Difficult Dialogues, Rewarding Solutions:

Results of an Initiative to Engage Stakeholder Groups in Solving the U.S. Human Capital Challenge

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Introduction[1]

In recent years a narrative has emerged—led in part by the President of the United States and key funders of research in higher education and public policy—that the U.S. is falling behind other nations in investing in a college-educated citizenry, and that without a dedicated response, the nation will become increasingly less competitive in the global economy. Patrick Callan of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education stated this clearly in the introduction to *Measuring Up 2006*, noting that:

> The expansion of a knowledge-based global economy has raised the bar for higher education in the United States—particularly in light of the rapid growth of college opportunities in many other nations…the comparative educational advantage of these countries rests with their younger adults and workers. As the baby boomers in this country reach retirement age, a key challenge for the United States—and each of the 50 states—will lie in our collective ability to improve rapidly the educational opportunities and achievement of our younger Americans. (2006, p. 10)

This need was given a specific benchmark by Lumina Foundation for Education in its "Making Opportunity Affordable" initiative, a $25 million grant program launched in 2007 with the objective of significantly raising college attainment rates in the United States to the point where 60% of the adult population would have, by the year 2025, "higher quality degrees or credentials" that have "well-defined and transparent learning outcomes which provide clear pathways to further education and employment" ("Strategic Direction," 2010). A related goal has

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been expressed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which aims to double the numbers of low-income adults who earn a college degree or credential with genuine marketplace value by age 26 (“Topics,” 2010). Similarly, in early 2009, President Obama announced a commitment to

> ensuring that America will regain its lost ground and have the highest proportion of students graduating from college in the world by 2020” and that “all Americans should be prepared to enroll in at least one year of higher education or job training to better prepare our workforce for a 21st century economy. (“Education,” 2010).

The Midwestern Higher Education Compact was one of several organizations funded by Lumina Foundation through its “Making Opportunity Affordable” portfolio to conduct applied research in an effort to generate what the Foundation identified as “evidence of scalable, powerful improvements in institutional performance that can advance, accelerate, and institutionalize a productivity agenda.” It was with this objective that a strategy and process was developed to engage diverse groups of stakeholders in honest conversation about the human capital challenge facing the United States; specifically, the need to expand significantly the proportion of American adults with valuable postsecondary credentials in an era of severe fiscal constraints and without any reduction in quality of postsecondary education.

Our work occurred in two phases: 1) a policy summit held in late 2008 built around an activity we called “difficult dialogues,” wherein participants were organized into 12 discussion groups of 12 to 15 participants to define further the particulars of the challenge and to identify innovative strategies and solutions; and 2) a series of similar dialogue groups held in each of 12 Midwestern states between April and December of 2009. This paper addresses selected themes that emerged from our work, with a focus on phase two of the initiative in the individual states, and outlines the implications of our findings for higher education policy.

Theoretical Framework and Methodological Foundation

While stakeholder theory, identification, analysis, and management is relatively prominent in the private sector and in commercial arenas (Rutterford, Upton, & Kodwani, 2006; Donaldson & Preston, 1995), considerably less research is conducted on stakeholders in the public and non-profit areas, particularly with regard to higher education (Chapleo & Simms, 2010). Stakeholder theory has gained popularity since the mid-1980s as a better way to describe, understand, and manage businesses (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Stakeholder theory represents a departure from the shareholder model, which sees managerial efforts as being guided solely by what best benefits shareholders, to a view that other groups surrounding a business exist that have a stake in its activities and thus must be considered in planning and decision making. The stakeholder model asks two primary questions: 1) who are the stakeholders; and 2) what "stake" or potential benefit does each group of stakeholders have regarding the company's success? By better understanding its stakeholders, managers can respond in ways that lead to improved performance and sustainability for the company or organization (Donaldson & Preston).

Stakeholder identification and stakeholder participation is critical to strategic planning, to crafting strong policy (Bryson, 2004), and to identifying problems to be solved (Freeman, 1984). Within higher education, stakeholder identification and participation is especially important because success is "often reliant on an even broader range of 'customers' than is the case in many private sector organizations" (Chapleo & Simms, 2010, p. 19). Although subjectivity may interfere with decisions regarding who gets classified as a "stakeholder," assessing the needs and opinions of individuals and groups with a vested interest in the activities of an organization can be valuable as a means of gathering information and in the development of new ideas and projects.

The majority of work conducted on public or stakeholder perception on higher education has been conducted within the policy realm, as opposed to the academic realm. Additionally, most of the information known about the public's perception of higher education has been gathered through surveys. Doyle (2005) writes that the extant "literature on public opinion and higher education consists almost entirely of reports generated from surveys of the public, either nationally or from an individualized state" (p. 370). According to Doyle, the two most prominent sources of knowledge of the public's perception of higher education include the American Council on Education and the collaborative research conducted between Public Agenda and both the California Higher Education Policy Center and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (Doyle, 2005).

