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The high costs of higher education and its benefits to students and to society are central issues in legislative and public debates on public higher education. In order to enrich and inform this debate in our state, the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions has mentored a team of University of Wisconsin-Madison undergraduate students to document how people consider the aims of higher education in Wisconsin.

The team of student researchers designed and conducted a qualitative research study focused on the following research questions:

1. *What do Wisconsinites see as the aims of higher education in the state?*
2. *How do participants' lived experiences, social background, and educational history influence their views of higher education in the state?*
3. *How are the aims of higher education politically positioned and communicated?*

These research questions emerged out of team discussions, and were guided by concerns over the recent political polarization of college education in the state.

Our community-based and participatory research methodology

This community-based participatory action research project (CBPAR) involved student researchers working as equal partners with the research facilitators throughout the research process. Student researchers completed CITI training and were held to the same ethical principles as all university researchers. The research team collaboratively designed the research study and interview protocol. Student researchers each recruited a diverse set of five interviewees from within their own social networks. The final sample totaled 40 adult Wisconsinites ranging in ages from 20 to 87 who reflected the general racial, demographic, and socio-economic background of the state. Student researchers independently transcribed interviews and wrote a series of analytical memos to generate research themes, then collectively analyzed data into findings.

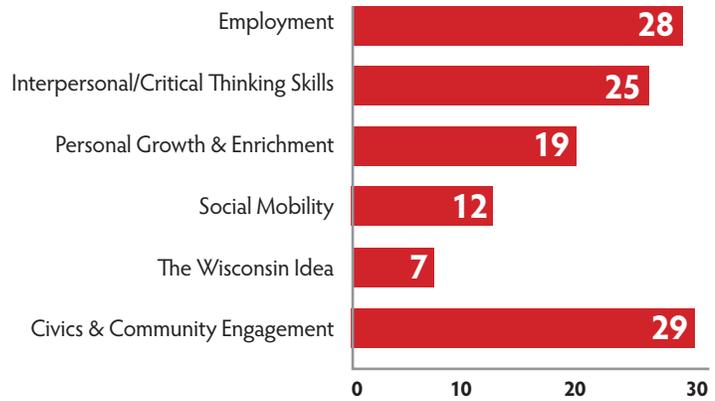
Findings: An eclectic conception of the aims of higher education

The research team identified six major themes that participants discussed as the aims of higher education: civic and community engagement, employment, interpersonal/critical thinking skills, personal growth and enrichment, social mobility, and the Wisconsin Idea.

- 72% of participants discussed civic and *community engagement* as an aim of higher education. Within these conversations, higher education was seen as a mechanism to gain knowledge to become informed citizens, participate in democracy, and give back to one's community. Many participants claimed that those who receive the privilege of higher education are responsible for giving back to their home communities and to those who are less fortunate.
- 70% of participants discussed *employment* as an aim of higher education. While there was disagreement over whether or not higher education equals job security, most participants agreed that higher education provides more employment prospects, career flexibility, and professional networking opportunities.

- 62% of participants discussed the development of *interpersonal and critical thinking skills* as an aim of higher education. Although no one participant alone gave a precise definition of what critical thinking is, collectively critical thinking was defined as the ability to understand, listen, and discuss different ideas and perspectives as well as to be open minded.
- 47% of participants discussed *personal growth and enrichment* as an aim of higher education. These participants provided examples of ways higher education can personally enrich lives through engagement with foreign subjects and new communities by highlighting ideas related to cultural awareness and acceptance, identity development, and becoming a well-rounded person.
- 30% of participants discussed *social mobility* as an aim of higher education. In this context, higher education was seen as key to removing socioeconomic barriers and/or physically removing oneself from poor or desolate areas.
- 22% of participants explicitly brought up the *Wisconsin Idea* as an aim of higher education. Related to the theme of citizenship, participants described the Wisconsin Idea as applying one’s acquired knowledge to benefit the state and connect citizens to the university through both outreach and education.

Participants' Aims of Higher Education (n=40)



Findings: Barriers to accesses and affordability

Participants were also concerned with the barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education.

- 70% of participants mentioned concerns with *higher education funding and affordability*. Many of these participants discussed personal challenges they or their loved ones have faced concerning paying for higher education.
- Other barriers participants mentioned included:
 - Inadequate *pre-college advising and/or academic advising*
 - Lack of *support for Students of Color and First-Generation Students*
 - Lack of *mental health and disability support services*

Conclusions and recommendations

- Our study suggests that Wisconsinites have a more eclectic vision of the aims of higher education than our politically polarized policy debate tends to recognize.
- Higher education administrators and policymakers should recognize the diverse set of expectations that Wisconsinites have about the aims of higher education in the state, and reflect these priorities in our budgeting decisions.
- Public universities can engage in outreach to Wisconsinites about how their work advances these eclectic aims of higher education, and about how this work is funded.
- Future research can focus on how underrepresented students consider the aims of higher education in order to better serve these populations.

The mission of The Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) is to conduct and support research, critical policy analysis, and public dialogue on student experiences with the transition from college to the workforce in order to inform policies, programs, and practices that promote academic and career success for all learners.

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