coded into categories.

Though the survey sample over-represented older Minnesotans, when looking at questions by age group, there was no statistically significant relationship between age and answers to survey questions.

The questions and responses for each are included in section 4 below.

4. QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES ON COLLEGE READINESS

This is the text that was used with respondents in the college readiness surveying, along with totals for the various responses. Note that responses to QE4A are categorized in appendix A.

For the next questions, 'education after high school' is meant to include anything from attending a technical school to completing a four year bachelor's degree.

I'd like to know if you agree or disagree with the following statements.

QE1. "There will always be plenty of ways for people with only a high school education to make a decent living in Minnesota."

Would you say you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?

of

Respondents %

85	(11)	Strongly agree
265	(33)	Somewhat agree
275	(34)	Somewhat disagree
177	(22)	Strongly disagree
3		Don't know
0		Refused to answer

QE2. "The number one goal of high schools should be preparing almost all students to enter and succeed at some type of education after high school."

(IF NEEDED: Would you say you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?)

of

Respondents %

441	(55)	Strongly agree
277	(34)	Somewhat agree
61	(8)	Somewhat disagree

23	(3)	Strongly disagree
1		Don't know
0		Refused to answer

QE3. “You are knowledgeable about the classes and tests that high school students need to take today to be prepared for more education after high school.”

(IF NEEDED: Would you say you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?)

of

Respondents %

305	(39)	Strongly agree
343	(44)	Somewhat agree
90	(12)	Somewhat disagree
49	(6)	Strongly disagree
14		Don't know
2		Refused to answer

QE4. Do you have any children under the age of 18?

of

Respondents %

216	(27)	Yes
587	(73)	No (IF NO, GO TO NEXT SECTION)
0		Don't know (IF DK, GO TO NEXT SECTION)
1		Refused to answer (IF RA, GO TO NEXT SECTION)

QE4a. (IF YES) Of today's 9th grade students, half will not get any more education after their high school graduation. What do you think is the biggest obstacle that keeps them from getting more education?

(SEE APPENDIX A)

QE4b. (IF YES) when each of your children finishes high school, about how much money do you realistically expect to have saved to help pay for their education after high school . . . nothing, less than \$10,000, between \$10,000 and \$50,000 or more than \$50,000?

of

Respondents %

28	(13)	Nothing
64	(31)	Less than \$10,000
80	(39)	Between \$10,000 and \$50,000
36	(17)	More than \$50,000
6		Don't know
1		Refused to answer
588		Not applicable

APPENDIX A

**QE4a BIGGEST OBSTACLE THAT KEEPS HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES
FROM GETTING MORE EDUCATION**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1 Finances	59	7.4	27.9	27.9
	2 Cost of more education	59	7.3	27.8	55.7
	3 Financial aid	3	.4	1.6	57.3
	5 Don't want to go into debt	1	.1	.5	57.7
	7 Future job concerns	2	.2	.9	58.7
	10 Family reasons	22	2.7	10.3	68.9
	11 Lack of role models/bad influences	6	.8	2.9	71.8
	12 Teachers	7	.9	3.3	75.1
	14 Lack of info/don't know how to apply for financial aid	7	.8	3.2	78.3
	17 Personal choice	5	.6	2.3	80.7
	18 Not interested in a field that requires more education	5	.6	2.1	82.8
	19 No desire/lack of drive/laziness	20	2.4	9.2	92.0
	77 Other	17	2.1	8.0	100.0
	Total valid	212	26.4	100.0	
Missing	88 DK	3	.4		
	System	589	73.2		
	Total missing	592	73.6		
Total		804	100.0		

ⁱ Minnesota Department of Education Data Center statewide graduation rates, downloaded May 15, 2012, from <http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp>

ⁱⁱ "The Condition of College and Career Readiness 2011: Minnesota," ACT, Inc., 2011, p. 4

ⁱⁱⁱ "Education Pays 2010," The College Board

^{iv} "Career Clusters," Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, 2011

^v Minnesota Private College Research Foundation analysis of U.S. Census data for Minnesota and federal poverty guidelines

^{vi} "How America Pays for College," SalieMae, 2011, p. 17

^{vii} "How Families Finance Postsecondary Education Attendance in Minnesota," Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2010, p. 53