Within this research, most of the findings can be generalized to opinions about the importance of and the cost of higher education (Immerwahr & Farkas, 1993; Immerwahr & Johnson, 2010); however, very little research engages the public in identifying the best means through which to solve some of the larger problems facing higher education. Indeed, since most public opinion research is in the format of surveys, there is little discussion around these topics within the public sphere; Heck (2004) writes that "in the past, quantitative methods of analysis were almost used exclusively in conducting policy research—often addressing questions related to the efficiency of delivering services or monitoring the impact of a policy in bringing about some desired outcome" (p. 214).

Qualitative methods are used by political scientists and other policy researchers in an effort to discover, describe, and understand complex systems, cultures, and political and social relationships (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). According to Heck (2004), the "focus of qualitative inquiry on understanding the meaning of events from those individuals who engaged in them is

unsurpassed for purposes of doing policy research" (p. 216). Qualitative research attempts to build theories, rather than test theories, and therefore favors a more flexible approach of inquiry that can evolve as more data is collected. The respectability of using focus groups to help answer social scientific research questions has increased in recent years (Kahan, 2001). Such groups bring together differing groups of stakeholders to discuss policy issues in an honest format and help researchers identify areas of stakeholder agreement. Focus groups are advantageous because they allow for a verbal interchange between participants about the issues they feel are important in regards to the policy topic; additionally, the focus group setting may cause participants to "think about issues in ways that they might not if they were interviewed alone" (Heck, 2004, p. 225). While the ability to generalize the results of focus groups is somewhat limited statistically, it has been found that studies involving various stakeholder groups help gain public confidence in the policy outcomes from such research (Kahan, 2001).

Our goal was to gather the most information-rich data on the public's perception of increasing the proportion of Americans with a postsecondary credential. To accomplish this task, we chose a theory-based strategy of sampling to capture insights from key higher education stakeholder groups. Theoretical sampling was used to select participants who "provide the greatest potential for manifesting the theoretical propositions being studied" (Heck, 2004, p. 221). We used a cross-stakeholder design for focus groups in phase one of the research and a single stakeholder design for the focus groups conducted for phase two. Homogeneous focus groups designed to capture the ideas of different stakeholders can reduce the sloganeering and posturing that might take place in a group of more heterogeneous individuals discussing a challenging policy issue (Kahan, 2001). Our study, therefore, included K-12 teachers, state legislators, college faculty, employers, recent college graduates, and current college students.

Focus groups were conducted in a semi-structured manner utilizing a choice work framework, wherein participants were provided with background materials and a guiding set of questions to frame the conversations. The collective decision-making process, known as *choice work* or *deliberation,* engages civic actors in crafting decisions based on what they view to be most valuable. Matthews (2005) noted that collective decision making in a pluralistic democracy seldom ends in total agreement; however, choice work conducted with and by citizens can provide researchers and policymakers with a general sense of direction, or minimally, some insight into the extent to which people will engage in problem solving. The reflective judgments that emerge in policy focus groups can "give rise to what might be called a 'public voice,' which is more coherent than the cacophony of special interest pleadings that fill the universe" (Matthews, 2005, p. 73). As a result, Matthews (2005) continues, "public deliberation is more dialogic than logic, more discursive than 'an exercise of pure reason.' The power of the spoken word, grounded in collective experiences, forms practical wisdom" (p. 75).

Procedure and Participants

As noted earlier, our study was conducted in two phases. Phase one consisted of a policy summit held in late 2008 and phase two was comprised of a series of dialogue groups held around the Midwest between April and December of 2009. The policy summit was advertised as an opportunity to engage a diverse group of higher education stakeholders in honest conversation about the need for new strategies to significantly expand the pool of human capital necessary for the region and the nation to remain vibrant and economically competitive. The centerpiece of the policy summit was the engagement of the approximately 200 participants in an activity called "difficult dialogues." The dialogues involved diverse groups of 12 to15 individuals in conversation about the human capital challenges facing the United States and the need to

redesign public policies and institutional practices to produce more college graduates at a lower overall cost with no reduction in quality.

We worked with the not-for-profit group Public Agenda to develop and facilitate the dialogue process. Public Agenda is a nationally known, non-partisan research and civic engagement organization that has engaged policymakers and citizens groups since the mid 1970s in dialogue to define, understand, and tackle important public policy issues. A key tool used by Public Agenda in its engagement efforts is its use of a choice work process, similar to that described by Matthews (2005), wherein three different possible perspectives or views on an issue or problem are presented as a way to structure conversation. This deliberative process has been employed by groups such as the National Issues Forum and by the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good in its "Access to Democracy" project around educational attainment and the purpose of higher education (Daun-Barnett & Bowman, 2005). We worked with two representatives of Public Agenda to develop a draft choice work framework, conduct a pilot dialogue group, revise the framework accordingly, and recruit and train dialogue group facilitators. The resulting choice work presented three different approaches to the issue, with a focus on institutions, students, and systems.

