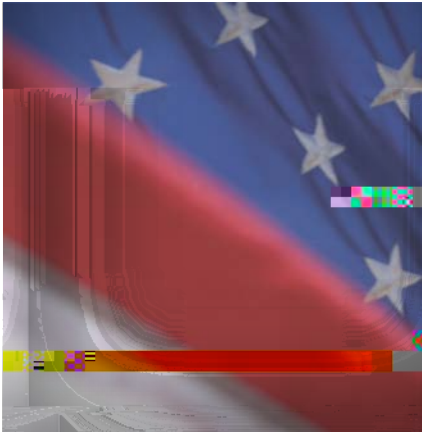




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Recently, many studies have focused on the value of a college education. To government, its value depends on return for public investment; for businesses, the focus is on critical thinking, communication, and workplace skills developed to ensure productive workers; for individuals, the value correlates with getting a good job, making a living, and enjoying a higher quality of life.

This year, HESIG, in conjunction with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy the Stockton Polling Institute and with grant support from the Educational Testing Service (ETS) Center for Advocacy and Philanthropy, conducted a project entitled “Finding Solutions and Building Public Trust in an Era of Change.” It consisted of two executive roundtables and a scientific survey of more than 800 New Jersey residents, focusing on the value of a college education.



With these distinctions about measuring the value of college as a public and private good, growing public concern about the cost of college, and growing personal debt to help pay for it, defining the value of a college education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a challenging exercise. Indeed, about one-half of New Jersey residents surveyed by HESIG during 2013 and 2014 believe that college is unaffordable. Roughly 70% see cost as the principal barrier to entering or completing college.

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Figure 1









consideration. Clearly, life circumstances affect choices about college attendance, but geography seems to be a paramount consideration, along with program offering.

Most students attend a college within about 150-200 miles of their homes, nationally. Yet it seems that we have built much higher education policy, especially regarding student financial aid, around a false assumption that there is a large and mobile national student market.

These factors hint that policy solutions stemming from a national perspective about college access, affordability and completion challenges, may be better found at the local and regional levels, closer to where student decisions are made, and where educational service is delivered.

Figure 8

There are many flaws in this assumption, starting with the notion that more comparative computer-based information, without appropriate professional guidance will help first generation and underrepresented student populations. Little

Figure 9, concerning actions that can be taken to reduce time to degree completion seem both to complement and reinforce this suggestion. Greater ability to transfer credits from one college to another, and more information about job and career possibilities are top responses. This seems to make sense, especially because jobs for college graduates are likely to be generated by the local and regional economy, as with college access.

These observations, perhaps reflected by the HESIG poll, if not directly supported by the data, hint that we might need to be concerned about growing interest in college "report card" and "rating" initiatives. This movement, in the name of accountability, seems to proliferate from the assumption that more comparative, consumer-driven information about college program quality, price and effectiveness, will lead to better consumer decisions; and that these choices by individuals will lead to better outcomes, including better college performance and improved affordability and completion rates.

With the help of many individuals since 2012, including insightful advice of the HESIG Policy Steering Council, HESIG has laid a strong foundation on which to recommend an action agenda.

This fall the Council will advise on how to achieve these “next steps,” including expanding the conversation through additional “executive roundtables,” engaging each segment of New Jersey higher education; and seeking input from key policy makers often overlooked in a strategy for change college and university trustees.

*The HESIG Policy Steering Council consists of top state and national higher education policy advocates, business executives, elected officials, college presidents, administrators, students and trustees. Its membership and charge can be found on the HESIG webpage.*

*Questions and frequencies for the HESIG College Value Poll are available at*