The dialogue groups were comprised in relatively equal proportion of state legislators and other legislative and executive branch officials; higher education institution representatives; higher education system and association representatives; and a mix of students, business sector representatives, retirees, and representatives of non-profit groups. Dialogue groups were presented with a four-page document that described the three approaches and provided examples of how the problem might be viewed within each of the three contexts. Participants were given time to read and study the document and asked to align themselves with one of the three

approaches as a starting point for discussion. The first two hours of discussion were devoted to framing the problem and coming to some consensus about its particulars. The second two hours were devoted to identifying solutions from both a policy and programmatic perspective at the institutional, system, and state levels. Solutions were organized around a thought experiment: "Suppose you had to increase the proportion of adults in the United States with a college degree by 20 percentage points by 2025 with no increase in funding and no decrease in quality. How would you do it?"

During the second phase of the research, the researchers conducted theoretical group interviews which, according to Morse (2007), "are intended to provide the final missing pieces of the puzzle, polish data collection, complete processes of saturation, or provide any other information that the researcher requires" (p. 241). Each dialogue group in phase two was structured to include individuals from a single targeted stakeholder group, which contrasted with the strategy used at the policy summit, where groups were intentionally assembled to facilitate cross-sector conversation. The groups were comprised of faculty, undergraduate students, business leaders, recent college graduates, administrators, presidents and system leaders, continuing education directors, community organization leaders, K-12 teachers, graduate students, and two groups of state legislators.

A total of 156 individuals participated in the phase two dialogues, which lasted between two and three hours. Group size ranged from five to 28 members, with 156 total participants and an average group size of 13. Each of the 12 group discussions was facilitated by members of the research team. Focus groups were conducted in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. As in phase one, the participants were given the choice work document and then asked to choose one of the

three approaches to answer the question of how to increase college degree attainment with no increase in cost and no reduction in quality.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data from the phase one dialogues conducted at the November 2008 policy summit were analyzed by Public Agenda in consultation with staff from the Midwestern Higher Education Compact. A summary of the dialogue process and themes that emerged from the policy summit conversations were presented in a monograph published by the Midwestern Higher Education Compact in early 2009 (Immerwahr, 2010). The remainder of this section describes the data collection and analysis process for the dialogues conducted in each of 12 states during phase two of the research. The phase two dialogue groups generated over 30 hours of audio recordings. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 550 pages of data. During each of the dialogues the discussion was documented on flip charts and posted on room walls as a running public record of the conversation; these notes were also transcribed and included in the data and helped to fill gaps in the audio recording. Discussion facilitators' private notes were also transcribed, as were email exchanges between participants in advance of the one of the dialogues.

As noted earlier, participants were provided with a choice work document that outlined three possible approaches to the issue and provided examples of questions associated with each approach. The three approaches and their associated questions were used as a guide for the initial coding process. These *a priori* constructs helped to focus the conversation, constrain irrelevant or tangential information, and sharpen external validity (Pandit, 1996). This process of coding—known as *selective coding*—reflects the development of "a core category, propositions, or hypotheses" (Merriam, 2009, p. 200). Since the primary discussions were related to the three

larger approaches, this method of selective coding was appropriate as a framework around which to conceptualize and build out from our initial coding structure.

While selective coding was initially used, the researchers also used open coding—"tagging any unit of data that might be relevant to the study" (Merriam, 2009, p. 200) to develop new codes that were not well integrated into the three approaches. A "unit of data" is defined by Merriam (2009) as "any meaningful (or potentially meaningful) segment of data…small as a word a participant uses to describe a feeling or phenomenon, or as large as several pages of field notes describing a particular incident" (p. 176). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), units should be heuristic and stand by themselves, "meaning they should be interpretable in the absence of additional information" (p. 345). Strauss and Corbin (1990) explained that open coding "fractures the data and allows one to identify some categories, their properties and dimensional locations" (p. 97). For open codes, the actual language used by the participants informed the code and category labels, known as *in vivo* codes. The researchers also used axial coding—the "process of relating categories and properties to each other" (Merriam, 2009, p. 200), after the open and selective coding processes commenced.

The researchers reviewed several transcripts together before beginning to code transcripts individually. Then, to establish an acceptable level of inter-rater or inter-coder reliability, each researcher separately coded a large portion of one of the dialogue transcripts. The coders reviewed and discussed the coding and determined that they had approximately 95% agreement between them. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend the use of this process until approximately 90% agreement is achieved to develop sound inter-rater reliability (p. 64). Next, the researchers coded two states' data and then came together with the entire research team to review and discuss the coding structure and recalibrate the coding scheme. The remaining ten

states were then coded individually by two of the researchers. After the completion of the coding, the research team met again to review the coding process and results.

According to Wiener (2007), there are numerous advantages to using a team approach to coding, including a decrease in inhibition to ascribe early codes based on personal fears of inaccuracy, increases in coding precision due to discussion and debate of the identification of codes, and greater ease in moving toward abstract concepts. After using the team coding approach, the research team organized the data into themes. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative researchers build toward theory by gleaning "bits and pieces of information from interviews, observations, or documents" that are "combined and ordered into larger themes as the researcher works from the particular to the general" (p. 15). The researchers employed a grounded theory approach to their investigation; in other words, the researchers did not impose a set of research questions upon the data but instead allowed for themes to emerge from the discussion questions and conversation. This inductive process allows researchers to "gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses as in positivist research" (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). Both codes and themes were sorted and reviewed for similarities and differences until the point of saturation, the point at which additional analysis does not offer any additional insight (Creswell, 2007).

Findings

As reported by Immerwahr (2010) in his report of the phase one research, participants across the policy summit dialogue groups communicated a shared sense of urgency of the problem given the demographic challenges facing the United States and the pace of progress in educational attainment of other countries compared to the U.S. Participants also agreed that there were no easy answers to the problem given the state of the nation's finances and the budget

deficits faced by many of the states. Participants noted that it was time to move past blaming others in order to develop systematic approaches to the problem; however, there was considerably less consensus on benchmarks to measure progress and demonstrable uneasiness with the idea of applying “business models” to higher education and of using related terms such as “productivity,” “efficiency,” and “return on investment” in discussion.

The policy summit dialogue generated a wide variety of proposed solutions that were focused primarily at the student level and that can be organized into four primary categories or themes. Theme 1 focused on improving college readiness to reduce the need for remediation and promote student success. Proposed solutions addressed areas such as increased rigor in the high school curriculum; better alignment of the curriculum to college admissions standards; earlier identification of remedial needs; and improved counseling and advising. Theme 2 focused on improving retention of current college students. Proposed solutions addressed areas such as increased intensity and intrusiveness of advising in the first year; enhanced mentoring from faculty and staff; making curriculum more “relevant” to student interests and career objectives; and providing incentives to students to encourage progress and completion, including even monetary awards.

Theme 3 focused on the creation of integrated P-20 systems in the states. Proposed solutions addressed areas such as expansion of accelerated learning opportunities; improved matching of postsecondary programs to local and regional workforce needs; improved coordination among different K-12 and higher education entities; and differentiating institutions and curbing “mission creep.” Theme 4 focused on using incentives and business models to encourage innovation and objective-oriented efforts. Proposed solutions addressed areas such as rewarding faculty for mentoring and for excellent teaching; using data to drive improvement;

appropriating funds to public institutions partly in response to success in meeting completion goals; and encouraging and rewarding innovative approaches to teaching, learning, advising, and institutional management.

The participants in the state focus groups held in phase two also expressed an interest in moving toward solutions even though a general consensus on next steps was not reached. As with the policy summit participants, we noted a general agreement on the urgency of the issue and the need to make progress on multiple fronts. While similar themes were heard during the state groups as were heard at the policy summit, including improved high school guidance counseling and enhanced academic rigor of the high school curriculum, particularly in the senior year, there were some notable new narratives that emerged. These included a suggestion that colleges admit only those students who have a better than average chance of being successful and commit to seeing them succeed, not just enroll; an exhortation that colleges focus on the retention and graduation of their current students first before enrolling new learners; and a recommendation for accelerated remedial coursework that is completed over the summer or that students complete concurrently with other “college level” courses in their chosen major or program.

Themes that emerged at the institutional level included improved course selection to match more directly students’ academic and professional aspirations; expanded relationships with business and other entities related to curriculum advisement, internships, early hiring options, and opportunities; better information on why students leave; improved utilization of technology for common courses; a shift in focus from class completions to competencies that can be demonstrated in a variety of ways; and providing a “no-frills” option for students who are looking for a higher education without the myriad “amenities” that have contributed to the

expansion of college costs. System level themes that emerged included better coordination within and between educational sectors; improved mobility of students among institutions; outreach to “stop outs” and accommodation of varying enrollment patterns; more inter-institutional cooperation and less competition; and maximizing current system capacity before expanding individual institutions.

Given the scope of the project and the multiplicity of findings, the remainder of this section will focus on themes related to the choice work “approach on students,” which received by far the most “votes” from participants when asked to align themselves with one of the three approaches for discussion purposes. Not surprisingly, students also factored most prominently in the discussion of the costs of higher education and in the discussion of possible solutions to the human capital challenge facing the U.S.

The narrative that emerged most prominently across the focus groups was that a significant proportion of students are simply unprepared for college and that this unpreparedness has academic, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. Institutions often admit students who require significant support in order to succeed, but institutions then either fail to provide that support or they have yet to identify effective, affordable strategies for helping students to manage the transition to college and ultimately to complete their academic programs. Parents were seen as insufficiently involved, advising and counseling were thought to be largely absent or ineffective, and students were described as challenged developmentally to make choices in a system that regularly presents decision points regarding where, what, and how to study—decisions that bring significant consequences if one changes his or her mind or life circumstances require an alteration of plans. Students’ lack of readiness to engage in the complex decision-making process required to “choose the right college” or postsecondary option was thought to be complicated by

their general lack of academic preparedness, their limited access to good advising, and parents', family members', and peers' narrow understanding of the college choice process and what it takes to be successful in college. Examples of these themes are illuminated in the findings below.

Under-preparedness for College

Although a few participants believed that efforts to prepare high school students for college were improving, far more participants expressed frustration that a student's successful graduation from high school did not guarantee that they were academically prepared for college. As one participant shared,

> …it seems to me that the best transition we could have would be graduating students from high school [who] can read with comprehension…write effectively…communicate orally and have quantitative skills. And if they have those, whatever subject matters they go into, they will be prepared. If they don't have those, just because they've memorized a lot of things about the subject matter, doesn't mean they can actually work within it.

Another participant concurred: "generally speaking, a bunch of people who are first time, full time students don't make it past the first or second semester because of academic preparation. They arrive at the door not able to do the work." Unfortunately this concern applied even to students with good high school GPAs. It was perceived that many high schools lacked academic rigor and, therefore, did not guarantee students' preparation for college academics. High school graduates' limited skills in reading comprehension, math and writing were identified as key concerns.

Participants suggested a variety of solutions, including increasing high school graduation requirements in an effort to address the lack of rigor, particularly in the senior year. Others believed a viable solution was to have a variety of access points for students to enter based on

their goals and abilities. As one participant stated, "…I don't think our time should be spent on remediating students. I think we should be helping them find other directions that they should be going in." Many others agreed, as this participant expressed,

> There's far too many students coming to the four-year (institutions) that aren't prepared (and) that take that remediation. It costs the universities more, it costs (the students) more. If we could show that the community college is a way to for certain students to succeed on an even playing field that's right for them…what's right for everyone isn't right for them.

One legislator described this commitment within her state,

> We're trying to gently nudge people, and sometimes not too gently, to the place in the system where they're most likely to be successful. Always having access points along the way, so you can go anywhere you want to, work harder. So there's always an access point, but it may not be where you wanted to start.

Despite the strong agreement that remedial courses were a costly and ineffective solution to students' under-preparedness, a few participants believed that students should not be punished for what the system couldn't provide, as evidenced by this participant's comment,

> I am a product of that remedial math course at (state university) and it did help me because our math teacher in senior high school wanted to talk about nothing but sports. So you did have people fall through the cracks that need that remedial (work) somewhere and not all high schools are there.

The problem was also more complex than academic underpreparedness, but concerns were also expressed for their emotional preparedness and aspirations for the college experience. As one participant shared,

> [there's] not much emphasis on…students emotional development, preparedness developmentally. One of the things that I've noticed with the students coming into undergrad is that no matter how good their grades are, if they're not emotionally prepared to deal with the rigors of college, then that's what ultimately causes them to fail. So I think…one of the things that came to mind was better collaboration between campus units, talking about student affairs, academic affairs, working hand in hand in ensuring not only academic success but the overall development of the student.

Our analysis illuminated a near consensus across participants of a concern for the underpreparedness of high school graduates. At face value this may sound like "blaming the victim"—the student—instead of identifying ways to change higher education to better meet the needs of students. While this is a fair critique, we also heard many participants' comments as a simple identification of the problems faced by students who have participated in an educational system that has failed them rather than blame.

It should also be noted that the construction of the forced choice exercise had many participants believing they were picking what they perceived to be the most important focus area; as this participant shared, "I picked the second one [focus on the student], because it's hard for me to pick institutions or systems over students, and I just sort of, my knee jerk reaction was to go to what you could do to address the student situation first."

As one participant stated, many solutions aren't

> …really getting to the root of the problem, which is catching kids up really early on, like with Head Start programs, really good teachers and, you know, building students' reading comprehension and mathematics and all that core stuff at the beginning, instead of trying to catch kids up later on, which costs a lot of money.

Even when response systems and institutional approaches were discussed, they most often remained connected to a focus on what was best for the student, indicating the overwhelming focus on students was predominant even within other approaches.

College Aspirations

Many of the issues surrounding student's lack of emotional and academic readiness for college were closely connected to student's delayed development of or limited college aspirations. As one participant stated,

> I think that if people have…some kind of idea what they could do or what they like, that they would be more likely to go to college and pursue higher education, because I think that there's a lot of people that just don't go to college because they don't know what they're gonna do their first year and want to get out and, like, figure out what they're gonna do with their lives.

Participants believed that instilling students with the aspirations to attend college was important and needed to occur much earlier than high school. It was suggested that those advising students needed to stop making higher education seem like an option but instead, "phase two of schooling." As one participant stated, students need to be socialized that it is unacceptable *not* to attend college. One example provided by a participant involves one high school that has partnered with an area college to create a "College Go Week," where all high school students will focus on something that has to do with college, with seniors completing college applications. Most of the colleges will also waive application fees during that week. As one participant stated,

> Students need to start thinking about going to college, at the latest by middle school. And it's much more than academic preparation. We have to somehow–and, again, this is hard

> because I don't know the exact mechanism for doing this, we have to reach not only the child, but the child's parents and the child's peers.

Many concurred that family and peers played an important role in shaping students' college aspirations. As one participant shared,

> In my family when I was raised it wasn't a question of are you going on to higher education. It was where are you going for higher education and what will be your vocation. What will be something that you do? We raised our four children the very same way. It was a mindset at home and if you don't wanna go to a four-year institution then pick a profession and educate yourself.

While instilling these values and providing access points may be a good solution, without models who can encourage an understanding of the value of education the problem will continue. One participant expressed his concern, "They have no model in their life that says, if I go to tech college, I can get a good job. They don't – they just don't see the connection." Participants discussed the importance of schools working with families to create a "college friendly" environment in the home. One participant described it as "recruiting the entire family." In some situations this can include assisting with basic literacy and language for family members in addition to education about college and the application process. Unfortunately, many participants believed that few families truly understood what was expected of their children in order for them to attend college:

> there's very little conversation in the high school with the parent, so even the parent may not have ever gone to college, but they could understand if somebody sat down with them and said, 'Look, in order for your kid to go to school, they need four years of English. They need three years of math. You've got to help us force'–but nobody says that to

> parents. They have no – you know, we talk to parents all the time, and _____ 'I want my kid to go to school.' And it's like, 'Well, they didn't take enough English.'

Lack of Advising and Counseling

Many of the issues identified with college aspirations and choice were attributed to poor advising. Participants stated a variety of concerns that high school advisors and counselors were not adequately advising students for the transition to college, as stated by one participant, "The counselors and advisors focus on getting the student out of high school versus getting them ready for college. And that is a consistent complaint throughout all of the high schools in our district…" Another participant concurred, saying, "…even if that means taking an easier route. So unless the student is highly motivated and says, 'No, I want to take another year of math, or I want to take another year of lab science,' it just doesn't happen."

Concerns were expressed that students were not advised to use their senior year to take advanced classes or to explore academic interests and skills that could assist students in becoming "more focused on their future and what they're going to do while they're in college." Instead, some believed, there was too much focus on extracurricular activities and not enough on the connection between how their time is spent and what they may want to do in college. As one participant stated,

> I think it's more that students need to see a connect--because a lot of times students, especially in my high school, they took classes that just got them through high school so that they could learn about other extracurricular activities, and then there are those students who take the AP classes, even if they're not quite sure on their college decision yet. And those students who take the AP classes see the connect for this is what college is

> going to be like, and the students who haven't had – experienced those classes don't see the connect and don't see the purpose in continuing their education.

Many participants discussed the need for advisors to assist students in exploring their interests and identifying their skills and what possibilities exist to match the two.

> I think that if people have that idea and have some kind of idea what they could do or what they like, that they would be more likely to go to college and pursue higher education, because I think that there's a lot of people that just don't go to college because they don't know what they're gonna do their first year and want to get out and, like, figure out what they're gonna do with their lives. And then after that first year, a lot of people don't come back to school, and I think that's a big problem.

However, many participants had less patience with having this exploration extend to the first two years of college and instead saw this as a waste of time.

Institutional fit is an important and often misunderstood factor when considering students' college success and therefore, advising becomes important. As one student participant shared,

> I think that, like, even though community colleges have a lot of benefits for people who are able to financially benefit from them, I think that a lot of people sometimes will sell themselves short by going to community colleges, and they sacrifice their own education and the abilities that they have.

As this student implies, degrees from different institutions carry varying amounts of social capital. Knowing the potential consequences of a student's college choice and its manifestation in familial economic class patterns, it behooves educators and advisors to remain invested in

academic preparation and instilling career aspirations that match students' goals. This point was made by one participant,

> So we're probably always going to have that group of students who decide sort of last minute that I need to do something after high school, and I'm going to go to my local community college, and sort of figure things out. And maybe they're underprepared. Maybe they haven't had the kind of comprehensive advising and counseling, either in the high school, or parents, just don't have the cultural capital to impart in terms of what it takes to be successful in college.

It is becoming an increasing financial challenge for state systems to maintain multiple institutions across the state delivering similar programs and services with diminishing enrollments and prepared students. However, eliminating the lower enrollment schools entirely may reduce access for students whose family responsibilities or economic situation limits their mobility. A win-win solution to this dilemma was suggested by one participant,

> ...I would love to see our senior institutions offering more completion programs at two-year colleges, so that for those of our students who are place-bound, I think that can be an additional motivational idea for them: 'Okay, if I finish up with you, I know I can then continue on and get that bachelor's degree right here close to home.'

Lack of adequate counseling concerning career choices, academic courses, and institutional options were named as consistent issues throughout many focus groups; however, many also acknowledged the unrealistic expectations for advisors also were problematic:

> Well they're doing so many different jobs. They're arranging classes for kids. They're supposed to be dealing with mental health issues, which, when do they have time for

that? It's usually the crisis and call the police by this time. And then advising kids on where they should be going to school or what they should be doing next.

Relationship to Scholarly Literature and Theory

The research findings discussed in this paper focus on the notion of students' relative preparedness to make choices that often carry significant weight and that can result in negative consequences if personal preferences or circumstances change down the road. In this sense it is helpful to think of postsecondary participation as comprised of a series of decision points regarding one's career and vocational objectives, whether to attend college, where to attend college, what to pursue as a major course of study, what classes to take, whether to transfer to another institution or drop out entirely, etc. —choices that must be made repeatedly in advance of every new academic term. These choices are frequently made at the age of 17 or 18, at a time when one's cognitive and emotional capacity may be insufficient to the task. Consequences for the "wrong" choices—or for changing one's mind at a later date due to a shift in preferences or in response to unforeseen circumstances—can be severe within systems that can be unfriendly and unforgiving.

While a rich and extensive literature base exists regarding the process by which individuals arrive on the college campus, less well known is the process by which individuals approach the various decision points that face them as students once they matriculate. "College choice" is an umbrella term used to refer to the process by which an individual decides if and where to go to college. Researchers have generally conceptualized the college choice process as occurring in three broad stages. This formulation was originally proposed by Hanson and Litten (1982) and expanded and refined by Jackson (1982), Manski and Wise (1983), Hossler and Gallagher (1987), Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989), and Cabrera and La Nasa (2000).

Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) proposed that the college choice process occurs in three broad stages of *predisposition* (the decision to pursue or not to pursue postsecondary education), *search* (the gathering of information about various options), and *choice* (the selection of a particular path or institution to attend).

Research examining the college choice process has generally emerged from sociological and economistic traditions. The econometric perspective, grounded in human capital theory, suggests that individuals approach the college choice process as "rational actors" who weigh the assorted costs and benefits of going to college as compared to various alternatives, eventually selecting training and skill development opportunities that will enable them to realize the greatest returns in the labor market. However, the notion of rationality and the human capacity for rational action has been criticized by various scholars who have challenged its dominant place in traditional decision-making theories and frameworks and in conceptualizations of the college choice process (Beattie, 2002; Bell, Raiffa & Tversky, 1988; Bordieu & Wacquant, 1992; Hearn & Longanecker, 1985; Hogarth & Reder, 1987; Manski, 1993; March, 1988; Matilla, 1982; Perna, 2000; Schwarz, 1998; Simon, 1957, 1997; St. John & Elliott, 1994).

For example, Morgan (1998) suggested that adolescents are prone to what he called "rational fantasies" in their overoptimistic ideas and estimations of future earning power, which may appear to be irrational, but can actually be quite rational based on one's given level of knowledge, maturity, and cognitive complexity. Individuals also have varying capacities to project into the future in order to identify and estimate the myriad short- and long-term benefits and costs of pursuing postsecondary education and training (Farkas, 1996; Smith & Powell, 1990). Manski (1993) and later Beattie (2002) challenged the notion that high school students can function realistically as "adolescent econometricians" in the manner implied by a purist view

of human capital theory. Manski (1993) introduced the term “adolescent econometrician” in challenging the prevailing assumption that the formation of expectations of the benefits of postsecondary attendance are homogenous, i.e. that “adolescent econometricians” of all types develop their beliefs based on the same set of variables and process relevant information in similar ways. Manski asserted that it was theoretically impossible that young people formed expectations about future earnings in a universal manner, and suggested that social scientists in general had failed to investigate adequately the different ways that youths deduce or surmise the various economic and non-economic returns to schooling. He argued that without knowing how adolescents perceive the returns (or benefits) to education, one cannot infer their decision processes based solely on their choices.

Beattie (2002) employed the concept of the “adolescent econometrician” in her later examination of the ability or wherewithal of high school students to assess external economic conditions and earnings prospects and then to use this information as part of a rational benefit-cost analysis in decisions about postsecondary pursuit. Following the reasoning of England (1989), Beattie suggests that group differences may structure individual tastes as well as perceptions of opportunities. She states that ignoring this fact “may obscure the complex ways that non-economic social processes transform individual attentiveness to or knowledge about the economy” (p. 21), and thus one’s ability to use an estimate of future earnings as an influencing factor in the college choice process.

In sum, scholars and critics have noted the limitations of the human mind to acquire and process the necessary data implied by the full information premise of traditional theories of economic demand, and have outlined how individuals possess varying capacities to project into the future in order to identify and estimate the myriad short- and long-term benefits and costs of

pursuing postsecondary education and training. Critics have also noted that human choice processes are subject to group effects—including gender, race, and class-based influences—that shape worldviews, opportunity structures, and the metrics one employs in calculating the pros and cons of various alternative life paths, including college (Antonio & Horvat, 2002; Beattie, 2002; England, 1989; Farkas, 1996; McDonough, 1997; Morgan, 1998; Perna & Titus, 2001; Walpole, 2001). The development limitations of the 18-year-old mind and heart should be acknowledged in considering the support networks and structures that would assist young people to make education related choices with potentially significant short- and long-term consequences, and whether perhaps certain choices should be curtailed and options limited to reduce the chances of failure.

Analysis and Implications

Perhaps the most remarkable finding is the amount of agreement that existed among the diversity of higher education stakeholders who participated in the dialogues on the nature and scope of the human capital challenge in the United States and the depth of common understanding about the obstacles we face as a society in meeting this challenge. While ideas and opinions on strategies and solutions were in some cases widely divergent, there was general agreement that the nation's and the states' fiscal environment has changed—perhaps permanently—and that we cannot simply spend our way out of the problem nor can we expect to "ride out" the current economic downturn in anticipation of better times. The groups moved beyond the stereotyped opinions often associated with their roles and positions and engaged in open dialogue with each other, sometimes noting how they contradicted themselves due to the complexity of the issue. For example, several participants decried the increased proportion of

funds spent on administrative support and yet they emphasized the need to do more to mentor, to advise, and to support students.

While numerous specific policy and programmatic recommendations were made during the dialogues, perhaps more powerful and more challenging are the contradictions and conundrums that emerged from our discussions. For example, participants recognize the efficiencies that might follow from a more focused curriculum but also believe it is important for students to have the opportunity to explore and benefit from a diversity of courses. Participants also recognize the high cost of operating multiple campuses and running duplicate programs but also believe that distance should not prevent students from accessing a particular course or program of interest. On a systems level, participants recognize the value of centralized policy making and standardization but also believe strongly in institutional autonomy and entrepreneurship. The conundrum that may cause the most internal angst and discomfort is the belief that all students should have an opportunity to go to college and give it their best shot, while also believing that perhaps not every high school student can succeed in or should go to college and acknowledging the high cost of failure to students, families, institutions, and governments.

In many ways what we heard was illustrative of what might be deemed “the American narrative,” with its emphasis on autonomy and choice, fairness and equity, and self determination and responsibility. We heard participants struggle with the prospect that fundamental changes in our higher education system required to increase production while maintaining affordability and quality might challenge some of these strongly held beliefs. Driven by the narrative of competitiveness and the profound sense of economic insecurity that dominates the American psyche in late-2010, the nation risks normalizing the notion of “access” without consideration of

how much or what type of access is enough, or how one will know when access objectives have been achieved. To suggest that perhaps not everyone should go to college, or that students' curricular options should be curtailed, or that the interests and abilities of many young people might be better served by following an alternate pathway to a career or into the workforce, can have significant political consequences. As Karrabell (1998) states:

> In a country attached to notions of advancement based on merit, people perceive education as the path to success. These impressions of a college degree may be self-fulfilling. If you can't get a good job without college, then college must be what gets you a good job. If the most successful people have graduated from college, then college must be the avenue to success. (p. 214)

Rosenbaum (2001) suggests that teachers, school counselors, and parents often reinforce the notion of "college for all" out of a belief that to communicate lower expectations would put students at a disadvantage as graduates (and in some cases detract from a standard benchmark of school "quality"—the percentage of seniors who go on to higher education). He suggests that counselors often fail to advise students about jobs, either because of their own ignorance, their own bias about college, or a desire to avoid discouraging students' (often unrealistic) postsecondary plans. He states that parents often prevent counselors from providing realistic advice and encouraging students to consider alternative pathways, reflecting a shift in the power dynamic of the parent-counselor relationship from 30 years ago, when "expert" counselors were able to advise parents as to what was in their son's or daughter's best interest, with parents largely compliant with the counselor's recommendations. As a result of all of these factors, many students end up being pushed into college without the appropriate skills, preparation, maturity, or interest to succeed. Rosenbaum states:

> Although it is not meant to be deceptive, the college-for-all norm can inadvertently encourage a deception that hurts many youths, including the disadvantaged youths it is meant to help. The college-for-all norm encourages all students to plan on college, regardless of their past achievement. So as not to discourage students, the college-for-all norm avoids focusing on requirements, but in the process it fails to tell students what steps they should take to be successful in college, and it does not warn them when their low achievements make their college plans unlikely to be attained. (p. 57)

The difficulty facing legislators and other higher education policy makers and leaders is to act boldly toward producing real change while remaining sensitive to fundamental values and beliefs about the purpose and role of higher education that are connected intrinsically to the American narrative. Researchers can assist policymakers by examining differences in program effectiveness and program efficiency when discussing financial and programmatic strategies for improving postsecondary access and success. For example, what is the value of getting one more person enrolled and through college? What is the marginal cost? What is the level of acceptable loss from individuals who drop out? A dialogue between researchers, policymakers, and higher education leaders is necessary to address related questions with implications for students, institutions, and systems. What core functions of higher education must be preserved or enhanced? What systems of delivery are the most effective and under which conditions? What radical changes can be made to higher education system's infrastructure that better fit today's needs? How can we better connect and enhance support systems that assist students at critical junctures? What is the taxpayer's responsibility for higher education and what are the responsibilities of students and families? How do we improve student retention? How can the system be more "user friendly" for students, especially for returning adults? How do we better

align needs of the workplace with the education and training delivered? How do we balance the need for students to explore and have a well-rounded education with the need to prepare them for the workplace?

The dialogues provided rich insight into areas thought to possess the greatest potential for effecting real change in public policy and institutional practice. Our work underscored the need to facilitate real dialogue within and among stakeholder groups to foster the networking needed at the state and campus level in order to effect change. Networking across stakeholder groups and the collaborative problem solving that results is key to addressing the complex issues our nation faces in increasing the educational capital of our citizens while containing costs and maintaining the quality of higher education.

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